



Refuge for Cherilyn

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Category: Romance, Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

Description: A conservation officer. A single mom. And a growing pile of bodies ...

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources Conservation Officer Shaw Harrison is still reeling from a nasty divorce. With his ex-wife and daughter states away, he throws himself into his work, trying to numb the pain. But when he discovers a woman and her children hiding in the woods, broken, scared, and defeated, Shaw jumps into action and brings them to sanctuary. Cherilyn Travis will do anything for her daughters. And when she finds herself as one of the only witnesses to a murder, she knows she must find safety for her children. With a special needs child, her options are limited. Surrendering to the help and kindness of the Kentucky conservation officer is her only option. As Shaw and Cherilyn grow closer, their enemies will do anything to keep them apart. Can Shaw find refuge for Cherilyn, or will his own family pay the price?

Total Pages (Source): 79

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

CHAPTER1

It was justten o'clock and already he'd cited two guys for fishing without a license and arrested a boater who was obviously impaired?so much so that before he could get out of the boat, he fell in the water and had to be fished out. By the time he got the drunks sorted out at a little after three that afternoon, all he wanted to do was go home.

"This is central dispatch. Any KDFWR units in the vicinity of Cumberland Falls State Park, please respond. Repeat, any KDFWR units in the vicinity of Cumberland Falls State Park, please respond."

Ugh. I can't believe this. I'm almost finished with my shift. Hope this doesn't tie me up."Central dispatch, this is KDFWR unit two ninety-one responding. ETA of eight minutes. Copy?"

"Roger that, unit two ninety-one. You'll be met by a Whitley County deputy sheriff there. Copy?"

"Roger, central dispatch. En route. Over." What the hell was so ridiculously important that a county deputy would be there? God, he hoped somebody hadn't killed a bear.

The big Ram pickup rolled up into the parking lot and, sure enough, a Whitley County cruiser sat there. Beside it was a big guy, broad shouldered and tall, arms folded across his chest. As soon as he stepped out of the truck, the deputy approached him and stuck out a hand. "Whitley County Deputy AaronFriedman."

He took the hand and shook it. "Conservation Officer ShawHarrison. What's up?"

"Office said they needed us to look at some security footage. They called us, but we called you because we aren't that familiar with the terrain and hoped maybe you were."

"I'll do what I can." Shaw never ceased to appreciate the work of the stone walkways and buildings at the state park. It was beautiful, all hand-hewn beams and stone, originally built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early part of the twentieth century. It burned a few years later, but was rebuilt, and it was impressive to say the very least.

"Help you gentlemen?" a young woman asked at the front desk.

Aaron nodded. "Yes, ma'am. We got a call from someone named Roxie?"

"She's our manager. Let me get her."

The girl disappeared for a minute and came back with a middle-aged woman. "Hi. I'm Roxie. I needed you to look at some camera footage and tell me what you think might be going on. I don't know if I need to be concerned or not."

"We'll do our best, ma'am. I'm Deputy AaronFriedman and this is Conservation Officer ShawHarrison."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Shaw threw in.

"And you guys too. Come on in. Want a cup of coffee or something?"

Aaron visibly perked up. "Uh, yeah! That would be great."

“Sure,” Shaw added. “I’d like that.”

“Hey, Shannon, can you get these gentlemen some coffee? Cream? Sugar?” Both men shook their heads. “Black.” She turned back to the two men standing before her. “There’s a car at the upper parking lot, right at the edge. We didn’t realize it had been there so long, but I started checking video footage and saw that it’s been there for several weeks.”

“Can you tell us when you first noticed it on camera?” Aaron asked as he scribbled on his tablet with a stylus.

“Yeah. March fifth. I checked, and it was cold that day. We had a power outage?”

“Y’all seem to have a lot of those,” Aaron interrupted.

“Yeah, well, this place is falling down. If the state doesn’t do something pretty soon, it’ll be too far gone. But anyway, there was a power outage, so I don’t have the footage of anyone getting out of it. When it shuts off because of the power, it doesn’t automatically come back on. It has to be reset. Yet another thing that’s a dinosaur around here,” she muttered as she paged through the security footage.

Aaron had the top of the stylus resting against his lips when he asked, “So you haven’t seen anyone around it?”

“Oh, no. I’ve seen somebody around it. I just can’t figure out what they’re doing. I made notes. I saw them on shots from March twelfth, March fifteenth, March twenty-fourth, and March thirty-first. And a lot of times since then.”

“And what were they doing?” Shaw asked.

“They came back to the car, put something in, got something out, and disappeared off

the edge of the screen there.”

He was a little confused. “And is there a trail there? I sure don’t remember one.” He thought he’d hiked every trail in that park.

“That’s just it. There’s no trail there. Nothing. I have no idea what’s going on.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” Shaw asked Aaron.

“Yep. Meth.”

“Yeah, that was my thought too,” Roxie said. “But there’s been no odor, and whatever they’re taking out of that car, it’s not anything big, plus they’re not leaving and coming back with supplies. The car’s just been sitting there. It hasn’t moved.”

“Soooo...” Aaron stopped and looked at his notes. “I think I’ll drive up to the parking lot, take down the license plate number, and run it. Maybe that will give us some clues. Shaw, you think you might hike back in there?”

“I might, but not without the right gear. I’m not exactly sure what the terrain is like back there, and I’d want to be prepared.”

“Fair enough. Okay, Roxie, thanks so much. We’ll work on this and keep you updated.” Aaron extended his hand again and she shook it, so Shaw did the same.

“I appreciate it. Y’all come back sometime and I’ll give you a discount on lodging.”

“I’ll remember that!” Aaron called back as they stepped out the front door.

Both men walked, heads down, back to their vehicles, deep in thought. “Let me know what you find out on that plate?” Shaw asked Aaron.

“Oh, you know it. Absolutely.”

“Thanks. Hey, that lady sheriff, is she?”

“Married? Oh, yeah. She’s RossMcEvers’ wife.”

“No shit? I recognized the name, but I didn’t think he had a sister. She’s not from around here, is she?”

“Nope. Texas. All of his people originally came from down there around Tarpley.”

“Ah. Well, can’t blame a guy for asking,” Shaw said with a laugh.

Aaron started to laugh too. “I know. She’s not hard on the eyes, but I’ve only got eyes for mine, so that’s all I can say about that!”

“Ah, yeah, you’d better behave yourself. You’ll get in all kinds of trouble. Wife?”

“Yeah. Haven’t been married that long. You might know her. MaisieFriedman? She’s a social worker.”

“No. I really don’t have cause to run across any social workers in this job, but if I ever need one, I’ll give her a call.”

“Do. She’d be happy to help. Well, better get back and see if I can start piecing things together. You planning to hike that?”

Shaw smirked. “Yeah, but I’d like to know who that is first so I know whether to take pepper spray or a rifle.”

“Gotcha. Good plan. Well, good to meet you, and I hope we cross paths again sometime. I’ll let you know what I find out about that plate.”

“Good to meet you too. Thanks, Aaron.”

“No, thank you!” He watched the deputy get into the cruiser and drive away. Then he thought of something and ran back to the lodge office. “Hey, do you guys have any maps of the park, like hiking trails and stuff like that?”

“Sure!” Shannon handed him a map.

“Thanks. Have a nice day,” he remembered to say as he went back outside, but he was looking the map over by the time he walked down the lodge steps.

He’d have to look that map over really well. One thing he sure didn’t want out there in the woods was a surprise. There had been enough of those in his career to last a lifetime.

* * *

Shaw stopped at a diner in town, ordered a plate lunch, and spread out the map. Then he pulled up a local map on his tablet and started comparing the two. His open faced roast beef sandwich was almost gone when his phone rang, and it was an unfamiliar number. “Conservation Officer Harrison.”

“Hey, Shaw, it’s Aaron. Got some info on that plate.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“Yeah? Whatcha got?”

“The car belongs to a Cheryl Travis. Lives over on Pinehurst Drive in those apartments.” Shaw knew the ones. They were Section 8 government subsidized housing. “Driver’s license says she’s thirty-six years old.”

Travis. Travis. Do I know... “Hey, Aaron, I went to school with a Marlon Travis. Let me see if he knows her by any chance.”

“Oh! Yeah, please do. Let me know.”

“I will. Thanks. I’m looking at trail maps right now. If it doesn’t rain tomorrow, I’ll probably try to go back in there and see what’s going on.”

“Might want to take somebody with you.”

Shaw laughed. “You volunteering?”

He heard Aaron snort. “Maybe.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you.”

Shaw sat there and thought about it. Did he want to take Aaron in there with him? Or should he ask another conservation officer? If it was one lone woman, he doubted he’d be in any danger. Protocol said he should get someone else to go with him, but

his gut told him he'd be fine.

He sure hoped his gut was right. Otherwise, he could be in deep shit.

* * *

The next morning, he went looking for Marlon Travis. But if he and Cheryl Travis were related, could it be that she didn't want to be found?

By the time he found Marlon, he'd devised a plan. Records showed that Marlon worked at a local auto parts store, so he headed that direction. He'd no more than stepped through the door when a man asked, "Can I help you?"

"Maybe. Does Marlon Travis work here?"

"Yes, sir. He does. He's in the back. Let me get him." The man disappeared, so Shaw wandered off to look around in the store. They had a lot of auto cleaning supplies, and he saw a wax he thought he might like, so he picked it up and headed back to the register.

He rounded the end of the shelves and looked up when a man said, "You looking for me?"

The guy did look familiar. "I think so. Marlon Travis? Went to school at Whitley County?"

"Yeah? Do I know you?"

"Shaw Harrison?"

"Oh, yeah! I remember you. Harry the Bulldozer." It was a nickname they'd given

him because of the way he mowed down opponents on the football field. “That field goal you kicked that sent us to state, that was awesome.”

“Thanks! I didn’t figure anybody remembered that.” It was true. Most everyone else had moved away. There were just a handful of the former students he knew who were still there. “So I need to ask you something. You know a Cherilyn Travis?”

“Yeah. She’s my ex sister-in-law, and nobody’s seen or heard from her in a while.”

Shaw thought that was odd. “Did anybody file a missing person’s report?”

“Nah. She’s a little odd.”

“So she’s done this before?”

“No, not this. She’s just... odd.”

“Odd how?”

“I dunno. Maybe a little... paranoid? Something like that?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“Ah. Gotcha. I’ve got the address as four twenty-three?”

“Nah. That’s my brother’s place. She don’t live there no more.”

“Do you know where she lives now?”

“Some other apartment somewheres. So why you asking about her? I mean, has she done somethin’?”

“No. We just heard there was something going on in her apartment building and we wanted to ask her about it.”

“Oh, you mean that murder?”

That was the first Shaw had heard about a murder. “Uh, yeah. The murder.”

“Yeah, that was awful. Killing that woman with her little kids there. Awful.”

Jesus, how did I miss that? He knew the answer. He never turned on the TV. Hell, he didn’t have time. He worked all the time, and when he was home, a boatload of electronics yakking at him was the last thing he needed. “So we were wondering if she saw or heard anything that might help us.”

“Good luck. Probably thought she was next and took off.” That struck Shaw as strange. She was that paranoid? That was pretty bad. “Thing is, she’s got the girls with her.”

“Girls?”

“Yeah. They’ve got two girls. Maya’s fifteen and Lara’s ten. Wherever she went, she took them with her, or at least it looks that way.”

That truly alarmed Shaw. It was one thing if she was hiding out, but her kids too? They should’ve been in school. “Where do they go to school?”

“Maya goes to the high school. Lara’s at Central Primary. She’s special ed.”

Shaw was stunned. What would make a woman run that way? She had no reason to feel that threatened.

Unless she had seen something.

“Okay, well, thanks for the info. I’ll see if I can scare her up.”

“Good luck with that. She spent her whole life huntin’, fishin’, trappin’, that kind of thing. I doubt she’ll have any trouble staying hidden.”

That was the moment Shaw was sure his suspicions were true. Cheryl Travis was out there in the woods in Cumberland Falls State Park. He needed to find her before something happened to her and her kids.

Unless, of course, it already had.

* * *

She was running out of money, but there was no going back to the apartment. That just couldn’t happen. If there was anything she had a perversion to, it was dying, and she had no plans to do it anytime soon.

Her thoughts were pierced by yet another whine. “Oh, no. Mom?”

It was hard to stop herself from sighing loudly. “What, honey?”

“My period’s started! What am I supposed to do? I don’t have anything!”

It hadn’t crossed her mind, and she wasn’t sure why. “Okay. I’ll figure this out.”

“And what am I supposed to do while you’re figuring it out?”

“Maya, please! I’m doing the best that I can.”

“We should just call Dad to come and get us.”

Cherilyn’s heart froze. “No, baby. We can’t. You know that. I’ll figure something out.” But what? If she went over to the store, shoplifted them, and she got caught, she’d be dead. Maya really did need them. What the hell could she do? “Look. Here.” She handed Maya one of her athletic socks and a shopping bag. “Put the sock on top of the bag and use that until I can get you some.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“Mom! That’s gross! Are you serious?”

“Baby, we do what we have to. I’m just trying to keep us alive.”

“MAAA. I gah DAHHHH.”

She stooped to look into Lara’s eyes. “Yes, sweetie. Your dolly is very pretty too.”

“I UNT my BED.”

“We can’t go to your bed right now, but we will soon.” I just lied to my child, she told herself, but there was no way around it.

The afternoon passed in the usual way, the three of them playing silly little games and making crafts out of things they found in the woods. She wished they could build a fire, but that was out of the question, so they had nothing for heat. At least it only got down into the fifties at night. When the three of them wrapped up together, they kept plenty warm enough, but she hoped it wouldn’t be long before she could be in a bed somewhere, alone, with the girls in another room. She loved them, but keeping them satisfied and quiet was becoming more than she could handle.

She got them down for the night, wrapped up together. “Now listen to me. Stay right here. I’m going to the lodge to see if I can find food and a way to get in and get some feminine products. I’ll be back as fast as I can, okay? Maya, look after your sister.”

“Look after your sister, look after your sister. That’s your job, not mine.”

“Maya, please! Try to be a little kinder and help me out a bit. I’m doing the best I can.”

“We could go home. That would be a big help,” the girl huffed. “Why can’t we go home?”

“We can’t do that right now. So stay here. I’ll be right back.” Cherilyn put on her boots, grabbed her backpack, and headed toward the lodge. But when she was about fifty yards away, she turned and looked back.

The little tent looked pitiful there in the brush, but she didn’t know what else to do. It wasn’t safe to be in town, and it wasn’t safe there. There was no middle ground. He knew she’d seen him, and she would bet he was looking for her at that very moment. He probably hadn’t done much else since that night.

She looked through the dumpster first. The restaurant had been closed for at least thirty minutes, so she figured they’d already brought out the trash. The lid was open and she was about to lean in when she heard laughter, so she wheeled around and hid behind the big steel bin.

“God, I hate to throw this stuff out,” a female voice said.

Another one tuned up. “Yeah, I know, but we have to. Have you ever, you know... taken any of it home?”

“Oh, yeah. When Mike was laid off, I took stuff home every night. Roxie knew it too, but she didn’t say anything. She knew we needed it.”

“Yeah, I’ve been tempted a few times. If the shops go on furlough again, I might have to, and it’s looking like that’s gonna happen.”

“Yeah. Unemployment only goes so far.”

Cherilyn knew that. She also knew what it was like to be unable to work because you had a disabled child. Once Lara had started school, it had gotten easier, but trying to explain to an employer why you had to leave because your child was having a meltdown at school was almost impossible. Lara’s intellectual disability was classified as severe with her IQ at around forty, but she did manage to communicate some. Of course, when she was upset and couldn’t make people around her understand, she went completely wild, and no one could handle her but Cherilyn. One day she’d finally given up and taken on the role of full-time caregiver.

She waited until the women stopped talking and went inside, then sneaked around the front of the waste bin and started going through the bags. Something struck her as odd. There was a lot of food waste, but it was neatly wrapped in foil, almost like it had been packaged. There was chicken, and fried potatoes, and broccoli florets. Did they know she was out there? Had they seen her? Or had they noticed someone had gone through it? She pulled several packets out, stashed them in her backpack, and was about to sneak away when the door opened. “There you are!”

Cherilyn spun, terrified, to find a girl who looked like she was in her early twenties. “I’m, I’m, I’m sorry. I’ll put it back and?”

“No, no! I saw you out here last week. We’re trying to leave everything we can for you.”

“Please don’t tell anybody that?”

“Hey, honey,” the girl said, “if you’re out here digging through trash and living in the woods, there’s got to be a good reason. If I can help you with anything, I guess just leave me a note and I’ll try.”

Won't hurt to ask, I suppose, she told herself. "Do you by any chance know where I could get some sanitary supplies for my daughter?"

"We've got a few in here that we keep for guests. I'll give you those, and I can go down to the shelter and get them to give me some. Why don't you go there? It would be better than?"

"NO! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I just, I can't. He could find me there, and if he does?"

"I get it. Abusive ex?"

That's much easier to explain, I guess, Cherilyn told herself. "Yeah. Very."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“Gotcha. Yeah, so hang on and let me give you these. Just a minute.” The young woman disappeared into the building. Cherilyn almost ran. What if the girl was really going to get someone else to have them keep her there until they called the police?

But in just a couple of minutes, the girl came out the back door with another garbage bag. “Okay, there’s some tampons in there, and I put a couple of packs of wipes in too. And here.” She reached into her apron and held something out to Cherilyn. “It’s all I’ve got.”

It was a five dollar bill.

Tears rolled down Cherilyn’s face. She couldn’t believe how generous the girl was being. “I can’t take that. No. You need that.”

“You need it a lot more than I do, honey. Take it. Please. I’ll sleep better tonight if you do.”

Cherilyn reached out and took the crisp bill. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I don’t know why you’d help me, but thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Just be careful, okay. And if I were you, I’d move the car to maybe another spot down the way there. They’re watching it, I think.”

“Oh! Thanks. I appreciate it. My name is...”No. Don’t tell her.“Sherry.”

“Pretty name. I’m Amanda. I’d better get inside before they start looking for me. You take care, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, I will. Thanks again.” Cherilyn stood there, frozen in place, as the girl stepped back inside, but before the door closed, Amanda turned and gave her a little wave.

When she got back to the tent, she handed Maya the bag. “Can I?”

“Yes. I’ll wait out here so I can see you and you’ll be safe enough. Be sure to drop it in the bucket and screw that lid on tight so it won’t smell or it’ll draw the animals.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, honey.” Cherilyn watched as Maya made her way about forty feet down the path and ducked behind a tree where they kept the potty bucket. At some point she was going to have to empty it, but she didn’t know where. If she had a shovel, she’d dig a hole and cover it. Until then, they’d just have to try to keep the lid on tightly. Maybe the next morning she could take the five dollars to the little store over on the road and buy some trash bags. That would be best.

When Maya was back in the tent, Cherilyn opened her backpack and pulled the food out. She watched as her girls ate ravenously. They had one meal a day, and she had to make it count. How long could they go on like that?

She had no idea, but she’d do whatever she had to so they could stay alive.

* * *

The sun was bright, and Shaw was pretty sure it would warm up in the middle of the day, so he dressed accordingly. As he sat on the deck with his cup of coffee, he looked at the map again. The only place anywhere near the park to get anything was the gift shop and the vending machines at the campground, and both were quite a hike. If they were staying out in the woods and the car wasn’t moving, where were

they getting food? Water? Were they bathing at all? He couldn't imagine that they were. And she had two children with her? How were they getting by?

He decided his first stop would be at the lodge again. Maybe they'd missed something on the video footage. It was time for a second cup of coffee when his phone rang. "Got news for me?"

Aaron laughed. "No. I'm just calling to enjoy a moment of your winning personality!"

"Well, I know that's a lie!" Shaw laughed back. "What's up?"

"I checked her financial records. None of her money has been touched since she left. She's hiding well, almost like she knows how to do it. I don't know how she's living out there."

"She's got two kids with her."

"What? Are you kidding?"

"No. A fifteen-year-old girl and a ten-year-old girl who's intellectually disabled. If they're out there, I don't know how they're staying alive."

"Think they have help?"

"I dunno. But I'm going back to the lodge today, and then I'm going into the woods."

"You need backup?"

"Nah. I'll be fine."

“Shaw, women carry guns too.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“I’m aware of that, but I’m not sure she’d have a gun around a child who’s disabled. If she’s smart enough to survive out there, she’s smarter than that.”

“Yeah, I’ll give you that one. Okay, keep me up to date, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind a bit. Catch ya later.” As he hung up the phone, Shaw wondered what he’d find down in the woods. What if they were dead? What if she’d gone down there and killed the girls and then herself? That would be a mess, but it wouldn’t be the first time he’d come upon something like that. It happened far more often than most people knew.

After he’d cleaned up everything from breakfast and rinsed out his mug, he climbed into the truck, then climbed back down. His dad’s sledgehammer was sitting right inside the doorway of the shed, so he grabbed it, dropped it into the bed of the truck, and slid in behind the steering wheel again. He could hear it banging just a little as the truck bumped down the driveway. At the end, he turned left and headed toward his parents’ house. He’d intended to take the damn thing back three weeks earlier and kept forgetting.

As soon as he got there, he grabbed the sledgehammer and took it straight to the garage to hang it in the spot where his dad kept it. Then he let himself in the back door and called out, “Anybody home?”

“Shaw?”

“Yeah, Mom, it’s me. I brought back Dad’s sledgehammer.”

A male voice called out, “You didn’t have to do that. I didn’t need it right now.”

“I kept forgetting. I figured if I remembered, I’d better do it right then.” Following the sound of the voice, he stepped into the living room to find his dad in a tee and shorts, reading the newspaper.

“That’s what happens to you in your old age,” JohnnyHarrison said with a smile as he looked up over the newspaper at his youngest son. “You get old and forgetful.”

“Hey, speak for yourself, old man.” Shaw grabbed a toss pillow from the recliner and lobbed it at his dad.

“Hey, you’re gonna mess up my newspaper! You know, that thing I pay a fortune for that’s not worth a damn the next day?”

“You should watch TV like the rest of us.” Shaw plopped down in the recliner. “You guys going to the picnic this weekend?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure we are. Your mom wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing!” Leslie said as she hustled into the room. “I can’t help it if I like socializing.”

“Eh. Socializing. You mean gossiping?” Johnny asked, and Shaw grinned, listening to his parents’ banter.

Leslie scowled. “Socializing. You know, Mr.Antisocial.”

“I’ll have you know, I socialize plenty.”

“Yeah, at the diner with the other old codgers.”

“Now I’m a codger?” Johnny barked, and Shaw was laughing so hard that he couldn’t breathe.

“Yes, but you’re a cute old codger.” As Leslie passed him with a basket of laundry, she leaned over and kissed Johnny on the cheek.

“Cute. Bah. Crazy woman. So what are you up to today, son?”

Shaw managed to quell his laughter. “I’m going out to the resort park. Got something going on out there.”

“Meth lab?”

“Nah. I don’t think so.” He wanted to tell his dad, but he knew better. It was no time to get caught up in JohnnyHarrison’s extensive knowledge of detective work from criminal thriller novels.

“Well, okay then. Good luck with that.” And Johnny went back to his paper.

“Hey, do you know a deputy sheriff named AaronFriedman?”

Johnny paused in thought. “Friedman. Hey, honey, a deputy named Friedman. Where do I know that name?”

“That’s the one whose wife and little girl were kidnapped by that guy who killed that social worker,” Leslie called back.

Shaw was shocked. How had he forgotten that? “Oh! Yeah! I remember. And the guy killed his ex-wife in the process, right?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

Johnny nodded. “Yeah. That’s him. Why?”

“Because he’s working on what I’m working on.”

“Ahhhh,” his dad said as though he’d just figured out the creation of the universe. “You be careful with that.”

Leslie had dropped off the laundry and was pouring another cup of coffee. “Wanna come over for dinner tonight?”

“I will if I can. Gotta see where this goes first.” Shaw stood and pushed the chair up to the table. “I’d better get on it or I’ll miss whatever it is you’re planning on cooking.”

“Pot roast with potatoes and carrots,” his mom said with a smile.

“Ahhhh, you know how to rope me in! See you guys later.” He stepped up to his mom, gave her a kiss on the forehead, and rested his hands on top of her shoulders. “Love you, Mom.”

Her hand softly brushed his cheek. “Love you too, my boy. Although I wish you’d shave that mess off your face.”

He laughed as he headed for the door. “Always gotta be a ‘but’ in there somewhere, right?”

“I didn’t say ‘but.’ I said ‘although.’ Big difference,” she called after him.

“Oh, yeah. Right. Bye, Dad.”

“Bye, son. Have a good day.”

As his truck rolled out of their driveway, Shaw took stock. He had a nice home with three bedrooms and a den. His job was his life, and he loved it. As he was growing up, he never thought he'd have a job that would let him spend so much time outdoors with the local flora and fauna, and he felt like the luckiest guy in the world. He had an agency truck, plus he had his own truck, a nice Sierra extended cab pickup. And every day he thanked his lucky stars that Morgan had made more money than he did. Because of that, she didn't get a damn thing in the divorce settlement, so he got to keep everything he'd worked for. Didn't hurt that she'd already taken up with a wealthy attorney and everybody in town knew it. She certainly couldn't claim she had nothing. As soon as the divorce was final, Austin's mother had thrown an engagement party for them, and Austin gave her an engagement gift—a cabin cruiser. He kept hoping he'd catch them out on the river or lake with some kind of violation, but he'd never seen them out. A couple of his friends told him they'd heard that the boat was taken to the Gulf of Mexico and Morgan and Austin spent a lot of time down there. Good. Less opportunities for him to run into her.

The truck rolled to a stop in the parking lot of the resort's lodge, and Shaw looked around. The car was still there. After he'd sat on the tailgate and put on his hiking boots, he pulled out a hooded sweatshirt, dragged it on, and grabbed his backpack and his hiking poles. The most obvious route, at least to him, was the trail that led down to the river.

Three-quarters of the way to the river, he realized his original doubts were being confirmed. Four people had already passed him going back toward the lodge, and there was another party somewhere behind him headed in the same direction he was. No one who was hiding would choose a path where there was so much traffic.

But he wasn't sorry. When the trail spit him out at the water, he almost gasped aloud. It was beautiful. There were a few hawks circling an area on the opposite bank, and a crow cawed from somewhere up in the trees. Songbirds were everywhere, and he noticed some bear tracks down near the water line?deer too. Everything was starting to green up, and little wildflowers grew here and there in patches. That spot embodied everything the outdoors was supposed to be. Clean water. Fresh air. Wildlife. Abundant plant life. And he was there to see it all. He pulled out his phone, made a panoramic shot of the area, and then turned to walk back.

After he offloaded everything he had into the truck, he made his way back to the steps of the lodge and strode up, once again marveling at the workmanship. The lodge was a massive, friendly structure, and a familiar feeling of pride swept over him. His state?Kentucky. It was glorious, a verdant playground of the gods, including the ones who owned horses and the ones who made bourbon. Yes, they were definitely classified as gods. Who else could come up with things so perfectly suited to mankind?

"Hey there!" a voice chirped, and Shaw looked up to find a familiar young woman standing there.

"Hey. Shannon, right?"

The girl blushed. "I'm surprised you remembered!"

"I remember names and faces pretty well. How ya doin' today?"

"I'm good. You been out hikin'?"

"Yeah. Walked back to the river on the trail up there. Lots of people out today."

She nodded. "Yep. We've almost got a full house for the next few nights."

Shaw leaned on the counter. “You work nights here?”

“No. I’m off nights.”

“Oh. What time do the night people get here?”

“They usually start showing up about three thirty or so.”

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll catch up with some of them.”

“Great. Oh, and if you get here before I leave, I’d be happy to sit and have a free meal with ya. To show appreciation, ya know.” She was beaming and her cheeks were flaming pink.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

Let her down easy, he told himself. “Oh, that would be great, but I promised my folks I’d come to their house for dinner tonight. Maybe some other time?”

“Oh, sure. Yeah. That would be great. So see ya around?”

“You bet. Later, Shannon.” He fought hard to keep from laughing, and he was a little surprised she hadn’t asked about Aaron too. Shaw sure didn’t consider himself a catch, but the dating pool there was pretty damn small, so having a woman come onto him was nothing new, especially since it was so difficult for a woman to make a living there. The only jobs around there were service jobs with poor pay and no benefits. That young woman was lucky. She had a state job, so she was better off than most.

Before he left the parking lot, he looked at the little car again. Okay, so I’m a woman with two young kids and I’m hiding out. Where would I go? What would I do? How would I survive? There was only one answer that made any sense.

She had help. If his hunch was correct, the evening shift at the lodge would be able to tell him something. All he really had to do was show up and ask the right questions.

* * *

As she let the rope slip through her fingers, the bag on the other end slowly dropped to the ground. She’d learned that trick years back when skunks had raided their campsite garbage over and over. Her dad had taught her to throw the rope over a thin branch about twelve to fifteen feet up, tie it to the bag, then draw it up to within two feet of the branch and tie it off at the bottom. Few animals could get to it that way, and it

didn't just work for garbage. It worked for their supplies too.

She was a little afraid of the chicken, since it had sat there all night, but she figured the biscuits and broccoli were probably fine, as well as the potatoes. There was no way to heat anything, but that was okay. They tasted fine cold. Sure, they would've been better warmed, but there was only so much she could do.

As usual, she spent the day trying to keep the girls occupied and Lara fairly quiet. God help her, anything the child said was yelled, and it was hard to stay hidden when a kid was screaming in the woods. They were far enough out that she hoped if anyone could hear the ten-year-old, they thought it was an animal of some sort. She'd thought about going deeper into the woods, but it was hard enough to traverse the little foot path she'd carved out, much less make it longer and farther out. It would be the perfect way to get turned around and separated from the kids, and she couldn't risk that.

Every minute of the day was consumed with ways to get them out of the predicament they'd found themselves in. The Travis name wasn't very well thought of in the area, so there were few people she could trust. Actually, there was no one. They were all probably looking for her already, but then she realized that might not be true. Frankie had never been much of a husband, or much of a father to Maya, but after Lara was born, he used every excuse he could think of to stay away from home. A few of his excuses had jobs as waitresses at local bars or as strippers at local clubs, but with a disabled child and no way to make a decent living, she hadn't felt like there was much she could do. He was no high-dollar breadwinner, but at least he had a job, which was more than she could say for most of the men she knew. Truth be told, he was probably glad they were gone. He could spend his money the way he wanted and he wasn't responsible for anyone but himself, plus he didn't have to put up with the kids. He was probably happier than he'd been in a long, long time.

As for her parents, they might be looking for her, but going to them would be too

obvious, and it would put them in danger too. That was out of the question. She loved them, and exposing them to possible harm was something she just couldn't risk. If she could find a way to get the girls to them, she could disappear, but the thought of being separated from her children tore her apart.

She had a job to do at dusk. "You girls sit tight. I'll be back in just a few minutes," she said as she picked up a piece of trash paper.

"POOP?" Lara screamed.

"No, I'm not going to poop. I've got something I've got to do. Stay right here. I'll be right back. Maya?"

"Yes, Mom. I'll keep her here. Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure. But I'll be right back." Cherilyn took off down the path, then veered to the right. As she went, she tore off little pieces of the trash paper and dropped them, hoping they'd lead her back to the campsite.

Sure enough, it wasn't that far until she caught sight of the lower parking lot down by the observation point. Continuing toward it, she dropped little scraps of paper and kept going until she reached the tree line. That was far enough, and she laid down a big stick across the end of her path. As long as nobody moved it, she could find it. It only took her a minute or two to get back to their site, and she sat down with the kids again and waited for dark.

When night fell, she headed to the dumpster again, but the employees never came out. She couldn't understand that. Didn't they have garbage that evening? She knew the lodge was almost full. Voices had rung through the trees all day, and sounds of cars and people talking filled the air. Of course, they couldn't hear her or the girls for the noises surrounding them, but Cherilyn and the children could hear them in the

silence of the forest.

Tears rolled down her face as she headed back to the campsite empty-handed. She had nothing to feed the kids except a couple of granola bars, and she realized she was going to have to come up with a plan to get some food. Maybe she could figure out the best way to get the most for her dollar out of the vending machine at the campground, and she had the five dollars the girl had given her. Cheese and crackers? Candy bars? Granola bars? She wasn't sure what they had in the machine, but she'd come up with something. If nothing else, she'd try to find a way to pry open one of the doors of the lodge and steal something while the restaurant was closed. That wasn't what she wanted to do, but it would be something she'd have to do, and she prayed their crappy security cameras weren't working.

They had one little battery-operated clock, and she waited until it said one thirty. Everyone around the park was silent, either in bed or had left, and after she made sure the girls understood to stay put, she crept up to the parking lot, started the little car, and drove it down to the lower parking area. When she'd parked it and locked the doors, she found the stick and followed the scraps of paper back, using only the beam from a tiny penlight to find her way. Lara was sound asleep. "Where did you go?" Maya whispered.

"I moved the car. The girl at the lodge told me somebody was asking about it. They'll find it, but they'll also think we've moved, and that's what I want them to think."

"Do you think they know we're out here somewhere?"

She smoothed her oldest daughter's hair and pressed her palm to the girl's cheek. "I don't know, honey, but I hope not. And hopefully we've hidden ourselves well enough that they won't find us." She'd heard tell that there was a cave up the hill somewhere, and she planned to look for it at dusk the next evening. If she could find that, they could get rid of the tent, and locating them would be even harder for anyone

who happened to be searching for them.

Which was probably no one, except the one person who'd want to. And if he found them, that would be the end of everything.

CHAPTER2

The very firstthing he noticed when he pulled up was the absence of the car. It was no longer sitting in the parking lot, and he wondered where it could've gone. Had she left?

The door to the lodge swung open and Shaw stepped inside to find an unfamiliar woman behind the counter. "Can I help you, sir?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm Conservation Officer ShawHarrison with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. I need to speak to some of your staff. Could you tell me where to find the evening staff from the restaurant?"

"Yeah, they're down in the dining room. Want me to get their supervisor up here?"

"That would be very helpful. Thank you."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

The woman pointed to the lounge area in front of the huge stone fireplace. “Just have a seat and I’ll call her.”

He thumbed through a couple of the magazines lying on the coffee table in front of the leather sofa until a shadow fell across the table. “Officer Harrison? MarshaConnors, restaurant manager.”

A very attractive woman stood there, and Shaw popped up off the sofa in record time. “Yes, ma’am. I’m OfficerHarrison, and I really need to speak to some of your employees.”

“And which ones might those be?”

“Maybe the ones who clean up after the restaurant closes?”

She side-eyed him, her lids slitted. “What is this in regard to?”

“I’m not sure. I’m just trying to locate the owner of the car that’s out in the parking lot, and they’re the only ones I can think of who might’ve seen someone.”

“Gotcha. Yeah, I noticed that car too, but it’s not there now.”

“I also noticed that. I just want to ask them some questions. They’re not in any trouble.”

“Okay. Let me get a couple of them up here. That’s all I can spare. If they can’t help you, send them back and I’ll send up a couple more people until you have one of

them tell me to stop.”

“Will do. Thank you very much.”

“You’re quite welcome. Always willing to help out law enforcement.”

“Thank you, Ms.Connors. I appreciate it.” He also appreciated the swish of her hips as she walked away, and he kept watching as she made her way down the stairs to the dining room.

In a couple of minutes, two young women clomped up the stairs, whispering as they came. They stopped right in front of him. “Uh, OfficerHarrison?”

“Yes, ma’am. Have a seat, please.” The ladies sat down side by side on the adjacent sofa. “I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions. You haven’t done anything wrong. We’re just trying to figure out something. There’s been this car in the parking lot and?”

One of them blurted out, “Car? We ain’t seen no car.”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s okay. I’m just wondering, have you seen anybody hanging around? Like, oh, maybe a woman?” The furtive glances between the two girls didn’t go unnoticed by Shaw. “She’s not in any trouble. Matter of fact, we’re trying to help her. But we can’t help her if we don’t know where she is.”

The other girl glared at him. “Are you her husband?”

“No, ma’am. I’m not. I’m not related to her in any way. I’m just afraid she might be in danger, and she’s got two kids with her who also might be in danger.” They looked like they wanted to speak, but they didn’t, so he threw out another trick. “Look, the sheriff’s office is looking into this too. I’d like to be able to tell them you cooperated,

but I can't if you don't."

"Sheriff? We don't want no trouble," the dark-haired girl whispered.

"No. We don't. We ain't done nothing wrong," the blond added.

"I don't think you have. Just help me, please? I can't help them if you don't help me. How would you feel if you had to hide out in the woods with your kids and nobody tried to help you?"

"But we been helping?" The minute the words came out of the brunette's mouth, the blond elbowed her in the ribs. "Owww! Damn, Amanda!"

"Shit, Maddie, you gone and done it! Look, Officer Harrison, she ain't done nothing wrong. We just been givin' her scraps and stuff for them to eat. She had to have some, um, personal items for one of the girls too, and I found her a few. If my boss knew all this, I'd get fired. That's the only reason why we didn't want to say nothin'."

"I get it, and it's fine. Your boss doesn't have to know about this. Personally, I know the health department would have a fit if they heard me say this, but if you can find somebody who can use the scraps, I'd rather that than just throwing them out to go to the dump. At least somebody's benefitting from them. Now, what can you tell me about her? This woman. Her name is Cherilyn."

"She said it was Sherry. She's just been comin' down and gettin' the scraps. That's all. We don't see her no other time."

"Not during the day?"

Maddie shook her head. "No, sir. We ain't seen the kids neither. Just the woman."

“Got it. And can you tell me where she comes from? Does she come off a trail?”

“Yeah, but I seen her turn and go up.”

“Up?”

Amanda pointed to her left. “Yeah. Up the hill back there.”

