

AARON #1 AMAZON KINDLE BESTSELLER

PATTERSON

& ELLIE ANN

A SARAH STEELE THRILLER

BREAKING STEELE

ACCLAIM FOR AARON PATTERSON

AIREL

“Move over Twilight! Here comes Aaron Patterson!” —*Joshua Graham, bestselling author of Beyond Justice and Darkroom*

“I was surprised by how much I really, really liked this book. I have not jumped on the whole “fallen angel” bandwagon, just as I didn’t jump on all of the vampire stories that came out after Twilight. This is not your typical fallen angel story. It is one that has left me breathlessly waiting for the next one in the series. Hurry up please!!!” —*Sandra Stiles*

“It takes rare talent for a man to write a novel from a male POV and have it published to great critical and commercial acclaim. But it takes a miracle for that same male, or in this case males, to write a novel from the POV of a teenage girl and have it turn out as incredibly as did the new StoneHouse YA by Aaron Patterson and Chris White, *Airel*. From the first sentence, I felt compelled to dive into this young woman’s story and just as importantly, I felt like I personally knew her, which means I laughed, stressed and cried right along with her. A beautifully written and crafted fiction about teenage innocence, faith, loss and love. A must read for teens and adults alike.” —*Vincent Zandri, International Bestselling Author of The Remains, The Innocent, and Concrete Pearl.*

“I am happy to say that this novel is one of my favorites of its kind. I never thought I could read a novel like this and be so swept away! I am always willing to try new books, but I usually steer clear of this kind of novel. Not anymore! Not when I can be so engrossed into the character’s story, like I was with the beautiful *Airel*, that before I know, it’s over. I kept turning the pages, wanting to, no-NEEDING, to know what was going to happen next.” —*Molly Edwards, Willow Spring, NC*

“I just finished reading *Airel*. One of the best book I’ve ever read, if not the best. Of all the books I read, I related to *Airel* the most. I mean she’s just so REAL. I’m blown away that two guys could write a girl’s character so perfectly, so right. Better than a lot of female writers. I loved this book. It’s so versatile, I was never bored. The story is told from various points of view. Normal girl, check. Epic warrior angel, check. Psycho killer, check. The manifestation of all evil ‘the seer,’ check. Even Kim and Michael had their share. And it’s so great to see how everyone thinks and what really goes on in their mind and how it goes on there. Also, it had different times and places and that was very cool. I mean when I first started reading the part in Stuttgart, Germany, 1897 I was intrigued. I was a little disappointed that it was too short until I got into *Airel*’s mind. Then out of nowhere visions of 1250 B.C. Arabia, I was blown away. The characters were beautifully written, I related to each of them in a way but *Airel* is just out of this world! She’s me! Minus the half human, half angel thing lol. And the end was something else.” —*E.M. Book Review*

SWEET DREAMS

“Sweet Dreams was a book I read in 2 days. I truly enjoyed the read. It kept me

wanting to know more. I'm looking forward to Part 2 of the WJA Trilogy!" —*Sharon Adams, Novi, MI*

"Suspense, thriller with a perfect ending, leaving me wanting more. An on the edge of your seat, all night read. I most certainly will be reading "Dream On." —*Sheri Wilkinson, Sandwich, IL*

"New authors come and go every day. Very few come on the scene with the ability to weave a tale that will make you sad to reach the end, longing for more. At a time when the world needs a real hero, Patterson delivers big with the WJA's Mark Appleton—an unlikely hero for the 21 century." —*The Joe Show*

"Aaron Patterson spins a good tale and does it well." —*W.P.*

"*SWEET DREAMS* is packed with action, suspense, romance, betrayal, death, and mystery." —*Drew Maples, author of "28 Yards from Safety"*

DREAM ON

"Once again, Aaron Patterson has made a home run! 'Dream On' is a wonderful read from cover to cover! I am now anxiously awaiting his next book 'In Your Dreams.' I originally purchased his first book by mistake, and was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed it... so now I'm hooked! Aaron has got to start writing faster!!! Although his books are definitely worth the wait! Bet'cha can't read just one! This guy has real talent for writing and keeping the suspense growing... the worst part about the book is the last page... I hated it to stop!" —*Ruth P. Charlotte, NC*