“Which trail is that?”

Maddie shrugged. “There ain’t no trail up there, far as I know.”

“Me neither,” Amanda confirmed. “Never seen one up there. But there’s a cave up there somewheres. I heard about it all my life, but I ain’t never seen it.”

“A cave?” Both women nodded. “Uh, okay. I didn’t see that on the map either.”

“I heard it was ’cause they don’t want folks up there. Like it’s really ancient and stuff, and Indians prolly lived in it, and they don’t want it messed up. And maybe bears are up there. We don’t really know.” He could tell Amanda was being truthful, and it appeared Maddie was also.

“So, if you see her again, could you please not say anything? We’re trying to find her before something happens to all of them.”

Maddie nodded. “Yes, sir. Do we call you if we see her?”

“I’d really appreciate that. Here.” He handed each of them his business card. “Just call me. That’s my cell. I’m going to do everything I can to get them to a safe place.”

“She said they can’t go to a shelter. I think her husband was abusin’ her or somethin’.

Said he'd find them there and... I don't know what she thinks would happen, but it must be somethin' real bad," Maddie said, her voice turning to a whisper as she spoke.

"I don't want that to happen. There's no plans to force them to go to a shelter, but we have to do something for them. Just let me know. Please."

"Yes, sir. We will. And thank you for carin' 'bout 'em. It appears don't nobody else give a damn for 'em," Amanda said, her eyes sad.

"I understand. I care. There's a really nice deputy who does too. He's got a wife and a kid, and he doesn't want something awful to happen to them."

"Good. We don't neither."

"You ladies had better get back to work. Please tell your manager that I got everything I need from the two of you and that I appreciate her sending you up."

"Yes, sir. We will. Thank you. Take care," Maddie said as they all stood. "Gotta get back to it."

"Okay. Thanks again." He watched the two young women head down the stairs, heads hung, and he felt sorry for them. The woman in the woods had put them in a terrible position, and that really wasn't fair to them.

Once he was outside, he took a long look around. Had they really left? He fired up the truck and drove around, then down to the observation point. It only took him a second to spot the car. She'd moved it, and he figured the women had told her someone was asking about it. But it confirmed that she was still there.

Now to figure out exactly wheretherewas.

* * *

Thankgod she'd found that cave. It was pouring down rain, but they were snug and dry inside it. The tent would've been a disaster. She'd already decided they'd have to get into the car and she'd back it up a hill into brush so it couldn't be seen before they'd sit out in the rain. Besides, Lara would wail from being wet and cold, and that would make life miserable for sure.

With the rain coming down the way it was, she couldn't go to the lodge to look for food. She couldn't really go anywhere. They huddled there in the cave, the girls playing cards with an old deck she'd found. Of course, they weren't really playing cards, but Lara thought she was, and from time to time, she'd plop two or three cards down and yell, "GO FITCH!" Let her think she was playing Go Fish. Maya was willing to play along, and it wasn't hurting anything.

Eventually, Lara nodded off, and Maya pulled a blanket over her sister. "Mom?"

Cherilyn turned to her older daughter. "Yes, honey?"

"Mom, I'm so hungry. Don't we have anything?"

"Baby, we've got so little that we've got to keep it until we just can't stand it anymore. After that, I don't know what we'll do."

"Can't Grammy and Poppy help us somehow?"

Cherilyn sighed. "I'm thinking about taking you to their house."

"You meanwe're allgoing to their house."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

The mother shook her head. “No. I’m talking about driving to within a block of their house, letting you and your sister out, and letting you walk from there while I watch from a distance until you’re in the house.”

“You have to come with us!” Maya whispered loudly. “You can’t just leave us! We want to be with you. I love Grammy and Poppy, but I don’t want to be with them. I want to be with you.”

“If that’s what I decide we have to do, that’s what we’ll do. But we’re not to that point quite yet. As soon as it quits this damn raining, I’ll find us some food, I promise.” She didn’t know how, but she’d keep that promise. She wasn’t going to let her children starve.

The rain finally stopped about nine thirty that night, and she sneaked down from the cave, through the dense brush, and to the back of the lodge. There was no one around but, sure enough, in the trash bin was a bag with leftover food neatly wrapped inside. Cherilyn didn’t even bother to look to see what it was. She just took it and hustled back up the hill.

Twenty minutes later, both girls were back to sleep after having a piece of pizza and a dinner roll apiece. Cherilyn ate one piece of pizza too, and left the dinner rolls. There were still two, and the girls could have them for breakfast. She wasn’t important. It was far more important for them to eat.

Every time she stood up, her pants almost dropped, and she knew she was losing weight. Even when she did manage to eat, the tension and fear made her almost nauseous, and she hated that worse. She’d rather not eat than to waste food on herself

that would just come up. The girls needed it too badly.

When she finally settled down to sleep, she listened to the leaves rustling outside and the drips of water that hit the leaf litter on the ground. There had been a time when sleeping in a cave like that with the wind blowing and the smell of rain in the air would've been a dream come true. Instead, in her situation, it was a nightmare. Something had to happen fast, and she made the decision.

The next morning, she'd talk to the girls, and that evening as it got dark, she'd drive down her parents' alley, drop them off, and drive away as soon as they were in the back door. Where she'd go, she didn't know, and it didn't matter. He'd eventually find her, she was sure.

Then a jolt of white-hot fear seared through her mind. What if he took one or both of the girls and held them until she showed up? She'd gladly step in if he'd let them go, but she knew the truth.

He'd kill all three of them, and probably laugh about it. They meant nothing to him. They were meaningless, unless she managed to tell someone about what she'd seen. She fantasized about seeing him dragged away in handcuffs, but she knew better.

Even if it happened, she'd already be dead.

* * *

The first thing he noticed when he woke was the absence of the sound of rain. That was a good sign.

As Shaw dressed, he thought about what the employees at the lodge had told him. If he was going to find her, he was going to have to be stealthy. If she'd avoided detection for three weeks by anyone other than two women who took out the trash,

she could probably keep doing it. Finding her shouldn't be that hard, but he wondered what he'd find when he did.

Once he was on the road, he hit his hands-free, spoke into it, and waited. "Hey there! How ya doin'?" a deep Texas drawl asked in greeting, and it made Shaw smile. He had always heard that you could take the boy out of Texas, but you couldn't take Texas out of the boy. It was obviously true. Aaron had been in Kentucky long enough to lose that Lone Star twang, but it was still there.

"Good, good. You okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Sheriff's got me doing funeral detail today. You got anything new?"

Shaw filled Aaron in on what he'd learned. "And I'm headed there now."

"Prepared?"

"Yeah. As prepared as I can be, I guess. And before you say it, I remember what you said. And I'm prepared."

"Okay. As long as you're prepared. Let me know what happens, right?"

"Sure. No problem. Wanna do lunch?"

"Turn down food? Not this boy! Just let me know. The funeral detail should be finished by eleven."

"Roger that. I'll give you a call. Later."

"Yeah, later. Be safe out there."

“You too.” Shaw hit the button on the steering wheel to end the call and gave some thought to what he was about to do. It was wet out from the previous day, and the forest floor would be slick, but the damp leaves would also muffle his footsteps and make it easier to come up on her without alerting her to his presence. That was the best he could hope for.

The temptation was there to park down in the lower lot by her car, but he knew that was probably just a smoke screen. She most likely was staying in the same spot, just trying to throw off anyone who might be looking for her. Instead, he parked up by the lodge, walked down the back side of the building, checked around the trash bin, and watched for footprints. Sure enough, there were signs that the leaves had been disturbed behind it, so he stepped carefully into the tree cover and kept his eyes on the ground. To the untrained eye, it might’ve seemed there was no path, but he could plainly see it, and he followed it slowly, cautiously, hoping he’d see her before she saw him.

It took him twenty-five minutes or so before he heard them?voices, and they sounded like children. One was speaking at a low level, but the other one was loud, and he figured that was the younger girl. The one thing he didn’t hear was an adult voice. Shaw crept silently up the trail, watching closely, until he topped a small rise. Crouching down, he watched.

Two girls sat in front of a small cave. The larger one was trying to brush the smaller one’s hair, and the younger girl was fighting her sister’s every attempt. “Be still, Lara! Your hair looks like a hornet’s nest.” Lara, the older girl had said?these were definitely her kids.

“NO! I NA WANNA HAIR!” She waved her hands about, batting at the older girl. “STAHHPPPP!”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“No, you stop. Mom told me to brush your hair, and that’s what I’m going to do. Now, you be still or I swear, I’ll knock you down and sit on you to hold you.” Lara continued to fight... Maya. That’s her name, he told himself.

They were so distracted that they didn’t even see him approaching, and he thought that was good. He’d gotten to within twenty feet of them and crouched down when Lara looked up and screamed, “MAN!”

Maya’s head whipped around and her eyes bulged. “Shit! Get in the cave, Lara. Who are you? What do you want?”

“I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” he said in little more than a whisper. The girl wouldn’t run. She wouldn’t leave her sister, and Shaw knew it.

“What do you want? Mom! Mom!”

“It’s okay! Really, it’s all right. I’m a conservation officer. You know, I take care of birds and fish and plants? I’m not here to hurt you. I just want to help you.”

“Mom! Shit! Stay away from us!” she screamed and backed toward the cave where the younger girl hid, her eyes big as half dollars. “Don’t come any closer!” she yelled as she grabbed a large rock and held it aloft.

“Look, I’m not gonna hurt you, but if you hit me with that, I’ll be forced to arrest you, and I don’t want to do that.” He was about to say something else when he saw the girl’s eyes flick to the right slightly, and something pressed into his back.

A woman's voice whispered, "Don't move. I mean it. I don't want to shoot you, but I will if I have to. Down on your knees."

Shaw knelt and splayed his arms outward, then slowly lifted his hands and wove his fingers together behind his neck. "I'm not going to hurt you. But if you hurt me, you're hurting a law enforcement officer, and more than one person knew I was coming here today." When she didn't respond, he tried again. "Look, I just came to talk to you. I'd like to help you if I can. I know what's been going on because I talked to the employees at the lodge, and you shouldn't have to live like this, Cherilyn."

"How do you know my name?"

"We ran the plates on your car." He waited for a few seconds before he spoke again. "Can I turn around now? I swear to god, I'm not going to hurt you. I wouldn't do that. Looks like you've got it rough enough as it is." There was an instant sensation of the weapon pulling away from his back, and he twisted and grabbed it.

It was a stick.

The woman jumped back and stood there, a look of total terror on her face. "What do you want?"

"I just want to talk to you. I'm gonna stand up now, okay? It's okay, really. I'm not going to hurt anybody. I just want to talk." He rose to standing and took in the sight of the woman in front of him. She was pitifully thin and her hair looked brittle and dry, there was skin peeling off her face, and he could tell just by looking at the three of them that they hadn't had a bath or clean clothes in weeks. "You can't keep living out here like this. Let me help you, okay?"

She sighed and bowed her head. "Nobody can help us. I don't know what's going to happen."

“I can help you. I swear, I can, if you’ll just let me. So, can we...” Shaw pointed about fifty feet away at some large rocks. “Let’s go over there and sit down, okay? We’ll just talk and see if we can figure this out.”

She sighed again. “Whatever.” Then she turned and walked toward the boulders.

Shaw waited until she sat on one, then he sat on the one farthest from her. Yeah, she smelled wretched, but he also knew if he got too close, she’d get spooked, and he didn’t want something to happen that would hurt any of them. When they were both settled, he looked into her face and smiled. “I didn’t want to talk in front of your girls. The last thing I want is for them to be scared or hear too much.”

“Yeah. This has been hard enough on them.”

“I can see that. Can you tell me why on earth you’re out here?”

She sat there for a few seconds, picking at some flaky skin on the back of her hand. “I saw something.”

“Okay. I know there was a murder in your building.”

Her eyes snapped to lock with his. “How did you know that?”

“Your brother-in-law told me.”

The response was instantaneous. “Oh, shit. No. You didn’t tell him you were looking for me. Please tell me you didn’t.”

“Uh, yeah, I told him I was looking for you. Said some employees at a local business had reported your car here and?”

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit. Oh, god, I’m as good as dead.” Her hair swung back and forth as she stood and started to pace in fear, a fear so palpable that Shaw could feel it. “You told him I was here? Why? Why did you do that?”

“Not here, no. Besides, I didn’t know it would be a problem, and we were trying to find you, and?”

“We? Who’s ‘we?’ You and who? My ex?”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:27 am

“No. Me and a deputy sheriff.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“No. You haven’t. But we’re concerned about you and the girls. When Marlon told me you had kids with you, I knew I had to find you.”

She stopped and glared at him. “You just sealed my death warrant. You know that, right?”

“I don’t understand. Marlon’s brother is that abusive?”

“No. He’s not abusive. Why would you say that?”

“Because the girls at the lodge said?”

“Yeah, I told them that because I didn’t want to explain. I knew they could probably understand that.”

“So why are you out here then? What are you so afraid of?”

“Because.” She sat back down on the rock and looked at her hands in her lap.

“Because I... I saw him.”

“Your ex?”

“No. The guy.”

“Guy? What guy?” Shaw was lost but, suddenly, it came to him. “The guy. The guy who killed your neighbor?”

She nodded, still refusing to look at him. “Yeah. I saw him.”

“How? When?”

She drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly before she lifted her eyes and gazed up at him from under her brows. “There was always noise in her apartment, so I didn’t think anything about it. I heard some sounds, but I just ignored them. About nine thirty, I had the girls in bed and I decided to go down to the car and get some laundry I’d brought home, and when I walked past the apartment, I heard a few loud bangs, but I still didn’t think anything about it. I didn’t know her very well. She was kinda... odd.”

“How?”

“I dunno. Quiet, but if you ever spoke to her, she started babbling about all kinds of stuff and it was hard to get away from her. She had a couple of little kids too, but I don’t think they lived with her. She had visits with them, but I think the state had them. Anyway, I went down to the car, got the laundry basket, and started back up the stairs. And he met me halfway down.”

“The guy from the apartment?”

“I didn’t know that at the time. I only knew he didn’t belong in our building. Asshole.”

“How did you know that?”

“Because I know him.”

Shaw felt some of the air leave his lungs, and the rest threatened to follow.
“You know him?”

“Oh, yeah. I absolutely do. And he looked right into my eyes, so he knew who I was.”

“Was it your ex?”

“No. Frankie’s an asshole too, but he’s not like that.” She shook her head. “It was his best friend, Rodney Frymire. He knows me. Son of a bitch is crazy. Totally crazy. When we were still together, I told Frankie not to let him come over anymore. I didn’t like the way he looked at me, and I damn sure didn’t like the way he looked at Maya. And one day, he told Frankie to shut Lara up or he would.”

“What did he mean by that?”

Cherilyn scowled. “He told Frankie, ‘If that was my kid, I’d punch it in the face.’ He’s an asshole.”

“Sounds like one.”

“Yeah, and if you told Marlon anything about where I am, he’s probably going to find me. Marlon won’t go out of his way to tell Frankie anything, but if he sees Frankie, he’ll say something.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“I didn’t tell him anything about the park. He knows nothing except that we’re looking for you.”

She seemed to relax a little. “Good. Maybe that’ll buy me a little bit more time.”

“You’re going to be safe now. I’m going to see to it.”

She let out a sarcastic little chuckle. “Oh? And how the hell do you intend to do that?”

“You’re going home with me.”

“I can’t go home with you! You might be an ax murderer or something.”

Shaw snickered. “Here. Take my phone. Look up the Whitley County Sheriff Department and ask for Deputy Aaron Friedman. When he answers, tell him your name is Cherilyn and you want to know if I’m safe to be around.” And he handed her his phone.

She sat there, staring at it, before she poked the screen. “It’s locked.”

“Sorry. Let me unlock it.” She handed it back, and when he’d unlocked it, he returned it to her. “Go on. Call him.”

He watched as she doodled around on the screen, looked and scrolled, and finally touched something before putting the phone up to her ear. “Um, yes. Could I, um, speak to Deputy Aaron... Friedman?” There was a moment of silence.

“Ask them to patch you in,” he whispered.

“Uh, okay. Can you patch me in? I really need to talk to him.” More silence before she said, “Okay. I’ll wait.” Thirty seconds passed, and then she said, “Oh. Um, hi. Um, my name is Cherilyn. Um-hmm. Uh-huh. Yeah, I’m here with him. He told me to call you because I don’t know him. Yeah. Uh-huh. Okay. Okay. Yeah. Uh-huh.” She held the phone out. “He wants to talk to you.”

He took the phone and put it on speaker. “Hey, dude, what’s up? I’ve got you on speaker.”

“Good. Everybody okay?”

“Yeah. We’re all okay. Got a little tense for a minute there, but it’s all under control.” Then he winked at Cherilyn and watched as a little smile tugged the corners of her lips upward.

“Good. What’s next?”

“She told me what’s going on. Aaron, I can’t leave them here. I’m taking them to the house with me and we’ll figure something out.”

“Like what?”

He thought for a few seconds, and then he had an idea. “Hey, can you go talk to SheriffMcEvers? See if she’s got any ideas? Or maybe I could come talk to her?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell her what’s going on and see what she wants to do. She’s pretty good about meeting everybody right where they are and not asking too much. I think she’d welcome a chance to sit down with you.”

“Good deal. Now I’ve got to get them rounded up and see if we can get something going for them. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

“Please do. And Cherilyn?”

She perked up. “Yeah?”

“That man standing there with you is a good guy. He’s not going to hurt you, and he’ll do whatever he can to help you. We’ve both been worried about you and your girls. I’ve got a wife and a little girl, and it scares me to know you and your kids have been out in the woods all this time. Let Shaw help you and we’ll be in touch, okay?”

To Shaw’s surprise, big tears rolled down Cherilyn’s face. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say. I mean, really... Thank you. Nobody gives a damn about us.”

“That’s not true, and we’ll prove it. Shaw, we’ll talk soon.”

“Yep. Thanks, Aaron. Later.” He touched END on the phone’s screen and looked at the crying woman. “Let’s get you guys gathered up and get in the truck.”

“My car...”

“No. We need to leave it. If they show up looking for you, it could keep them guessing, and that’s what we want. You don’t need to be driving anyway. If you’re out, somebody might see you, and then you’d definitely be in danger.”

“That’s true. What am I gonna do, sir? I really don’t know what to do.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“It’s not sir. It’s Shaw. And we’ll figure that out together. Come on. Let’s get on it.”
He stood and waited while she made her way back to the cave.

In five minutes, everything was picked up and they were on their way to the truck, but as they got close to the lodge, Shaw pointed to his right. “Go to the tree line over there. I’ll pull the truck over and you can get in there. That way the cameras at the lodge won’t catch you.”

“Okay.” She took the younger girl’s hand and the three of them made their way down through the brush as Shaw headed to the parking lot.

Please, god, don’t let them bolt before I can even get them in the truck. He pulled around to the spot he’d pointed out, and for a moment or two, he didn’t see them anywhere. But in seconds, they appeared through the brush, and he ran around to open the truck doors for them. Jesus, my whole truck will have to be fumigated after this, he told himself, but that was something he couldn’t worry about. As soon as the doors closed and their seatbelts were snapped, he took off.

No one spoke as he drove along. An occasional glance told him she was staring out the window and still crying. The older girl seemed extremely nervous, and the younger one was playing with something on the back of his seat?most likely a map. There had to be something he could do to help them relax a little, and then he saw the sign up ahead. “You guys like burgers?”

“Yes!” Maya barked out.

“BURGERS!” Lara screamed.

Cherilyn gave him a soft smile. “Sorry. She doesn’t understand the concept of inside voice.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“I’m really kinda afraid you don’t.” Shaw didn’t know what to say about that. Two hours of that yelling was going to be hard to take.

“So let’s pull up. You tell me what you want, and I’ll order, but when we get to the window, I want you to look out the other way so nobody can see your faces, okay? Don’t know who’s inside here.”

Ten minutes later, they had burgers, fries, and soft drinks, and were headed to his house. He had three females coming to his house, three females he didn’t really know. Dear god. He’d completely lost his mind.

He got them inside, got them seated at the table, and set all the food out. It was hard to eat with the stench, but he managed. When they were finished, to his surprise, Cherilyn and Maya cleaned everything up. “Now what?” Cherilyn asked.

“Now you can all shower and we’ll wash your clothes.”

Maya gave him a weird look. “But we don’t have clean ones.”

“I’ve got some tee shirts you can wear, and you can wear some of my old boxers. I don’t wear them anymore, and if they’re too big, we can pin them until your clothes are clean. Then we need to get you some more clothes. Aaron’s wife is a social worker and?”

“No! No social workers! They’ll take them!” Cherilyn cried out.

“No. She won’t. I promise. She’ll just find some clothes and things. Aaron will brief her, and it’ll be okay. So you take a shower first and when you’re done and they’re getting cleaned up, you can make a list and I’ll give her a call.” She didn’t move. “Cherilyn, it’s gonna be okay. We’ll help you. I promise. But we need to get you cleaned up and in some clean clothes, okay? You go on into the bathroom. The towels are behind the door. When you’re done, I’ll have a basket just outside the door with some stuff in it, and you can get dressed. Then you can help the girls.”

He didn’t think he’d ever seen a face so pitiful when she asked, “Why? Why are you helping us? Why do you give a damn? Nobody cares about us.”

“That’s not true. DeputyFriedman and I have been working on ways to help you, but you have to trust us. Can you at least try?”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah. At least for my girls, I’ll try.”

“Good. That’s all I ask. Now scoot. They’ll be fine until you come out.”

“Okay.” Cherilyn glanced at the girls. “Behave.”

“I will. I don’t know about her,” Maya said and pointed to Lara.

“MOM! NOT LEAVE!”

“I’m not leaving. It’ll be okay. Mr.Shaw will take care of you. You’ll be fine and I’ll be done in a hurry.” He watched as she hustled toward the bathroom.

He called out to her, “Toss your clothes out and I’ll put them in the machine.”

“Okay.” The door closed, and in just a minute, it opened a crack and she dropped everything she’d been wearing on the floor.

“Do you have a laundry basket, Mr.Shaw? We can’t mess up your house. I’ll pick everything up and?”

“Relax. My house is lived in. It’s not a museum. You’re fine.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

The girl looked around. “This is nice. It’s so big.”

This is big? It’s tiny! What the hell were those apartments like?“Well, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. We had to share a bed at home. Are we going to do that here?”

“No. You and your sister can, but your mom can have her own room.”

“Oh! Nice! Thanks. Do you really have a washer and dryer?”

Shaw’s heart hurt for the girl. He was pretty sure they went to the laundromat. “Yeah. They’re not new, but I’ve got a pair.”

“Can you teach me how to use them? I’ve never used any regular ones before.”

“Sure. But I don’t mind doing the laundry.”

“If you’re letting us stay here, we should do the work. We should. It’s only right.”

“I get it. And yeah, I’ll let you help.” He glanced over at Lara, who seemed to be fading fast. “Hey, getting sleepy?”

“Uh-huh.” It was the quietest he’d seen the child.

“Let’s go over here and you can lie down on the sofa, okay? Then once you get your shower, you can take a nap on the bed.”

“No nap. I na baby.”

“I know, but everybody needs a nap now and then. Do you need a drink?”

The child looked at her older sister. “PEE!”

“Okay. I doubt Mom locked the door. Come on.” He watched as Maya took Lara’s hand and led her down the hallway. She rapped on the door and he heard Cherilyn call out, “Yeah?” The girls disappeared into the bathroom, and he grabbed his phone.

“You got ’em?”

“Yeah. They’re here. Hey, your wife, do you think she’d help out?”

“Whaddya need?”

“They need some clothes and shoes.”

He heard Aaron laugh. “No problem! That woman loves to shop! You got sizes?”

“No, but I’ll get them.”

“Hey, tell you what, why don’t I have her come by your house and see what they need, okay?”

“Okay. Sounds good. Thanks, Aaron.”

“Anytime, bud.”

They’d have clean clothes and some shoes. Underwear. Socks. Maybe Aaron’s wife could get them toothbrushes, toothpaste, and hairbrushes. He remembered one of the

young women at the lodge saying the older girl needed personal hygiene products. They could get those too. And he needed to get some things to keep the girls occupied. Books, movies, some toys for the younger one. He didn't know what they liked, but he could come up with something, he was sure.

An hour later, they were all squeaky clean. He'd found some rubber bands, and Cherilyn had gathered up the excess fabric at the waistbands of the boxers and tied it off with the bands. She held Lara on her lap, wrapped in a poly fleece throw, until the child was warm and drowsy, then carried her to the bedroom Shaw had gotten ready and tucked her in.

By morning, they'd have some clothes to wear, and they would have had at least two decent meals. Then the real work would begin. He and Aaron were going to find Rodney Frymire. That son of a bitch would pay.

CHAPTER 3

Cherilyn took a look at herself in the mirror. She looked horrible. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair was lifeless. Her ribs were visible, and so were her hip bones. What must that man think of me? she asked herself.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Maya was still sitting in the living room with Shaw when Cherilyn came back from tucking Lara in for an afternoon nap. She'd no more than sat down when Maya crossed the room and bent down to her ear. "Mom, can I take a nap with Lara?"

"Of course, honey," Cherilyn answered, her voice low. "That's just fine. Go cuddle up with her and get some sleep." She watched as Maya made her way down the hallway, and then she turned to Shaw. "She wanted to know if she could nap with Lara. Honestly, I think they're excited about having an actual bed to sleep in."

"It ain't much, but it's not a cave," Shaw said with a grin.

"It's nice. It's very nice. So thank you."

"You're very welcome. Want something to drink?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. Like what?"

He wandered into the kitchen, but she could still hear him. "Well, let's see... I've got all kinds of soda, and tea, and milk, and... Okay, there's some beer in here too, and I've also got bourbon in the dining room."

"I don't usually care for bourbon, but if you don't care how much company I am, I think that's what I want." What she really wanted was to get plastered long enough to not worry, and it helped that she was in his house. For reasons she couldn't understand, she felt completely safe with Shaw.

"Bourbon it is. I think that's a great choice." She watched as he crossed to the dining

room, took out a couple of glasses?she thought they were called on-the-rocks glasses, but she wasn't sure?and poured bourbon in both of them. "Here ya go. Two fingers, and a generous two fingers at that."

"Thanks." As he sat and took a sip, she watched him. Even though she wasn't a fan of beards, his suited him. It was just right, not too long and not the scruff most of the guys wore. It was a real beard, but not messy or bushy. It was classy.I guess I've never actually been around a classy guy, she thought. Her dad was a wonderful man, but classy he was not.

"Is there anything else you can tell me that'll help us find this guy?" he asked out of the blue, and she was a little taken aback.

"I didn't know what he'd done when I saw him. It wasn't until the next morning that I found out."

"Exactly what happened?"

"I heard a lot of commotion, so I opened the door and looked down the hallway. There was a cop there with Grace?she's the lady who lives in the apartment on the other side. She said she heard the woman's little girls crying, and she went over and knocked on the door. One of the kids let her in, so she asked what was wrong, and they said their mommy was in the tub and wouldn't wake up. That's when she found the woman. Her name was Lynne, I believe."

"Did the police come to talk to you?"

"Yeah, and I wasn't about to tell them what I'd seen. I figured that would be my death sentence, so I decided to mind my own business and stay to myself. It wasn't until after they were gone that I realized what had happened, what part Rodney had played, and I had to get out of there. I knew he'd come back looking for me."

“Do you know if he’s been back there?”

“No. I wasn’t close enough to any of the other residents to call them and ask.”

“Gotcha.”

His time in the kitchen had afforded Cherilyn a chance to look around without his notice, and she pointed to a picture on the mantel of the big fireplace. “Who’s the girl?”

“My daughter, Candace.”

“Oh! Where’s your wife?”

“With her new, rich husband, Austin.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“And Candace?”

“Since Morgan and Austin got together, she’s paid zero attention to Candace, and the girl runs wild. She can do whatever she pleases.”

“Do you see her?”

“No. Not much. Not that I don’t want to. She doesn’t care about seeing me. Morgan and Austin’s lifestyle appeals to her. Lots of money, no supervision, doing whatever she wants to do.”

“I’m sorry.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“It’s okay. Someday I’m going to get a call that she’s pregnant by some forty-year-old asshole or in jail for something stupid, and suddenly I’ll be the person she can count on.”

“Your parents?”

“They live here in town. I see them pretty often, and we’re close.”

“Does she see them?”

“Not much. She sees them as old country hicks and really doesn’t care about them.”

Cherilyn took a deep breath and blew it out. “Someday, when her life’s gone to shit and she’s got nobody else, she’s going to regret blowing all of you off. You do realize that, right?”

“I hope you’re wrong, because I really don’t want her life to go to shit. I’d just like to be part of it.”

“How old is she?”

“Fifteen.”

“Like Maya. That’s a tough age.”

“Yeah. I remember all too well. For what they’ve been through, your two seem pretty well-adjusted.”

“Maya, yes. Lara... Honestly, I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to keep her at home. She’s getting older and stronger, and there’s going to come a time when I can’t control her. I’ll probably have to send her somewhere. I don’t want to, but if I can’t control her, she won’t be safe, and above everything else, I want her to be safe. That’s the most important thing.”

“I agree, and I think it’s pretty selfless of you to feel that way,” Shaw said and took another sip of bourbon.

“Not selfless. It’s just a fact. If she takes after Frankie’s side of the family, and so far she has, she’ll be bigger than me by the time she’s fourteen, so I won’t have a choice. When I can’t keep her from running out in traffic, or she knocks me down and kicks me when she gets mad, she’ll no longer be safe with me, and I’ll have to make a decision.”

“I’m sorry, Cherilyn. It has to be hard.”

“It’s my lot in life. Nobody asked me if I could handle it before it happened to me, so I just have to deal with it.”

They sat there in silence. If Cherilyn had to characterize it, it would be companionable silence. She didn’t feel like she had to fill every second with conversation, and Shaw was easy to talk to. For a professional man, he was surprisingly relaxed and laid back, and she needed that, the idea that she could relax with someone and not be on her guard constantly. What was it about him?

All of a sudden, the bourbon hit her like a sledgehammer, and the tension of the last three-plus weeks settled in instantly. “Oh, god. I’m so tired. I feel like I’m just going to pass out.”

“You’re relaxing from the absence of stress as the bourbon is melting it all away. You

probably need to go to bed.”

“I think I will. Shaw, thank you so much. Seeing my kids lying there, quiet and still and unworried... that means everything to me.”

“You’re very welcome. Hang on just a minute.” He hopped up, and she wondered where he was going. When he reappeared, he had a bottle of water in his hand. “Go on in there and lie down. Take a nap. I’ll wake you guys when I’ve got some dinner for us. But you’ve been under a lot of stress. You deserve to lie down and get some sleep without worrying about what’s going to happen in the next minute. While you’re down, I’ll wash all the clothes and they’ll be clean by the time you wake up. Do you like pork?”

She was a bit confused. “What?”

“I asked, do you like pork? I’ve got a pork roast in here, and some vegetables, and I can?”

“Don’t go to any trouble for us.”

“I’m not. I’ve gotta eat too!” he said and laughed.

“Yeah. We like pork. We like just about anything.”

“Okay. Go lie down. Get some rest. You deserve it. And Cherilyn?”

“Yeah?”

“I meant everything I said. You’re not alone in this anymore. I’m involved now, and so are Aaron and his wife. She’ll come by and get some sizes and stuff from you and the girls, and everything will be fine. You’ll have what you need, some of what you

want, and a safe place to be until we can figure all of this out, okay? Your worries are over.”

She felt tears pool in her lower lids. “Thank you,” she managed to croak out.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“You’re welcome. See you in a few hours.”

As she dragged herself toward the bedroom he’d pointed out earlier, she cried, her cheeks slick and her nose running. She and her girls were warm and dry. They had a roof over their heads, clean clothes on their backs, and a comfortable place to sleep. Shaw had said he was a conservation officer.

He was wrong. Apparently he hadn’t looked in the mirror lately, because from where she stood, he was an angel.

* * *

“How about tomorrow at ten?”

Shaw made a note in his calendar. “Sure. That sounds perfect. Listen, thanks so much, SheriffMcEvers. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome. It sounds like they’ve been traumatized enough. If we can do the interview in a neutral place where they’ll be more comfortable, that’s fine with me. By the way, do you think they need legal representation?”

“Oh, no. Nope. They haven’t done anything wrong. And I know that she’ll tell you whatever you want to know as long as she doesn’t feel threatened.”

“Good. So I’ll see you tomorrow morning at ten. May bring Aaron with me if he’s free.”

“That would be great. I’d love for them to meet him. See you then.”

“Yes, sir. Bye.” He’d been on the phone with CarlyMcEvers for three whole minutes and his respect for her had grown even greater than it was before. She seemed like a kind, considerate person. He hoped Cherilyn and the girls would see her that way.

A soft rap came from the door, and Shaw opened it to find a woman standing there, a very pretty, sweet-faced woman. She had a little girl with her, and one look at the child told him who they were. “Maisey, right?”

“Yeah! You’re Shaw, right? Good to meet you.” She held out a hand and Shaw took it, wondering at its softness but also its tight grip. “I hear I have some shopping to do.”

“Listen, thanks so much. I really appreciate it. But they’re asleep right now and?”

“You have any of their clothes?”

“Yeah. In the washer.” He stood there for a minute, then felt like a complete idiot. “Geez, sorry. I’m so rude. Come on in. And who do we have here?” he said as he bent down to smile at the child.

“I’m Murielle. Did you know my daddy is a deputy?”

“I know your daddy. He’s a good guy.”

“Yes, he is.”

“And who’s your friend here?”

Murielle held up the stuffed dragon. “This is Donnie. He’s my bestie. And Maisey is

my mom now. She loves me, and I love her. My mommy died, so Maisey does mom stuff now.”

He’d heard that story, and he made a mental note to ask Aaron about it. “Oh, well, it’s nice that you’ve got a mom now.”

“Yeah. She’s the best. Do you have kids I can play with?”

“You could, but they’re asleep. They’ve had a hard time, and they’re really tired.”

“Oh. I know how that is. A bad man stole me. I was very scared.” Her gaze left Shaw’s face and she stared at her little dragon, stroking his head as she sighed. That left him even more curious.

“They’re very scared too. There’s a bad man in their life. But I’m trying to keep him from finding them, so don’t tell anybody they’re here, okay?”

“No! I won’t. I don’t want him to get them. Mommy, can I play with Donnie on the front porch?”

Maisey glanced at Shaw, and he nodded. “Sure, baby. Just come back in if you need to, and don’t wander away. Stay on the porch.”

“Okay, Mommy. I won’t. Come on, Donnie. There’s rocks out here that you can blow fire on.” She shuffled out the front door and closed it behind her.

“She’s adorable.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Maisey chuckled. “She’s a mess. That kid... I never cease to be amazed at how smart and funny she is. She and Aaron are my whole world.”

“Do you have kids?”

Maisey shook her head. “No, but we’re thinking about it. That your daughter?” she asked as she pointed to the photo on the fireplace mantel.

“Yeah. She’s fifteen.”

“Tough age.”

He laughed quietly. “So I’ve heard!”

Ten minutes later, Maisey had looked in all their clothing, written down sizes, plus measured shoes and made notes. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. The oldest girl is fifteen and she needs some, um, feminine products.”

“Gotcha. I’ll get girly shampoo and body wash and stuff like that too. Oh, toothbrushes and toothpaste?”

“Yeah, they need those too. And hairbrushes.”

“Got it.”

“And here.” Shaw fished his wallet out of his back pocket. “You can use my credit

card. I don't need it back anytime soon."

Maisey shook her head. "No. I've got this. You can't imagine how thankful I am that you got them out of the woods and into a warm, dry place."

"But I don't mind?"

"And neither do I. So don't worry about it. I'll go get this stuff, and how 'bout I pick up pizza for you guys on my way back?"

"You don't have to?"

She laid a soft hand on his forearm, and Shaw could feel his stress melt away. "I know I don't, but I want to. You guys work hard and somebody needs to reward your dedication."

Shaw blushed. "I'm just a conservation officer."

"You are not 'just a conservation officer.' You're law enforcement, and you're one of the good guys. Now you just sit down, take a load off, and I'll be back in a little while."

"Maisey..." When she turned, he smiled. "Thank you so much."

"You're very welcome. See you in a bit."

As soon as she and Murielle were in the car, Shaw locked the door and took up his spot on the sofa again. The house was quiet, the dryer was running, and everything was cleaned up and neat. He thought about the three females down the hallway and hoped their dreams were nightmare-free. They needed some respite from the horrors they'd experienced.

Especially Cherilyn.

* * *

“Cherilyn?” The nightmare was going on, but the voice wasn’t from it, and she couldn’t figure out what was happening. “Cherilyn? Honey, wake up.”

Her eyelids fluttered and it took her a minute to remember where she was. “Whaaa...”

“Cherilyn, it’s Shaw. Wake up. Dinner’s here.”

“Oh! Oh. Oh, um...” She rubbed her eyes. “Dinner. Right. Wait. I didn’t cook.”

She heard him let out a little laugh. “A friend brought some by. Said she just wanted to help out and let everybody relax. So come on. It’s getting cold. And I think you should wake the girls. They don’t know me that well.”

“Okay. I will.” She spun and dropped her legs off the bed just as Shaw walked out the bedroom door. “Shaw?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

In a split second, his face peered around the doorway. “Yeah?”

“Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. See you in a minute.”

Cherilyn sat there for a few seconds and took stock. She did feel better since she’d had a little rest, and she bet the girls did too. After a little stretching, she stood and made her way to the other bedroom. As soon as she opened the door, Lara sat straight up in bed. “MOM! I NEEDA EAT!”

“Yes, honey. We’ve got food. Maya, baby, get up.”