"After reading Patterson's first novel, 'Sweet Dreams,' I was really looking forward to reading 'Dream On.' This book was amazing. I couldn't put it down. If you're looking for an exciting read, read this book." —*Paul Carson, Boise, ID*

"I read the first book by Aaron Patterson (*Sweet Dreams*) and was very anxious for this sequel. I was not disappointed. This book kept me guessing with every page turn. It's very well written and I really enjoyed the technology employed, which makes it just a bit futuristic without being overdone. This was a fantastic suspenseful thriller that kept me guessing throughout the entire book. Mr. Patterson has become my favorite fiction writer." —*Donna H. Boise, ID*

"This is the second book of Aaron's I have read and I have to say he is a very talented writer!!! I read this book in under 12 hrs; it was so good I couldn't put it down. He managed to surprise me with a twist that I did not expect! It is filled with suspense and keeps you guessing throughout. I will be suggesting this book to everyone I know..." —*Amanda Garner, Oklahoma*

BREAKING STEELE

AARON PATTERSON
& ELLIE ANN



Also by Aaron Patterson

Sweet Dreams (Book 1)
Dream On (Book 2)
In your Dreams (Book 3)
Airel (Book 1)
Michael (Book 2)
Uriel (Book 3 Coming Soon)
19 (Digital Short)
The Craigslist Killer (Digital Short)
Breaking Steele
Twisting Steele (Coming Soon)
Melting Steele (Coming Soon)

*For Soleil, you are so strong and beautiful.
And yes, you're still my favorite daughter.*

The mind can break and be lost forever, but if the will breaks it comes back stronger.

Prologue

LIGHT FILTERED THROUGH THE slats in the wood. Car headlights shone through the barn walls, moving like fingers tracing words on the sawdust-covered floor. Tracy Mulligan cried silently as she lay bound and gagged, hanging onto the last thread of life. She clung to a hope that someone would find her, but with each passing car, and each passing day, her hope was replaced with dread. This was the end.

“God, help me.” Her strangled voice sounded strange in her own ears, as if from someone else, someone from beyond.

Her prison was so small she couldn’t even sit up. She was locked in a grain box that smelled of rotten corn, rat droppings, and urine. Her own urine. It felt like the top was closing in on her. With each of her movements, the sides touched her, pushed and scraped, making the small space feel like the jaws of a monster. Tiny holes in the planks let in comforting rays of light.

Her legs and hands were duct taped, and an old t-shirt was stuffed into her mouth with duct tape wrapped around her head. Every time she moved the tape pinched her scalp. She’d once had long, blonde hair, but now it was short and ragged. He had cut it all off. It had almost been the worst part, feeling those scissors on her head, making her look as ugly outside as she felt inside. After that, she knew there was no going back to how things were before. He’d taken everything away. Even her hair.

She just wanted to sleep. To forget for a moment this waking nightmare she was in.

Why me? Please, God, I don’t want to die.

But then the agonizing thought returned. God wouldn’t help her. This was her fault. Tracy never thought the guy she chatted with, and yes, even flirted with online would ever do this—

The tall man called himself Hank. She met him on Facebook and added him to her friends list. He was so nice, and always remembered little things—things she had forgotten she had even mentioned. He had this way of making her feel like the only girl in the world. He told her he was seventeen, but it turned out he was in his forties.

Tracy’s heart skipped a beat when she heard the alltoofamiliar sound of footsteps, and then the beads of light disappeared as a figure stood above her, covering her with shadow.

No, not again. Please, not again.

The lid burst open. Light blinded her and all she could see was a hand reach out and pull her out of the cramped space. She struggled and squirmed, but knew it wouldn’t do any good. He had her. And when he was done, she would be thrown back into the dark hole until he felt the need to pay her another visit.