“Yeah, um, okay.” The girl rubbed her eyes and sat up. “We have food?”

“Yeah. One of Shaw’s friends brought something by. Let’s go see what it is. Come on. He said it was getting cold.”

She decided maybe she’d better go to the bathroom, so she turned back and stepped through the narrow doorway, closing the door behind her. And when she switched the light on, she got the surprise of her life.

Sitting on the vanity was a pretty basket with a bow on the handle. Inside were three hairbrushes, three toothbrushes, tubes of toothpaste, shower gel, shampoo and conditioner, a box of tampons and a package of panty shields, some deodorant, and a sampler box of ten different perfumes. There was a smaller package inside, and when she opened it, she found a display card inside with twelve pairs of earrings on it, from

rhinestone studs to small hoops, and even some dangles. How had he done that?

The minute she opened the door, a voice screamed, “PIZZA!”

“What’s all the fuss in here?” she asked as she stepped into the kitchen. The girls were going crazy, and Shaw was grinning like a jack-o-lantern.

“Pizza! Real pizza! Look, Mom! There’s pepperoni, and sausage and mushroom, and supreme! With everything! I don’t believe it! Pizza!”

“PIZZA!” Lara screamed again.

“Oh, that really looks good.” The smell was heavenly, and she couldn’t remember the last time she had a nice pizza. The stuff from the lodge was barely edible, much less good pizza.

“Drinks, everybody. What do you want?” Shaw had the refrigerator door open.

“COKE!” Lara screamed.

Cherilyn shook her head. “No. No Coke for you. You can have water or milk.”

“NO! COKE!”

“No Coke. Water or milk.”

“MOM! COKE!”

“No, ma’am! You’re not having Coke, so decide.”

“MAYA GET COKE!”

“Yes, and Maya isn’t screaming. When you stop screaming, you can have Coke.”

“NOT SCREAMING!”

“Yes, you are. You’re having milk. Maya?”

“Just a soft drink. I don’t care what kind,” the girl said, her cheeks reddening.

Shaw reached into the refrigerator. “Okay. I’ve got pretty much everything. Cherilyn?”

She thought for a few seconds. “I’ll take a soft drink too.”

“Alrighty. Here we go.” Shaw set cans of soft drink down in front of Maya and Cherilyn, plus one at his place, then poured a huge glass of milk for Lara. “Dig in, y’all. It’s better while it’s hot.”

“So who is the friend who brought the pizza?” she asked as Shaw sat down.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Her name is Maisey. She’s the social worker I was telling you about who’s married to the deputy who helped me find you guys.”

It hit her in that moment. “Is she the one who left the basket in the bathroom?”

Shaw nodded and smiled. “Yeah, and there are about eight huge bags of stuff in the laundry room. Clothes, shoes, socks, underwear, bras, pajamas, slippers, robes, all kinds of stuff. I think there are some lightweight jackets in there, and some hair ties, and dozens of other things. She really went all out.”

Cherilyn was confused. “Why?”

Shaw leveled his gaze at her and some kind of fluttering started in her chest. “We all want to help you. You’ve had a hard time of it. It’s time you got the kind of help you need, and it’s going to happen, Cherilyn. Don’t doubt it.”

“I really do appreciate it. I don’t understand why anyone would want to help trash like us. We’re just?”

Shaw caught her off guard when he yelled. “No! Don’t say that! Don’t even say that about yourself! You have so much more to offer the world than that, Cherilyn. Whoever fed you that shit, you need to tell them to fuck off.”

“FUCK!” Lara screamed.

Shaw’s face turned bright red and Cherilyn fought laughter. “Oops. Sorry. Not used to having kids around, obviously,” he mumbled as an apology.

“Lara, no. We don’t say that. You say it again and I’ll wash your mouth out with soap.” She wondered what Shaw would think about that, but regardless, it had the desired effect. Lara calmed down immediately.

Then she heard him chuckle. “My mom did that to me?once. Never had to do it again. I got the message loud and clear.”

“Yeah, I bet. Mine did it to me a couple of times, and that was plenty. I’ve never had to do it to Maya. Did it to Lara once and anytime I say that now, she shuts up.”

“Well, thank god for small favors, right?” He grinned as he picked up another piece of pizza. “I’ve got movies. Who wants to watch a movie?”

Maya brightened. “I do!”

“MUHMAID!” Lara barked.

“I don’t have that one, but I’m sure I can find something in there. I’ve got all kinds of movies from when Candace was little. Eat up and we’ll watch.”

An hour later, as they sat in the living room, both girls glued to the TV, Cherilyn sneaked glances at Shaw. God, he was good looking, rugged but refined. She was five feet and seven inches, and he was tall, maybe six two or something. That was perfect.Perfect for what?she asked herself.No guy this nice and classy is ever going to give somebody like me the time of day.It was true. If he did want her, it would be for a couple of fucks and then she’d be cast off to the side. Nobody wanted her. She’d been married to FrankieTravis. Women didn’t get much more desperate than that.

And as she watched him, in one instant, his eyes cut sideways to her and locked with her gaze. She could feel a flush spreading out over her skin, and she was sure the surprise in her eyes gave her away. It was awkward as hell until it happened.

He smiled. It wasn't a smartass smile, one of those I-know-I'm-so-hot-that-all-the-women-want-me smile. It was gentle and pure, and for a brief moment, she allowed herself to fantasize that he might actually be interested in her. Could he ever? A split second later, he got up from his chair and took off to the kitchen. Well, I blew that, she chided herself.

Suddenly, there was warmth by her right ear and she heard a voice whisper, "Here." An arm extended over her shoulder, and in the hand was a can of soda. "Thought you might enjoy this."

She turned her head to say, "Thanks," and there he was, his lips less than two inches from hers. "Uh, that's nice of you."

"You're welcome." Then he stood, stepped away, and claimed his seat again, and the magical, mystical moment was over, the moment in which Cherilyn imagined herself being with someone like Shaw. If only it could be real, she told herself as they finished watching the movie.

"Time for bed," she said as soon as the credits started rolling. "Go on. Both of you. Brush your teeth and hair and get into your pajamas. We've got a lot of work to do tomorrow washing and putting away all of the nice things Maisey bought for us. And we need to write a nice thank-you to her."

Maya lifted her hand as though she were asking a question in class. "Can I do it, Mom? I want to."

"Sure. But for now, go. Get some sleep. I'll be in there in just a minute." She watched them go, then turned to look at Shaw. "Thanks again."

"You're welcome. So once they're in bed, join me out on the back porch? It's really nice out tonight, and I like to sit out there and just look at the moon."

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on your quiet time. You’ve probably had enough of me to last?”

“I wouldn’t ask you to come out there unless I wanted you to. Go put them to bed. I’ll be out there waiting. And grab another couple of drinks if you want.”

“O-o-o-okay.” What was happening? She wasn’t sure. It took her about ten minutes to get them tucked in and close the bedroom door behind her. She grabbed two sodas from the refrigerator and padded out barefoot to the back porch.

It really was lovely out there. Rather than a porch, it was more like a simple deck, only about a foot off the ground and without a rail. There were two chairs and one two-seater glider, and Shaw sat on the glider to one end, so Cherilyn chose the chair closest to him and handed him the drink. “Thanks.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“You’re welcome. Thanks for having these for us.”

“You’re welcome. I wanted to talk to you about tomorrow.”

Had she hoped he wanted to talk to her about something else? She wasn’t sure, but that wasn’t what she’d thought he’d say. “Okay. What about tomorrow?”

“SheriffMcEvers is coming to talk to you.”

Fear gripped her heart. “No.”

“Yes. You have to talk to somebody, and she’s the perfect person.”

“She?”

“Yeah. CarlyMcEvers. I’ve known her husband all my life. She’s a super nice lady. You’ll like her, I promise. So she’s coming to talk to you about what happened. I’m hoping she’ll have a way for the county to help you with some kind of lodging until they get Frymire in custody, and then you can go about your day-to-day without having to be afraid and always looking over your shoulder.”

So hedidn’treally want them there. “I’m sorry we’re taking up your hospitality and getting in your way.”

Shaw gave her a strange look, his brow wrinkled downward. “What makes you think you’re in my way?”

“I mean, you’re trying to find me somewhere to go, and I don’t really blame you.”

“No, Cherilyn, it’s nothing like that. I just assumed you really wouldn’t want to stay here. I mean, I figured this was awkward for you, living in my house, and you’d want your own place.”

Take a chance, stupid, she told herself. “Actually, I feel really safe here because I know you won’t let anything happen to us.”

The smile he gave her was gentle. “You’re right about that. I’d take a bullet for you. I wouldn’t do that for just anybody, but I think you’d be worth it.”

“Thanks. I think that’s just about the nicest thing anybody’s ever said to me.”

Shaw leaned forward, his forearms resting on his thighs and the soda can between his hands. “Let me tell you something. I think you’re a remarkable woman. You’ve handled all of this, and even though I wish you’d handled it in a different way, your only real thought was to keep your kids safe. To somebody else, it might look like you dragged them out into the woods to save your own ass, but what I know is that you’re terrified something will happen to you and there’ll be no one for them. So let me put those fears to bed. If anything were to happen to you, those two girls would have a home here for as long as they wanted. I would never turn them out, not after seeing how much their mother loves them. I’d definitely honor that. So you can talk to Sheriff McEvers and not have to worry about your children. They’re safe here.”

Her hands started to shake, and she could feel sobs bubbling up in her throat. “Why? Why do you even care?”

“Because I happen to think that you’re all worth it. All three of you.”

A river of tears streamed down Cherilyn’s face. Her parents loved her, but they

fought constantly and were far too busy trying to keep from killing each other to pay much attention to her. Frankie had been the worst thing that ever happened to her. All he'd done was run her down and tell her how worthless and ugly she was until she'd finally started to believe it. She'd look in the mirror and see someone who had no value and no purpose. Why would Shaw look at her and think she had value? "I'm totally useless. Nobody wants me and nobody cares about me. I know you think you do, but?"

Shaw leaned out and pressed a finger to her lips to shush her. Then he smiled. "Stop it. Don't talk about yourself that way. Have I lied to you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then if I say you have value, you have value. I wouldn't lie about something like that."

It was hard for her to form words with her emotions so raw. "Look at me. Nobody would ever want to date me, or marry me, or have anything to do with me. Frankie was the absolute best I could do, and if that's the best I can do, I'd rather be alone."

"Why do you think that's the best you could do?"

"Look at me!" she almost yelled, her face still tear-slicked. "I'm skinny. Hell, my hands are bony. My hair looks like shit. My skin looks like hell and I'm pale as a ghost. I don't have boobs and I don't have a butt. I look like I don't give two shits about myself, because I don't. I'm just a wreck." There was nothing left to say, and she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Then you need to start giving a shit about yourself, because I do."

"But why?"

“Let me make a list. Know what attracts me to a woman?”

“Big boobs and nice hair?”

“No. She needs to be smart. Resourceful. Frugal. Faithful. Honest. Open. Hardworking. Clever. And another thing?she needs to be funny. Thing is, I think life has dragged you down until you’ve had nothing to laugh about. I think I can change that if you’ll let me.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“I’m sorry. I don’t see me as being any of those things. Is that what you want me to be?”

“No, you’re all of those things. And I can tell you this. No matter what happens, I always want you in my life, even if you’re nothing more than a friend. You’re the kind of person who makes a very, very good friend to have. Know why?” She shook her head. “Because I know without a doubt that if I was in a lot of trouble right now, you’d be the first person I’d call, and you’d do whatever you had to do to help me. You’d do that for any friend. I can tell that about you.”

She tried, but she couldn’t quit crying. “You’re right. I would.”

“Then let me help you. Let me be your friend. Someday you’ll return the favor, and I’ll be glad I was here for you when you needed me. Come over here and sit down.” He patted the seat beside him.

Cherilyn didn’t know what to do. Yes, she was attracted to him, but was that enough? Was he expecting something from her? As soon as she sat down, he threw an arm across the back of the glider behind her and looked into her eyes. “How long has it been since somebody other than your girls hugged you? Since you felt like somebody cared about you?”

She tried to laugh and failed. “Long, long time.”

“Then you’re long overdue.”

Cherilyn didn’t get a chance to ask what he meant before he wrapped his arms around

her. “Everybody needs somebody to hold them when they cry, and I think you need that right now.” Without warning, a wail broke from her lips, and she sobbed aloud. Shaw stroked her hair and held her, his arms tight around her. “Get it all out. You need to. It’s been all bottled up inside you while you fought to survive. That’s over, so let it out and give yourself a break, Cherilyn. I’ll be here for you if you’ll let me.”

She cried until she was hoarse, until her throat hurt and her eyes felt like they were filled with crushed glass, until her nose ran like a spigot. There didn’t seem to be an end to her tears, their heat burning tracks down her cheeks.

Suddenly, her eyes popped open, and she realized she’d been asleep. “Wha... What happened?”

Shaw gave her a little squeeze. “You fell asleep.”

“We’ve been sitting here the whole time?”

“Yep.”

“Aren’t your arms aching?”

“Not as much as your heart has, and that’s okay. I’m strong enough for the both of us.”

“What time is it?”

“I think it’s a little after two.”

“Two? Oh, god. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not. You needed that. I’m just glad I was here to supply it.”

She pulled away from him a little and sat up. “I should probably go to bed.”

“We both probably should. Grab a bottle of water to put on your nightstand before you crawl under the covers. You’re likely a little dehydrated from crying, and that’ll fix you right up.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Shaw stood and held a hand down to her to help her up. When her palm fell into his, she felt a connection she’d never known with anyone. “Thank you for being here for me, for us. You’ll never know how much I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Go get some sleep. Things will look a lot better in the morning, I promise.”

She gave him a tiny nod. “I hope you’re right.”

On her way through the kitchen, she grabbed that bottle of water and headed to the bedroom. Once it was on her nightstand, she went back to the bathroom, blew her nose, splashed some water on her face, let out what she’d had to drink earlier, and went back to the bed. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she felt herself relax, and with the soft sheets around her and the blanket pulled over her, she was cozy and warm in just a couple of minutes. In no time at all she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, just the kind of sleep she needed. Tension melted, her shoulders relaxed, and as she drifted away, she thought about what Shaw had said, that everything would look better in the morning.

She sure hoped he was right.

CHAPTER4

There was no moon. It was still as cloudy as it had been earlier in the day, but the weather lady on the radio had said it was supposed to clear off, and he hoped that was

right. There'd been enough gloom for a while.

As he sat there and took another sip of his lukewarm beer, he thought about Cherilyn and her girls. They'd most definitely need help, and he wanted to be the one to offer it. He didn't want to turn over their care and protection to just anybody. There was no way to know what other people's motivations might be, but his was purely to see them do well.

Or was it? Even though she was tired, rundown, and little more than a wisp of a thing, there was something about Cherilyn that really attracted him, and he knew what it was. No, it wasn't that she was a damsel in distress and needed him to rescue her. That wasn't it at all. In fact, quite the opposite.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

She was a survivor. Against all odds, she'd managed to keep herself and her kids safe. He was also sure that if Frymire found her, he'd kill her before she could talk. No one had been looking for him, so he had to be fairly certain she hadn't said anything yet, but there was no doubt in Shaw's mind that he would be looking for a way to make sure she couldn't.

His thoughts turned to Morgan. He'd felt lucky as hell to have her. She was beautiful, accomplished, and if she was ashamed of him and his vocation, she'd never said anything before they married. He remembered their wedding day, and it had been epic. Every man in attendance had told him how lucky he was, and how gladly they'd take her off his hands if he ever decided he didn't want her.

But by the time she'd found out she was pregnant with Candace, she was already driving to Lexington for a better job in a bigger law firm. Shaw begged her to just be happy with what they had there, but she couldn't. Before he knew it, she'd bought a house there, a large, expensive house, and wanted him to come there to stay, so he did when he could. Then there were the parties, and she dictated what he could wear, how he could wear his hair, and told him what he could and couldn't talk about. It always irked him when she introduced him as "my husband, the wildlife officer." He had a bachelor's degree?he'd majored in wildlife biology and minored in criminal justice?but that didn't have the same ring as power broker.

The day she'd announced that the baby would be raised in the Lexington school district was the day the trouble began. He reminded her that they lived in Corbin, but her response was, "You might live in Corbin, but I live in Lexington." He'd fixed up a nursery, a beautiful little room in the house that was only used two or three times. If he wanted to spend time with his baby daughter, he had to go to Lexington. His

mother had been excited about having a grandchild there, but they rarely got to see the child.

And yet somehow they'd managed to stay together until Candace was twelve. There was something to be said for ignorance being bliss, and he'd intentionally ignored all the warning signs, preferring to believe it was all in his head. The day he got the phone call was the day that it got real. "Mr.Parker, this is Hideaway Farms. Just wanted to let you know that you left your watch on the nightstand when you and Mrs.Parker stayed here this weekend. You can pick it up at your convenience in the office. Thanks and have a nice day."

Parker was her family name. And he'd never been to Hideaway Farms.

When he confronted her, she screamed and yelled, asking him what she was supposed to do with a husband who just didn't want to better their lives. He hadn't thought their lives were all that bad until she started talking about first one man and another who made in excess of three million a year. The day he found out she was dating a real estate mogul from Tampa who traveled in the horse circles, he knew it was over. He couldn't compete with that kind of flash and drama, and he didn't really want to try.

The room Cherilyn's girls were sleeping in was the one he'd fixed up for Candace?the room she'd never slept in. He'd make arrangements to see her, only to find that they weren't at home. When he insisted she come and stay with him, there was always an excuse. She had a ball game. She had a dance recital. She had a karate class. His suggestion that she let him know when she was participating in something and he'd come to watch and support her had been met with hems and haws and no information. She didn't want him there. If everyone thought Austin was her dad, that was fine with her. The guy who worked for the state just wasn't good enough.

He took a moment to really scrutinize his thinking. He wasn't looking for someone

who'd be grateful to him, beholden to him, for what they had or were given. That idea had never crossed his mind. What he knew about Cheryl was that she'd be happy with what he could offer. She was strong enough to walk away if she wanted to, and down-to-earth enough to be proud of him and who he was. If nothing else, that was appealing.

He looked down at his phone's screen. Three fifteen. And Sheriff McEvers would be there the next morning at ten. It was definitely time to get some sleep. Carrying the bottle with him, he stepped into the house, closed and locked the back door, then checked the front before wandering down the hallway to his room. He'd left a lamp on, and he closed the door quietly, then went about getting ready for bed.

In the darkness, he thought about her eyes and how much sadness they held. She hadn't really smiled since he'd seen her that first time the previous morning. If he had to describe the way she looked, he'd have to say she just appeared to be exhausted. Life had dealt her a rough hand, and continued to dole out misery. Could he help end that?

The last thought he had before he slipped into the tranquility of sleep was how much he'd love to see her smile, and how much he wanted to be the person who put that smile on her face. He could do it?he knew he could. Didn't matter how long it would take.

He wasn't going anywhere.

* * *

The minute his eyes opened,he smiled. There was sunshine seeping in around the curtains and blinds, and from somewhere outside, the sound of a mockingbird pierced the early morning air. A glance at his clock told him it was almost seven, so he sat up, stretched, and climbed out of bed.

His destination was the back porch, and a second cup of coffee was slamming into his system when he heard a sound behind him and turned. Cherilyn stood in the open back door. “Is it okay if I come out and sit?”

“Of course! Please! Grab a cup of coffee and join me.”

She disappeared from view and was back in under a minute with a steaming mug of dark, strong brew. To his surprise, she took the seat beside him on the glider and threw her feet up onto the table in front of it. One sip and her eyes went wide. “Wow. This is strong stuff. Good, but strong.”

“Yeah. I like strong coffee. Always have. You get a good night’s sleep?”

A look passed across her face that said she was thinking about the question before she answered. “I think I did. I’m a little stiff, but it was so nice to sleep in a real bed.”

“But you had a real bed in your apartment, right?”

“Yeah, a second-hand mattress that was lumpy and stained. Everything here is so clean and comfortable. Oh, I hope this mug was okay,” she added and held it out so he could see it. It was a promotional mug from a farm store in town.

“Nothing here is sacred, honey. You see it and you need it, use it. Of course, if you use the last of it, write it on that pad stuck to the fridge so I can replace it.”

“I will. Thank you.” He watched her from the corner of his eye as she sat back and relaxed, hoping she was growing comfortable around him. “So what’s on your agenda for the day?”

“I have to go to work tonight, but I’ll be home all day. Do you think you and the girls will be okay here by yourselves?”

“Nobody knows we’re here, so I don’t know why we wouldn’t be. What time will you be home?”

“I go in at four, so I have to leave at about three thirty, and I’ll be back about twelve thirty. In the meantime, if you need anything, you can call me.”

Her cheeks pinked. “Uh, I don’t have a phone.”

“We can fix that. Not a problem.” The smile he gave her was intended to reassure her. “You don’t have to worry about anything, Cherilyn. You need it, you’ll get it.”

Those pink cheeks turned red. “You shouldn’t spend money on me.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“You don’t worry about what I do. It’s not an issue. Now, I’ve got some Danish rolls in the kitchen, so go ahead and eat and get ready. SheriffMcEvers will be here in a few hours. If there’s anything you need to ask her, make some notes so you don’t forget.” He’d been thinking about something, and he decided it was time to mention it. “I really think the girls don’t need to be involved in this. What if we took them to my parents’ house to stay while you talked to the sheriff?”

Her jaw dropped. “What will your parents think?”

“I’ll just tell them the truth. When I do, it’ll be fine. When you meet my parents, you’ll understand why.”

“But then they’ll know, and nobody can know, and?”

“They’d never betray your trust. Like I said, you meet them and you’ll understand.” He watched her face and saw the fear there. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then trust my judgment. My mom will bake cookies with them and find stuff for them to read and do. They’ll be fine, and they’ll have fun.”

She sighed loudly. “Okay. I’m trying, Shaw. Really, I am. But I’m so afraid...”

“I know. We’re gonna fix that. It won’t be long and you won’t have anything to be afraid of, I promise. Then you can pick up the pieces of your life, get some help, get your feet back under you, and live your best life, you and the kids.” For a second, he

thought she was going to say something, but she clammed up, her lips pursed like they were glued together. “Something wrong?”

“It’s just that... I’ll know you’ll be glad when we’re gone and you don’t have to mess with us anymore.”

“Did I say that?” After what seemed like forever, she shook her head. “You’re right. I did not. And that’s not true. I’m perfectly okay with the three of you being here.”

“But you barely know us.”

“We’ve been through this before, and I think it was as recently as last night, wasn’t it? You’re what my mother would call good people. You treat people the way you’d want to be treated, and you aren’t pushy or demanding.” Shaw turned sideways just a bit to face her. “Look, I have a theory that there are people who want to see, be seen, do, be noticed. They’re always moving and always looking. Then there are people who are happy to just be where they are, who don’t ask for much, don’t go around trotting out a lot of expectations, and don’t have to be the center of attention. You’re one of those people, Cherilyn. You aren’t asking for the world. You just want a decent life. And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.”

“Sometimes I think that’s too much to ask for,” she mumbled.

“I get it. I do. But with all of us working together, we’ll turn that around. Now, let’s go get some breakfast, get ready for the day, and get the kids up so they can eat and get ready.” As he stood, he reached for her hand and, to his surprise, she took his without hesitation so he could help her stand. Even more surprising was the fact that she didn’t turn loose as soon as she was on her feet. He made his decision instantly—he wouldn’t let go either. “Come on.” Without dropping his grip, he led her into the kitchen and in minutes they were enjoying the pastries and another cup of coffee apiece.

He was struck by how graceful she seemed. How had a woman like that wound up with the likes of her ex? What was his name? Frankie? She certainly deserved better than his sorry ass.

“You take a turn in the bathroom first and I’ll get the girls up. Sound okay?” he asked as he set their coffee cups in the sink.

“Okay. I’ll go. And thanks for the food and the company.”

“You’re welcome, and thank you. Hustle on up. I’ve gotta have a shower too!” He watched as she wandered down the hallway to her bedroom, and she turned in the doorway to give him a little smile. Why do I feel like I just won the lottery? he asked himself, laughing internally. It was true. Winning her over a little at a time made him feel better than he ever could’ve imagined.

The water falling in the shower was his cue, and he picked up his phone and hit a familiar contact. It was answered with, “Good morning, son!”

“Hey, Mom, how would you feel about having some company?”

Laughter came from the telephone. “You comin’ down here to spend the day with me? I know better than that!”

“No, but I’ve got a couple of school-aged girls here who could really use some attention and fun.”

“Oh! Whose kids?”

“I don’t have time to explain, but I will, I promise. By the way, one of them is special needs.”

“I didn’t say I’d do it, Shaw, and I’m sorry. I’ve got a doctor’s appointment this morning. But I’d be interested in meeting them sometime soon. How about this afternoon?”

“I dunno. I’ll have to see how everything works out, but that might be possible. What time do you think you’ll be back?”

“Probably no later than eleven.”

“Okay. We’ll be tied up for a while, but after that, maybe they can come down.”

“Who is ‘we?’”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“That’s something else I’ll have to explain later. But thanks for at least being willing.”

“Son, you know I’ll always do anything I can to help you. That’s what moms are for.”

“And I appreciate it. I’ve gotta get moving. Love you.”

“Love you too, son. Talk to you later.” Well, that was that. The girls would meet SheriffMcEvers, and he hoped they weren’t too afraid.

There was soft, even snoring coming from the room where Maya and Lara slept, so he knocked on the door and told them there was food to be had. Two minutes later, two youngsters sat on stools at the island in the kitchen, munching on pastries as Maya tried to keep Lara from sticking her fingers into her Danish. Movement caught his eye, and he looked up and toward the hallway.

Cherilyn slipped out of the bathroom and tiptoed across the hallway to her room, but not before he’d gotten a look at her. With the big towel wrapped around her, all he could see were her shoulders, but that was enough, and he wanted desperately to touch her. I really shouldn’t be thinking about her that way, he told himself, but it had been a long, long time since he’d had a woman under his roof, and he liked it. A lot. Was that something he’d even want to pursue with her? Shut it down, Harrison, he told himself as he turned back to the kids.

“Well, don’t you look nice!” he chirped as she stepped into the kitchen a few minutes later.

She shrugged. "Hair's still wet."

"You still look nice. That dress really suits you." It was true. Maisey had great taste, and the little sundress accentuated Cherilyn's trim figure nicely. "Did she get you a sweater too? It might be a little chilly out."

"Yeah, there's a nice one in there. As long as I'm in the house, I should be fine." She leaned back against the counter and watched the girls. "Lara, don't do that."

"SWEET," the girl called out as she poked the pastry with her finger.

"Yes. I know. It's very good too, right?" The child didn't respond. "But we eat our food, not play with it."

"She keeps doing that and it's exhausting, Mom," Maya groaned.

"I know, baby. Just keep reminding her." Cherilyn's head turned toward Shaw and she gave him a soft smile. "And it is exhausting."

He hoped his smile gave her some comfort. "Maybe you've just been doing it alone for too long."

"Maybe." She clapped her hands and both girls looked toward her. "Okay, you've played with your food long enough. You two need to get ready. The sheriff will be here in a little while."

Maya's eyes went wide. "Are they taking us away?" she cried out.

Shaw looked into the girl's eyes. "No. They're not taking you away. But we're going to see if they have any housing for you or any kind of assistance."

To his utter amazement, her voice was firm when she answered, “But I like it here.”

“That’s going to be up to your mom. It’s her choice. Now go help your sister get ready. SheriffMcEvers will be here in a little while.”

“Can we wear some of our new stuff?” Maya asked, glancing between the two adults.

“Of course. Now scoot!” Cherilyn grabbed the girl’s head, kissed her crown, then helped her to her feet. “Off you go.” As soon as they were out of sight, she sighed.

“That was nice of you, but I know you’d rather we got out of your hair.”

How could he make her understand without making himself too vulnerable? That was the hard part, being open and honest and exposing himself while still protecting his heart from being batted around like a tennis ball. “You’re not in my hair. You’re not in my way, you’re not causing me trouble, you’re not a pain in the ass. Nothing is wrong here. Everything is fine, unless being around me makes you uncomfortable.”

“I feel safer with you than I’ve ever felt with anybody.”

Shaw could feel his heartbeat pick up. “I think that’s the greatest compliment I’ve ever gotten.”

Cherilyn snorted. “Uh, well, I’m pretty sure it’s not.”

“Oh, I think it just might be.” He patted her arm and smiled. “I’ve gotta go get in the shower myself. Need anything before I jump in there?”

Her lower lids glistened with unshed tears. “Please, tell me again how it’s all gonna be okay.”

“It’ll all be okay. You’ll see. I’m a determined sumbitch, and if I say it’s gonna be

okay, it had better work out that way or I'll make it so myself." She rolled her eyes. "What? You don't believe me? Hide and watch, girl." Shaw stood and stretched. "Okay. Shower and then we wait. Come on in my room and knock on the door if you need me."

"I will. Thanks."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“You’re welcome. Always.” Once he was in the bedroom, he grabbed underwear and jeans. It would sure be nice if she was in here waiting for me when I get out. Wait? where the hell did that come from? There were two kids in the house, and the sheriff would be there soon. But that simple thought told him something important.

He wanted Cherilyn. And suddenly, admitting it to himself didn’t seem so hard after all.

* * *

Her eyes followed Shaw as he disappeared into the bedroom, and she found herself wishing she could climb into the shower with him. He was so, so kind, and no one had ever been that kind to her before. His parents had to be nice people. Only nice people could raise a man that sweet.

That idea made her snicker. Everybody thought she’d married Frankie because she’d wanted a “bad boy.” Nothing could’ve been farther from the truth. It was pretty simple, actually. He was the only guy who had shown an interest in her. True, it had been for all the wrong reasons, but when he’d asked her to marry him, it was only because she was pregnant with Maya. It had taken a nanosecond for his cheating ways to come out. Even so, he’d never been abusive, and he’d worked hard to keep them sheltered, fed, and clothed. He just had no skills to make a good living, and when Lara was born, he’d pretty much given up and slipped from one low-paying job to another. He hadn’t really wanted to be a husband, and he’d wanted to be a father even less, especially to a child who was different.

But this guy, he was the real deal. No one had ever been that interested in her and her

kids, and it didn't feel like he was doing it out of pity or to prove something. He seemed to genuinely want to help them, and he'd never be able to understand how much she appreciated that.

From somewhere in her subconscious, a voice whispered, "Cherilyn, honey, wake up."

She struggled to sit upright. "Whaaa... What happened?"

A chuckle sounded from beside her. "You fell asleep."

"Oh, shit! Has the sheriff been here?"

"No. I would've had you awake for that. But she should be here any minute."

"I thought you wanted the girls to go to your mother's."

"Couldn't. She's got a doctor's appointment, but she's interested in meeting all of you. I think she could be a big help to you. Her name is Leslie. My dad's name is Johnny."

"Oh. So is Shaw short for something else?"

"No. My grandpa's name was Mason Shaw Phillips. They named my two brothers for people on my dad's side of the family. My mother was a Phillips. That's where it came from."

"You're the youngest?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I've been beaten up and kicked around my whole life."

She let out a little laugh. “Are you close to your brothers?”

“Jimmy and I are pretty close. They live in Richmond near Eastern Kentucky University, so they’re not terribly far away. He’s a professor there. Third lives in Springfield.”

“Third?”

“Yeah. Jonathan Michael Harrison the third. He owns a body shop.”

“Oh!” She laughed again. “Which Springfield?”

“Springfield, Missouri.”

“I think there’s a Springfield in every state.”

He snickered. “If there’s not, I’ll be surprised.”

There was a shriek from the bedroom. “Dear god, I hope that’s not going to go on while the sheriff is here,” Cherilyn mumbled.

“I think that’s going to be taken care of. Don’t worry about it.” There was a knock at the door, and Shaw stood. “I don’t think this is the sheriff.”

He flung the door open and a very cute, dark-haired woman stood there. “Hey, Shaw! How’s it going?”

“It’s going good! Come on in. Want something to drink?”

“Nah, but thanks. Oh, hi! You must be Cherilyn!” The woman stepped inside quickly and extended her hand. “I’m Maisey Friedman.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“The lady who bought all the nice things for us!” Cherilyn stood and reached for Maisey’s hand, surprised at how strong the social worker’s grip was. “I appreciated that so much, and so did the girls. You’ll never know how much.”

“You’re quite welcome. I’m not really much of a shopper, even though my husband thinks I am, but it was fun. As for the girls... Aaron asked me to come and keep them busy while you all were talking to SheriffMcEvers. Are they here?”

“Yeah. Just down the hallway. Come on. I’ll introduce you, and thanks for this. I hate that you’re taking time out of your day to come here.”

“Nah. No problem. I love kids.”

Cherilyn opened the door and stood there with Maisey. “Girls, this is Mrs.Friedman.”

“You can call me Maisey,” the shorter woman said with a smile.

“Maisey? You’re the one who brought us all the pretty clothes! Thank you so much!” Maya gushed.

“PWIDDY!” Lara barked.

“Thank you! You’re pretty too.” Cherilyn watched as her youngest daughter beamed at their new friend. “So, what do you girls like to do?” As Maisey stepped into the room, Cherilyn heard a knock on the door and turned. The social worker leaned toward her and whispered, “Go. I’ve got this.”

“Thanks.” Cherilyn tossed one last look their way, but both girls were interacting with Maisey and paid their mother no mind.

Shaw was in the living room talking to a very pretty, curvy woman in a uniform. “Ms.Travis?” The woman held out her hand. “I’m SheriffCarly McEvers. You can just call me Carly. No need for formalities here. I want you to be completely comfortable.”

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate you coming here. I was afraid to... you know...”

“Come to the station? I don’t know the whole story, but from what Aaron told me, I think this is more appropriate.”

“Anybody want a cup of coffee?” Shaw asked and threw a thumb at the kitchen.

“Please! I don’t know how I’m going to make it through the day. Belle’s teething and had us up half the night. Can we sit?” she asked and motioned toward the furniture.

“Sure. Please.” Cherilyn chose the end of the sofa closest to the chair where Carly sat. “I’ll tell you what I can, but I’m not sure how much it’ll help.”

“If you know the guy, it’ll help a lot.”

“Well, yeah, I definitely know him.”

An hour later, Cherilyn had told Carly everything she could think of. “Do you know what he did for a living?”

Cherilyn thought for a minute. “I don’t think anybody ever mentioned what he did. I do know he was gone and then back. Maybe... I don’t know. I’m not going to try to

guess.”

“Okay. I’ll find out. In the meantime, I think what you’re doing is what you should be doing. Laying low. Don’t do a lot of going out, and don’t draw attention to yourselves.”

“We’ll just keep doing it then.” Cherilyn felt completely hopeless. She couldn’t go anywhere, couldn’t do anything, and Shaw couldn’t sit there with them all the time. But it was still better than being out in the woods.

Movement caught her attention, and the three people in the living room turned to find Maisey at the head of the hallway. “Maisey! Hey!”

“Hi, Carly! Hey, Cherilyn, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How long has it been since Lara’s hearing has been tested?”

Cherilyn thought for a few seconds. “I don’t suppose it’s ever been tested.”

“Oh, if she’s been in the state of Kentucky, it’s been tested. They test kids at every grade level, and being in special ed, which I’m sure she is, they’ve tested it. You’ve never gotten a report?” Maisey’s brow knit downward into a deep V.

“No.”

“I think she’s yelling because she can’t hear.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Cherilyn couldn't believe that. "Really?"

"Yes. I have a feeling that with the few times she doesn't yell, she's managed to read your lips a little. Come with me. Stop right outside the bedroom door." The two women stopped and stood there. Very softly, Maisie said, "Lara?" The child didn't turn. "Lara?" she said again, a little louder, but there was no response. In a regular speaking voice, she said, "Lara?" But there was no response. "Lara!" she called out loudly.

Lara spun. "I LARA!" she shrieked back.

Cherilyn was mortified. "Oh my god."

"Yeah. She can't hear. That's why she screams all the time. She can't tell she's screaming, because she's not hearing her own voice."

"Oh my god, I can't believe... How could I be so stupid? I can't believe?"

"Hey!" Maisie gripped Cherilyn's forearms and looked up into her eyes. "It's okay! You've lived with it until it seemed normal. But I haven't, and I see what's going on here. I'll get her set up for a hearing test. But you'll have to take her. They won't come here."

Before she could answer, Shaw spoke up. "We'll get her there. You tell me where and when."

That was all she could take, and Cherilyn began to cry. What had she done to deserve

being treated so kindly? She was just trash, just a throw-away person, and here were complete strangers making arrangements to help her and her kids. Nobody but her had ever cared about Lara?no one. Not one soul. Even the teachers at the school seemed exasperated with the little girl. But Shaw genuinely seemed to care, and so did Maisey and Carly. “Why are you doing this? Why does anybody care about me and my girls?”

A pair of strong, warm arms pulled her toward him, and Shaw clutched her to his chest, her forehead resting on his shoulder. “Because you’re a worthwhile human being, a good person, somebody who for once deserves a break in their life. Life has just happened to you, sweetie. It’s time to take some of that life back, make it happenforyou, and we all want to help you.”

Another hand landed on her shoulder blade. “All of that stuff is over for you. You’re going to get the help you need, and we’re going to walk right alongside you. When it’s easy, we’ll celebrate with you, and when it’s hard, we’ll be there to hold you up. You’re one of us now, and that’s not going to change, so get used to it,” Maisey said with a little chuckle.

She could hear Carly moving around behind her. “I think we need to let you rest a bit. If there’s anything I can do for you, don’t hesitate to call my office. If I can’t help, one of my deputies can. We’re going to find this monster and when we do, he’ll never get a chance to hurt you or those sweet girls of yours again.” Cherilyn turned just enough to see Carly, and the sheriff’s smile warmed her. Carly sweetly pushed a strand of hair off Cherilyn’s face and swept it behind her ear. “And let Shaw here help you. He’s one of the good guys.”

She could feel the vibrations from that deep voice when he laughed. “I try!”

“You do good work, officer. We’ll get going. Cherilyn, if you think of anything you forgot to tell me, just give me a call. I’ll leave my card on the table here. Shaw, talk

to you soon.”

“You bet,” he answered the sheriff.

Maisey patted Cherilyn’s arm. “I’ll get that test scheduled and give you a call. And you’ve got my number, right?”

“Yes,” Cherilyn sputtered through her sobs.

“Okay. If you think of anything else you need, let me know.”

“Is there... Could you... I really think Maya needs to go to a, you know, a woman’s doctor.”

“We can get her an appointment with a gynecologist. That’s not a problem. So I just want you to know, if it’s okay, I’m going to open a file on you at the office. Don’t worry, it’s not for anything except an open pathway for me to do anything I need to do to help you and do it at the state’s expense. You’re not being evaluated in any way. Is that okay?” Cherilyn nodded, and she felt a hand land on her shoulder and rub it. “Good. I’ll be talking to you. You take care of yourself.”

“I will,” Cherilyn tried to say, but it came out as a whisper.

“Y’all need to come over for dinner some night. I’ll talk to Aaron and let you guys get together on your schedules. How’s that?”

She felt Shaw nod. “Sounds good. I think it would be fun.”

“Great! Get some rest, honey, and I’ll be in touch. Bye.”

There was the click of the door and Maisey was gone. Cherilyn could hear her

speaking out on the front porch, and she assumed Carly was still there. She stood there, leaning against Shaw, and he rubbed her back as he held her. “See? Everything’s gonna be okay, darlin’. Everything. You can stop worrying. You’re safe here, your girls are safe here, and you have a lot of help.”

“MOM! MAISEY! WAN MAISEY!”

“I guess I should go see if I can calm her down.” As soon as Shaw let go, she felt the absence of his warmth. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and she couldn’t even tell him how she felt about him.

Howdidshe feel about him? He was kind and gentle and generous, and she wondered what he’d be like in bed. Stop it! she told herself, but she couldn’t. The longer she was around him, the more she wanted him. Sure, he didn’t look like a movie star. Instead, he was arealman, one who worked hard, who messed up and apologized, who hit the mark sometimes and failed at others, but always got up and tried again. He was funny and smart, caring and giving. They’d known each other a whole day, and already she felt closer to him than she had anyone in a very long time. As she headed to the bedroom, she turned and smiled at him. “I’m so sorry we’ve just kinda taken over your life.”

But the smile he returned made her heart quicken. “I’m not.”

“Is Maisey going to find us somewhere to live?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Shaw folded his arms across his chest and she felt a flutter in her stomach as his pecs flexed with the movement. “Do you want to go somewhere else?” She felt paralyzed. “Cherilyn, tell me what you want.”

In barely over a whisper, she asked, “Do you want us to leave?”

“The truth?” She nodded to him. “No. I don’t. I like having you here.”

“Even Lara?”

He closed his eyes, sighed, and opened them again. “Yes. Even Lara. And if Maisey is right about her hearing, things may get a lot easier very, very soon.”

She feared the answer, but it needed to be asked. “So what are we doing here?”

“Uh, I’m not sure what you mean, but if you mean what I think you mean, I’m trying to figure out a way to get someone to watch the girls so I can take you out on a proper date. That’s if you want to go, of course.”

A tremor of excitement rushed through Cherilyn’s whole body. “Are you serious?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be? Look, we’ve been thrown together in a very weird way, but I really do like you. But I told you that already. Why wouldn’t I want to be seen with a beautiful woman?”

Her mind raced. What would that be like? a real date? She’d never been on one. With Frankie, there’d been no dating. He’d pick her up and they’d go to the bowling alley,

or downtown to a diner with his friends, or to his mom and dad's house. And they usually wound up in the back seat of his car, which was exactly how Maya had come to be. But a date? A real date? What would that even look like? "Whuu, um, what would we do?"

"Go to dinner. Go to a movie." That was something she hadn't done in years. Movies were something she truly couldn't afford. "I'm sure we could come up with something. Cherilyn, the only way we're going to ever figure out what we want here is to spend some quality time without the kids. It won't work otherwise. We need adult time to figure out adult stuff. Does that make sense?"

"MOM! WAN MAISEY! POCCORN!" Lara screamed.

"Yes. It makes a lot of sense. But who's going to be willing to put up with that for a couple of hours?"

"I'm the one asking you on a date, so you let me work that out. I'm pretty sure I can. Go see to her. I've got to start getting ready for work. But know this." The short distance between them was swallowed with three steps of his long legs, and he cupped her jaw in his hands. "You're going to get through this, and when you do, I'll be right there on the other side, just like I am now. See to Lara and we can talk again later." Without warning, he pulled her face closer to his and kissed her forehead.

That simple act told her all she needed to know. She could be happy with ShawHarrison.

The question was, could he ever really be happy with her?

CHAPTER5

The rifle wasas clean as it was ever going to get, so he loaded it into his truck. It was

old, but it was more accurate than any weapon he'd ever owned. The shotgun, however, wouldn't be going with him. It was staying there, locked in his bathroom, and he'd give Cherilyn the key to the room so she could get to it. He'd stacked three boxes of shells on the vanity countertop, so he was pretty sure she had what she needed, and Lara wouldn't be able to get to it.

An extra pair of boots, pants, a shirt, socks, and a jacket went into his duffel, and he dropped that on the back seat of the super cab. All three of his huge, insulated tumblers were sitting on the countertop by the coffee maker, and once they were filled up, he'd put those in the truck too. As he came in and out of the house, he could hear Cherilyn and the girls talking and laughing in the bedroom the kids had claimed. For reasons he couldn't explain, their voices brought him a sense of peace. Maybe it was because for so long he'd hoped he'd have a family. Or maybe it was because he'd always hoped his house would be a place of love and laughter. He'd had that hope once, but Morgan had shattered it, and Candace hadn't made it a bit better. In the past twenty-four hours, it had seemed like more of a possibility, and he was surprised at how happy that prospect made him.

Everything was loaded and it was time for him to head out. CaptainLarrison would be checking on him in a couple of hours, and he had to be out somewhere, doing something. He peeked into the room and caught Cherilyn's eye, then tossed his head toward the living room so she'd follow him.

When he spun around, she was already standing there. "I've gotta go on duty. Listen, the shotgun is in my bathroom, along with three cartons of shells. Do you know how to use a shotgun?"

"I live in WhitleyCounty. What do you think?" she answered with a grin.

"Just as I figured. It's a twelve gauge, so be careful. Packs a wallop. And here." He pulled a chain out of his pocket, then dropped it around her neck. The key on it

sparkled in the light. “The key to my bathroom. I locked the door so the girls can’t accidentally get to it, but that’ll get you right in.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Here.” Shaw held out a cell phone, and she took it from his hands. “It’s not activated, so you can’t make or receive calls on it except nine-one-one. It’ll still call there. I charged it, so if you need to use it, do. And I’m hoping to get Aaron to come by here at some point and check on you.”

Her cheeks flushed red. “You don’t have to do that.”

“No, but I want to. There’s no telling what I’ll get into, so I want to know somebody is checking on you. Tomorrow I’ll take you to my parents’ house and introduce you and the girls to them. They can check on you too. Keep the doors locked and the shades drawn. I know it’s depressing with the pretty weather and having to be inside like a vampire, but the idea here is to keep you safe, and that’s what we’re going to do, no matter how depressing it is. Got it?”

“Yes. Got it. Whatever you say. I trust you.” The crystalline color in those eyes told him she wasn’t being a smart-ass. If he said do it, that was what she’d do, and that was all he wanted.

The idea of leaving them there alone while he was at work terrified him, but he had to have a job. God, he hoped she'd eventually be able to go back to her regular life with her kids, and he dared to hope that he would be part of that too. Nothing about her screamed fake, and he wanted badly to ask her if she felt anything for him. Shaw had a stop he had to make. He needed some answers, and he knew just who to ask.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

The weathered boards of the porch squeaked as he walked across them to the door, and he thought about the questions he had. He knew who he hoped was there, and he also knew who he hoped wasn't. His dad couldn't be an impartial source of support. He'd ask Shaw immediately, "Why do you need to get yourself mixed up in a situation like this?" His dad would never understand. His mom, on the other hand, was a completely different story.

"Anybody home?" he asked as he pulled open the screen door.

"Hey son! What's up?" a feminine voice yelled back.

"Are you busy?"

"I'm always busy," his mother called back with a laugh.

He snickered. "Too busy for me?"

"For you? Never."

"Awww, that's sweet." He sat down in a kitchen chair. "So there's something I need to talk to somebody about."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with your houseguest, would it?"

"Actually, it has everything to do with my houseguest." Shaw doodled with the salt and pepper shakers on the table, trying to make the words come. He wasn't sure what to say, because he wasn't sure how he felt. But he did know that he felt something.

Leslie took a seat across from her son. “This sounds serious.”

Shaw hung his head. He wanted to say it right, and in a way that could be understood, even though he didn't quite understand it all himself. “Mom, how do you know when something's right?”

“Honey, you're the only one who can know when something is right. No one else can know that for you. Besides, what would make you think you're wrong?”

“Dad would tell me I'm wrong.”

“And why would he tell you that?”

“Because he doesn't believe in love?” That sounded kind of harsh, and he didn't mean it that way, but if there were ever anyone who couldn't be called a dreamer or a romantic, it was his dad. “That's not exactly what I meant, but I think you know what I mean.”

“Have I ever told you the story about our senior prom?”

I'm not sure I want to hear this story, he told himself. “This wouldn't have anything to do with you and dad and the back seat of Grandpa's car, would it?”

“No! It's nothing like that. When we went to the prom, he took me for a very nice dinner and gave me a corsage of my favorite flowers, gardenias. We danced for three hours. When it was time to go, he said he had to make a phone call. I had no idea he was calling my dad to ask permission for me to come home late. Then he said he had somewhere he had to take me. He drove out toward the lake, and I was afraid of what was about to happen, but there was no cause.” His mother's eyes grew misty, a faraway look taking up residence in them. “We got to the lake and there, in the moonlight, was an actual gondola with a gondolier. I don't know where he found

them, but it was the most romantic thing I've ever seen. The gondolier poled us out into the middle of the lake, and your dad lit candles on a little table. He had cheese and crackers, summer sausage, and pigs in a blanket. I found out later that GrandmaBertie made those for him. But he was so proud, and we had so much fun. It was one of the reasons why I agreed to go steady with him. After that, we were inseparable. So yes, your dad does know how to be romantic. You've just never seen that side of him."

Shaw was shocked. "Wow. I never would've guessed. I mean, who would have?"

"So you see, son, your dad isn't quite the old stick-in-the-mud that you think he is. But go ahead. Ask me whatever it is you need to ask. And I'll give you an honest answer."

How to start? Shaw decided to just dive right in. "There was a woman in the woods, and she needed help. She had her two daughters with her, and they were running from somebody. I found them, and I brought them home with me. There's just one problem." He drew in a deep breath and blew it out. "I like having them there. I like being around her. She's been through so much, and yet she's so strong and determined. I really respect that."

His mother looked into his eyes with a glare that pierced his soul. "So do you like her because of those qualities, or are you just trying to be her knight in shining armor?"

"I really do like her. She doesn't take anything for granted, and every day is a gift to her. She's been mistreated and misused and abused and run over and kicked around, and I really don't want to see that happen anymore. She's got a child who's special needs, and she does such a great job with her. I don't know how to tell her that I want her to stay."

"And you're sure this isn't the knight in shining armor thing?"

Shaw shook his head. “It absolutely is not.”

“Are you attracted to her? I mean, in a way that matters?”

“All I really want is to pull her onto my lap, wrap my arms around her, and keep her safe. I want to do the same thing for her girls.”

“You said girls?”

“Yeah. She has two girls, Maya and Lara. She's a good mom, and she tries very hard to take care of them the best she can. But they've been living in public housing. That's how this whole mess started.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“What do you mean?”

“She saw a murderer.”

His mother's eyebrows shot up into her hairline. “She saw amurder?”

“No. She saw amurder-er. He was coming out of the apartment next-door when she met him on the stairway. It turned out that he’d just murdered her next-door neighbor. The problem is, she recognized him. He’s her ex-husband’s best friend.”

“Oh, my. That is problematic.”

“Yeah. That's why she was in the woods. If he finds her, he'll kill her, so we can't let anyone know where she is.”

“And the police?”

“They know. Sheriff McEvers was at my house this morning. Aaron Friedman was the one who brought me into the situation. An employee at the resort park noticed her car parked there for a long time, and they called and got him. He called me because he thought I would probably know the terrain better. Turns out she hides very well. It took me a bit, but I found them. They were cold, wet, hungry, and terrified. It broke my heart to see them that way. But this isn't about me pitying her. I really do admire her. She did everything she could to keep her children safe and hidden. If I hadn't found them, it sickens me to think what might've happened to them.”

“What's the plan now?”

Shaw shrugged. "I have no idea, but I do know that I don't want them to leave. I feel comfortable with them there, and you know all I ever really wanted was a family."

"Morgan sure made a mess of that."

"She sure did. This might be a way for me to start again, and I think she's the right person to do that with."

"Have you told her this?"

"I've told her that I don't want them to leave, but I don't know how to tell her how I feel, because I'm not really sure how to describe it. I can't say I'm in love with her, but I would like to find out where this could go."

"Then why don't you just tell her what you just told me?"

"Mom, I just need to know?am I messing up?"

The smile his mother gave him was gentle. "You're only messing up if you don't do what you know you should."

"I told her I want to take her on a real date. Do you think you could?"

"Watch the girls? Of course! I'd be glad to. I'd even come there if it would make them more comfortable. But whatever you need me to do, Shaw, I'll be glad to do it. All I really want is to see you happy."

And there it was. His mother saw how lonely and tired he was. She knew he needed someone to partner with him, to be his other half. Cherilyn was as close to perfect as he could imagine any woman being.

He gave his head a decisive nod. "I'm going for it. What's the worst that could happen? She tells me she doesn't want me? It's not like I haven't heard that before."

His hands were folded on the table, and his mother reached across and patted them. "That's the spirit! I bet she'll be more receptive than you could imagine. Just take her on a date, wow her, and she'll be putty in your hands."

"That kind of sounds wrong, Mom," he said with a laugh.

Before he could stop her, she leaned across the table and pinched his cheek like he was three years old. "If you're the charmer your dad was, you'll have yourself a girlfriend in no time."

"Owww! Mom! Gah. You're crazy, know that?" But he was grinning the whole time. That was the thing he loved most about his mother? she could be silly and playful, and she always made him smile.

"Yeah, I'm crazy, but I raised some good kids, kids I'm proud of." Where the pinch had been she rested her palm, and her skin was warm. "I love you, son. What Morgan and Candace did to you was wrong. We all know it. And I know you love your daughter, but I don't know what's wrong with that girl. I think all that high-faluting bullshit her mama?"

"Mom! You said bullshit!" Shaw barked, laughing.

"I did, and I meant it. All that mess with Morgan and Austin has gone to her head, and she thinks she's too good for us. She needs somebody to take her down a notch."

"Well, it won't be me, because I doubt I'll ever see her again. She doesn't want anything to do with me."

“I know, and I’m sorry. I called her a few weeks ago and left a message for her, but she’s never called me back. Her grandma! And she won’t call me back! It’s shameful what they’ve done to that girl, turning her against her family.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Yeah, well, nothing I can do about it.”

“You mark my words, Shaw, someday she’ll come dragging in with some kind of disaster and expect you to fix it for her. It’s coming. I can feel it in my bones. I hope you stand your ground.”

“And what would you do?” he asked, his eyes narrowed to slits as he glared at her.

She dipped her head and sighed. “I’d do whatever needed to be done if she was my kid. I know that. Why are you calling me out?” Then she started to laugh.

“Yeah. You talk a good game, but you’re a softy. I do want you to meet Cherilyn and the girls. I think you’ll like them.”

“If you do, I’m sure I will too. You’re an excellent judge of character, Shaw. You said your oldest brother was going to grow up to be a pain in the butt, and you were right.” Leslie was laughing, and Shaw loved it. There was nothing his mother’s laughter couldn’t fix.

Well, almost nothing.

* * *

Cherilyn watched the big truck roll down the driveway and disappear onto the street, and she shuddered. They were alone, and that was scary. It took everything she had to tamp down the surge of panic that roared through her whole being. It was the first time in over twenty-four hours that they’d been alone, and she really didn’t know

what to do with herself.

So she did what she always did. First, she washed everything in the kitchen. Then she started a load of laundry, followed by cleaning both bathrooms. After that, she organized the things in the dresser drawers in the room where she slept, then had a talk with the girls about picking up after themselves. That was followed with straightening up everything in the living room, and before long, it looked like Shaw had hired himself a maid.

There was nothing left. She'd done every chore she could think of short of taking out the garbage, and she didn't dare leave the house to do that. Instead, she left it in the laundry room and shut the door so Shaw would find it when he got home and take it out.

When he got home. Never had she wished a man would come home like she wished for that with Shaw in that moment. Being alone in the woods was scary, but being in civilization was even scarier. That guy could be around any corner, in any convenience store, shopping at any mall. Even worse, he and Frankie hadn't been best friends for that long. She doubted even her ex-husband knew much about the man, and yet he'd invited the asshole into their home. Why would she be surprised by that? Frankie wasn't just an asshole; he was a dumb asshole. Those were the worst.

She checked on the girls. Maya was reading quietly, and Lara was stretched out on the bed, sleeping. They were so tired from being out there in the cold and rain, and she remembered being told that no one ever actually catches up on sleep. Maybe with decent food and a warm place to rest, they'd eventually feel better.

That was the moment it hit her too, and she could feel herself sag. She was bone-weary, not just from the hiding and worrying, but from the elements and her body's work to keep her alive in those adverse conditions. Maybe a nap wasn't a bad idea.

It took her two whole minutes to get comfortable and before she knew it, she was sound asleep.

* * *

“Aaron, could you come in here, please?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He dropped his notepad on the desktop and made his way down the hallway, then stopped in the doorway. “What’s up?”

Carly pointed to the chair and then the door, so Aaron closed it and sat down. “Got a phone call.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you done any checking on this Frymire guy?”

“No, but I’d like to.”

“Please do. I’m making that an assignment for you. We got a phone call earlier from a sheriff’s department in Arkansas. It seems they’ve had a murder too.” She tossed a stack of papers across the desk to Aaron and he picked them up. One quick look told him he wasn’t going to like it. “And it’s suspiciously like ours. One of their deputies did a random internet search and our story popped up.”

Aaron flipped through the pages and stopped at the coroner’s report. “Drowned in her bathtub.”

“Yeah. Too much of a coincidence to discount. I think we need to see if there are more of these. We also need to know what this guy does for a living, or if he’s a pointless drifter, or anything else we can come up with.”

“I think I’ll start with the ex-husband. He might be a good source of information, if we can just get him to talk.”

Carly grinned. “I’m surprised you haven’t already!”

Aaron chuckled. “I think he can be persuaded to cough up some information. Let me see what I can do and I’ll let you know what I come up with. And thanks for giving me this.”

“You’re welcome. I know you and Shaw want to see these ladies in a much better situation, and that means you’ll do what’s necessary.”

“Yes, ma’am. And I know just where to start.” A firm plan was forming in Aaron’s mind, and he knew which phone call would be his first.

* * *

“Damn.” He’d followed the creek bank and found six illegal traps. Someone was making a good living from the pelts they were collecting, most of which were river otters. It had taken Kentucky years to build the population of the aquatic animals back up, and now idiots were hunting them out again. He’d catch the poacher eventually.

By the time he was back to his truck, it was dark. He’d no more than opened the truck’s door when his phone started ringing, and one glance told him it was Aaron. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Not much and a lot. SheriffMcEvers handed me the investigation into RodneyFrymire, so I started digging. And there’s no record of the guy.”

“What? What do you mean, there’s no record of the guy?”

“None. No birth certificate, no death certificate, no driver’s license, nothing. In the grand scheme of things, he doesn’t exist. The sheriff got a call from a sheriff’s department in Arkansas today, and they had a murder there that was eerily similar to this one, so we think they’re probably connected.”

“Okay, but what now?”

“Tomorrow I’m calling the Friend of the Court.”

“The guy has kids?”

Shaw heard Aaron snicker through the phone. “No, but FrankieTravis does.”

Shaw got Aaron’s meaning immediately. Kentucky’s Friend of the Court kept all records of child support, and if FrankieTravis had never paid any support for his kids, they’d definitely know. “Ah. Think he’ll sing?”

“I’m pretty sure he will. Key of B flat. I’m almost positive. So tell Cherilyn that we’re working on it.”

“Will do. Thanks, Aaron. Keep me up to date.”

“I will. Later.” And the phone fell silent.

Shaw sat there and thought for a minute. If the murder in Arkansas really was related, that was even scarier than he’d originally imagined. It also indicated that there might be others. But it appeared that their case had one thing the other one didn’t?an eyewitness.

That left him worried about Cherilyn. He had to get her a phone so he could check on them when he wasn’t there. It would be too late to pick one up when he went home, but he could do it the next day. By the time he was off the clock, he was a nervous wreck. Were they okay? He’d given her that phone, but Aaron hadn’t said anything about a call to the sheriff’s department. That made him feel a bit better.

Relief washed over him as the truck rolled up to a view of lights from the kitchen window. As soon as the door opened, an aroma hit his senses and he smiled. He stripped his boots off in the laundry room and instead of calling out, he made a production out of closing the back door and letting his footfalls announce his presence.

Everything inside him warmed as he stepped into the living room and saw her turn

with a huge smile on her face. “Hey! You’re home!”

“Yeah, and you’ve been baking, I see. Or should I say, I smell,” he said with a grin as he sat down and threw his feet up on the coffee table.

“I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Lawd, woman, you can bake anytime you want! If I don’t have what you need, I’ll buy it for you! What is that you’ve got going in there?”

“Monkey bread. The girls have always liked it.”

“I love it. Haven’t had any in a long time. Miller’s Old Country Store used to have it in Williamsburg, and every time I went by there I got a pan of it. Is it about done?”

“Should be. I was hoping you’d get here before I took it out and it got cold.” Adingsounded from the kitchen and Cherilyn leaped up. “It’s ready. Be right back.”

Shaw sat there and listened to her pattering around in the kitchen. That was when he noticed it?the house was spotless. She’d obviously spent the whole time he was gone cleaning and straightening. He heard her say something from the kitchen, but he couldn’t understand. “Hang on. I’m coming in there.”

The pan rested on the stove, and the fragrance was beyond mouthwatering. “I said, do you want coffee?”

“You know, I think I want a soft drink.”

“Which kind?”

“Lemon lime, I do believe.” She pointed to a chair, so he sat down and waited while

she pulled a can from the refrigerator.

“How many pieces?”

“Just two, please.”

She plated them gently, her hands delicate and slow, and he was mesmerized by her movements. Everything she did was deliberate, but it also seemed effortless. How did she do that? “Here you go.” It was really more like two and a half pieces, but that was okay.

“This looks amazing. Thanks so much.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for having us here.”

“You’re welcome.” Should I tell her? He only warred with his conscience for a minute before he decided she deserved to know. “I heard from Aaron. They got a call today from a sheriff’s department in Arkansas. There was a murder down there too, and it seems suspiciously like your neighbor’s.”

Her slim shape dropped into the chair to his right and she sat there with her piece of monkey bread, her eyes wide. “What does that mean?”

“It means we may have a serial killer on our hands.”

“And Frymire?”

“From what we can tell, he doesn’t exist.”

“Wha... What do you mean?”

“I mean Aaron can’t find any record of him anywhere. Nothing. Not so much as a parking ticket.”

“Seriously? So what do they do?”

“Aaron’s planning to lean on your ex-husband.”

“That’s a good idea.” She took a bite of the bread and set it back down. As soon as she swallowed, she sighed. “Think he’ll talk?”

“Has he ever paid you any child support?”

A light, sarcastic laugh slipped from her lips. “Do dogs have thumbs? No. I’ve never gotten a penny.”

“Well, what if the Friend of the Court found him?”

“Ohhh. Yeah. I see. That’ll probably do it.”

“I hope so.” The bread was amazing, and he found himself wanting another piece. “Tomorrow I’m getting you a phone.”

“I can’t let you do?”

“Yes. You can. You need one. I was worried the whole time I was at work, wondering if you three were okay.”

“You...” She stared at him. “You were worried about us?”

“Of course I was worried about you! I’ve got to introduce you to my parents. It would make me feel a lot better if somebody was available to come over in case of an

emergency.” He watched her face go scarlet. “What’s wrong?”

“So many people are altering their lives for us, and we’re not worth it.”

Something about her statement made Shaw furious. “I already told you once to stop that. Who says you’re not worth it? You’re definitely worth it! You’ve had a shitty life, and I’m hoping I can make sure that’s past you.”

“Why do you even care?”

How could he possibly explain to her what he was feeling? He wasn’t even quite sure what it was himself. All he knew was that something about helping them, about having them under his roof, gave him a sense of peace that he hadn’t felt before, and he craved it. Looking into those bright blue eyes made him feel things he’d never felt, and he tried to sort them out. Happiness? Definitely. Peace? He’d already noted that. Pride? Yes, he was proud that he could provide a place for them, food, shelter, and clothing, even though he’d offered to pay for everything and Maisie had refused it.

In one blinding flash, he understood. Every woman he’d ever dated, if it could be called that, was hellishly independent, as in making sure he knew they didn’t need him for anything other than a good time. If there was anything Shaw Harrison wanted, it was to be needed. He loved doing things for people, even the simplest of things, and doing things for Cheryl and her girls, giving them what they needed, seeing to their comfort, tapped into a well that had been buried deep inside of Shaw. He knew if he could get them through their current predicament, they wouldn’t need him in the classic sense. They had state aid, and an apartment, and her little car.

But she needed someone to partner with, and he did too. He needed someone strong and determined, someone who’d help him build a home and a family, and Cheryl had already done that. She knew how, and yet the things he could bring to the table would help her immensely. He could take them from barely getting by to being

comfortable. From single parenting to having two parents to help each other. From fatherless children to kids who had someone else in their life, someone they could look to not just as an authority figure but as someone who'd be there for them through thick and thin, someone who'd always have their back. He could be that person. After what he'd been through with Candace, being someone's father had never been on Shaw's radar, and yet when he'd seen those two girls in that cave, cold and damp and hungry, he'd longed to scoop them up in his arms and hug them to him, to tell them that everything would be okay and they'd never want for anything ever again.

Choose your words carefully, Harrison, he told himself as he struggled to find the right thing to say. "Have you ever wished someone could look past your second-hand clothes and beaten-up car and tiny apartment and see the woman inside you? The one who wants more for herself and her kids, and has absolutely no way to get there? Who has a lot of love to give and nowhere for it to go?"

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Her eyes filled with tears. “Every damn day.”

He couldn't stop himself as his hand rose and cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing away a tear. “I'm that someone, Cherilyn. I'm that man. I see you. I know who you are deep down.” A little voice in his head whispered, Be vulnerable. Show her your heart. “Every day I've wished I could find someone who could look past my uniform and the crest on my truck, the badge I carry and the professional attitude I have to wear plastered all over me, and see the man inside me. Every. Damn. Day.”

Her eyes closed, tears slipping from them and coating her cheeks, but she smiled. “I'm that someone, Shaw. I'm that woman. I see you in there, and you're brave, and selfless, and kind. You've given me more hope in the last twenty-four hours than I've had in years.”

“Do you want more?”

Cherilyn nodded. “Much, much more.”

His other hand rose until he held her face between his palms, and when he leaned down to kiss her, he was surprised as she turned her face up to his and waited. Those lips he'd thought about kissing were right there, and when he claimed them, he did so gently but firmly, a kiss that he hoped conveyed everything he felt for her, for her girls, for the possibility of something more with her than just a week or two.

As soon as her arms wound around his neck, he slipped both arms around her waist and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss, waiting for her to jerk away, but she didn't. She wanted it too, and he couldn't have been happier. The kiss slowed, hesitated, and

he gave her three pecks on the lips before he leaned back and looked down into her face. “Wow. That was amazing.”

A shy grin tugged the corners of her lips upward. “You think so?”

“You don’t?”

A giggle. “I didn’t say that!” He watched her bite her lower lip, then gaze up into his eyes. “Can I just say, I’ve never been kissed like that before.”

“Never?”

“Never. Not once. I always wondered what the big deal was with kissing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And now I know.” She leaned in and pressed her lips to his lightly. “I never knew a kiss could be so wonderful,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Oh, woman, you just wait. There’s more where that came from. But I meant what I said earlier. I need to take you on a proper date.”

“Where are we going?”

Shaw laughed. “I have no idea!”

“Mom?” The voice startled both of them and they turned to find Maya standing there, jaw dropped and mouth wide open. “What’s going on?”

“Just thanking Shaw appropriately.” He loved the bashful grin on her face.

Maya stood there, feet shoulder width apart and fists on her hips. “You can’t be doing that stuff.”

Cherilyn turned her nose up. “I can do whatever I want. I’m a grownup.”

“Are you going to need a chifferobe?”

Shaw chuckled. “I think you mean chaperone.”

“Yeah. Somebody to watch you so nothing fishy happens.”

“No. I think we’ll be just fine. Don’t you think we’ll be just fine?” he asked Cherilyn.

“I think we’ll be just fine. I thought you’d gone to bed.”

The girl stood there and heaved out a big sigh. “I wish I had.” Then she spun and headed back to her bedroom.

“Well, that was awkward,” Cherilyn whispered.

“What was awkward about it? We like each other. Nothing awkward about that. I’m going to sit down in here and you go check on her. Maybe when you come back we can remember where we got to.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll have any trouble remembering. Be right back.” He watched her go and smiled. Even tired and rundown, with her hair a brittle mess and her body way too thin, she was still pretty. He couldn’t imagine what she’d look like with a home, food, and love. Can’t call it that just yet, he told himself, but he wanted to.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

As he sat there and waited for her, Shaw gave thought to what he was doing. Was he just feeding a whim? Or was he building his future? He'd like to think it was the latter. Cherilyn was the one person he'd met who seemed to check off every box on his wish list. Sure, they'd met under unusual circumstances, but Shaw had always believed that everything happened for a reason. And that belief had led him to that day, to that moment, to that fragment of time that told him she could be the one. He wasn't going to ignore that.

He heard the softclickof the bedroom door and the sound of her socks on the hardwood floor as she reentered the room. "Get her all settled?"

"Yeah, but I think she's listening."

"So what if she is?"

Cherilyn grinned. "I think she's just a little freaked out. They've never had to share me with anyone. If you and I... If something comes of this, I'm not sure how the girls will handle it."

"Do you want something to come of this?"

"It would be nice. I'm not sure why you would care anything about me, but I enjoy being close to you. You're one of the kindest people I've ever met."

Shaw smiled. She thought he was kind. That was one of the nicer things someone had said about him. He'd gotten smart, or handsome, or sexy, or an asshole, but never kind. Matter of fact, he'd never thought of himself that way, but he supposed he was.

His parents were kind people, and he smiled to think that they might've actually rubbed off on him a little. "That's a very nice thing to say."

"It's true. Doyouwant something to come of it?"

"It would be nice. You're smart and pretty and?"

Her cheeks went scarlet. "Oh, I'm a lot of things, but I'm not pretty."

"Who told you that? You're very pretty. You have a beautiful smile, and you're so soft and lovely and... You're just a beautiful woman. You've got two beautiful daughters. You're the complete package, Cherilyn. I like being around you. You make me feel... peaceful."

She play-frowned. "Is that code for boring?"

"No. It's not code for boring. Not at all." The moment was interrupted by his phone pinging. "Need to check this. Might be Aaron." It was a text.

Maisey's calling you. She didn't have your number. So answer. I know damn good and well that you're awake.

He laughed. "I was right! It was Aaron." The phone started ringing, so he hit ACCEPT and pressed it to his ear. "Hey!"

"Hi! Thought I'd ask you if Cherilyn and Lara could come to the office tomorrow morning. I've got a hearing specialist who was coming for someone else's child, and she said she could test Lara too."

"Uh, I don't see why not. What time?"

“Ten? I can come and pick them up.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Maisey.”

“You’re very welcome. Night, Shaw.”

“Night.” Cherilyn was staring at him as he hung up. “She’s got a hearing test scheduled for Lara tomorrow at ten.”

“And how will I?”

“She’s coming to pick you up.”

“Oh. Okay. Think that’ll be okay?”

“Honey, if you’re not safe with Maisey, you’re not safe with anybody.” He took her hand and held it, tracing the veins on the back of it with his fingertips. “We’ll get you all sorted out. Then you can decide what you want to do.”

“I know what I’d like to do. I’d like to stay here.”

“I’d like it if you did. But I really think we need to take it slow and get that date in.”

“You’re probably right.” Then those clear blue eyes looked up into his and she whispered, “But I really don’t want to.”

He wasn’t sure how it happened, but in less than two minutes, she was under him on the sofa. Those kisses were poison to his self-control, and he was dying for more. He could feel her hands on his hips as his wound into her hair, and all he could think about was the softness of her skin and the scent of her shampoo. There was a hitch in her breathing when he nibbled on the side of her neck, and it made him smile. “Oh,

god, Shaw. Please.”

“Please what?” he whispered back to her.

“Please? I want to be with you however you’ll have me.”

He chuckled against her skin. “I thought we were going to take it slow.”

That made her laugh quietly. “I told you I don’t want to!”

“So what do you suggest?”

He looked down into her eyes, and what he saw there startled him. Gone was the frail, timid woman he’d seen before, and in her place was a passionate, hot-blooded vixen who knew what she wanted. “I’d suggest we be very, very quiet.”

“Uh, I can do that.”

“I bet you can’t.”

He pushed himself up on his hands. “I bet I can. You watch me.”

“Oh, I want to. I really, really want to.” Cherilyn braced herself up on her elbows and looked up into his face. “I hope me being this direct doesn’t scare you off.”

“Scare me off?” Shaw laughed quietly. “Girl, I’m so turned on right now that I couldn’t run if I had to. I’ll barely be able to walk to the bedroom with this tree trunk in my jeans.”

“Well, then, we’d better be quiet, huh?”

He sat up on his knees, then stood from the sofa and reached down for her hand. When she was standing, he wrapped his hands around the back of her neck and kissed her again. Pulling back, he stared down at her. “You can use the bathroom first. My room. Go on.”

“Okay. Out in a flash. Oh, I’d better get a gown from my room. I don’t want the girls to walk in and find me, uh, you know...”

“Yeah. Good idea. Get going. Be there in a minute.” She disappeared into the room she’d been sleeping in, then hustled across the hallway and closed his bedroom door. Oh holy hell, I’m getting laid! Is this awesome or what?

He checked the doors to make sure they were locked, set the alarm system, and turned out the lights. When he stepped into his bedroom, he could hear her pattering around in the bathroom, so he found a pair of lounge pants and tossed them onto the chair before sitting down on the side of the bed. They’d be good enough to pull on over his boxer briefs.

The bathroom door opened and she stepped out into the bedroom in a cotton gown trimmed in lace. It was a pale mint green, and it complimented the tone of her skin and hair while making her eyes look even bluer. “Not very sexy, right?” she asked as she glanced down at the garment.

“Very sexy because of the woman in it.” He stood and brushed his knuckles over her cheekbone as he passed her on his way to the bathroom. “I’ll be right back.” She didn’t answer, just smiled.

He stood there in the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. How old was she? She said she married Frankie because she was pregnant, Maya was fifteen, and Aaron

had said her driver's license showed she was thirty-six, so she was well within his age range for a relationship. He was no kid. Forty had been kind to him, but forty-one had left him doubting himself. Still, he worked out as often as he could, tried to eat right, and stayed busy. His hair was still thick and pale chocolate brown, his facial hair was always neat, and he had great teeth. The teeth thing was his mother. She was a stickler for oral hygiene. He only had one tattoo, and it read *Expectans Casus*, Latin for "adventure awaits." He and his buddy Rick had almost made a terrible mistake on that spring break. The original phrase they'd wanted was *casus expectat*, until they discovered that it literally meant "accident is expected." They'd been lucky to find a tattoo artist in Panama City who actually knew Latin or that particular accident would've been on their skin forever.

As he stared at himself, he was struck by how ordinary he looked, like a million other guys in their region of Kentucky. Just your average guy with light brown hair, a strong, square jaw, and hazel eyes. Nothing unusual, nothing that would make him stand out in a crowd. Then he realized... Cherilyn was the same way. She looked like a million other women in their end of the state.

But there was a defiance in her eyes that pulled him in, and he wanted to know more about it. She wanted more for her kids, something they could be proud of, and he could give them that. Even as an ordinary guy, he could provide an ordinary woman with an extraordinary life, not filled with monetary wealth, but with love and family and needs met and happiness. Shaw squared his shoulders and straightened his spine. He was an ordinary man, but for an hour, he planned to be the most extraordinary lover Cherilyn had ever had.

CHAPTER 6

It was terrifying, waiting for him to come out of the bathroom. He'd probably take one look at her naked and run for the hills. Why would he want her? Her hair was like straw, her skin was paper-dry, and her nails were a mess. Dark circles hung from her

lower lids, and every bone in her body was visible through her flesh. She was hideous and pitiful, and she decided he must've been very, very hard up to want her.

But she wanted him. There was no denying that. Shaw was the kind of man she'd always wished she was with but never found. Frankie had been the best she could do, which didn't say much for either of them, and after that, she'd just given up. If she couldn't even manage a relationship with him, why would she think she could do so with anyone else?