“Washday, my love,” His voice was so smooth, yet had a tinge of hate laced through it like a snake wrapped around a tree. “You know what today is?” He looked into her eyes as if searching for something.

She shut her eyes and swallowed a whimper. She wouldn’t give him any sign she was there. He’d have her body but not her soul.

“It’s your birthday.” He laughed. “And I have a special treat for you.”

It wasn't her birthday. What was he talking about?

He cut away the tape from her hands and legs and Tracy slumped to the floor. Her legs were numb. They started tingling, coming back to life. She thought hard about running again, but the last time she ran he broke her nose.

How long had she been here? She couldn't remember. It felt like years, but that couldn't be right. It had been enough misery to fill a lifetime.

She watched Hank fill the horse trough with cold water from a garden hose. He whistled as he waited for the tub to fill up. She hated washday. The water was cold and he would stand there and watch her with that evil grin on his face.

He half looked at her, mumbling and picking at his fingernails. She didn't know she could despise anyone as wholeheartedly as she did him.

"You know, my pet, you've been a good girl—most of the time. But one thing still bothers me. You don't look at me with the love and respect I know I deserve. Do you realize who I am?" His tone turned darker as he walked over to where Tracy sat in the dirt.

"I've given you everything. My heart, my soul ... and in return you whine and cry like a spoiled little brat!" Grabbing her by the hair, Hank pulled her to her feet. Dragging her to the metal tub, he stripped her down and tossed her in like a rag doll. The water took her breath away. She choked and gagged on the t-shirt that tried to work its way down her throat.

"You want your birthday present?" His voice softened as he pulled out a small, black stun gun. Holding it in his hands, he looked at her with a creased brow. "You make me sad, so sad, my sweet Tracy. I love you and you act like I'm the bad guy. And frankly, I've grown tired of you."

Tracy struggled to get out of the water, but it was too late. Hitting the trigger, a charge of blue electricity emitted and he jammed it in the side of her neck.

Electricity surged through her body. The shock of the charge made her brain freeze and her muscles spasm. She tried to move, she needed to move, she had to move, but when she tried as hard as she could to run, her foot barely moved an inch.

It took a moment for her to realize what was going on. Her body convulsed and twitched. The pain took over her mind. She tried to think, but everything was going dark.

He moved. He was pushing her under, forcing her down.

Her back arched and the gag jammed itself deep into her throat. This was it, the end—she was going to die and the last thing she heard through the water was his voice, muffled as if it came through another world. "Tracy, sweet, sweet Tracy ..."

Chapter 1

I JOLTED AWAKE TO the sound of my phone ringing. Disturbing the stillness of night, the ringtone sounded twice as loud as it usually did. I fumbled for the lit phone screen on my side table to see who disturbed my much needed rest.

UNKNOWN, flashed on the caller ID. I swore softly. Usually I'd ignore such calls, but now that I was mentoring some inner-city girls in self-defense, I had to always be ready if they needed me.

"Hello," I answered, my voice deep and groggy. I cleared my throat. "Hello?"

A soft laugh came through the receiver.

"Angela? That you?" I asked. She was the girl I mentored who was most likely to end up drunk and stranded at a party.

Silence.

I waited another moment. When nothing else came through the line, I sighed. And hung up.

Mysterious phone calls no longer perturbed me. They were all in the line of duty. As an attorney, they were expected. Every attorney I knew received them. It was the oldest trick in the book. I swear lawyers back in the Wild West had received telegraphs with *heavy breathing stop heavy breathing stop heavy breathing stop* written on them. I flipped on my lamp and took out my field notes. I wrote the date and time of the phone call to use for reference. I'd been getting more calls than usual since I'd been on the State vs. Williams case.

I put away the notebook and flopped back on my pillow. Closing my eyes, I relaxed under the blanket. The smell of my new air freshener wafted to me. I could hear the soft tick-tock of the grandfather clock in my living room. I shifted to my other side. Dangit. The caller had woken me up and there was no amount of Ambien that would get me back to sleep.

There was no use fighting it. I'd always been nocturnal. On nights before big events, like the court date tomorrow, I'd pop an Ambien so I'd be rested.

I got up, slipped my feet into some slippers, and made my bed. It was an old habit. There were so few things in life you could control, the foster care system had taught me that, but a made bed was one of them.

Then I went after my case notes. I'd seen the pictures of Tracy Mulligan, but they still shocked me with their brutality every time. I rehearsed how I could explain them to the jury. With just enough details they would feel a visceral reaction at the torture she went through, but add too many and they'd feel like it was superfluous.

I never had nightmares while I slept. No, they came when I was awake. Reality haunted me more than any fiction could. All I could think about was Tracy. The police discovered her hanging from the rafters in an old barn. The murderer, Hank Williams, was caught at the scene of the crime with the murder weapon in his hand, and ever since then he'd all but mocked the case. As if he knew something nobody else did. He was rich, the only son of a real estate tycoon, owner of Williams, Inc., he was powerful, and he lawyered up with four of the best defense attorneys money could

buy. But still ... I had enough proof to lock him away, or get him much worse. Then why did I feel like I hadn't prepared enough?

I took a drink and splashed some cold water on my face. *Come on, Sarah, you have a good case. Let it go and trust your instincts ... you'll nail this guy to the wall.* I would not lose, no matter how many lawyers he hired. Williams was going down for murder one way or another.

And if he doesn't go down, then I'll do him in myself. It was the dead of night, but I still covered my face with my hands, embarrassed. I shook the thought away. This was what happened to me at night. I became something different. Wild thoughts that I held back during the day came rushing to me like kids to an ice cream truck. They surrounded me: memories of what had been done to me as a kid, plans of what I could do to get revenge on people who escaped justice, and even detailed images of what I would do to them. It was the feral side of me, the side I kept locked up.

Who was I really? The successful, happy assistant district attorney, or the wild, angry vigilante? Even I didn't know.

Chapter 2

I DUG INTO MY oatmeal as I also dug into the morning paper. It was my ritual.

The paper ran a front-page article on the case. It often mentioned my name, Sarah Steele, the up-and-coming Assistant District Attorney. I smiled at the photo splashed on the front page. It was of me pushing my way through reporters, looking down to keep from tripping over a cameraman.

First, I noticed how long my blonde hair was getting. I was due for a cut. Second, I noticed how it seemed like the cameraman was pointed more at my legs than my face. At first I felt offended, but then I had to concede that it was a nice shot. I worked out almost every day, either with the girls at the dojo or running around the lake. Exercising got my mind off things—work, friend drama, my mom, my latest screw up with a boyfriend, but most of all the constant storm of memories trying to drown me.

I did not look much like the average ADA, with my blonde hair and light blue eyes. My looks did, however, lend to many deadbeat ex-boyfriends. I thought by the time I was twenty-eight I would be married with three bratty kids running around, and a rodent dog. So much for plans.

I scanned the rest of the article. It went into the nature of the crime, and wrote a little about me and how I was a foster care system brat turned successful attorney. It had only been two years since I graduated, and being young and a woman didn't exactly make me target number one for a high profile job. But I was tough, and even when I wasn't, I faked it. This business did not allow me to be off—ever.

This case had me worried, though. Hank Williams and his group of sharks always sat with smug looks on their faces, making me think they had something up their sleeves. I mentally scanned what we had on him, and shook my head. We had an overwhelming amount of evidence, but that's what worried me.

It was *too* easy.

We had the body, with trace evidence still on her and in her. We had his DNA and his prints on the stun gun he used to kill her. The police picked Hank Williams up just south of town, at an abandoned farmhouse in foreclosure. He was asleep next to a tub full of bloody water. The neighbor had called the police. It was about as open and shut as it could get.

I sipped my green tea with a hint of honey, and breathed in its steam. Drinking it made me feel clean inside. I never went a morning without it. By the end of the day I needed thick, black coffee, but I always wanted to start fresh.

My apartment overlooked the beautiful Boise skyline, and this morning the haze seemed a little heavier than usual. *Nothing like crisp, clean, city air.* And we had it most of the time, but not this week.