Something about Shaw made her want to try. It was his kindness, his goodness, his even temper, and his patience. He hadn't gotten ruffled no matter how much noise Lara made. He'd been sweet to Maya, giving her first choice of the bedroom the girls would share, and every time he looked her way, the girl beamed. She wanted a man in her life, a father she could depend on, and Shaw seemed like that man.

That made her wonder why he didn't insist on his daughter being there. Maybe he did, and she just wouldn't come. It was sad. She had a great dad, and she didn't even bother with him. He hadn't said it, but she'd watched him wince as she asked him about the girl's picture. Candace? Wasn't that her name? She was a pretty child, but it sounded like her mother had allowed her to become a spoiled brat.

There was a sound from across the room, and the bathroom door opened. Shaw made his way across the bedroom floor, and there was no doubt about what was on his mind. His manhood stood tree-trunk stiff inside his boxer briefs, and she was impressed, really impressed. He lifted the covers and slid under, then turned to her. "Is there anything you need to tell me?"

That question surprised her. "Uh, like what?"

"Like, anything that you really don't like? Or anything that really turns you on? Anything. Anything at all."

That question had never been asked before, and she wasn't quite sure how to respond. "Uh, nobody's ever ..." The burning sensation on her cheeks told her she was giving away her discomfort in a very visible way. "I mean, like..."

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Like nipple play. Is that important? I mean, to you getting where you need to go?”

Where the hell am I going? she asked herself, and then it stuck. “Oh! Um, yeah. I like that.”

“Okay. Lots of kissing? No kissing?”

“Kissing. I like kissing.”

“Got it. And I’m guessing you’d rather that I got you off with a finger to your clit than just penetrating. I mean, before penetrating you.”

Oh, god, this is embarrassing, her brain moaned. “Yeah.”

He tipped his head to the side and squinted at her. “You okay?”

“I, uh, I’ve never talked about sex with a guy before.”

“How am I supposed to satisfy you if we don’t talk about it?”

“Nobody’s ever cared about satisfying me before, I guess.”

His eyebrows shot up, but his look was stern. “Well, I’m not nobody. I’m somebody who cares. Anything you really don’t like?”

How do I say it? Oh, just go ahead, Cherilyn. Spill. “Um, I really don’t like butt stuff too much.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere! Okay. No butt stuff. That’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” It had been really important to Frankie.

“I’m positive. Not that important.”

Wow! He really does care about what I want! “Well, I guess that’s good.”

“Yeah, so where are your erogenous zones?”

What the hell was he talking about? “My what?”

“Erogenous zones. You know, where can I touch you that makes you, I dunno, shiver? Or give you goose bumps? Or send little lightning bolts to your lady bits?”

She almost laughed, but caught herself before she did. He was really trying, and she needed to be respectful of that. “Uhhhh, the sides of my neck? And the backs of my knees. But I really hate it when anybody touches my feet.”

“Okay. No feet. I’m not crazy about it either. But I do want you to touch me, grip me, fondle my balls. And I like my nipples tweaked.”

“Really? That’s a thing?”

Shaw’s chuckle was low and rumbley. “Oh, yeah. Does the same to me as it does to you. Except different body parts. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I think so.” Then something crossed her mind. “You know when you put your hands on my face before?”

“Yeah?”

Warmth flooded her core. “It felt good.”

He reached for her, pulled her to him, and pressed his palms to her cheeks again. “Then I’ll do it over and over.”

The instant his lips touched hers, Cherilyn felt like she’d been reborn. Her hands instinctively rested on his shoulders, and she could feel the hardness of the muscles under the smoothness and softness of his skin. With his uniform on, he looked... ordinary. But without his shirt, he looked powerful, muscles flexing here and there, and it was hard to take in the totality of the man he was. And, holy hell, he smelled amazing. She ran her fingers down the center of his chest and let them stop in the patch of dark hair there, its wiriness tickling her hand. He broke the kiss and before he could speak, Cherilyn blurted out, “I really like you.”

His smile was almost impish. “I really like you too. I’d like to more than like you, if that’s what you want.”

Could she be that vulnerable? Was there anything about him that had told her he wasn’t safe? That he was a liar, or a no-good, or a do-nothing? Not one thing. If ever there’s anyone you could say anything to, I think it would be him, she heard a voice sing in her head. “I’d like it if you fell in love with me.” The minute the words were out, she regretted them. He’d run, and she wouldn’t blame him.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

But his eyes found hers and the smile he gave her in that moment was warm and open. “I’d like it if you fell in love with me too. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Her insides were turning to mush, and she thought she’d faint from pure fear. “Do you think that could ever happen?”

“Honestly, I think it’s a probability. I don’t know if it’s a one hundred percent probability, but I’d say it’s in the high nineties. I certainly have no plans to stop it from happening.”

“Oh. I don’t either, then.”

“Good. Then let’s just see where this takes us. And no, that’s not code for using you and tossing you away. We do this... I can’t speak for you, but as for me, it’s a commitment to building a relationship.”

Something inside her chest trembled and the room seemed lighter. “Same for me.”

She giggled when he winked at her and said, “Then let’s go.”

Shaw dragged her down under the covers with him, his hands warm through the thin fabric of her gown. Once she was flat on her back, he kissed her again, and she could feel that same warmth running down her sides as he explored her body. She rolled onto her side to face him, savoring the strength of his arms and the heat of his body against hers. When he broke the kiss, he pinched the neckline of her gown between his finger and thumb and flapped it up and down a bit. “Ready to get rid of this?”

The eagerness in her own voice surprised her when she answered, “Yes! I am.” Without another thought, she let him grasp the hem of the gown and pull it upward, his forearm grazing her mound and then her belly as the fabric bunched. It was a struggle to get it off over her head, but she managed, and then waited, afraid to look at him for fear of what she’d see, that disappointment she knew he’d feel.

“Cherilyn?” His voice cut through her thoughts. “Cherilyn, open your eyes.” It was hard to do, to face that, but she managed, and when their eyes met, she almost gasped. “Baby, you’re so damn beautiful. I can’t remember ever wanting any woman the way I want you.” Something hard pressed against her leg. “Feel that? Yeah. I want you.”

Those words had never been said to her before, and she’d never before said the words that came from her lips in reply. “I want you too.”

“I plan to make you glad that you said that.” His lips found the side of her neck, and he sucked and nipped the delicate skin there before trailing down to her collarbone. As his right hand cupped one breast, his lips found the other, and he nipped, sucked, and tugged at the hard little nub. Everything below her waist contracted, and she didn’t know whether to whimper or scream. She must’ve made a noise because he whispered, “Shhhh. We’ve gotta be quiet or we’ll wake the girls.”

“Oh, shit, yeah. No. Don’t want that. We don’t... Ohhhhh, my god. Yeah,” she whispered back as he dragged a finger up and down her mound. “Oh, god...”

His breath was warm against her skin when he quietly asked, “Want me to go lower?”

“Oh, god, yeah. Please.” She could feel his hand drifting downward and when he reached her slit, he nipped her nipple. “Oh, damn, Shaw.”

“You need to get ready. My cock is on fire, and I wanna make this quick. I can’t wait

to be inside you.” She wasn’t sure what he meant until she felt his fingers slip into her cleft and pull upward.

Pure ecstasy. She’d never known that before at a man’s hands, but she was thrilled. As he stroked her sweet spot, she could feel the tension building in her belly, and her legs quivered. Doing it herself was the only way she’d ever gotten what she needed. Where had this man been her whole life? Something inside her unfurled, and for the first time in her life, she felt free and vibrant and alive. His lips trailed up her chest, up her neck, and found her mouth. “Come for me, Cherilyn. Give it to me,” he murmured into her lips and ramped up his stroking.

The instant her body turned loose, he pressed his lips to hers and smothered her cries with a kiss. Even as her legs stiffened and back arched, he held on, still stroking, still kissing, until he finally stopped the movements of his finger, but he deepened the kiss. It all made her aware of something very important.

She wanted ShawHarrison. He was the kind of man she’d always wished she had in her life, and he was there with her, trying to make her his. If ever Cherilyn had wanted to belong to a man, it was this man. She understood?he was trying to please her, and no man had ever done that. She wanted that, craved it. “God, Shaw, please...”

“Hang on, babe.” There was a little commotion, and then his full attention was on her again. “Had to roll something on. You ready for me?”

“Yes. Oh, god, yes. Please?”

“I’m all yours.” The minute his hardness slipped inside her, Cherilyn knew. She wanted Shaw to love her, because she already loved him. Maybe not that deep, ready-to-marry kind of love, but she loved the man he was, his goodness and his giving spirit. “Ohhhh. Oh, lord, girl.”

Fingers entwined in his hair, Cherilyn pulled his face to hers and kissed him, and he came right back at her, moving inside her, claiming her. God, she wanted him to want her! She wanted him to love her. She wanted him to hold her in those strong arms and never, never let her go. A clawing sensation exploded in her belly and her hips bucked. "Oh my god. More, more. Harder. Faster." The way he made her feel... it was beyond description.

"Baby, I can't hold on much longer. Oh, lord, girl, you're amazing." There was a second when he felt a little different inside her, and then the warmth she recognized. "Ohhhh, damn. So good, babe. So damn good."

His weight landed on her and for the first time under a man, she didn't feel suffocated. She felt safe. Her arms wrapped around his ribcage and she heard him sigh as his wrapped around and under her. When he rolled them to their sides, she looked into his face and found him looking right back into her eyes. All she could think to say was, "Hi."

"Hi, beautiful. Whew! That was pretty awesome. You okay?"

"Yeah. More than okay. You're right. That was awesome. Thank you."

His brow furrowed downward even as he grinned. "You're thanking me?"

"For making me feel important and special."

"That's because you are important and special. Woman, I swear to god, don't you know how much light you have inside you? How much strength and goodness you have in there? Babe, from this moment forward, until we both decide that it's over, I'm yours. And that decision? I hope it never comes."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Me either. I want to be here with you. You’re the first man who’s ever seemed to give a damn about me.” She let her forehead rest on his chest and curled against him, safe in his arms. “I...” Was it too soon? “I can love you. I know I can.”

“And I can love you. All we have to do is spend time together, be honest with each other, hold onto each other, and support each other. I can do that for you.”

“And I can do that for you. I want to. You’re all I’ve ever wanted, Shaw.”

“You’re more than I ever hoped for. Right now, we need to get some sleep. And I have a confession to make.” She couldn’t imagine what it could be. “I hadn’t intended for this to happen. I wanted to take you on a couple of dates, woo you... You know, all that old-fashioned stuff that nobody does anymore. But you’re such a siren, girl. I couldn’t wait, and I’m glad I didn’t. What’s happening here between us... It’s supposed to happen. I know that in my heart.”

I know that in my heart. Cherilyn could feel tears welling in her eyes. “I know it in my heart too.”

“Good. Now, sleep. At some point when this is all behind us, maybe we can take a weekend away, be by ourselves and be free to do whatever we want. But for now, we’ve got two girls across the hall and we need to be careful.”

“You’re right. We do. But a weekend away with you? That would be heaven.” She sighed against his skin. “I’d love that.”

“It would be heaven for me too.” His lips feathered a kiss on her forehead and she

thought she'd die of happiness. "Sleep. Tomorrow is a new day, and we've got a new relationship to work on. And that hardly seems fair to say, because it won't be work. With you, it'll be a pleasure. Goodnight, beautiful."

A tear trickled down her cheek and she smiled. "Goodnight, baby." She'd never been able to call a man a pet name, but with Shaw, it seemed natural. She was so happy she could barely stand it. And she couldn't wait to see what happened next.

* * *

He lay awake in the darkness until he was sure she was asleep. It took a bit of wrangling, but he managed to get his arm from under her without waking her and slipped silently out of bed. In the bathroom, he rolled the condom off, wrapped it in tissue, and tossed it in the trash. Then he looked at himself in the mirror again.

Same man. He looked just like he had a bit earlier, but on the inside, he felt different. Somewhere deep within, something had awakened, and he hadn't felt it in a long, long time. Morgan had coaxed it out of him years earlier when they were first together, but then it slipped away. Cherilyn had brought it back. Or maybe she hadn't. Maybe it had never really existed until he held her in his arms. Shaw wanted to believe that what they had was unique, and then he realized that, at least for him, it was. Even with Morgan, he'd never felt that way, powerful and strong and, yeah, sexy. That made him grin. Sexy. ShawHarrison was sexy. Eh, maybe; maybe not. Didn't matter. Cherilyn had seemed to enjoy herself, and that was what mattered most to him.

He splashed some water on his face, wet a cloth, and wiped himself up a bit. It took a second for his eyes to adjust after he snapped the bathroom light off, and when they had, he opened the door. Cherilyn was on her side, her back to him, so he slipped back into bed. As soon as his weight forced the mattress down, she rolled to face him, and without even thinking about it, he drew her into his arms.

Her hands came up, fisted, and curled up under her chin as her face rested against his chest. Shaw was sure he'd never seen anything so beautiful, so sweet and pure and tender, in his life. She was like a fine carving, something of marble or alabaster, and she belonged in a museum, admired and beloved by millions. But she was with him, and he hoped what he'd said would come true. He wanted to fall in love with her, and the seed was already planted. Based on what she'd said, maybe it had been planted in both of them. That was the best he could pray for.

It took him a few seconds to get comfortable?it had been years since he'd shared his bed with anyone?and then he found himself fading. It was the wee hours of the morning, and he'd worked a full shift the night before. He had to get some sleep, but for those few quiet moments, it was just him and her, a man and a woman, warm and safe and comfortable in the house he'd never quite been able to turn into a home. He had a feeling that it was about to become just that.

The next thing he knew, light was poking through the edges of the window blinds, and he blinked against the pain it sent shooting through his eyes. Coffee was usually the first thing on his mind, but that morning, it was the woman beside him in bed, and as he listened to her soft breathing, he was struck by how lucky he was to have her there. Sure, she'd come because of some horrible circumstances, but they'd iron all of that out and things would be good for all of them.

For the first time in longer than he cared to admit, he wasn't alone in that big bed, and he leaned in to kiss her forehead lightly. She stretched a little, huffed, and her eyes opened gently. "Hey, sleepyhead."

"Hey. I... Oh, shit. Oh, shit, shit, shit. Are the girls up?"

"No. It's like seven o'clock and they're still asleep."

"I've got to get back to my room so they won't know..."

“Cherilyn.” As soon as he called her name, she stopped. “Listen to me. They’re going to figure it out anyway, at least Maya will. Might as well get used to that idea. That girl doesn’t miss a thing, and I’m pretty sure she’s already caught some of the things we’ve said to each other or the ways we’ve looked at each other.”

“Oh, you mean the way you look at me like you could eat me up?” she asked and grinned as she traced from the tip of his nose to his chin with her fingertip.

Shaw chuckled. “Or the way you look at me like you could tear my clothes off and ride me like a bull.”

“Oh, lord. You’re so full of yourself,” she said with a pretend huff and sat up, the sheet falling to her lap and those beautiful breasts right in his face.

“No. You’re so full of me.” He gave her a wink. “Or at least you were last night.”

“Yeah, and I’m looking forward to that again.” Before he could say anything, she whispered, “Nobody’s ever done that for me before.”

“What?”

“The, you know, making me... Nobody’s ever done that for me. I had to do it myself.”

Shaw curled a finger under her chin and lifted her face until she was looking into his. “Nobody’s ever made you come?”

Her cheeks reddened instantly. “Yeah.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Doing it yourself is fine if you’re alone. But if you’re with somebody, the only times you should have to do that is if you just want to, or if you’re doing it for the person you’re with.”

“For the person I’m with?”

“Yeah. Like you do it in front of me and I do it in front of you.”

She side-eyed him. “People do that?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. It can be a real turn-on.”

“I’m not sure I could ever do that in front of you.”

“Why not? There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. As for doing it by yourself, that’s not a problem. The more you masturbate, the better sex will be for you. The only time it’s a problem is if you’re doing it instead of having sex with your partner. Then it’s a problem, and the question becomes why you have to. Because you shouldn’t have to.”

“That makes sense.” She seemed to be considering what he was saying. Then she grinned. “But you keep doing what you did last night, I won’t need to do that. Ever. I just want more.”

Hallelujah! I guess I did something right for a change! He was trying to hide his excitement, but on the inside, he was grinning like a loon. The woman had enjoyed it and wanted more. That was pretty damn spectacular. “Oh, you’re gonna get more if I

have anything to say about it. But for right now I guess we'd better get up, huh?"

"Yeah. Lara has that hearing test. Did you say Maisey's taking us?"

"Yeah. Said she'd be here about ten."

"Good. So I guess we'd better get moving." She stood from the bed and bent down to pick up her gown, so Shaw reached out and popped her ass. She spun and gaped at him, but it was obvious she was amused. "What was that for?"

He shrugged. "Later?"

The gown fell down around her softness and she smiled. "Yep. Later. Now, coffee and girls."

"Yes, ma'am. Coming right up." He grabbed his boxer briefs, dragged them on, and then pulled the lounge pants over them. By the time he got to the kitchen, she was already tinkering with the coffee maker.

Maya was fine, but Lara was cranky. It took Cherilyn two hours to get her ready to go, and even then she tried to get her shoes off, messed up her own hair, and was generally being difficult. He could see the strain on Cherilyn's face and hear her frustration, but he didn't know how to make it better.

By nine thirty, everyone was ready and dressed for the day, including Shaw. He had another afternoon shift to cover. He stepped up to Cherilyn and said, "Here," his arm outstretched.

"What?"

He opened his fist and dropped a key into her open palm. "So you can get back in. I'll

be at work.”

“You sure you want to give me a key to your house?”

“Yep. For as long as you’re here, it’s your house too. And maybe even after that, if you still want to be here.”

She leaned out to kiss him but before their lips could touch, there was a knock at the door. Shaw peered out the peephole, then threw the door open. “Hey, girl! Come on in!”

Maisey stepped into the house with a smile. “Thanks! How’s everybody?”

“I think we’re all?”

“MAISEY!” Lara screamed and headed straight for the little brunette, who was almost knocked off her feet by the excited ten-year-old.

“Hey, sweetie! We’re going on an adventure today! And when we’re done, we’ll get some lunch. Does that sound like fun?”

“LUNCH, MOM! WID MAISEY!”

“Yes, baby. Lunch with Maisey. That’s so kind of you, Mrs.Friedman.”

“Maisey. It’s just Maisey. And think nothing of it. It’ll be a good time and a chance for you three to safely be out of the house. Girls, get ready to go, please,” the social worker told the two children, and they headed down the hallway.

Shaw glanced at her. “Safely?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Yeah. Aaron’s going to meet us there and then go to lunch with us, so it’ll be fine. Join us if you want.”

“I just might do that. I could use a good time out of the house and?” BANG-BANG-BANG! Someone pounded on the door. Shaw glanced around, but neither of the women said a word. “Was Aaron coming here?”

Maisey shook her head. “No. Meeting us at the office. I have no idea?” BANG-BANG-BANG! “Shaw...”

“It’s okay. Take a deep breath, both of you. I’m sure it’s?” BANG-BANG-BANG! “Jesus Christ,” Shaw muttered under his breath as he peered out the peephole, and he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “What the hell?” With one quick yank, he threw the door open to almost have a fist in his face as the person knocking was ready to bang on the door again. “What are you doing here?”

She scowled and tipped her head. “Wow. Thanks. Nothing like a ‘hi, honey, glad to see you’ to make a girl feel welcome.” Before he had a chance to say anything, she pushed her way past him. “What’s going on here? A party and I’m not invited?”

The two women stood there and stared at the teenager before them, her long legs ending in stylish platform sandals at the bottom with a pop of bright pink polish shining from her toes, and stretching upward into a pair of obscenely-short cutoffs at the top. She had on a white crop top, and a jeweled stud glittered in her navel above the waist of the shorts, which dipped dangerously low. The makeup she was wearing was enough for four grown women, and yet she’d managed to get it all on her face, with some fake lashes to boot. Her hair was expertly balayaged, its ombre-style

coloring a combination of medium brown like Shaw's and a glittering blond, and from under it peeked a pair of hoop earrings that would've made great bangle bracelets. A little tattoo showed above the top of her ruffled neckline that dipped every bit as much as the waistband of her shorts. The bag she was carrying had to have cost more than three hundred dollars.

Both women stared at her and then at Shaw. "Uh, Maisey, Cherilyn, this is my daughter, Candace." Then he turned back to the girl. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a girl come see her dad?"

"You haven't wanted to see me in three years! Why the hell are you interested in me now?"

"God, that's so rude! I wanted to see you!"

Shaw glared at her. "That's so much bullshit. What do you want?"

"I don't want anything!" He could see her trying hard to look forlorn, but it wasn't working. She wasn't nearly the actress she thought she was. "I just wanted to see my daddy!"

"Right."

The girl pointed to the two women. "Two at once? Wow. That's pretty impressive."

"You'll be respectful in my home, girl," Shaw growled.

"What? That would be pretty cool! I mean, if they're?"

He could feel heat creeping onto his face. "Candace..."

Cherilyn pointed down the hallway. "I'm just gonna?"

"No. You're not. You're staying right here. I'm not going to let her disrespect either of you that way."

"Gah, Dad, I was just making a?"

"This is Maisey Friedman, and her husband is a friend of mine. He's a deputy sheriff," Shaw emphasized.

"Oooo! Am I supposed to be scared of the po-po or something?"

"And this is my friend, Cherilyn." Cherilyn's face had gone pale and he felt terrible. She shouldn't have to put up with that kind of behavior.

"Your friend? Do you mean girlfriend?" Candace asked with a grimace.

Every time her mouth opened, the words spewing from it made Shaw even angrier. "That's really none of your concern, now is it?"

"Well, maybe it is. I mean, look at her. You could do a lot better than that."

"You did NOT just say that. Girl, I should?"

"MOM! MAISEY! WE GO!" Lara bellowed as she wandered up the hallway and stood in the doorway. When she caught sight of Candace, she smiled a huge, toothy smile.

"Oh my god. You've got a retard here too," Candace whispered loudly.

"THAT'S IT! OUT! GET OUTSIDE!" Shaw bellowed and saw Cherilyn and Maisey

give a little jump.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Cherilyn looked like she was going to burst into tears. “Shaw, it’s okay, really. I’ll just?”

“Oh, no. You’re not going anywhere. Not until you get an apology.” He turned to find Candace standing there defiantly. “GO!” he yelled again and pointed to the door.

“God. Out here in god-forsaken bumfuck bumpkin land with a stick lady and a retard girl and?”

“Shut up and get outside.” She cleared the doorway and Shaw stepped out, slamming the door behind him. “Would you like to tell me what the hell you think you’re doing, showing up here and disrespecting every god damn person in the county this way?”

“Every god damn person in the county? I knew this place was small, but?”

“Shut up, Candace. Just shut up. And the next words out of your mouth had better be the truth, or so help me god?”

“So help you godwhat? You gonna punch me?”

“No. I’ll pull you over my knee and wear your ass out.”

“Sounds a bit kinky, don’t you think?” she asked with a snicker.

Shaw stood there, pulled in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He didn’t know what the hell was going on, but he fully intended to find out. “What are you doing here, Candace?”

“I told you, I wanted to see you.”

“Uh-huh. Why?”

“Do I need a reason?”

“To come here from Gulf Shores in...” He turned and looked in the driveway. “Oh my god, is that a Lamborghini Diablo?”

“Like it?” she asked with a cheesy grin.

“Who drove it?”

Candace snorted. “Me. Duh.”

“You’re fifteen!”

“Yeah, well, they bought it for me when I was fourteen, so I’ve been driving for a year. So I must be a good driver.”

Shaw thought the top of his head was going to blow off. “They let you drive at fourteen?”

“Hell, they’re always gone. How else am I going to get around?”

Morgan had always been a bitch, but he’d never expected things to go so far south in three years. Dear god, a fourteen-year-old had been driving that car around in Alabama? How the hell had she managed to not get caught? Or had she gotten caught and... Shaw didn’t want to think about that. “Fourteen-year-olds don’t drive cars, and you won’t be driving it here. Now, are you going to tell me the real reason you’re here?”

“I told you?”

“Therealreason, Candace. I can always call your mother and find out.”

“Oh, god, no.” Even the seven layers of makeup couldn’t hide the colorless pallor that washed out her features in seconds. “Don’t call Mom. Please. I really don’t want her to know where...” And she stopped.

That was the moment he knew?something had happened. “Candace, what did you do?”

“I just, dunno, bought something.”

“What did you buy?”

“Um, I bought detailing for my car.”

“Detailing? Like...”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Like blackout. See?” She pointed at it. “The wheels are blacked out. Brake assemblies blacked out. No chrome anywhere except the emblems. None. Oh, and the inside is all black, and I had colored LEDs put in, and when it’s running, the inside colors change, and the windows are tinted so it’s really dark in there, and?”

“Candace?” She stopped. “Who paid for that?”

“I did!”

“You did. So now you have a job?”

She seemed to be thinking of what to say next, and Shaw absolutely could not wait to hear what she came up with. It would no doubt be quite the tale. “Um, no. I, um, I paid for it the same way I’ve always paid for stuff.”

“And how is that?”

“Um, with Austin’s credit card.”

Oh, yeah. I see where this is going, he told himself. “And how much did all of this cost?”

“Um, about forty.”

“Forty dollars?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “No. Forty thousand.”

“Forty thousand dollars! You paid forty thousand dollars for that? Black plastic wrap stuck on a car? With Austin’s credit card?”

“Yeah, I know it was a little much, but he lets me buy bags and clothes and stuff, and I really wanted to do it, and there’s this cool guy named Jake with all these tattoos and piercings, and I really like him, and he does this stuff, so I thought that if I maybe...” She stopped, and Shaw was glad. He was pretty sure he knew what she’d been about to say and he sure didn’t want to hear that. “Um, but he charged me full price.”

Shaw stood there, dumbfounded. He didn’t dare ask, but he was pretty sure she’d given some guy a blowjob to try to get a cheaper price on something she charged on her stepdad’s charge card. To the tune of forty thousand dollars. For some black film he stuck on her car. And yet again he heard that small voice in his head whisper, Choose your words carefully, Harrison. “So am I to assume that they kicked you out because of this?”

“Uh, well, they strongly suggested that I not come home, so, um, kinda, I guess.”

“And if you wanted to come home, what were the conditions?”

“That I get a job and pay for it. Which I can’t because, gah, Dad, it’s forty thousand dollars! I won’t be able to make that much money until I’m eighteen!”

“I’ve got news for you. With the maturity trajectory you’ve got going on now, you’ll be lucky to make forty thousand dollars when you’re forty. Did you even try apologizing to them?”

“Why? I’ve always had whatever I wanted! I don’t see why this is any different!”

“Oh, it’s a lot different. A lot. It’s?” A sound interrupted him and he turned to see

what it was.

Coming up the driveway was a large red wrecker. As he watched, he heard Candace say, “Oh, no...”

His head whipped back around and he stared at her. “They didn’t tell you that you could take this car, did they?”

“It’s my car!”

“And exactly whose name is on the title?” She mumbled something. “What did you say? I can’t hear the lie you’re telling that you think I’ll believe.”

“Okay! So it’s Austin’s car! I mean, it’s not the one he drives. It’s one of his collector cars, and he never drives those, so?”

“Oh holy hell.” The wrecker driver got out and before he could speak, Shaw glared at Candace. “Give him your keys.”

“No! That’s my car! Well, it is now! I had the work done on it! It belongs to?”

“Austin. It belongs to Austin. Give him the damn keys, Candace. Right now.” He watched as his daughter opened her bag, pulled them out, and threw them on the porch floor. “Pick those up and hand them nicely to the gentleman.”

“He’s not a gentleman. He drives a tow truck,” Candace spat, and the wrecker driver glared at Shaw.

“Hey, I didn’t raise this hellcat, so don’t look at me. Candace?” Both he and the wrecker driver folded their arms across their chests.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Candace tiptoed over to the keys, picked them up, and held them out to the wrecker driver like they were on fire. “Here.”

The man took them from her and held out his clipboard toward Shaw. “Thank you. Sign for this?”

“Only that you took it. I’m not responsible for payment for this fiasco,” Shaw insisted.

“Yes, sir. Only that I took it. That’s all.”

“Okay, then yes. I’ll sign.”

“Dad, don’t sign that! Then he can’t take it!”

The tow truck driver gave her a look that told Shaw how stupid he thought the girl was. Problem was, it seemed the man wasn’t wrong. “Honey, I’ll just be back in a week when they report it stolen. At least this way you won’t be in trouble.” He turned away and headed toward the truck, keys in hand.

“Oh, god, what am I going to drive now?”

Shaw couldn’t believe he had to spell it out for her. “Nothing. You’re going to drive nothing. You’re fifteen. You’re not supposed to be driving.”

“But how will I get around?”

“Around to where? There’s nowhere for you to go around here.”

“I’ll go to Gran and Pap’s. She’ll let me do whatever I want.”

He shook his head and laughed. “You mean the grandmother who was telling me just the other day that she called and left you a message but you never called her back? You obviously don’t know my mother well. If I call her and tell her what you’ve done, she’ll tan your backside herself. And don’t even think you’re going over there to stay. She’ll tell you to get yourself right back over here and behave. She won’t put up with any shit from you.”

Candace looked totally miserable, but Shaw was finding it hard to feel sorry for her at all. She’d created the mess and had come there to dump it in his lap. It looked like his mother and Cherilyn’s predictions had come true. He stepped up in front of her and looked down at her. “Now, you’re going inside. You’re going to apologize to Cherilyn and Maisey for being rude, and especially for what you said about Cherilyn. And you’re going to apologize to Lara for what you said about her.”

“But she won’t understand. She’s a?”

“Candace Ann, I’ve never struck a woman, but I swear to god, I will slap you across the face if you ever say anything like that again. You are not going to come into my home, disrespect my guests, and make rude remarks to a child who can’t help the issues she has. You’ve got two choices here. You can either behave, or you can sleep out in the shed.”

“I can’t sleep in the shed!” she shrieked.

“Those are your choices. That’s how it is. You either behave or it’s the shed for you.” He waited as she stared at the porch floor. “Well? What’s it going to be?”

“Fine! I’ll go apologize!”

“No. You’re going to stand right here until you mean it.”

“But I need to pee.”

He shrugged. “Sounds like a personal problem to me.”

“Fine. I’ll apologize and play nice.”

“Good.” Shaw opened the door and pointed. “Get started.”

No one was in the living room. “Where are they?”

“Probably back in the bedrooms.” Shaw headed straight for his bedroom and opened the door. Sure enough, Maisey was sitting on one corner of the foot of the bed and Cherilyn was right smack in the middle, knees drawn up and arms wrapped around them. “Candace has something to say to both of you.”

Cherilyn frowned. “Shaw, really, you don’t?”

Maisey shook her head. “Oh, no, Cherilyn. Shaw is right. She needs to learn that she can’t talk to people just any old way she wants. She can apologize to both of us.”

“Come on. She’s waiting.” Shaw held the door as the two women made their way back up the hallway, Maisey in the lead. When they were all in the room, he turned to Candace. “I think you have something you want to say.”

“Yeah. Um, Maisey, right?” The brunette nodded. “Okay, so I’m not sure what I’m supposed to apologize to you about except maybe that comment about Dad having two girlfriends. That was pretty rude of me, and I’m sorry.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Apology accepted. Could I say something here?” Maisey asked, turning to Shaw.

“Of course.”

Maisey focused her attention, laser sharp, on Candace. “Honey, I see kids like you every day. Your mom and stepdad don’t pay any attention to you, you run wild and do what you please, and you act like you’re entitled to anything you want. You’re not. Everybody has to work for what they want one way or another. But being rude to people will get you nowhere. It’ll keep you from getting a good job, keep you from making friends, and generally undermine everything you try to do in life. Being kind will get you a lot farther. I’m a social worker. I visit kids like you every day in juvenile detention, and it’s not pretty. I’d rather not see you wind up there.” The girl said nothing.

Shaw glanced at her. “Well?”

“Um, okay, Cheryl? Right?”

“No. My name is Cherilyn,” the thin blond reminded her.

“Cherilyn. Yeah, okay. Um, I’m sorry for what I said. That was really rude of me. I mean, you have pretty eyes. Really. And you’re not fat. That’s good. And also, I respect Dad’s decision to be with whoever he wants. It’s really none of my business.”

“You got that right,” Shaw muttered under his breath.

“So I’m really sorry. Really. And for your girl too. What’s wrong with her?”

“Candace!” Shaw barked.

“No, it’s okay.” Cherilyn stood there almost like she was bracing herself. “She’s just mentally handicapped. She has a really low IQ and will never be able to read or write. She yells, but Maisey thinks maybe she’s hard of hearing. That’s why she came over today, to take Lara, Maya, and me for Lara’s hearing test.”

“Maya?”

“Maya’s my oldest daughter. She’s fifteen. Lara is ten. She can’t help how she is. She was born that way, and there’s nothing anybody can do about it, but she’s sweet and friendly.” Cherilyn’s voice broke when she said, “She’s my baby and I love her.” Then she turned to Shaw. “Can we just go? I can’t do this anymore.” Tears spilled from her lower lids and she wiped them away with her palms before they could reach her jaw.

Shaw wanted to go to her and sweep her up in his arms, but he didn’t think it was the right time. “Sure. And I’m sorry she treated you that way. We’re going to keep talking about it and it had better not happen again.”

“Could we maybe, I dunno, get a motel room for the girls and me to stay somewhere tonight? I just?”

“No. It’s not safe. You know that. And besides, we’re not going to have any more trouble like this. Right, Candace?”

The girl dragged her shoe across the floor. “No. No more trouble.”

“See? It’s fine. Now, you guys go get Lara’s hearing tested and maybe we’ll meet you for lunch. I don’t know. Let me know when you’re about done and I’ll see what’s going on then, okay?” Fuck it. I don’t care what anybody thinks, Shaw thought and

stepped right up to Cherilyn. “It’s gonna be okay, I promise.” His hands gripped her upper arms gently and he leaned in to give her a kiss on the forehead.

“Okay. One of us will call you. Girls, come on,” she called down the hallway. A door opened and both girls walked toward them, but when Lara saw Candace, she walked right up to the teenager.

“PWIDDY HAIR,” she bellowed.

Candace jumped a little. “Um, thank you?”

“MAISEY, WE GO?”

“Yep. We’re going. Come on. Shaw, we’ll give you a call in a bit,” the social worker said as she opened the door and shooed the girls out.

“Please. And thanks for this.” Cherilyn was right behind Maisey, but he caught her before she made it out the door. “Hey, I’ll miss you, babe.”

The smile she gave him was weak. “I’ll miss you too. See you in a bit.”

“Yep. Bye.” He stood there and watched them get in the car, then waited as it rolled down the driveway.

Cherilyn didn’t turn around to wave goodbye.

His heart broke. Candace had hurt her, and he was horrified. He had the promise of a good relationship, and a fifteen-year-old brat had ruined that. So deep in thought, he hadn’t even realized that Candace had walked past him and down the hallway. “Are you shitting me? They’re inmyroom?”

“It’s not your room. You’ve been gone for three years and wouldn’t even speak to me. It’s my house. They wanted that room. You can take the guest room.”

“So now I’m a guest?”

“Candace,” Shaw snarled, “don’t push me.”

“Fine! Gah.” Dragging the bags she’d brought to the porch, she headed into the spare room and closed the door behind her.

Shaw dropped onto the sofa and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. What the hell? Talk about shitty timing... He couldn’t wait to hear what his mother had to say about it all. He knew his mother. LeslieHarrison would be livid, and he wouldn’t blame her.

He was pretty fucking livid himself.

CHAPTER7

“Gah, this place is depressing,” Candace mumbled against the glass of the truck’s window.

“It is what it is.” The restaurant where they’d planned to meet wasn’t that far away, and there was no way he was leaving Candace at the house alone. He was afraid he’d come back and find the entire place cleaned out. She certainly didn’t have respect for anyone else’s property. She’d already proven that. Who knew what she was capable of?

Maisey’s car was sitting in the restaurant’s parking lot, and so was Aaron’s cruiser. They stepped inside to find the three adults and two kids sitting in the back of the restaurant, and Lara was playing with a toy police car that Shaw was sure Aaron had given to her. But he didn’t get a chance to sit down or even greet the women. As soon

as Aaron saw him, the big man rose from his chair and motioned for Shaw to go outside. “You go sit down and be nice,” he whispered in Candace’s ear as he pointed to the table.

The door closed behind them and Shaw turned to face Aaron. “What’s going on?”

“Hate to tell you, we got another call today. This time it was from Texas, and the news isn’t good.”

“Whaaa...”

“FBI agent out of SanAntonio. I know him; he helped when Maisey and Murielle were taken. They’ve been investigating some murders down there that are oddly similar to this one. Texas Rangers are involved too. They know about the one in Arkansas, and they found a similar one in Tennessee. They’re looking at Louisiana, Georgia, and Alabama, and wondering if there are more.”

He let his head drop until his chin rested on his collarbone. It just got worse all the time. If they all were connected, this guy was far more dangerous than they’d initially realized. He was about to ask Aaron something else when the officer said, “And I talked to FrankieTravis last night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Guy knows jack shit about any of this. He says he knows Frymire, so I ask, where does he live? Frankie’s got nothing. What does he do? Drives a truck. For which company? Frankie has no idea. Where does he stay when he’s in town? Apparently he stays with Frankie. Has he ever actually seen Frymire’s driver’s license? Nope?he hasn’t. Has he ever seen Frymire’s truck? No, picked him up at truck stops and he was already inside. It’s entirely possible that he doesn’t even really drive a truck. So basically, he’s hanging out with a guy he knows absolutely nothing

about, bringing him into their home, around his kids, and around his wife. A guy we suspect of killing a woman in cold blood. Gotta hand it to FrankieTravis?the guy's obviously a fucking genius."

"Oh, yeah. Einstein." Everything inside Shaw was screaming.

"And it gets worse."

"How can it possibly get worse?"

"The guys from Texas, Arkansas, Alabama... Nobody has a pic of this guy. Nobody. So the only people who know what he looks like are the people who've met him. We've got nothing we can use to find out what he looks like. I mean, there has to be footage from parking lot cams at truck stops, but unless we know which trucking company or what route, we have nothing to go on. There are literally thousands out there, and we'd never find him."

Shaw ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Needle, meet haystack."

"Exactly. We need more, something concrete, and we have nothing. Do you think Cherilyn could work with a sketch artist to maybe come up with a drawing?"

"I'll ask her, but she's been so traumatized by the whole thing that I'd really like to leave her out of it until the bastard's found. She'll have to testify in court. There's no way around that. But we need to catch this guy."

"But with no way of knowing where he might be next, we have no way of laying any kind of trap for him. I told Frankie that if I found out Frymire had been there and he hadn't called me, I'd lock him up myself. He promised me he would call, but I'm betting if Frymire killed that woman, he won't be back."

“I hope not.”

“Let’s get back inside and eat with the girls.” He laughed. “They’ve probably already started eating without us.”

When they stepped into the restaurant, Lara looked up and yelled, “SHAW!”

“Hi, honey! You girls hungry?”

Maisey and Cherilyn smiled up at him. “Yeah. Maya’s gonna chew her fist off if we don’t eat pretty soon!” Maisey said, and Cherilyn chuckled.

The older girl was red-faced, but she grinned at the teasing. “I will not.”

“Order whatever you want,” Shaw told Cherilyn and all three girls as he sat down.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“I guess they don’t have whiskey here, do they?” Candace muttered. Shaw gave her the hardest glare he could manage, but she seemed totally unconcerned. That had to change, and he’d address it later.

He watched as Cherilyn worked with Lara to pick out what she wanted. Maya’s requests were pretty standard?cheeseburger with pickle, mustard, and ketchup, with an order of fries and a soft drink. Maisey and Aaron were smiling and talking back and forth to each other, and Shaw was struck with how sweet the whole scene was?except for Candace, who sat there sullen and staring at the table. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves, and he thought it was a shame that Morgan had ruined the girl to the point that she couldn’t enjoy a simple meal with ordinary folks.

As soon as their orders were all picked up by the server, Shaw turned his attention to the two women. “How’d the testing go?”

Maisey smiled. “The technician said there’s definitely some hearing loss, so that needs to be addressed. I’m not sure how much. They’ll issue a formal report to Cherilyn with the next steps outlined.”

“I hope whatever needs to be done is covered by Medicaid or I don’t know what we’ll do,” Cherilyn said so softly that Shaw could barely hear her.

Shaw set his jaw and gave Cherilyn a stern look. “She’ll get whatever she needs. I’ll see to that if I have to.”

“You don’t have to do?”

“Not up for discussion, babe. Just not. So what else did you do while you were out?”

“I got some flip-flops,” Maya announced. “Lara got mad because she couldn’t get any.”

“FLIPS!” Lara shouted.

“They’re just a couple of dollars. Why couldn’t she get any?”

“Because she can’t walk in them. They wind up all sideways on her feet and with the straps broken.” Cherilyn reached over and swept hair out of Lara’s eyes. “You need a haircut, honey.”

Lara didn’t say a word; instead, she held up two fingers, snapping them together and then apart, over and over like scissors. It was obvious she understood what Cherilyn was talking about.

“Yeah! A haircut. Maisey knows some good places, don’t you, sweetie?” Aaron asked and winked at his wife.

“I do. Got a really good one. I’ll fix you right up.” Maisey grinned. “She’s been doing mine for years.”

“Your hair is so cute,” Maya told the dark-haired woman.

“Thanks!”

Everyone except Candace chatted, laughed, and swapped stories all throughout lunch. Shaw was thinking about how they needed to get going when Aaron’s phone rang. The women went on talking, but something about the expression on Aaron’s face made Shaw’s heart skip a beat, and not in a good way. At least twice the officer

glanced up at Shaw. When he hung up, he nodded to Shaw and stood, so the conservation officer stood and followed him outside. “What’s up?”

“That was central dispatch. Since SheriffMcEvers is aware of the situation, she told them to call me. They found a body in the back seat of a car at the resort park about two hours ago.”

“Frymire?”

Aaron shook his head. “No. FrankieTravis.”

* * *

Cherilyn sat thereon the sofa in Shaw’s house, unable to move. She couldn’t quite process what Shaw was saying. Frankie was dead? How had that happened? Her mind was going in twenty different directions until something he said brought her thoughts to a screeching halt. “What? What did you say?”

Shaw’s brow furrowed downward as he frowned. “I said his body was in the back seat of your car.”

“Mycar?”

“Yep. I had to give them an accounting for pretty much every minute since you left the woods, even though Aaron had told them he talked to Frankie last night.”

“But it wasn’t in my car when I was in the park.”

“No. Initial exam says it had been there less than twenty-four hours, and I assured them there was no way you could’ve gone back. You didn’t have a way to get there, and you couldn’t handle the body by yourself.”

“I just don’t... Why would somebody... Shaw, what’s happening? Why is this happening?”

“I don’t know, but Aaron and I are both sure it has something to do with Frymire.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

A sensation hit her stomach like a sledgehammer, and she felt queasy. “But why would Frymire do something like that? They were best friends!”

“At least Frankie thought so. This is for one of two reasons. Either Frankie refused to turn you over to Frymire, or it was intended as a message to you.”

The room started to spin and by the time he’d finished speaking, her head was hanging over the toilet in the small bathroom. She felt a presence behind her and a pair of hands pulled her hair up and held it. His voice was gentle when he asked, “You okay?”

“No. No, I’m not okay.” One more round of retching and she was pretty sure there was nothing left in her stomach. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then spun toward the sink and splashed water on her face. “Oh, god,” she whispered as droplets of water fell into the sink from her chin. “How am I supposed to tell Maya about this?”

He handed her a towel. “I’ll help you, but you have to tell her. And then we need to do some serious thinking about how to proceed from this point forward. It’s my job to keep you safe and?”

“How is it your job?”

When he didn’t answer immediately, she spun to find him standing there, arms folded over his chest. “Why wouldn’t it be? I was very clear with you. You, in my arms, in my bed... that’s a commitment, as far as I’m concerned.” A look passed over his face, one she didn’t really understand until he spoke. “If anything happens to you, I’d

be... crushed. That can't happen. I've spent a lot of time alone and hurt and angry, and I've started to heal. That's because of you. I don't intend to let that slip away because I was asleep on the job. You and the girls are safe with me, and that's a promise I intend to keep." Then he opened his arms.

Cherilyn fell into them. There had been so many lonely nights, so many tiresome days, so much fear and poverty and hunger and hopelessness. Shaw was the end to all of that, and she found it almost too good to believe. "I can never give back to you all that you've already given to me, much less more."

His arms tightened even closer around her, and his breath was warm in her hair as he whispered, "Babe, you already have."

The tears cascaded from her eyes so quickly that she couldn't stop them. He had no idea what he meant to her. Thinking about Shaw, about the possibility of being there with him for the long haul, gave her a sense of peace and security that she'd never had in her life. Her parents had been poor, and life hadn't been any better with Frankie. Shaw wasn't a rich man, but he had a home where they could all have a safe, healthy, and happy life. It was the kind of home she'd always wanted, not fancy, but full of laughter and love and family. Cuddled up there against him, she felt sheltered and safe. She had a request, and she hoped he'd make it happen. "Could I please meet your family?"

The vibrations from the chuckle made her feel warm all over. "I told you that I want you to. Let's do that, get you three over there, let you meet my mom and dad. I know Mom's going to want to see Candace, if for no reason other than to ream her ass for how she's behaved."

She let out a little giggle. "Oh, she's one of those moms?"

"Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Boy, the stories we can tell when my brothers and I are

together. Makes her so mad, and it's so funny!" Shaw said with a laugh.

"I bet." She pulled back so she could gaze into his eyes, and the way he looked at her surprised her. No man had ever looked at her that way, like she held value and he cherished her. Frankie had typically ignored her while he watched TV, yelled at her because she didn't have dinner ready, or complained about something she had or hadn't done. Shaw wasn't that kind of guy. His home was a peaceful place, and it was very obvious that he wanted to keep it that way. "What do we do now?"

"We're waiting for some of the law enforcement from other places to contact us, bring some evidence to the table, and see if we can connect the dots. But it's not an event. It's a process, and it's going to take some time. Promise me you'll hang in there, okay?" As gently as a spring breeze, his finger stroked a strand of hair out of her face and hooked it behind her ear. "I'm here for you, for Maya, and for Lara." Then he snorted. "And yeah, even Candace."

"She's not a bad kid, baby. She just needs somebody who gives a damn about her to pull her up short and redirect her."

He grinned. "That's the second time."

What the hell is he talking about?she wondered. "The second time for what?"

"The second time you've called me baby." He kissed her forehead and she thought she'd melt. "And I like it. A lot."

"Are we going kind of fast?" She didn't want to go all in only for him to realize two weeks later that it was too much.

Every bit of that doubt was whisked away when he spoke. "No. We are not. I want you established in a home, you safe, your kids safe, and having everything you need

and most of what you want. That's my goal."

A soft fingertip stroked down his nose and stopped at the cleft between his lips.

"You, ShawHarrison, are a determined man. And you move fast."

"No, I'm a man who knows what he wants. And right now, I want you to go sit down and take a deep breath. Don't worry about telling Maya right now. Give yourself a day or two to kind of process the whole thing and then we can tell her together. How's that?"

"That would be great."

"Good. Tell you what?I've got to go to work in a bit, but I'll call my mom, see if they can bring dinner over for all of you. You can sit and talk and have a good time. I promise, they'll love you, and you'll love them. Even though they're my parents and I'm a little biased, they're still great people, and I enjoy spending time with them. My mom's a hoot." He pulled his phone out of his pocket, poked around on the screen, and held it out to her. "That's what they look like, so when you look out and see someone, you'll know if it's them or not."

"Good. Okay. I guess I need to change. Maybe shower. Do something with my hair and?"

"Cheri, you did all of that this morning. There's no need to primp and preen for them, honey. They'll love you just like you are this very minute."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome. I've gotta go get ready for work. Just do like you did yesterday?keep the doors locked and don't let anybody you don't know in." Then he scowled. "And don't let Candace out. God only knows where we'd find her, if we

ever did.” Shaw leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Oh, and I’ve got like five streaming services. The passwords are on the coffee table.”

“I don’t know how to do that.” It was a little embarrassing to admit, but she didn’t.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Don’t worry. Candace can show you. I probably don’t even have all of the ones she likes. She’ll just have to tough it out, I guess.”

Cherilyn watched him head to the bedroom, so she took up a spot on the sofa. Then she turned sideways and put her feet up. That felt good. She’d never had a place as comfortable as his, and it was nice to be able to relax.

But she had a feeling that calmness and peacefulness wasn’t going to last long. Especially if he was right about Frymire.

* * *

As soon as he was out of the driveway, he made the first call. Then he made the second. It was answered with a cheery, “Hey, son!”

“Hi, Mom. Whatcha doin’?”

“Thinking about dinner.”

“Would you mind fixing maybe three or four times what you usually do?”

“Uh, we havin’ a party?”

“Sorta.” He outlined to his mom what he was thinking. “I think it would make her feel safer and more settled if she knew you guys weren’t that far away and you liked her and would help out if she needed you.”

“Shaw?”

“Yeah?” Boy, did he dread the next sentence, because he already knew what it was going to be.

“You sweet on this woman?”

Yep?there it was. “Yes, actually, I am.”

“Dang it, Shaw. Birds with broken wings. Dogs with broken legs. Why do you always go for the busted-up things? You really like having to put them back together, honey?”

“No. I like knowing they healed because of me, but this is not what that’s about. She makes me feel... whole. Like there was a piece of me that was missing, and when I found her, I found it.”

“Nowthat’s the kind of answer I wanted to hear. Makes perfect sense after everything that happened with you and Morgan.”

“Speaking of Morgan?”

“Oh, lord, what’s Candace done this time?”

He let out a sigh. “She’s here, Mom.”

“How did this happen and I didn’t know about it?” Leslie shrieked.

“Long story, but short version... She stole Austin’s credit card and bought forty K’s worth of detailing for a car she claims is hers but is really his. Which a towing company picked up. So Austin and Morgan kicked her out.” He stopped for a second.

“Now that I’ve said it all out loud, it sounds horrible.”

“It is pretty horrible! What’s wrong with that girl?” Leslie growled.

“You know the answer to that one. Morgan is what’s wrong with that girl. Her mother has ruined her. She’s gotten anything and everything she’s wanted until she feels totally entitled. She was rude as hell to Maisey, Cherilyn, and the girls. I mean really, really rude. She smarted off and said she’d just go to you. I told her you wouldn’t put up with her shit either and you’d send her packing back to me.”

“Damn tootin’.”

“She’s at home with Cherilyn and the girls, and there’s no telling what kind of horror I’m going to come home to. Maybe Cherilyn gone because she just can’t take it and Candace rummaging through everything I have. Who knows?”

“If we’re going over there for dinner, I’ll sit her down and we’ll have a little chat.” Leslie snorted. “She may be your daughter, but she’s my granddaughter, and I’m not putting up with that mess for one minute.”

Shaw laughed. “I probably should’ve called you before I lit into her. I bet she would’ve hated your lecture even more than mine!”

“If she didn’t, it would mean I’d lost my touch, and honestly, I don’t think I have. I’ve still got it in me.”

“I’m pretty sure you do. So if you could go by the store, pick up that phone, and take it to Cherilyn, I’d really appreciate it. I’ve already paid for it.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“What about one for Candace?”

“She’s got one. Of course, I’m wondering what will happen when Morgan and Austin quit paying for it. That’ll be a blowup for sure.”

“You know it. But yeah, we’ll do that. I’ll let you know if I have to set her straight. We need to be on the same page. You know, a unified front.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you too, son. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.” And the phone went silent.

Cherilyn and the girls would get to meet his parents, they’d have a good hot dinner, and she’d have a phone before the end of the night so she could feel safer. It would make him feel a lot better too.

He was headed to Somerset to check on an injured hawk someone had found in their yard when his phone rang, and he didn’t even look at the screen. “Harrison here.”

“Shaw, it’s Aaron. You in the middle of something?”

“Got a run to make, but it shouldn’t take too long. What’s up?”

“We’ve got company at the sheriff’s office.”

“Frymire?”

“No. Texas. An FBI agent and a Texas Ranger.”

“Ah. Yeah. Let me see to this and I’ll come back. I’m just over in Pulaski County. It won’t take long.”

“Okay. See you then.” As the call ended, Shaw thought of all the possibilities. Maybe they were bringing some information that was useful. But if so, why were they there? They could’ve done that over the phone. And he understood the Texas Rangers being involved, but why was the FBI all up in the situation? That really made no sense.

Sure enough, the hawk had a broken wing and broken leg. After calling a veterinarian in Corbin, he immobilized the animal with some bubble wrap taped around it, then drove it to the veterinary clinic. The homeowners lived out on Sears Road near the national forest, so he had to make the trek back through the Big South Fork, but it didn’t take too long. By the time he got to the Whitley County Sheriff Department, an hour had passed, and he hoped the visitors weren’t too pissed. He had a job to do too, after all.

The daylight was waning as he pulled into a parking spot and made his way into the building. They buzzed him in at the door, and before he’d taken five steps in, Aaron was there. “We may have a lead.”

“That would be good, seeing as how we’ve had nothing so far.”

“Medical examiner called.”

“Yeah?”

“Just wait ’til you hear.” He followed Aaron as they wandered through the darkened and almost-empty hallways until Shaw saw light in a room up ahead. Aaron turned to step in, with Shaw right behind him. “Agent Livingston, Ranger Chambers, this is

Conservation Officer ShawHarrison. Shaw, FBI Agent CruzLivingston and Texas Ranger DaxtonChambers. Cruz is FBI field office and Daxton is a Texas Ranger, both out of San Antonio.”

Both men shook his hand. “Just call me Dax. Everybody else does,” the tall ranger said with a smile and a Texas drawl.

“Thanks. So Aaron says you may have something, but I have to ask?”

Cruz interrupted. “Why is the FBI involved?”

Shaw stared straight into his eyes. “Yep.”

“In one of the murders we found, the one in Arkansas, we have every reason to believe the woman came from Texas.”

That made it crystal clear. Once the crime crossed state lines, it became a federal investigation, if they believed the woman was alive when she crossed. “So do you think he took her to Arkansas?”

“That, or he made arrangements to meet her there. We’re really not sure, but it pays to have all hands on deck,” Cruz answered.

“Gotcha.”

“So...” Dax spread out about a dozen sheets of paper on the table. They were all photos from case files. “We’ve narrowed it down to these thirteen. Some are a stretch, but some could very easily be the right guy. Recognize any of these?”

Shaw shook his head without even looking at them. “No. I never saw Frymire or whatever his name really is.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“And we’ve come up with nothing in the way of photos,” Aaron added. “If he really was a trucker, that’s a wide, crazy selection pool with no idea where to start.”

Cruz shrugged. “We’re in the same boat. There are literally thousands of trucking firms out there, and without more information, we don’t even know where to begin. Now that FrankieTravis is dead, we’re at even more of a loss. Didn’t you say he has a brother?”

“Who? Frankie? Yeah. Marlon.” Aaron was leaning against the door jamb on one shoulder, and he folded his arms across his chest. “He’s seen Frymire.” Aaron leaned out the doorway. “Hey, English!”

“Yeah?”

“Need you to pick up somebody. MarlonTravis. We’re not arresting him, but he’s got to come in here and talk to us. Appropriate threats can be made.”

“Roger that. Right now?”

“The sooner, the better. Case file is on my desk, and the address is on the... third sheet.” How Aaron could remember that stuff, Shaw couldn’t imagine, but the guy was really on the ball. Aaron pointed toward the other officer’s voice. “Marlon’s not far from here, so unless he had something to do with this and he’s fled, English should be back with him in just a few minutes.”

The men continued to talk, and Shaw realized something unsettling. They reallydidn’t have a damn thing to go on. Nothing. “Oh, forgot something,” Aaron said,

turning to Shaw.

“Yeah?”

“There were skin cells and some hairs and fibers under Frankie’s nails,” Aaron informed the men. “The medical examiner is hoping to get something from that. If we can get the DNA run, we might have more to work with.”

“Oh, we can get the DNA run,” Cruz said with a snort. “I’ll make sure of that.”

“Good. We need to get this under control.” At first, Shaw had been wary, but now he was glad the FBI and the Texas Rangers were involved. Maybe they’d get some much-needed technical help that way. “The girls are oblivious, but Cherilyn is scared half to death.”

“You got somebody watching her?” Aaron asked.

“My mom and dad are there this evening with dinner, but that’s about it.”

“I’ll talk to SheriffMcEvers and see if we can get some surveillance for her, if that would make you feel better,” Aaron offered.

“A lot better. I mean, as of right now, they don’t even feel like they can go out in the yard. First, holed up in a damp, cold cave in the woods, and now... At least they’re in a comfortable home, but it’s like they’re prisoners and they haven’t done one damn thing wrong.” Shaw worked to tamp down his rage at the situation. It was unfair?grossly unfair. “So how long are you guys staying?”

“Until we find something or there’s another similar murder nearby. Got any suggestions for places to stay?” Dax asked.

Aaron nodded. “We can help you find a room, or you could come stay with Maisie and me. We wouldn’t mind, and Murielle would be thrilled.”

Cruz smiled. “We don’t want to be a bother to anybody. We’ll just get a room.”

“Bother? After what you did to help us, Cruz, we’re family. But suit yourselves. I have to tell you, Murielle is a lot of fun.”

“Your little girl?” Dax asked, smiling so hard that his eyes crinkled.

“Yeah. She’s a doll. She’s got a stuffed dragon named Donnie that she totes around with her everywhere.” Shaw watched Aaron’s face as he talked about his child, and he looked like he’d burst with pride.

“Bring her down here sometime. I’d love to meet her.” Shaw could tell Dax wasn’t blowing smoke up Aaron’s ass. Did he have kids? If he didn’t, he should, because he seemed like a great guy.

Aaron nodded. “I’ll do that.”

“You’ll love her. Murielle’s adorable,” Cruz added with a grin. Then he sobered. “Shaw, how’s the woman doing?”

“Cherilyn’s okay. They’re scared and still recovering from being out in the damp and cold for so long, but they’re all right. Maisie’s helped them, and my mom and dad are pitching in.”

Cruz’s smile was gentle. “That’s really nice of them. I hope we get this taken care of soon so they can have their lives back.”

“I think Shaw wants to give them a new life,” Aaron said and rolled his eyes.

That got a chuckle out of Cruz. “There are worse ways to meet a woman!”

Shaw was about to say something when there was a commotion out in the main part of the office, and they could hear somebody shouting. “I ain’t done nothin’, and you can’t haul me down here and make me talk if’n I don’ wanna!”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Ahhh, our special guest.” Aaron hoofed it out of the room, and the other three men waited until he reappeared.

“Marlon! Long time no see!” Shaw called out with a grin.

“What the hell’s goin’ on here? Hey, Harry the Bulldozer, why am I here?”

Aaron was grinning. “Harry the Bulldozer?”

“Long story.” Shaw rolled his eyes. “You haven’t done anything wrong, Marlon. We just wanted to ask you a few questions. You can answer those, can’t you?”

“Do I need my lawyer?”

“No. I just told you, you haven’t done anything wrong. But with what happened to Frankie, we figured we?”

“Whaddya mean, what happened to Frankie? Has something happened to Frankie?”

Oh my god, nobody told him. Shaw felt horrible. What a way to find out that kind of bad news. “Sit down, Marlon. We need to talk.” As soon as the man was in a chair, Shaw sat down across from him and clasped his hands together on the table’s polished surface. “Marlon, I don’t know any other way to tell you this, but Frankie’s dead.”

It was no act?it was obvious Marlon hadn’t been told. “You’re joking, right? It’s a joke. Right? Frankie’s not... I mean, I just talked to him last week and...” His eyes

begged in Shaw's direction. "Please tell me it's not true."

"We can't, because it is," Aaron threw in.

"Wha... What happened to him? Accident? I kept tellin' him using that homemade bungee jumpin' thang was dangerous, but he wouldn't listen to me."

Aaron shook his head. "No, Marlon. He was found dead this morning in the back seat of Cheryl's car."

The big man seemed stunned, his eyes wide and his hands shaking. "Cheryl kilt him?"

Aaron shook his head again. "No. It happened while she was somewhere else, so we know it wasn't her." Shaw was ever so glad that Aaron hadn't told Marlon where Cheryl was. That was information her ex brother-in-law didn't need.

A tear rolled down Marlon's cheek, and Shaw felt sorry for him. "So who... Who would do that? Frankie didn't have no enemies, least not that I knowed of."

Cruz spoke up. "We think it was Rodney Frymire."

Marlon stared, his eyes squinted. "Who are you? And what do you know 'bout Frymire? You ain't from around here."

"I'm Agent Cruz Livingston from the FBI's San Antonio Field Office. We have reason to believe that Mr. Frymire may be involved in several murders, including the one in Cheryl's building a while back."

"Frymire? Really? What's that got to do with Frankie? Him and Rodney were friends. Why would Rodney do that?"

Dax sat down in the chair next to Marlon and laid a hand on the table. "Because Cheryllyn saw him that night leaving the murdered woman's apartment."

"Awww hell. So that's why she disappeared! Makes sense. She's probably scared shitless."

Shaw nodded. "She is."

"But why? I don't get it?"

Cruz sighed. "We think Frymire either wanted Frankie to hand Ms. Travis over to him, or he was sending a message to Ms. Travis that he wasn't screwing around. Maybe even trying to trick us into thinking she killed Frankie so we'd flush her out of hiding and he could kill her before she could testify. And we need your help to try to find him. Nobody's seen him since that night."

Marlon shook his head vigorously. "I don't know nothin' 'bout where he is, I swear. If'n I did, I'd tell ya. I sure would. Murderin' motherfucker."

"So you don't know where he lives?" Shaw asked.

"He stayed with Frankie when he was in town. Drove a truck, ya know."

"What trucking company?"

Marlon shrugged. "No idea."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Did you ever see his driver’s license?” Aaron asked.

“Nope.”

“Mr.Travis,” Cruz began, then stood and spun the papers on the tabletop until they faced Marlon, “can you tell us which of these men is RodneyFrymire?”

“Sure.” Marlon looked them over, then picked them up one by one and scrutinized them. “Nope. None-a these ones is Rodney.”

Cruz side-eyed Marlon. “You sure about that?”

“Absolutely. I ain’t never seen none-a these guys.”

“But if you saw a picture of him, could you identify him?” Shaw asked.

“Oh, yeah. I think so. I mean, I weren’t ’round him much, but I think I could do that.”

“And you don’t have a phone number for him?” Dax asked.

“No. He weren’t my friend. He was Frankie’s. But Frankie would have it in his phone.”

Dax turned to Aaron. “Did you recover a phone at the scene?” The deputy shook his head. “You got Frankie’s number?”

“Sure!” Marlon fumbled until he pulled out his phone. It was an old flip phone held

together with duct tape, and he opened it, then pushed a few buttons and paged through. “Okay, it’s eight five nine...” Aaron wrote it as Marlon spoke it, then stepped out of the room. “Will that help?”

Shaw shrugged slightly. “Maybe. But that’s all we really need, Marlon, unless you think of something else.”

“Okay. If I think of anything, I’ll call you. Oh, god, my brother... What do I do now?”

“The medical examiner has the body and when he’s finished with the autopsy, they’ll give you a call. Give me your number.” Shaw wrote it down as Marlon called it out. “We’ll call you, I promise.”

“Thank you. I just... I can’t believe this. Thank you. Can I go now? I need to go see Mama and Daddy.”

“Sure. We’ll have one of the deputies take you home.” Shaw stood and escorted him back up the hallway. In just a few minutes, he was gone.

He returned to the conference room to see two very frustrated Texas lawmen gathering up those photos. “None of them,” Dax muttered.

“That’s what the man said and, to my knowledge, Marlon’s never been in trouble with the law, plus I’ve never known him to be a liar. I think if he’d seen Frymire’s face on one of those sheets, he’d tell you.” Shaw was positive of it. Marlon wasn’t the best of people, but he certainly wasn’t the worst.

“I handed the phone number off to one of our detectives.” Aaron sat back down. “What about the DNA?”

Cruz sat down too and pulled the file toward him, then stuffed all the papers into it. “I’ll check on it.”

Aaron sighed. “Okay. Until we get that back, we really have nothing to work with.”

“Yep. So could you lawmen point us in the direction of a hotel?” Dax asked.

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll take you there. And tomorrow morning, if you want one, I’ll take you to get a rental car.” Aaron stood. “Shaw, talk to you soon.”

Shaw stood and shook Aaron’s hand, then Cruz’s and Dax’s. “You bet. Thanks, guys. I just want this piece of shit caught.”

“So do we,” Cruz assured him.

CHAPTER8

He’d been backin his truck for about forty-five minutes when his phone rang, and he recognized the number. “Hello.”

“Hi! It’s me!”

“Hey, gorgeous!” He smiled and hoped she could hear it in his voice. “I put the number in my phone when I paid for it.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Ah. And I guess you had them put your number in this one?”

“You’ve got me all figured out, woman,” he said with a laugh.

“Your mom and dad put theirs in it too, so that’s good, I suppose.”

“Very. If they didn’t like you, they wouldn’t have done that. Did you guys have a good time?”

“Yeah. They’re really nice. Wow, and your mom’s a great cook. It was delicious. Your dad played the cup and nut game with Lara and had her laughing her head off. When it wasn’t under the cups, he’d pretend to pull it from behind her ear, and she thought that was the funniest thing she’d ever seen. I bet he did that for an hour and a half, and she laughed every time.”

“Yep. That sounds like my dad. Did Candace behave herself?”

There was a giggle. “Yeah, after your mom took her outside and read her the riot act. I couldn’t hear what she was saying, but it was quite the storm out there on the porch. Leslie’s really hurt, but she does love Candace. I think they’ll be okay.” She stopped, and Shaw waited. When she finally spoke, his heart leaped at her words. “I wish I had a family like that.”

“You can. Someday. Maybe sooner than you think. It’ll happen, Cherilyn. Trust me, it will. Oh, and I met the Texas guys tonight. They seem really nice, but they don’t have any better grasp of this than we do. The only thing they may offer is the ability to get the DNA done a lot faster than we could.”

“Well, that’s something, right?”

“Oh, it’s more than something. If we can link it to somebody who’s in the system, we’ll be in much better shape in the investigation.”

“Good. Well, I guess I’ll see you when you get here. How much longer?”

Shaw looked at the clock on his dash. “About three hours.”

“Okay. I’ll have the girls in bed by then.”

“Good. That’ll give us some time to ourselves.” He hoped that was what she was thinking about, because it was certainly what he was thinking about.

“Yep. And that’s a good thing.”

“Yes, ma’am. It sure is. Kisses, babe. See you in a bit.”

“Kisses back. Bye.”

He had a woman to go home to. Now to find a killer, and they had to find him. If anything happened to her, he’d never forgive himself.

* * *

Leslie had fought like hell, but Cheryl and her girls had insisted they could clean up the kitchen, while Candace sat at the table and poked around on her phone like the rest of the people in the room weren’t there. After they’d talked and laughed all evening, Leslie gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and told Cheryl she’d love to have them all to the Harrisons’ house for dinner. The younger woman couldn’t believe it. Somebody really liked her enough to want to invite her to their house! That

had never happened before, except for Shaw.

Ah, Shaw. Her heart sighed every time she thought of him. He was strong and handsome and smart, and he had a decent job too. That was a real plus. He treated her with respect, which was more than she'd had with Frankie. It wasn't like Frankie had been a bad man. He just wasn't much of a man at all.

She'd gotten everything done, clothes in the dryer, dishes in the dishwasher, when she heard the TV snap on in the living room and went to see what was going on. Candace sat there, remote in hand.

"Hey, I thought you were in bed."

The girl didn't even look Cherilyn's way. "You thought wrong. I stay up pretty much all night."

"I kinda think your dad isn't going to allow that."

The eye roll was almost audible. "He thinks he can tell me what to do, but he can't. I can do what I want."

Cherilyn sat down in Shaw's recliner and smiled at the girl. "Anything he tells you to do is only for your benefit."

"Oh, yeah? Letting them take my car? I don't think that was for my benefit."

"You do know that in Kentucky, if you get caught driving underage, your driver's license is denied until you're eighteen, right?"

"I'd just keep driving without one."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Driving what? You don’t have anything to drive.”

Candace sat there, her face a mask of anger. “I don’t know why he has to be such a hard-ass.”

“He’s not. He’s trying to give you what you need.”

“I need a credit card and a car.”

“No. You need to behave like a fifteen-year-old girl, not a twenty-year-old college student.”

“You don’t even know me. How can you say that? That’s pretty judgmental of you,” Candace countered, and it was no more than Cherilyn had expected.

But the adult in the room had been anticipating that kind of answer. “Let me ask you something. You had a car and a credit card. What happened?”

“Uh, my mom and stepdad started being dicks.”

“No. You took advantage of their generosity by overusing your stepdad’s credit card and taking his car.”

“Those are things they should’ve given me! I should have those things.”

“Why? Did you earn them? Why should you have them?”

“Because I want them.”

“Do you hear how you sound right now? You sound like a four-year-old in a toy store instead of a young woman who knows the value of money and work.”

“I’m not going to work. I don’t have to.”

“You’re right. You don’t. And you can also stay here for the rest of your life, mooching off your dad because you think you’re so entitled to things that you won’t even help yourself.”

“Lady, you’ve got a lotta nerve saying?”

“Do I? I’m not the one in trouble because I used a credit card that wasn’t mine to pay for detailing I didn’t need on a car that didn’t belong to me. That, my dear, took a lot of nerve, and not the right kind.”

Candace sat there, scowling, and Cherilyn hoped she was thinking about what had been said. Finally, she asked, “So how do you think I can get Dad to give me those things?”

“You won’t. Because a fifteen-year-old shouldn’t have them. You’re not an adult, no matter how much you think you are. You’re definitely not old enough to use good judgment or you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I fucking hate you. I fucking hate this place. And I hate my dad for this. And my mom and Austin too. Fuck all of you.” She threw the remote at the TV and stormed off to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

“Oh, boy. I bet I just screwed up royally.” Cherilyn moved to the sofa, sat down, and pulled a throw over her legs. She’d be glad when Shaw got home, and she hoped he

wouldn't kick her out for what she'd said to Candace. After all, not one bit of it was a lie.

* * *

"And then you said what to her?" She could tell Shaw was trying hard not to laugh too loudly as she recounted the conversation she'd had with Candace.

"I told her she didn't have the ability to use good judgment or she wouldn't be here now. And it's true."

"I have a feeling she's angry at you because that's basically what my mother said to her too. I mean, I haven't talked to Mom, but I can hear her saying something like that to somebody. And Candace has earned it."

"I'll say. That girl really feels entitled. God love her, she needs a reality check."

"Oh, trust me, she's getting one. I'm enrolling her in school next week."

"Oooo, that's gonna go over great."

Shaw chuckled. "Ya think? I'm expecting an all-out insurrection."

"I'd say that's probably an accurate expectation." The answer might hurt, but she had to know. "Are you mad at me for saying those things to her?"

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Not at all. I think it helped to hear them from somebody who’s not a relative. She thinks we have some kind of grudge against her, my parents and me, but that’s not true. Hearing it from somebody who has nothing to gain from her approval and nothing to fear from her anger should make it something she’ll take to heart. She knows we love her. She just wants us to love her with stuff, not with time and relationships. Those have no value for her, because she hasn’t had those with her mom or Austin. They handed her stuff so she’d be quiet and stay out of their way, and it worked, until it didn’t.”

Cherilyn reached for Shaw’s hand and he gave it to her without hesitation. “Good. I didn’t want to make you mad, make you want us to go or?”

“Short of screwing somebody else in my bed, I can’t think of a thing you could do that would make me want you out of here.” Shaw extended his arm and Cherilyn scooted up against him, letting him pull her in, resting her head on his shoulder and taking in his warmth.

“You don’t have to worry about that. You’re all I’ve ever dreamed of.” It was right there on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t say it. She needed him to say it first, to make sure she wasn’t rejected.

“Good. Because you’re all I could possibly want.” She felt his kiss on the top of her head, light as a feather but carrying the weight of the commitment he’d promised her, then he yawned. “Let’s go to bed. It’s been a long day and I’d really like to spend the last of it in your arms.”

“And I’d like to spend the last of it in your arms.” She’d been there barely forty-eight

hours, but she couldn't imagine being anywhere else. Shaw was her dream come true, and she hoped he knew that.

The two people who took to his bed that evening wanted and needed each other. He kissed her lips, her neck, her nipples, down her belly, and stopped at the most sensitive spot on her body. Cherilyn gasped as he drove her higher, and she could feel her climax building, its power growing and burning through her. Staying quiet was almost impossible, but she managed. She tried to push him back as he crawled toward her. "No. I want to give back. Just let me? Please?"

"No. I mean, yeah, I want you to, but tonight, I want to be inside you. I just want to be with you, Cheri. That's all." His lips covered hers as his hardness pierced her, and she was sure she'd never felt such joy. His length was perfect. His thickness was perfect. The way he moved his hips? perfect. Everything about him was perfect, and she hoped he knew that. As he moved inside her, his lips traveled from hers, across her cheek, and to her neck, and her hips rocked against him. God, she wanted him even deeper inside her! "Damn, girl. I haven't ever wanted any woman the way I want you."

"No man has ever made me feel this way. I think about you all the time, and I..." She couldn't finish the sentence. She craved him. That was what she wanted to say, but she didn't want to sound foolish or desperate.

His hands covered her breasts, then slid until his fingers could tweak her nipples. It made her groan with pleasure, and he slammed into her harder. "God, baby, I hope you're falling for me because I'm damn sure falling for you."

Even as her body fell prey to his, her eyes filled with tears. "I know it's too soon, but..." She just couldn't. The words wouldn't come out.

"It's not too soon, babe. It's all right here. You don't have to say anything. Just come

with me. That'll say it all." The speed of his strokes increased, and something deep inside Cherilyn contracted painfully, but from that pain radiated pleasure, a throbbing, hot pleasure she'd never experienced before. His fingers tweaked her nipples again as the throbbing continued. "That's it, babe. Let it all go. Awww, hell, I wanted to hold out a little longer but I just can't. You're just too much, beautiful. Way too much." He slammed into her and stilled for a few seconds, then relaxed on top of her and wrapped his arms under and around her. Rolling them together to their sides, he gave her a lazy, testosterone-laden smile. "I don't want to pull out of you. I want to stay in there forever."

"I'm going to have a hard time cooking breakfast with you attached to me," she whispered with a giggle.

"Screw breakfast. We'll stay in bed. There's cereal and milk. They won't starve." The kisses started again, and Cherilyn saw stars. He was falling for her, and she had already fallen for him.

Eventually, he wound up in the bathroom, ridding himself of the condom he'd filled, and she took a turn when he was back in bed. As she stood there, watching water drip from her face in the mirror, she marveled at what was happening. She was nothing, a trash girl who'd become a trash woman and a trash mother raising two trash kids, but a man like Shaw cared for her. That wasn't just wonderful.

It was a miracle.

* * *

The sky was overcast, and the forecast said it was going to rain. There was talk of busting some pot growers in the national forest. Great. Nothing like being out in the rain and the darkness to make a man feel warm and cozy.

The girls were eating cinnamon toast Cherilyn had made, but they weren't really talking. From time to time, Candace would glare at Maya, and the far-less-worldly girl shrank back. It hurt Shaw to watch what was happening, and he was about ready to say something to his daughter when she blurted out, "Oh, by the way, I heard you."

He looked out at her from under a furrowed brow. "Heard me?"

"Heard you. And you," she said, motioning to Cherilyn. "Fucking." Shaw thought he'd heard her wrong, but his eyebrows shot up of their own accord. Then she made the mistake of repeating herself. "I heard you guys fucking."

White-hot rage traveled through Shaw's body, and he closed his eyes, trying to calm himself before he spoke. He'd almost managed to do it when Lara yelled, "FUCKING!"

Those eyes flew wide open and he took in Cherilyn's face. She looked like someone had hit her in the gut. That look sent him over the edge. "You," he growled and pointed at Candace. "Out. Now. Out. Get out."

Candace smirked. "Couldn't you be a little quieter? I think they could hear you in the next county."

"I said out. Sit on the porch. I'll come and talk to you when I'm calm and rational, which I'm not right now."

"If you didn't want me to hear you, you should've?"

"Candace, shut up. Absolutely, positively shut up and get out of my house."

"It didn't sound all that great, to be honest. Sure not like the porn I watch sometimes on?"

Everything inside Shaw torqued and the next thing he knew, he had Candace by the collar of her pajamas and was dragging her toward the door. She was screaming, and Cherilyn was yelling something, and Maya and Lara were making some kind of racket, but he couldn't tell who was shouting what, and he didn't care. As soon as they were out the door and it was closed behind them, he rounded on Candace. "You. You're my daughter and I want to love you, but you're making it very, very hard right now. That shed out there? You're sleeping there for the next two nights."

"What? No! I'm not sleeping in a shed. Fuck you."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Then you can sleep in the back yard. You can sleep in the bed of my truck. I don’t give a god damn, as long as you’re not under my roof, do you understand me? You have been nothing but hateful and disrespectful to me, Cherilyn, and the girls since you got here. You’re one of the worst human beings I’ve ever met. No wonder your mom and Austin wanted you gone.”

In that instant, he regretted what he’d just said. Candace’s defiant expression turned to one of misery, and her lower lip quivered. “See? You don’t want me either. You’re just as bad as them. None of you give a damn about me. None of you! I’m tired of being forced to be places where I’m not wanted. I want to go somewhere, anywhere, but here.” A tear fell down one cheek, then another down the other cheek. “Not one damn soul on this earth loves me.”

Shaw stepped up in front of his daughter and wrapped his arms around her. As soon as he drew her up against him, she began to sob. They hadn’t beaten her or abused her, but she’d sure as hell been ignored. Her behavior was simply about lashing out in emotional pain, and he should’ve been smart enough to see that, but he’d missed it. There was too much going on, and she’d shown up at the absolute worst time possible. Still, that was no excuse. He was her dad, and he needed to act like it.

She leaned against him and sobbed, but she didn’t make any attempt to touch him. Instead, her hands were balled up under her chin, her body curved forward as though she suffered some unnamed, unseen agony. He let her cry for a minute or two, then pushed her back and cupped her face in his hands. “Hey, look at me.” When her eyes opened, he smiled into them. “Once upon a time, you were my little baby. Candace, I can’t tell you how happy and excited I was when you were born. You were my whole world. You followed me around, I played with you, we did things together. But your

mom... I don't make it a habit to speak badly about your mom, but she just snatched you away from me. It hurt. It still hurts to see you this much older and more grown up and barely knowing you. I know my little buddy is gone, but I still love you, sweetie. You're still my baby girl, and I'll always be your daddy, no matter what. But honey, you've?"

"Dad, I'm sorry. I really am. I'm so sorry. I just, I dunno, I don't seem to belong anywhere and nobody wants me."

"I want you. I've wanted you all long, honey, but you just ignored me or pushed me away. I'm sorry doing what I do and being who I am has been such an embarrassment to you, but I love what I do and I have a good life. It could be good for you too if you'd just let it. I think I just might have a shot at a happy home with a good woman." He chuckled. "If you haven't already run her off."

"Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. It's none of my business."

"True, but the thing is, you embarrassed Cherilyn. That should've never been said in front of Maya, even though she's your age. And as for Lara, I know you don't like her, but?"

"Who says I don't like her?"

"Candace, you've been pretty clear on how you feel about her."

"I was just being an asshole. I don't mind her. I just wish she didn't scream all the time."

"Yeah, well, that's what the hearing test was about. We're hoping to figure something out. It's frustrating for her. She yells because she can't hear, or at least that's what we think. But honey, you can be part of this if you want to. You just have to act like you

want to.”

“But I still can’t have a car?”

Shaw shook his head. “No. You still can’t have a car. But I promise you, as soon as you’re sixteen and have a permit, I’ll try to buy you something to drive. It may not be much, but it’ll get you around safely.”

The girl sighed, and Shaw was hopeful that they had come to a mutually-agreed-upon truce. “Okay. But I’m not happy about it.”

“You don’t have to be happy about it. That’s just the way it is. You’ll have to live with it.”

She looked up into his eyes. “You really want me here?”

“Yes. I really want you here. But I want you to behave like a decent human being, and I don’t really think that’s too much to ask. And now, I want you to go in there and apologize to Cherilyn.”

“Okay. But I do wish you’d be a little quieter.”

“Point made. Let’s go.”

The door opened and he found Cherilyn’s back to them as she stood at the kitchen sink, her hands braced on the sink rim and her head down. He gave Candace a little shove toward the kitchen and when she turned and looked at him, he nodded toward Cherilyn, so Candace inched into the room. “Um, Cherilyn?”

The blond at the sink didn’t turn around. She just said, “Yeah.”

“Hey, um, about what I said, I’m sorry. I really am. That was rude of me, and none of my business, and I shouldn’t have said that, especially in front of Lara.”

Cherilyn turned, her eyes red from crying. “I really wish you hadn’t. I had to explain our relationship to Maya, and that’s hard because I really don’t know what to say. This is new, and we’re still getting to know each other, but I care about your dad a lot. I mean, alot. What we were doing in the privacy of the bedroom is a natural way for us to express our love, and it really hurt that you made it seem dirty and ugly.”

Express our love. Shaw hadn’t missed that. It rang in his ears. “Yeah, and I really am sorry.” Candace hung her head. “Want me to talk to Maya?”

“Oh, no. I think you’ve done enough damage in that department.” Cherilyn folded her arms across her chest as she leaned back against the edge of the sink. “And I don’t know how I’m going to get Lara to quit yelling fucking.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s problematic, huh?” To Shaw’s delight, Candace’s face was turning bright pink. Good. He sure as hell felt like she should be embarrassed about her behavior. It was costing both him and Cherilyn time that they could spend together happily instead of doing damage control.

“Yes. It is. So thank you for apologizing. I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t believe a word of it until I see it in action.” Cherilyn was stepping up and defending herself and her kids, and Shaw was filled with pride. Had he given her that little bit of self-confidence? He’d like to think it had always been there and he’d just activated it.

“You’ll see. I promise. I just want you and Dad to be happy. And I want to belong.”

“Good. Thank you. Now, go make your bed and get ready for the day. Showers are going to be had, so get your clothes together.” When Candace didn’t move, Cherilyn said, “Scoot.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Still blushing, Candace turned to leave the room, but Shaw caught her and kissed her on the crown. "I love you, sweet girl."

"Love you too, Daddy." She disappeared down the hallway and closed the door quietly.

"What the hell did you say to her?" Cherilyn asked, staring at Shaw.

"Just gave her enough rope and let her hang herself. My mom always says that's best."

"Well, it worked. That's the nicest she's been since she's been here."

Shaw nodded. "Yeah. I hope it took." Then he stepped up and pressed his hands on top of Cherilyn's hips. "I heard what you said."

"What I said? When?"

"When you said that what we were doing was a natural expression of our love." The look on her face told him she hadn't even realized what she'd said. "Do you love me, Cheri?"

"Um, it's just an expression, and I don't?"

"Because I think I love you. Matter of fact, I know I do, even if it's just on an introductory level." His lips found hers as he leaned into her.

She pulled back with a grin. “Introductory level? Like you’re going to get a trial period and if you like it, maybe you’ll pay for the subscription?” Cherilyn asked with a giggle.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I’m going to pay for the subscription, but I want my whole trial offer first.”

“Is that right?” She was laughing outright, and so was he. Life was good.

At least for the moment.

* * *

It was almost time for him to leave for his shift when his phone rang. “I hope you have good news.”

“The DNA results are coming by courier in about an hour.”

“Can’t they just send them in an email?”

“They could, but Cruz and Dax want a certified copy from the lab. It’ll hold up better in court. Can you come down here?”

“Try to stop me,” he told Aaron.

“Good. We’ll be here waiting.”

It would take him almost that long to get there, so he just told all of the girls goodbye and took off. He didn’t tell Cherilyn what was happening. She didn’t need to know until they knew more. To his surprise and delight, there was an unmarked car with a deputy in it near the end of his driveway, and he felt some measure of relief just

knowing that someone was watching the house while he was gone.

As he drove, he thought about the night before. God, it had been so perfect. For the first time since he and Morgan had divorced, he felt as though he'd found someone he could bond with, someone who'd treat him decently. She was someone he could trust and depend on. As badly as she'd been treated, he was pretty sure that anything he did for her would be appreciated, and he intended to do a lot. If they worked out and really wound up together, he'd treat her like the princess she was, the princess she deserved to be. The girls too.

Then he thought about Candace. Maybe she'd straighten up after their talk. He'd missed her so much over the time they'd been apart, and all he really wanted was to be her dad again. He knew it would take time, but that was fine. She'd gone when she was twelve. Those three years weren't a lifetime, but for an adolescent, they might as well be. Her body had done a lot of maturing in those years, and so had her brain. Then he snickered?maybe her brain hadn't done as much maturing as he'd thought. At any rate, no matter how she acted, he really was glad she was there.

The parking area was almost full at the sheriff's office in Williamsburg, but he managed to find a spot and headed toward the building. About half of the people in the parking lot were folks he knew, many of them deputies. The side door to the building was unlocked for the day, and he stepped inside to find Aaron and Cruz standing off to the left near the front desk, an envelope in Cruz's hands. When Aaron spotted him, he motioned to Cruz, and the two men moved in Shaw's direction. "Got it?" he asked before they reached him.

"Yep. About to do the unveiling. Dear god, I hope there's something to unveil," Cruz said, finishing the sentence in a whisper.

"If there's not, we're screwed," Aaron said with an exasperated sigh.

Shaw sighed too. “Tell me about it.”

“Got it?” a voice asked as they made their way into the conference room, and he looked up to see Dax already at the table, piles of files on either side of him.

“Yeah. Here we go.” Cruz plopped down in a chair and slid his finger under the envelope’s flap. The resealable adhesive let out a gripping sound, and he reached into the envelope and pulled out several sheets of paper.

“Are we seeing these first?” Shaw asked, a bit surprised.

“Yeah. As soon as we’ve reviewed them, they’ll post them online, but for now, they’re confidential until we give them the nod. Once we do, all law enforcement will have access to them. But this gives us a few hours to get our legs under us.” Cruz glanced over the papers several times. “Oh, boy.”

That scared Shaw a little. “What?”

“It seems there wasn’t enough DNA evidence in the trace at the apartment where the woman was killed to make any kind of formal identification. But...” Cruz held up another paper and looked at it. “There was enough in Ms.Travis’s car and on Frankie Travis’s body.” He pulled out another sheet of paper. “Whoa! Jackpot! Got a CODIS hit.” Aaron and Dax both already had their laptops up and were waiting. “Looks like he was originally an inmate in the Texas corrections system. Man by the name of WarrenTalbot.” Aaron and Dax’s fingers were flying across their keyboards. “Armed robbery, domestic violence, assault with a deadly weapon, breaking and entering, auto theft. And,” he said with a smirk, “attempted murder. I think we’ve found our guy.”

“Got a picture?” Shaw asked.

“Oh, yeah.” The sheet of paper fell in front of Shaw onto the table, so he pulled out his phone, snapped a picture of it, then sent a text to Cherilyn with the photo. His message was short and sweet.

Know this guy?

His phone rang almost immediately, and everyone in the room could hear her before Shaw could even say a word. “Do you have him in custody? Have you found him? Please, god, tell me you have.”

“No, but at least now we know who we’re looking for. I take it that’s him?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s him. Rodney Frymire.”

“Nope. His name is Warren Talbot, and it appears he’s no stranger to the Texas corrections system. He’s got a rap sheet the length of my left leg.”

“Not surprising. Just one more example of Frankie’s poor judgment. But how did he know my neighbor?”

“Bar maybe? Convenience store? I don’t know if we’ll ever get an answer to that question, but at least we know who we’re dealing with.”

“Yeah. Somehow I don’t feel a bit better, Shaw. Not one bit.”

He sighed into the phone. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I hope they can find him pretty quickly. I’m just glad you could confirm that he’s the guy we’re looking for.”

“Yes. That’s definitely him.”

“Good. And babe?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s a plainclothes in an unmarked at the end of the driveway. You girls are safe. Try not to worry too much, okay?”

He couldn't miss the fear in her voice. "You think that's going to stop him?"

There was no good answer for that question. Based on the laundry list of offenses the guy had committed, seeing an officer sitting there was probably not much of a deterrent, and he realized in that moment how much danger the officer at the end of his driveway could be in. "I have no idea. I'm getting off here to listen to their plan. I'll give you a call back later. Stay inside and be safe, okay?"

"Yeah, um, okay. Thanks. Talk to you in a bit. Bye."

"Babe?" Shaw turned to find Aaron grinning like an idiot at him. "So now she's babe? You move faster than anybody I've ever seen. Good work, officer!" Shaw rolled his eyes at the man who'd become a good friend. "Don't misunderstand me. Nothing wrong with that."

"No. Nothing," Dax echoed.

"Good. For a minute there, I thought I was going to get the lecture on professionalism," Shaw muttered.

Cruz gave him a quick head shake. "Nope. Not at all. Honestly, she's in the best possible place for her to be right now."

The three men backed him. He had nothing to worry about from them. "So what's our plan?"

"There is no 'our plan.' As much as we'd like to include you, you have a different kind of job to do, but yours is on two fronts, both the professional and the personal. That's plenty for you to handle." Shaw started to say something, but Cruz stopped him with a raised palm. "No. I know what you're going to say, but no. We'll keep you apprised of everything that's going on, but you've got your hands full. We're

here specifically for this, so we can totally focus on it.”

“I have to side with Cruz on this one. He’s right,” Aaron added.

Dax nodded. “Me too. You’ve got three women and?”

“Four as of now,” Shaw mumbled.

Aaron chuckled. “Oh, yeah. Maisy says she’s quite the fireball.”

“That may be the understatement of the millennium.” For a split second, Shaw felt like he was suffocating. He did indeed have too much on his plate, but there was nothing he could do about it. He just had to hang on and trust that the three men in the room with him could handle it, and he realized something important.

If anyone could handle it, it would be them.

CHAPTER9

Cherilyn paced. They’d managed to identify the guy. What next? If he found out they knew who he was, what would he do? Disappear? Come after her? Come after all of them? Sometimes she wished she’d stayed in the woods with the girls.

But that dissolved as she thought about Shaw. Absolutely everything about that man spoke to her, and the thought that the happiness she’d started to feel just from being there might be snatched away from her was something she couldn’t even entertain. No. It just couldn’t happen. She finally had a chance to have a real life, one for her and her girls, and she wasn’t going to let that slip away. She’d do whatever it took to make sure it didn’t.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice. “Hey, what’s going on?”

She spun to find Candace standing there. “Oh! I didn’t hear you come into the room.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t sneaking around or anything.” Candace flopped down in a kitchen chair. “So what’s going on? You look weird.”

“Oh, thanks for that.”

“No, no. I don’t mean bad or anything. You just look, I dunno, worried? Or something?”

Cherilyn sat down across from the girl. “You do know why I’m here, right?”

Candace’s eyebrows arched and she rolled her eyes. “Nope. Nobody’s told me anything. You two act like it’s a big secret. I have no idea what’s going on.”

Should I tell her? Cherilyn asked herself. Candace and Maya were the same age, but Candace was much more mature. No, maybe it wasn’t maturity. She was just much more... exposed to the real world. Maya and Candace might’ve both been fifteen, but that was where the similarity ended. This seemed like something Shaw’s daughter could understand. “Okay, so I’m here because I saw a murderer coming out of the apartment next door to me.”

“Oh, shit! That’s not good.”

Normally, she would’ve corrected the girl for the swear word, but she just didn’t have the energy at the moment. “No. Especially since he’s somebody I know.”

“You know a murderer? You’re kidding.”

“Nope. He was my ex-husband’s best friend.”

“Yeesh! That’s pretty awful.”

“Yeah. Scary. That’s how I wound up here at your dad’s. I was hiding in the woods at the state park with the girls, afraid the guy would find me and kill me next.”

“You were in the woods? Like out in the trees? At night? In the dark?”

“Yes, Candace. At night, in the dark, and in the rain too.”

“Wow. You were really scared.”

“I still am.”

The teenager was obviously thinking about what was being said, so Cherilyn said nothing. In a minute or two, Candace glanced back at Cherilyn. “So that doesn’t explain it. How did you wind up here?”

“The employees at the lodge saw my car sitting out there and were worried. They called the sheriff’s office, and that’s how Aaron got involved. And then Aaron needed somebody he figured would know the park better, or know how to hike it or track something or somebody, so that’s how your dad got called. Just a random transmission over the radio. Took him a couple of days to find us, but he finally did.”

“Oh.” She twiddled with the glass sitting on the table in front of her. “You really like my dad, don’t you?”

Cherilyn straightened her spine. “I do. I more than like him. And I’m sorry you think I’m not good enough for him, but I’ll always be the person he needs me to be.”

“Look, I’m sorry I said that. I guess I always hoped my parents would get back together, but my mom and my dad are nothing alike?I mean, nothing?and that would be a mistake. I don’t know how they wound up married in the first place. They’re the last two people on earth that I’d throw together.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“But they made you. And you’re a pretty girl, and you seem smart too.”

She snickered. “Smart-ass, you mean.”

“You don’t have to be a smart-ass. That’s not a requirement. But you are smart. You found your way all the way from down south to up here. That wouldn’t be easy to do. I think you have the potential to be a fine person, but you’ve got a ways to go.”

“Oh, wow. Thanks for that.” It was quiet for a few seconds, and then Candace sighed. “Yeah, I guess I deserved that. And I guess you’re right. But I’m just not like the other kids around here. I don’t like the same things, or like to go the same kinds of places, or wear the same kinds of clothes, or any of that stuff. I’m just different.”

“Yeah, and that’ll make you popular in school.”

Candace stared at Cherilyn in alarm. “School? Who’s talking about school?”

“You have to go. It’s a law.”

“I’m not going to school.”

“Candace,” Cherilyn said, locking eyes with the girl, “if you don’t go to school, Child Protective Services will take you and put you in foster care. If your dad doesn’t enroll you, he’ll be in trouble. If he does but you refuse to go and skip, they’ll put you in juvenile detention, and you heard what Maisey said about that. Is that really what you want?”

“No. I didn’t want any of it. I didn’t want to be kicked out of my house, I didn’t want to lose my car and my credit cards, and I didn’t want to come here.”

Cherilyn almost said, They weren’t your car or credit cards, but she didn’t. “I didn’t want to be in the woods either, but I did what I had to do to get by. That’s where you are right now. You can do what you need to do to be comfortable here, or you can fight against it constantly and unsuccessfully, make yourself miserable, and make everybody around you miserable. Is that really what you want?”

The girl lifted and dropped her shoulders in a deep, hopeless shrug. “I guess not.”

“Then I’d suggest you try being thankful for your dad and the chances he’s willing to give you, the home he’s offering you, and the things he’s glad to do for you. Your dad is a good man, one of the best. Everybody who meets him likes and respects him. As fathers go, you could do a lot worse.”

“But there’s no swimming pool, or hot tub, or?”

“No. But there’s a house that’s warm in the winter and cool in the summer. You’re not getting wet when it rains. You’ll have clothes to cover up your nakedness and food to fill your tummy. Do you have any idea how many people in this world would give their left arm to have the things your dad is offering you here?”

“Oh, god, if I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that, I…” The girl stopped for a few seconds. “So let me ask you something. You love your girls.”

“More than anything in the world.”

“Could you ever love me like that?”

Cherilyn gave the teenager a gentle smile. “You’re Shaw’s daughter, and if I love

Shaw, I can love you too.”

“Do you love my dad?”

Be honest here, she warned herself. “I think so. I mean, we’re still figuring things out, and then there’s this big dark cloud between us, and?”

“Dark cloud?”

“Uh, amurderer?” Cherilyn reminded her.

“Oh, yeah. I see.”

“Yeah. So there’s a lot of pressure here, and a lot of fear, and we want to be sure that what we feel for each other isn’t pity, or looking for security, or trying to be a hero, or any of those other things that can be mistaken for love.”

“How do you know when you’re in love?” There was no guile in Candace’s voice. She was genuinely curious.

“I think... I think when you’re to the point that if you both were standing in front of a gunman and you could honestly say, ‘Let him go and take me instead,’ that’s love. Love is wanting more for the other person than you do for yourself. It’s thinking of the other person before your own needs. It’s knowing that if anything happened to them, there would be a hole in your heart that no one else could ever fill. Ever.”

“Hmmm. That makes sense.” She smiled without looking at Cherilyn. “I’ve never loved anybody that way.”

“I’m not surprised. Kids don’t usually. Until they’re grown, the world revolves around them because their parents take care of them. But once they’re out on their

own and know how hard it is to be a grownup, they start to feel the need to be connected to other adults, to form bonds, and then they know what it feels like to lose someone. As soon as that loss hits, they understand. Some kids feel it earlier, like when they lose a parent.”

“I just... I don’t know...” Candace was trying to say something, but it wouldn’t come out.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

Cherilyn decided to try to bridge that gap. “Look, I think part of the problem here is that you’ve been left alone to live an adult life. But honey, no matter how much you want to believe it, you’re not an adult. You’re still a kid. Your judgment and emotions haven’t matured yet. And that makes you make bad choices, because you don’t have the maturity or experience to know what to do. You know what they say. ‘Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.’ And that’s true.”

Head still bowed over her glass, Candace rotated her head until she could look at Cherilyn. “You know, I didn’t know what to think of you when I first saw you, but you’re okay. I mean, you’re not... You know, new clothes and latest styles and makeup and all. But as a person, I mean, you’re really okay.”

“Thank you. Now, your dad is going to be home in a bit, and if you’re not in bed, he’s going to want to know why. And after he’s worked a full shift on a night like this, that might not be pretty.”

“Guess not.” Candace pushed her chair back and stood. “Do you know what he’s doing tonight?”

“He said something about how they had some pot growers to catch and he was probably going to wind up spending the entire evening out in the rain.”

Candace’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh. He won’t be in a good mood then. I’d better get to bed.”

“I think that’s a wise choice,” Cherilyn said in agreement. “See? Your judgment is

already improving.”

“From experience,” Candace added.

Cherilyn chuckled. “Yep! I think you’ve seen his bad mood. If I were you, I wouldn’t want any more of that!”

“Nope. Night.” The girl shuffled off to the bedroom, but she turned and smiled at Cherilyn. “I’m sorry for all the things I said about you. I really do like you, and I’m glad you’re here.”

“Apology accepted. I hope someday we can be friends.”

“Me too.” She turned the doorknob and was gone.

Cherilyn sat there for a few minutes, thinking. That child needed a mother, not a friend, and it appeared Shaw’s ex had tried to be her daughter’s buddy. Or maybe she’d handed Candace things to placate her while she and her new husband partied and traveled.

If she stayed with Shaw, she’d be in Candace’s life. There was one thing Cherilyn knew for sure. If you asked her girls, especially Maya, if their mother loved them, they’d quickly answer that she did. It seemed Candace couldn’t do that with her mother.

Cherilyn made up her mind that she was going to talk to Shaw. If he wanted her to stay around, she wanted permission to start something she hoped would help... maybe she’d call it “Operation: Candace’s Mom” or some other silly-sounding thing. It made her giggle. It would be a stealth attack on a fifteen-year-old girl.

That kid didn’t stand a chance!

* * *

It had been a first. Four agencies? KDFWR, Whitley County Sheriff Department, U.S. Park Rangers, and Williamsburg Police Department? took part in the raid that nabbed them five growers and an unusual amount of nitrogen fertilizer. That was disturbing, knowing what could be done with the fertilizer. How it would all sift out, he wasn't sure. That was up to the Whitley County Sheriff Department. He was just glad to know that a growing project was ruined and he wouldn't be running into any booby traps or potential assailants as he went about his daily work.

He gave the guy watching the house a wave, and saw the vehicle's lights click on as the officer pulled away. Shaw was home. There was no need for anyone to watch the house as long as he was there.

It looked like there was a lamp on in the living room, and as he pulled around the back, he could see the light on over the sink. He was soaking wet. His hair was still dripping, and even his socks were soggy. Trying hard to be quiet, he opened the back door as gently as he could and got a big surprise.

Lying on top of the washer was his bath robe and a pair of dry underwear, with a note: Warm towels in dryer. Sure enough, he opened the dryer door and found it filled with bath towels, so he stripped off, dried off with a warm towel, and slipped on his underwear and robe. His wet things could wait until morning.

As soon as he opened the laundry room door to the kitchen, he could smell the coffee, and a beautiful face with gorgeous blue eyes smiled at him. "Hey!"

"Hi." It took him a split second to cross the room to where she stood, and he took her in his arms. "God, you have no idea how good it feels to be warm and dry and here with you. Thank you, baby."

“You’re welcome. Got coffee going, and I’ve got some hot vegetable soup in a pot on the stove. Want some?”

“Oh, hell yeah. I probably won’t thaw out until tomorrow morning. Don’t cuddle up against me tonight. You’ll freeze to death.”

She was already pulling a bowl from the cabinet and a spoon from the drawer. “That’s not true. Besides, fifty percent of the job is me keeping you warm, not just you keeping me warm.” He watched as she ladled some soup into the bowl and set it in front of him, then shoved a piece of homemade cornbread onto the plate the bowl sat on. “Here ya go. Hope you like it.”

“Baby, if it’s hot, that’s all that matters.” He picked up the spoon, filled his bowl, and slipped it into his mouth. A garden warmed by the summer sun? that was what it tasted like. “Oh, my god, this is good.”

“Good. Eat up. Have a good-enough evening?”

“Got the guys we were after.”

“Yeah?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Yeah, after sitting out there in the cold rain for at least two hours. Miserable, but it’s my job.”

“Well, at least you got to arrest them.”

“I didn’t. U.S. Park Rangers did.”

“You didn’t arrest them?”

Shaw shook his head. “Nope. I don’t get that privilege. I don’t get recognized. I go out there and put my life on the line, and the newspaper will talk about how Whitley County and Williamsburg city and the U.S. Park Service brought them in. KDFWR won’t be mentioned anywhere. If we are, it’ll be a first.”

“Were you the only conservation officer out there?”

“No. WadeJennings was there too. He’s from our region. I’m usually alone on this end of the region, but I specifically asked CaptainLarrison if he could send somebody else down here tonight, and he did, thank goodness. We needed everybody we could get.”

“Violent bunch?”

He swallowed another bite of soup. “No, but what we found in the way of supplies was disturbing. Stuff that the Oklahoma City bomber used to make the bombs. Kinda scary.”

“Well, at least they’re gone now.”

The bowl was empty and he was full. “Lawd, honey, that was delicious.”

Cherilyn grinned. “Getting warm?”

“Slowly but surely. You guys have a good night?”

“I guess. I got to talk to Candace one-on-one for a while.”

Shaw’s eyebrows shot up. “And how did that go?”

She took a deep breath and sighed it out. Shaw took that as a bad sign until she said, “Surprisingly well. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

It seemed like she was having trouble figuring out what she wanted to say. He just waited, not wanting to push, as she thought. Finally, she said, “That girl needs a mother.”

“She does.”

“That’s something I could do for her, be a mom.”

“Yes. You could.”

“But do you want me to?”

Shaw knew where it was going. “Do you want to?”

“I’d like to.”

“Okay. Well, what’s stopping you?”

“Ummm...”

Shaw reached over and took her hand. “Okay. Let’s do this. For right now, I can say that I love you as a friend and always want you in my life. How’s that?”

She seemed to relax, and a little smile crept across her face. “Yeah. I love you as a friend and I always want you inmylife.”

“Good. So that paves the way for you to do what you feel you need to do in regard to Candace.”

“Thank you. She’s your daughter. She asked me if I could ever love her like I love my girls, and I really want to.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“You now have your license to do so.” Shaw smiled and stroked his hand down her cheek. “When I found you in the woods, I felt like I’d just stumbled onto the Hope Diamond. Not kidding. Unless you decide you don’t want to be here, I’ll always want you here. And if you want to leave, I hope you’ll still be my friend.”

She leaned into him across the corner of the table and kissed his lips lightly, then pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. “I’ll always be your friend. Even if we were married, I’d want to first and foremost be your best friend.”

Shaw took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead. “I love you, precious girl. You’re mine. Fuck that ‘always be my friend’ stuff. I’m in love with you, Cherilyn. The last forty-eight hours have been the best I’ve had in forever. I don’t want this to end.”

“Good, because I’ve been afraid I’d get my heart broken over you,” she whispered to him.

“Nope. I won’t break yours if you won’t break mine.” He scooted his chair back, then patted his lap, and in a second, she was in it. His arms wrapped tightly around her, her warmth seeping into his skin. “I wish I could freeze this moment and make it last forever.”

“Me too. Make all the other troubles and problems of the world go away and just be here together forever.” There was a sensation on his skin that he didn’t recognize for a few seconds, and then he realized it was tears. They were slowly trickling down her cheeks and falling onto his chest.

Shaw thought he'd die of happiness. A woman he was in love with was right there in his lap. Two girls who'd love him as a father and another who was already his daughter were right down the hallway. His parents were just a few miles away. Everyone he loved was right there, except for his brothers. Those jackasses could take care of themselves, and he chuckled as the thought crossed his mind. "What's so funny?" her tiny voice asked.

"Just thinking about my brothers and how everybody I love is right here around me except them. They're assholes though, so they need to stay right where they are."

Cherilyn slapped his bicep lightly. "Don't be like that! I don't have any brothers or sisters, so you should be glad you have them."

He chuckled softly. "I am. But they're still assholes." He couldn't wait until the assholes could meet her. God, he sure hoped they didn't scare her off!

* * *

It was like a miracle. Three weeks had gone by, and Shaw was ecstatic. There'd been no word on Warren Talbot, so no one really knew what was going on. Cruz and Dax had gone back to Texas, then come back to Kentucky to help out Carly and Aaron with a few more leads.

And every day, Shaw was more in love with the woman living in his house. There was something magical about coming home to clean laundry, something to eat, a pot of hot coffee, and someone who was genuinely interested in what had happened during his shift. That was really nice after all the years alone.

But there was much more to it than just that. The woman he'd found in the woods was slipping away, and in her place was someone whose eyes were bright and whose skin glowed. The girls looked healthier, and it seemed that Maya and Candace were

actually getting along. Candace helped Maya with her makeup and hair, and Maya taught Candace things about birds and snails and frogs they found in the yard. Home had become less about a house and more about a family, and it was all he'd ever really wanted.

"I'm taking the girls and I'll go on down to Mom and Dad's. You about done?"

"I think so. Maybe..." He heard Cherilyn speak to someone. "She says about fifteen minutes. Is that okay?"

"Of course. We'll just meet you down there. See you in a bit. Love you, babe."

"Love you too. See you then." He could hear Maisiey in the background, laughing about something with someone at the salon where they'd gone to have their hair done. She and Cherilyn had become good friends, and the time they all spent together was something he looked forward to. For someone he hadn't known before, Aaron had become a really good friend in a very short while. The week before, they'd gone to Aaron and Maisiey's for dinner, and Carly and Ross had been there too with the baby. As Shaw held Belle and played with her for a little while, he was struck by the things he felt. Would he like to have another one? A baby, maybe a little boy? That would be nice. At one point, he caught Cherilyn watching him, and the smile on her face told him she was thinking the exact same thing. He was pretty sure they'd be talking about it at some time in the near future.

"Y'all come on in here! I've got some sparklers for you take out in the yard. Maya, Candace, make sure Lara's safe with those things, okay?" Leslie said as she handed the girls the boxes.

"We will, Gran!" Candace called out as she and Maya took Lara's hands and led the child out the back door.

“We care, Leelee,” Lara called out, using the name she’d given Leslie.

“I can’t get over the changes in that girl since she got those hearing aids. She’s a pleasure to be around,” Shaw’s mother said, watching the youngsters go.

“Yeah, it’s made a world of difference. Her teachers say she’s doing great in class, and she’s not disruptive anymore.”

“Where’s Cherilyn?”

“She and Maisey went to the salon earlier. Maisey’s going to drop her over here when they’re done. She said about fifteen minutes, so she should be here any time.” There was the sound of a car door closing, and Shaw opened the front door. “There she is now.” He gave Maisey a wave as she drove away, and then looked straight at Cherilyn. “Whoo-boy! My god, woman, you look amazing!”

Her hair was shiny and healthy-looking, and she’d obviously had some lowlights put in it. And it had been shaped up nicely. “Like it?”

“I love it! It looks great! You look great. Come here.” As soon as she was in his arms, he planted a kiss on her lips that made steam rise from his skin. “Mom’s about got dinner ready, I think.” He watched as she headed toward the kitchen. “Hey, you know, your hair looks just like Candace’s from behind.”

“Ya think?”

Shaw started to laugh. “Yeah. I’ll have to be careful not to walk up behind her and grab her butt.”

She let out a shriek of laughter. “That would be weird for sure!”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

He was so thankful for his parents. Leslie and Johnny had welcomed Cherilyn and her girls with open arms, and they'd been great for helping keep Candace moving forward. She was still unhappy about going to school, but Leslie had offered to pick her and Maya up a couple of days a week and take them somewhere fun, so that helped.

When dinner was finished and Cherilyn had helped Leslie clean up, they all headed home. They'd no more than walked in the front door when Shaw's phone rang. "Hey!"

"Hey there. Wanted you to know... Looks like Talbot may be on the move," the Texas FBI agent said.

"To here?"

"We're not sure. Somebody caught him on camera at a rest stop near the Tennessee state line outside Bowling Green. Since we have no idea where he might be going, I wanted to give you a heads up."

"Yeah, thanks. Talked to Aaron?"

"Dax is talking to him right now. And Shaw?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful. This guy is dangerous."

“Roger that. Thanks, Cruz.”

“You’re welcome. Call me if you hear or see anything.”

“Will do. Bye.” Shaw stood there, phone still in his hand. Now what? His phone rang again and he hit the button. “Cruz just called me.”

“I’m asking Carly to put somebody on your house again. I just think it’s a good idea.”

“I’d appreciate that. Please tell her thanks in advance from me.”

“Will do. By the way, Maisey said the girls had fun today.”

“I think they did. I know mine came back looking like a whole new woman! And I’m not complaining. She looked great before, and she looks great now.” There wasn’t another soul around and Shaw was still grinning like a loon. “Please tell Maisey that I said thanks for being such a good friend to Cherilyn. I really appreciate it.”

“Maisey’s glad to have a friend, and Cherilyn’s a good one. You found the right woman, buddy. You’re a lucky man.”

“Thanks. Oh, I’m getting her a car! She doesn’t know it yet, so I’m guessing we’ll be seeing you soon for dinner. She’ll want to show it off.”

“Good deal! Sounds good. Take care, and if you need anything, just call.”

“Will do, bud. Thanks again. Later.”

He spun to find Cherilyn staring at him. “Is something wrong?”

“Uh, no. Not really. Just Aaron and Cruz, checking in. Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good. I bought some ice cream. Want some before bedtime?”

“Yes, ma’am. Sounds good. I forgot something in my truck. Be right back.” Shaw headed out the back door and didn’t look back.

Thoughts were zipping through his mind so fast that he was almost dizzy, and when he reached his truck, he leaned against it and sighed. Talbot was moving around somewhere, and that had him worried. If they could just get a jump on him, Shaw could stop worrying about the situation. He wanted to talk to Cherilyn about making their relationship permanent, but not until that was behind them. Would it ever be?

Once the house was dark and quiet, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in against him, listening to her sigh and feeling her relax against him. Their lovemaking had gone from something frantic and wild to something that made him feel whole and loved. It was intense and passionate, but there was an element of sweetness to it that was beyond anything he’d ever had with Morgan. When he was inside her, he felt like the luckiest man alive.

Fuck Warren Talbot. There was no way Shaw was going to allow that motherfucker to take away what he’d found in Cherilyn’s arms.

CHAPTER 10

He was packing his travel mugs into his bag when the phone rang three days later, and when he saw the number, he grabbed it and hit ACCEPT. “Yeah.”

“We’ve got a problem.” Shaw could feel his blood turning icy at Aaron’s words. “Cruz and Dax are on their way here. Got a call earlier. Marlon Travis.”

“What happened?”

“One of the guys found him in back of the auto parts place. Don’t know how long he’d been there. Beaten all to hell. Fingernails missing. Left for dead and may not make it. It looks bad, Shaw, and I only know of one person who’d do that to him, for only one reason.”

“Fuck.” His hands had already started to shake. “What do?”

“We’ve already got a detail coming to your house. There’ll be somebody there ’round the clock. Got some guys coming up from Arkansas and some from Mississippi. We’re all determined that this is the last place this guy is going to see daylight.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing. Keep them safe. That’s all you can do. We’ll take care of the rest. But they shouldn’t be alone at any time. Period.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that.” Problem was, hewasworried. Cherilyn had gone to the store in her new car, and he was worried blind. “Aaron, I’m going to Majors Market to make sure Cherilyn is there. I’m headed that way now.”

“What’s she doing out by herself?”

“She insisted on going. Said she was taking Mom with her, but I don’t know if she did.”

“You’d better start finding out. Get on it.”

“I will. I am.” The phone went dead, and his first move was to call Cherilyn, but there was no answer. Not surprising. Cell reception around there was crap. Shaw only stood there for a few seconds before he yelled, “Girls!”

Candace appeared in the kitchen doorway. “What’s up, Dad?”

“I’ve got to go find Cherilyn. You stay here, all three of you, and don’t open the door for anybody. I taught you how to use my shotgun, so do it if you need to. There’s supposed to be a detail at the end of the driveway to watch the house.”

“What’s going on?” a frightened Maya asked as she slipped into the room.

“Nothing?yet. I’m going to find your mom and make sure she’s okay.”

“Did you call Gran?” Candace asked. “She said she was going to pick up Gran to go with her.”

“No. Call her, would you? Then call me.”

“Okay. Be careful, Dad. Please?”

“I will. Lock the doors and don’t let anybody in.”

“Yes, sir,” Maya answered, her voice weak.

“It’s gonna be okay, girls. Just stay put.” Shaw stormed out the door, then locked it behind him before he slipped behind the wheel of the truck. Cherilyn had to be at the store.

She just had to be.

He stopped at his mom and dad's to see if she'd dropped Leslie off, but his mother met him at the door. "No, I couldn't go. I had a guy here working on the drains. Clogged. Candace just called me. What's going on, Shaw?"

"Nothing, Mom. Just a little worried, that's all. It's fine." It wasn't. He could feel the fear seeping through his skin, could almost taste it, and he had to find Cherilyn before something happened.

As he headed toward the store, he thought about calling Aaron, but he knew his friend was in the process of getting somebody to watch the house. That was all they really needed. Once that happened, they'd be all set, and everything would be fine.

But Cherilyn was nowhere to be found. She wasn't at the store, and her car wasn't in front of Maisey's office either. He tried to call her again and got no answer, then tried Candace and Maya both, but they didn't answer either. That struck him as odd. The reception at the house was usually pretty good. There was nothing for him to do but turn around and go home.

Sure enough, there was an unmarked car and a plainclothes sitting at the end of the driveway, and he felt better immediately. As he rolled up, he put down his window, but the guy didn't look at him, so he tooted his horn. The officer still didn't turn to look. Shaw slammed the truck into park and opened the door. That was when he saw it.

Blood dripped from the bottom of the car door, and he knew instantly what had happened. He needed to call Aaron, but first, he had to make sure they were okay, and he drew his handgun and pulled his rifle into the front seat with him, then let the truck roll quietly down the drive toward the house. And his heart sank.

The house was dark. And the car wasn't in the driveway. Something had happened, something horrible, and fear exploded in his chest as he stepped out of the truck. With his weapon raised, he made his way up the steps to the front door. It was closed and locked, and he backed away from it slowly, then circled around to the back. That was when he saw it.

The back door was wide open.

* * *

Cherilyn drove up to the house and around the back to bring everything inside. “Girls! I’m here! Come help me get the groceries in!” She stepped back out the door toward the car. That was when she heard it. It was a distinct popping sound, something she’d never heard before, and it was close. There was a quality to it that made the hair rise on her arms, and she headed back to the house to find Candace and Maya standing in the kitchen, their faces pale. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Dad told us to get in the house, lock the doors, and not go out. He went looking for you. I called Gran, but she said you hadn’t been there, so I don’t know?”

“Get in the back bedroom. Now. Don’t talk. Just go.” Cherilyn locked the knob and the deadbolt on the back door, then turned off the kitchen light. She checked the front door, then snapped the light off in the living room too. Turning off lights as she went, she made her way to the back bedroom, then ran to their bedroom, grabbed the shotgun and a box of shells, and headed into the back bedroom again. Once that door was closed and locked, she turned off the light. “Get down behind the bed,” she hissed. When they were all in place, she shoved two shells into the old double-barrel and waited.

It was silent. Even Lara was quiet as a church mouse. The four females waited, and then they heard it—the sound of footsteps. As the steps moved away from the bedrooms and headed toward the front of the house, Candace whispered, “Where are your car keys?”

Cherilyn was frantic. “What?”

“Car keys.”

“Why?”

“Where are they?” Candace whispered again.

“On top of the washer.” Why was she asking?

Before Cherilyn could stop her, Candace bolted. She threw open the bedroom door and ran, and it took everything Cherilyn had to keep Lara still and quiet while Maya clutched her mother’s arm until Cherilyn was pretty sure she was losing circulation. She could hear Candace’s feet pounding through the house and out the back door, and the sound of another set of feet almost instantly behind her. Gravel crunched in the drive, followed by a lot of swearing and a sound she couldn’t initially identify. Then it hit her.

It was a dirt bike.

She listened as the sounds of the car and the bike faded, and she lay there with the girls, waiting. The house was quiet again, and she could feel tears pouring down her face. What was happening? What the hell had Candace done?

In a few minutes, there was the sound of another vehicle, and they waited, terrified. She heard someone come up the front porch steps, and then the footsteps disappeared. In a few seconds, she heard them again at the back, and without a sound of a door opening, she was sure it had been left open. They were going to die. There was no doubt in her mind. All she could hope for was that he’d let the girls go and just take her.

In a few moments that felt like months, the footsteps came closer, and they headed into the master bedroom. Lying there, waiting for what seemed inevitable, the light snapped on across the hallway in the bigger room. Through the open door and from under the dust ruffle on the bed, she could see into the hallway, and what she saw made her heart almost stop.

It was Shaw's boot.

Cherilyn's voice was nothing but a breath. "Shaw?"

The click of the switch let the ceiling light illuminate the whole room where they hid and in an instant, he was on his knees, drawing her up to him. "Baby! What the hell happened? Are you okay? The girls, are they okay?"

"Oh, god, Shaw! Oh, god, there was somebody in here! And, and, and?"

"Cheri, where's Candace?"

"Oh, god, Shaw, she's gone! She grabbed my keys and ran! I think he followed her! Oh, god, what are we going to do?"

Shaw ran and she followed him as he headed out the door and toward his truck. He threw the door open and grabbed the mic on his radio. "Central dispatch, this is KDFWR unit two ninety-one, requesting immediate assistance. Requesting an all-points on Candace Harrison, age fifteen, driving a white late-model Chevy Impala, Whitley County plates. Being pursued by person of interest Warren Talbot, wanted for the murders of Lynne Redfield and more in several other states. Request medical and law enforcement to my residence, eighty-three ninety-five Kimball Lane, officer deceased. This suspect is armed and dangerous." He turned to Cherilyn. "What was he driving?"

“Sounded like a dirt bike.”

“Suspect may be traveling on a dirt bike. Repeat, requesting immediate assistance.”
His phone rang instantly. “Harrison.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“That detail in front of my house? He’s dead. Talbot shot him. He came into my house and Candace lured him out. She’s out there somewhere in Cheryl’s car, and he’s in pursuit. Aaron, please, god, help me. Please?”

“On it, bud. Cruz and Dax have been here for less than an hour, and Cruz has already got the Louisville field office mobilized. They’re on their way, and so are all the teams between here and Lexington. Carly’s calling everybody in. We’ll find her, Shaw, I promise. We’ll find her.”

Static on the radio caught his attention. “Central dispatch, this is Whitley County unit one twenty-five. I have eyes on a white Chevy Impala traveling at a high rate of speed on Ashland Pike. Repeat, white Chevy Impala traveling at a high rate of speed on Ashland Pike. Small Suzuki bike following at close distance. Advise, over.”

“Whitley County unit one twenty-five, this is central dispatch patching in FBI Agent Cruz Livingston.”

Cruz’s deep Texas drawl filled the airwaves, and Shaw had never been so glad to hear a voice in his life. “Whitley County unit one twenty-five, FBI Agent Cruz Livingston. Be advised suspect is armed and dangerous. Is Sheriff McEvers monitoring this channel?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Roger that, AgentLivingston. This is Whitley County Sheriff CarlyMcEvers. Be advised, roadblocks are being set up on Ashland Pike at mile marker forty-three at the Laurel/Pulaski county lines. Repeat, roadblocks set up on Ashland Pike at mile marker forty-three at the Laurel/Pulaski county lines. Central dispatch, advise all agencies monitoring fourteen A and seventeen A to move to this channel. Over.”

“Central dispatch. Roger that, SheriffMcEvers.” And the radio fell silent. Then his phone rang again. “Harrison.”

“Shaw, you need to get in the truck and head toward that roadblock. Do it now. Don’t wait. Make sure Cherilyn and the girls are safe first. Take them to your parents’ house. Then head that way. Do you hear me?”

“Dax, what’s happening? Dax? Please?”

“We don’t know, but we’re headed that direction now. There are units from Fayette County converging on that roadblock as we speak. He’s got nowhere to go, Shaw. Every side road is being covered. They’re headed straight for the roadblock, but if Candace doesn’t know how to handle that car, this could get really ugly really fast. Has she driven before?”

“Yes!” Shaw couldn’t believe that he was actually glad his fifteen-year-old daughter had driving experience, but he was. Very. “Yeah, she drove here from Gulf Shores. She can handle a car.”

“Good. Get on the road. Now. See you in a few. And trust the process, Shaw. You know that.”

“Thank you, Dax. Thanks.” He spun to find Cherilyn still standing there. “Grab the girls. You’re going to my mother’s, and then I’ve got to get moving.”

“What’s going on?” she asked as blue and red lights filled the air and a cruiser and ambulance pulled up at the end of the drive.

“You don’t want to know. Get them and let’s go. Now.” He waited, hands shaking, as she hustled the girls up and got them into the truck. It only took an instant to back into the turnaround in the front yard and tear out toward the road. At the end of the drive, he put a window down and saw Mark Findley, another Whitley County deputy, stepping out of his cruiser. “I’m sorry, Mark.”

“I heard the transmissions. Get on the road. We’ve got this.” Mark waved him on, and Shaw turned left out of the drive and stepped down on the gas.

“What was that about?”

As quietly as he could, he whispered to Cherilyn, “He killed the plainclothes officer watching our house.” From the corner of his eye, he watched her hands clasp across her mouth as she stifled a silent scream. Shaw wanted to comfort her. He wanted to tell her everything would be okay. But that might be a lie, and he wouldn’t lie to her.

He slid to a stop in front of his parents’ house and hustled Cherilyn and the girls out of the truck, then took off before they could even get in the house. Out there somewhere on the way to Ashland was his baby girl, and he had to get to her.

There was nothing left to do except to pray he wasn’t too late.

* * *

The two blackcruisers sat at the side of the road, partially obscured by brush, and the

drivers waited. “Unit one fourteen, see them?”

“Roger. Coming up fast. Hold. Hold. Hold.” The sound of the car whizzing by rustled the brush, followed by the grinding of the bike’s engine. “Now!”

The two cars tripped their lights and the sky lit up as they pulled out and fell in behind the bike. As the car and bike passed along the highway, cars on either side lit up the night as the two vehicles passed, and each successive pair fell into line behind the ones before. By the time Candace could see the roadblock, there was a line of cruisers traveling behind her and Talbot for as far as she could see, and behind the roadblock was an ocean of flashing lights, what looked like hundreds of them. She didn’t know what to do. They were getting closer to the roadblock, but he was still following her, and she was scared. Slow down and let him catch her? Or hit the police cars? She didn’t want to hit them. They might shoot her, right? But he might shoot her too. One thing was sure. If she did survive an accident, law enforcement would still be there to deal with him, so the choice was pretty clear to her.

She waited until she got to within a few hundred feet of the cruisers blocking the road, then slammed on the brakes and cut the wheel. The little Chevy spun to face the oncoming bike, and before she knew what was happening, it slammed into the Chevy’s grill and launched up the hood. But with the impact, her airbag deployed, and it was lights out.

* * *

There were cruisers everywhere, and he couldn’t get anywhere near the scene, so Shaw rolled the truck off on the shoulder, slammed it into park, and took off running. There were officers every few feet, and a few tried to stop him, but it was no use. He was running, screaming her name, praying to anything and everything that his little girl had survived whatever had happened.

And he ran face first into a wall created by AaronFriedman, DaxChambers, CruzLivingston, and CarlyMcEvers. “Stop, Shaw! Stop!” Aaron yelled, and they all grabbed him at once.

“Let me go! I need to see Candace! I need to know she’s all right!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. “Candace!CANDACE! Oh, my god, I need to see her!”

“The EMTs are working with her right now, Shaw. Calm down. Let them do their job and you can see her, okay?” A pair of hands grabbed his face and he found his friend staring into his eyes. “Listen to me! It’s okay. They’re working with her right now. Let them work and you can see her in a minute.”

“Where is he? WHERE IS HE? I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch! Where’s Talbot?” Shaw bellowed above the din of officers’ voices and radio transmissions. To the side, he saw movement, and got a glimpse of a bloodied Talbot up against a cruiser. “TURN ME LOOSE!I want a shot at that motherfucker!”

“Shaw, calm down. Come here! I want you to sit down and take a deep breath.” CarlyMcEvers took his arm and spun him, then pushed him backward into the front seat of her cruiser, its door open as it sat there on the road. “Listen to me. He’s in custody. He’s not going to hurt anybody else. We’ve got him for at least two murders, for assault on Marlon, and Cruz and Dax are going to make sure he goes away on federal charges. It’s over, Shaw. It’s really over and you can go live your lives now.”

“No. Candace. I?”

A voice called out, “Sheriff!”

Carly spun. “It’s one of the EMTs. That guy right there. Go, Shaw. He wants you to come to the ambulance.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

It was just a hundred feet or so, but it seemed like three miles. Shaw ran. It was the fastest he'd ever run in his life. Nothing and no one could've stopped him, but when he reached the EMT, he slid to a halt. "Is she okay?"

"Looks like she has a traumatic pneumothorax. We think the airbag probably broke a rib and punctured her lung. We're taking her now, but she's stable, and by the time you get to the hospital, we should know something. So take a deep breath, Officer Harrison. I'm pretty sure she's gonna be okay."

"Can I just?"

"No. We need to get rolling. See you at the hospital." The EMT hustled away, and Shaw was left standing there in a void within the ring of officers, trying to make sense of everything.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back, and in a couple of seconds, there were four officers, people who'd proven to him that they were the best of the best, standing there with him. "She'll be okay, Shaw. They'll take good care of her," Carly whispered to him and rubbed his arm.

"Yeah. They're the best. She'll be fine," Aaron said and slapped him on the back.

"We got him, Shaw. He's going away and he'll never be back here." Dax wrapped an arm around his shoulders and gave him a sideways hug. "She's going to be fine. I have to believe it, and you do too."

Cruz clapped him on the other shoulder. "That's one very brave, very selfless little

girl you have there. She probably saved Cherilyn's life, and maybe even hers, Maya's, and Lara's. It was foolish and reckless, and it worked."

Shaw stood there, speechless. He couldn't believe Candace had done that. She'd come there a month earlier, hating all of them and the place where they lived, and she'd likely just saved the life of the woman he loved. What in the world had changed? Then he remembered something. "The officer at the end of my drive?"

"Roger Markham. Been on the force for thirteen years. He has a wife and three kids. We'll all be there for them. He died doing what he wanted to do, Shaw, keeping people safe and serving his community. And Talbot will pay for that too, and pay dearly," Carly promised him.

A man was dead. A very, very bad man had been apprehended. His little girl was on her way to the hospital. And the rest of his family was safe and well at his parents' house.

A split second later, he felt himself sag. "You okay?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah."

"No. You're not. I think we need to have you checked out," Carly insisted.

A deep Texas drawl said, "Nah. Just an adrenaline drop. Get up." Cruz grabbed his upper arm and spun him toward the cars. "Let's go. We need to get to the hospital, and I'm driving."

* * *

It seemed like they'd been there for two hours, but he looked at his watch and realized it had only been about fifteen minutes. What was happening? And why wasn't

anyone telling him anything? Another five minutes passed, and then the door opened.
“Harrison?”

“That’s me!” Shaw rocketed up from his seat, Aaron right behind him. “Is she okay?”

“Come on back. You can see her now. Hey, Aaron,” the young doctor said.

“Hi, Chet! Good to see you.”

“You too. Playing on the softball team this summer?”

“Wouldn’t miss it!”

The three men stopped outside the cubicle, and the doctor swept an arm toward it.
“Go on in. She should be awake.”

Shaw was terrified. He stepped up to the side of the bed and looked down. Candace lay there, still and quiet, with a huge bruise on her right cheekbone and a trickle of blood coming from her nose. “Baby? It’s Daddy. Honey, you okay?”

“Daddy?”

Shaw Harrison never cried, but the tears came so fast that he couldn’t stop them. “Oh, god, honey, I was so scared.”

“I’m okay. Hard to breathe.”

“Yeah. The airbag broke one of your ribs and it punctured a lung, but it’s gonna be fine. Why did?”

“Is Cherilyn okay? Maya and Lara? Are they okay? Please tell me he didn’t get them,

Daddy. Please? I was so scared.”

That was all he could take, and Shaw dropped into the chair beside the bed, sobbing. She could’ve easily died, and yet she was asking about Cherilyn and the girls. A hand clamped onto his shoulder and a patient voice said, “Your dad’s okay. He’s just been under a lot of stress with worrying about you tonight, but he’s fine. Right, Shaw?” Aaron asked quietly.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Yeah. That’s all it is. Nerves.” Shaw took a deep breath and huffed it out, all the while wiping tears from his eyes with the backs of his hands. “I’m fine, really. Just exhausted and relieved. That’s all.”

“Good. You’re not mad at me, are you? I wrecked Cherilyn’s car. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, baby, no! I’m not mad at you. I’m so proud of you. You’re a hero, sweetie. He probably would’ve killed Cherilyn and all three of you girls if you hadn’t lured him away. I want to spank your ass for it, but I want to hug you for it too. But right now, I want you to feel better. I’m going out here and sit down with the doctor to talk about how you’re doing, but you get some rest, okay? I’ll be back in a little while. And Candace?” Shaw stood, then took her hand at her bedside. “I love you, my baby girl. I never, never stopped loving you. I’ll always love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy. I’m really tired.” She yawned widely.

“Get some rest.” Shaw let Aaron lead him out into the hallway. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? Tears? You’re human! It’s a miracle that girl is alive. I have to say, she’s one helluva driver. She handled that car like a pro.”

“Did I tell you that when she showed up here, she’d driven up from Gulf Shores in her stepdad’s Lamborghini Diablo?”

“Are you shitting me?” Aaron started to laugh. “Aww, hell, that Chevy was nothing after that! Now, let’s go get you a cup of coffee and sit down for a little while. You need a break.”

They'd been in the waiting room, chatting and drinking coffee for about twenty minutes, when footsteps rang out into the hallway and Cherilyn burst into the room. "Oh, god! Is she okay?"

Shaw took one look at her reddened eyes and the tear streaks down her face, then patted the chair beside him. "Come sit down. She's gonna be fine, according to the doctor."

Cherilyn collapsed into the chair and buried her face in her hands, then sat up and threw her head back to sigh. "Oh, god, why did she do that?"

"To draw him away from all of you. She thought of you three first instead of herself."

"I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. Candace did that. Miracles do happen." Cherilyn reached over and took Shaw's hand. "I love you, Shaw, you and Candace. I hope this doesn't change anything for us."

"Oh, it changes things. It changes things a lot."

A stricken look covered her face. "How?"

Shaw closed his eyes and smiled. "You'll see."

CHAPTER 11

After a good bit of consideration, the surgeons had made a small incision in Candace's chest and repaired her lung, then wired her broken rib into place and left a chest tube in for a few days to make sure it was healing. On the fifth day, they told Shaw to take her home.

Cherilyn had done everything she could to make sure Candace was comfortable. She

built a bank of pillows, since the girl had to sleep partially sitting up for a week. She made sure there was a bottle of water on the nightstand. She made sure Candace took her medicines. She made sure there was help for showers and dressing changes, and someone read to her, played a game with her, or napped with her almost constantly. She was never alone.

But on the first night Shaw had to work after she'd come home, Cherilyn saw him off to work and headed back to the kitchen when she heard Candace call out, "Cherilyn?"

Cherilyn stuck her head through the doorway. "Hey, honey! What's up? Need something?"

"Could you sit down for a minute? I need to talk to you."

"Sure." Cherilyn sat down on the side of the bed and smiled at the girl. "What's going on?"

"I need to ask you something."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"If my dad asks you to marry him, would you?"

Everything inside Cherilyn shrieked. Was Shaw planning to ask her? Had he and Candace been talking about it? "Uh, do you know something I don't?"

Candace gave her a tiny smile. "No. It's just that I can tell he loves you, and you're really good for him. He loves Maya and Lara too. You'd make a good couple. And I..." She stopped.

"You'd what, honey?"

“Um, I... I like you too.” She reached for Cherilyn’s hand, and the woman counted it as a win. She knew what Candace was trying to say, and the idea made her smile.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“I love you too, honey. I loved you anyway because I love your dad, but now that I’ve gotten to know you, I love you just for you, dad or no dad. So yes?if he asked me, I would say yes, unless he gave me some reason not to.”

Candace snickered. “What would be a reason not to?”

Cherilyn started to laugh. “Like, ‘Will you marry me and do all my housework for the rest of your life?’ or something like that. That would probably give me second thoughts.”

“What about, ‘Will you marry me and have a baby with me?’ Would that be a reason not to?”

That question stopped Cherilyn dead in her tracks. Then she remembered something?the sight of Shaw playing with Belle the night they’d been at Aaron and Maisey’s. He’d looked so natural holding the baby, and the little thing had giggled and squirmed with joy as the big man gave her his full attention. She’d thought at the time that he’d make a great dad for a tiny human. Could that tiny human be hers? “No. That would not be a reason not to.”

Candace chuckled. “Or would that be a reason to?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay. Just curious. Didn’t know and wanted to throw it out there. So I guess we’ll see what happens, right?”

“Yeah. I guess we’ll see.” Cherilyn smoothed Candace’s hair away from her face and stuck a strand behind the girl’s ear. “Tell you what. Take a little nap, and then I’ll try to help you get a shower. I think that would help you feel better.”

“It sure would. I hate it when I skip a shower. I feel grimy.” Candace made a face and Cherilyn laughed.

“Yeah, I totally know! Get some rest and I’ll make sure you have some clean pajamas.” Cherilyn rose and stood by the bed, then leaned over and kissed the girl’s forehead. “I love you, sweetie.”

She’d reached the door when she heard Candace say, “I love you too.”

* * *

“Maybe I should just call your mom and?”

“Babe.” Shaw wrested the phone out of her hand. “They’re fine. My mother managed to raise me and my brothers to adulthood. I think she can handle three girls. My dad has his club meeting and then he’ll be home too. Just relax.”

“It’s been months since I was away from them and I guess I don’t know how to behave.” Cherilyn squeezed his hand and he squeezed hers back. “So is this the date you promised me the second or third day we knew each other?”

“I guess so. It’s the first time we’ve been anywhere by ourselves.” They strolled along the riverfront in Knoxville, their joined hands swinging between them. “And here we are.”

“Calhoun’s? What’s this?”

“It’s a steakhouse?a very good steakhouse. You’ll love it, I promise.” He led her up to the door, opened it, and followed her inside. The hostess glanced up and he responded with, “Harrison.”

“Yes, Mr.Harrison. Right this way.” She sashayed along in front of them. “Have you been here before?”

“I have. She hasn’t.”

“Well, good!” She motioned to a small table, and Shaw hustled to pull out Cherilyn’s chair. Their butts had no more hit the chair seats when the hostess placed menus in front of them. “And here’s our wine list, as well as beer and alcohol. We have a couple of signature cocktails and plenty of other things to choose from. Mandy will be along in just a minute to see to your needs. Have a great dinner, Mr. and Mrs.Harrison.”

Cherilyn’s eyebrows popped up, and Shaw fought the urge to laugh as the young woman walked away. “I guess that’s her way of saying we make a handsome couple!” he whispered.

“I guess. Do we look like an old married couple?”

“Who you callin’ old, woman? I’m not old. I’m seasoned. Mature.”

“You’re full of shit, that’s what you are,” Cherilyn scolded, but she was doing a lousy job of hiding her grin.

Dinner was amazing, and so was dessert. They walked a few blocks down to a couple of breweries, but they both decided the crowd looked a little young and rowdy for them, so they headed back to the car, taking their time to look at the architecture of the city.

As they rode the elevator up to their room at the four-star hotel adjacent to the University of Tennessee Conference Center, Cheryl yn leaned against Shaw’s shoulder. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

“I dunno. What do you want to do tomorrow?”

“I dunno. Sleep in.” Shaw laughed at her. “No, seriously. Do you have any idea how many years it’s been since I slept in?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“With Lara, I’m sure it’s been a few! God, I’m glad she’s got those hearing aids and she’s doing so great. It’s like living with a totally different kid.”

“It is. I feel like the world’s worst mom because?”

“No. Stop. You had every right to expect the school to do better than that. They failed you and her. That’ll never happen again.”

“It had better not. I’ve got Maisey on my side now,” Cherilyn huffed.

“Yep. And I’d hate to be on Maisey’s bad side,” Shaw said with a laugh.

As soon as the door to the room closed, he watched her. Just as she had when they’d first checked in earlier, she wandered the room, touching things, looking at things, then pulled open the drapes over the big windows to gaze out at the lights of the city. “Oh, wow. This is so beautiful at night.”

“Yeah. It really is.”

“And we have bathrobes and slippers! Look at that! I bet the shower is amazing.”

“Probably. Hey, want something to drink?”

“I really don’t want to go back down to the bar.”

Shaw grinned. “We won’t. I’ll have room service bring it up.”

“Ooooo, fancy! I like it!”

Shaw picked up the receiver of the phone on the desk and punched in a one and a two. A smooth female voice answered, “Room service.”

“Yes, ma’am, this is Mr.Harrison in six thirty-one. I placed an order earlier for... Yes, ma’am, that’s me. Uh-huh. Okay. Thank you very much.” He gently dropped the receiver into the cradle and turned to Cherilyn. “It’ll be up in about ten minutes.”

“What did you order?”

“Oh, you’ll see. I think you’ll like it. Now, sit down here with me and let’s look through this book.” He’d seen it earlier, a beautifully bound book full of pictures of local attractions and points of interest. “I bet we see something in here that we’d like to do tomorrow.”

When she told him she’d never been to an art gallery, he insisted they’d go to the downtown gallery. She liked the zoo too, but he pointed out the botanical gardens. “The kids wouldn’t care anything about this, and we can always bring them back to the zoo. This is more of a grownup thing,” he said, pointing to the pictures of the flowers and flagstone walkways.

“True.” There was a knock at the door. “That must be room service.”

“No-no-no,” he barked as she tried to get up. “I’ll get it.” Shaw looked through the peephole, then opened the door. “Oh, this looks great. Thank you so much.” There was a twenty dollar bill on the desk right beside the door, and he handed it to the young man who’d brought the cart.

“Thank you, sir! I hope you enjoy it. We made sure everything is in place,” the young man said and winked.

“Thank you so much. Have a great evening.” Shaw pulled the cart the rest of the way into the room, then closed and locked the door. “Oh, this looks nice.”

Cherlyn’s eyes were the size of golf balls. “Wow! What did you order?”

“Let’s see, a charcuterie tray?”

“I thought it was supposed to be a board.”

“Not necessarily. It’s still charcuterie, even though it’s on a platter.” And a pretty platter it was too, white china trimmed in gold. “And we’ve got caramel cheesecake slices, and petit fours?”

“What are those?”

“Tiny little finger cakes. You’ll like them. And...” he said and pulled the silver-plated cover from a tray with a flourish. “Chocolate-covered strawberries.”

“Oh, wow! I’ve never had them before! And there’s a huge pile of them!”

“I knew you’d like those. Let’s get out of our clothes, into our robes, and sit down and enjoy this. Just lounge around and act like rich people.”

“Yeah. Let’s do that. We’re some Saudi crown prince and his consort, LadyCherilyn.”

Shaw chuckled. "I like it!"

Ten minutes later, Cherilyn was picking through the cheese on the tray. "Oh, god, this is so good. And this tea!"

"Yeah. Lemon and lavender tea. When I saw it, I knew we had to have some."

"What's this for?" she asked, pointing to a large wine chiller filled with ice, a bottle of something nestled in its center.

"I suppose that's up to you." He loved the confused look in her eyes. "These strawberries are to die for."

She reached for one and took a bite. "Oh, god, so good."

"Yeah, and the presentation is gorgeous. Isn't it beautiful with the little sparkler-kinda thing in the middle?"

"Yeah. What is that?" She pushed some of the strawberries away and looked at the object in the center. "Looks like they wrapped something round in silver film, then tied it with those ribbons and let the top edge of the film stick up like a fountain or something. It's really very pretty."

"What did they use? Can you tell?" he asked as she reached for the object.

"Feels like some kind of little box. Let's see..." She picked at the ribbons around the silver acetate and when the knots were finally loose, she undid them. "Huh. Yeah. It's

a little box.”

“A little box?”

“Yeah. It has hinges. Does it open like...” The top flipped open and she stopped.

“What is it?” She didn’t answer. “Cherilyn, is there something in it?”

The eyes that met his were filled with tears as she turned the box toward him, but she said nothing. Shaw gave her a no-nonsense stare. “Careful. What you say next will make the difference in whether I open that bottle of champagne or throw it off the balcony. What’ll it be?”

She set the box on the table, then fanned herself with her right hand as she held out her left. “Please put it on me,” she requested in a hoarse whisper.

Shaw took the gleaming diamond ring from the little box and held it out. “Will you accept this and everything it stands for?”

She was smiling through her tears when she whispered, “Yes.”

Taking her hand gently, he slid the ring on and looked at it. It was beautiful with her slender fingers. He’d done a good job when he picked it out. “Cheri, I didn’t think I’d ever do this again, but I swear, girl, you’re everything I’ve ever wanted. You, Maya, Lara?you’ve made my life complete. And thank you for being so welcoming to Candace. I know she can be a handful sometimes, but?”

“I’d love her anyway, but I love her more because she’s yours.” Cherilyn’s right hand stroked down his cheek and she smiled. “I want us all to spend the rest of our lives together as a family, or at least until they’re grown and gone.”

“That’s what I want too. Marry me. I won’t take no for an answer.”

She giggled. “You won’t have to. Because I will.”

* * *

“So you guys had fun?” Maisey asked as everyone chattered. He’d invited Maisey, Aaron, and Murielle, Ross, Carly, and Belle, plus his parents, who brought all three girls, and both of his brothers and their wives and kids to the restaurant in Corbin. They’d come straight from Knoxville to meet everyone for dinner.

Cherilyn beamed. “Oh, yeah. It was great. We went to a nice steakhouse, and to an art gallery, and stayed in this amazing hotel.”

Aaron piped up. “The Tennessean? It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, it really was.” Shaw took a swallow of beer and set the bottle back down. “Thanks for telling me about it. The trip would’ve been fine if we’d never left the hotel.”

Third laughed loudly. “The trip probably would’ve been more fun if you’d never left the hotel!”

“You don’t have to be dirty about it,” Leslie told her oldest son as she reached behind his two kids and slapped him on the back of the head.

“Owww! Geez, Mom, we never grow up as far as you’re concerned, do we? Maisey, I’d like to report child abuse because my mother keeps slapping me upside the head.”

“Watch it. I’ll tell her to slap you again,” Jimmy said with a laugh.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Did you guys bring us anything?” Maya asked, her face one huge smile.

Shaw nodded. “Matter of fact, we did. We got you tee shirts. They’re in the car. We got your grandma and grandpa some steak seasoning from the restaurant.”

“Oooo, that sounds good,” Johnny cooed.

“Did you get anything for yourself?” Candace asked, and Shaw wondered what she was thinking.

“Matter of fact, we did. Something for both of us.” He turned to Cherilyn and nodded, so she fidgeted with her fingers for a minute, then lifted her left hand, palm in, so everyone could see her ring.

“Oh my god! You did it!” Candace sang out, and the whole room broke out in chatter. There were hugs and kisses and congratulations, and when they’d all finally settled down, Jimmy tapped his beer bottle loudly with his butter knife until everyone looked around.

“Now I know why my brother insisted I drive all the way here just for dinner. Good thing Mom and Dad are putting us up free!” Everyone laughed. Jimmy held the bottle aloft. “To my brother and his wife-to-be. May they find happiness and refuge in each other’s arms.”

“Hear, hear!” Third cried out and lifted his bottle. There was the clinking of glasses and bottles all around the table, and Shaw thought he’d burst with happiness. Then he turned and looked at his fiancée.

She was still slim, but she'd put on about fifteen pounds, and every one of them looked good on her. The hair that had been brittle and straw-like was healthy and shiny, and the skin that had been peeling and dry was glowing, thanks to the lotions and creams she and Maisey were so fond of. He'd encouraged her to start having her nails done, knowing what he was about to do, and they looked wonderful with their French tips. The girls looked healthy and happy, and he marveled at how just a few weeks of being treated well could make such a difference in someone's life.

They took the girls' things from Leslie and Johnny's car and loaded everyone up. Once they'd gotten the kids in and down for the night, they dragged their luggage in and left it in the laundry room for the next morning. Shaw collapsed on the sofa, and Cherilyn joined him with a soft drink in each hand. "Whew. What a day," he whispered as he opened the can and took a sip.

"Yeah. I'm beat. Happy, but beat." She did the same with her drink, then set the can on the coffee table. "I think tomorrow I should check on Marlon and his parents. Frankie might've been an idiot, but honestly, he wasn't a bad person. He just kept bad company." She waited a few seconds, then asked, "Is that okay with you?"

"Of course. You do what you feel you should do. Honestly, I think it would be a nice gesture. And please, offer them my condolences. He wasn't the brightest bulb in the box, but he was an okay guy."

"Thanks. I will."

"I think I want to call Dax and Cruz tomorrow to tell them thanks again and that we're engaged. They're good guys. I owe them a lot."

"We both do." They sat there in the quiet, leaning against each other. Finally, Cherilyn asked, "Do you want me to get a job and help out?"

Shaw shrugged. "I dunno. Do you want to get a job?"

It was Cherilyn's turn to shrug. "I dunno. I wouldn't mind, if that's what you want. I mean, after we get all three kids settled in permanently. Unless..."

Shaw cut his eyes toward her. "Unless what?"

"Well, um, Candace asked me something."

"Yeah?"

"She, uh... She wanted to know if I'd still marry you if you wanted to have another child."

"And what did you tell her?" Shaw couldn't wait to hear that answer.

"I told her... I told her that I wouldn't not marry you if that's what you wanted."

"Is that what you want?"

For a few seconds, she didn't answer. Then a slow, wide grin crept across her face. "I wouldn't mind it."

"How 'bout this? How 'bout we take precautions for about six months, and then we just let nature take its course. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, it doesn't. Regardless what happens, we'll be happy just being together."

Cherilyn slipped her arms around his waist as his own arms encircled her and pulled her close. He could feel the warmth of her cheek through the fabric of his shirt as her face rested against his chest, and he knew she was listening to his heartbeat. "I think that sounds like the perfect plan."

He kissed the part in her hair and sighed. Shaw couldn't remember ever being so happy. He'd gone from sitting at home alone with a frozen dinner to sitting around a table every night with a family as they ate a home-cooked meal. "Oh, and to answer your question, no. I really don't want you to get a job unless you really, really want to. You've got enough to do around here."

"Okay. That's fine with me."

He squeezed her tightly, then took her arms from around him and pressed her up to sitting. "We need to get to bed. We're both exhausted and those three will be up at the crack of dawn. You know they will."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:28 am

“Yep. Okay. Let’s go.”

As they fell asleep in each other’s arms, Shaw whispered, “I love you, Cheri.”

“I love you too, babe. I always will.” It was a promise he knew she’d keep. For the first time in a long time, Shaw wasn’t living in a house.

He was living in a home.

* * *

“They haveno idea where we are, do they?” Cherilyn asked as she spread out the sleeping bag.

“Aaron does. I felt like somebody needed to know where we were in case there was an emergency. Or if we somehow didn’t come back, at least somebody would know where to start looking for us.”

“That’s probably wise. I doubt they’d ever guess.” She sat down on one of the sleeping bags and watched him as he pattered around the little campsite. “It was beautiful, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yeah. It really was. It was perfect, just the people who matter to us and the preacher. And you. God, baby, you looked beautiful.”

“You looked pretty handsome yourself!” He glanced at her to find her grinning at him. “This was genius.”

Shaw plopped down beside her as the campfire he'd been tending roared to life, and the warmth lit up his skin. He hadn't brought a tent. The little cave was big enough to hold both of them for the night, their wedding night, right back where it all started. Then he stretched out and pulled her down with him. "This is perfect. Me. You. Dumpster diving. Faking me out with a stick so I think I'm about to get shot."

"Yeah. Perfect. I can get us some pizza if you want. I know where the dumpster is."

"I bet you do! Know what I'd rather eat?"

She giggled as he kissed the side of her neck. "What?"

He grinned. "A taco."

"Yeah? Well, I want a sausage."

"Yeah? Did you pack a taco?"

"Yep. You pack a sausage?"

Shaw laughed. "Oh, yeah. I never go anywhere without my sausage!"

"That's good. We'll never go hungry, will we?" Her lips found his, and she kissed him with a sensual hunger he'd never felt from her before.

"No." His fingers undid the buttons on her shirt slowly, slowly, until he could pull it to each side, then unhooked the front closure on her bra and pulled it open wide. He stared down at the beauty beneath him and gave his bride a smoldering smile. "No, Mrs.Harrison, we will not."