My cell phone buzzed and I looked at the number. It was Angela. I answered as I took my bowl to the sink.

"I saw your picture in the paper," she said in her sweet girly voice with a hint of an Italian accent. "And my mom finally believes you really are an important person."

I laughed. "I tried to convince my mom of the same thing, but didn't succeed." I

rinsed my bowl off and set it in the dishwasher. “Are you prepared for the tournament today?” The girls had a regional kickboxing tournament they’d been training for. It killed me that I had to miss it, but this trial had me working long hours without many breaks.

“I just need you to wish me luck before I leave.” Her voice muffled and I heard Jessie and Cassandra yell, “Wish us luck, too. She can’t have all the luck.”

“Good luck,” I shouted with a laugh. “Each of you are powerful inside and out. Angela, remember not to stray too close to your opponent during the fight. Jessie, follow through with your roundhouse. Cassandra, your left jab is your greatest strength, don’t forget to use it. And remember to have fun.”

“We’ll come back with metals to decorate our dojo with,” Angela said. “Bye!”

I smiled as I hung up. Those girls were challenging, rough, and time consuming. But they were more than worth it. They helped dispel the despair I felt over what I came across at work. And when I was being honest with myself, I knew they helped me feel like I was fixing something that I’d broken a long time ago. If only I’d had an older person go through life with me when I was young, maybe I wouldn’t have gone through what I did.

As I slipped into my high-heels, my phone buzzed again. It was the office. “Steele,” I answered.

“You out of bed? We need you down here right away.” It was my boss, Dan Butler. Just the sound of his voice set me on edge. He was a constant thorn in my side.

“What’s up? You get something new on Williams?” I downed the last of my tea and headed to the bathroom as I spoke.

“You could say that. We have a meeting with the judge at ten. They said they have something of immediate importance.”

It must be bad if the judge is calling an impromptu meeting. “I’m on my way.”

I thought of over a million different reasons for an emergency meeting. None of them were in my favor. Did they have the stones to plead insanity? Maybe they were going to tell us he escaped or killed himself. Neither of the scenarios were out of the realm of what this guy would try to pull.

Twenty till ten I made my way up the courthouse steps and went into the ladies room to make sure I looked the part. My hair was pulled back in a comfortable pony and I had on my black suit jacket with a short skirt to match. I looked professional, but still like a woman. I put on a fresh coat of lipgloss and then rubbed it off, thinking better than to look *too* put together.

I could tell the judge’s wife had decorated his room. There were too many fake flowers and decorative urns. Even though the room was big, it seemed crowded. Too many people in here were too big for their britches. There was Dan Butler, in his designer suit and haircut that cost more than mine. Then on the other side of the room were Williams’ four lawyers, all in black. When the judge came into the room I stood, along with the others. Dan had his hands shoved into his pockets, which he only did when he was nervous.

“Have a seat.” The judge was a curt old pig who had been on the bench when dinosaurs still walked the earth. I thought he was rude and pretentious and everything in between, but when it came down to it—he was fair.

“I have been presented with new evidence. It seems that a member of the jury has

come into some money as of late.” He cleared his throat and continued.

I swallowed. This could mean getting a whole new jury. I didn’t want a new jury. I liked our jury.

“The juror said he was paid to make sure the defendant would be found guilty.” He looked up from behind his spectacles and smirked.

Dan objected. “If you are accusing me or anyone in my office of buying off the jury, you are mistaken. We have an open-and-shut case.”

But the defense attorneys wouldn’t let him get away with that. They chimed in with their piece. This was just what they had been waiting for. I knew it at the pit of my stomach. Maybe this is why Williams had looked so smug.

“The defense asks for an immediate mistrial upon such evidence. The media has already been displaying my client as a cold-blooded murderer, and any effort to find an unbiased jury is now out of the question.” The bald lawyer, Mr. Sawyer, stood as if he was going to leave.

“Sit down, Mr. Sawyer,” the judge ordered. Sawyer sat. “I will call for a replacement, that is why we have them. I won’t call for a mistrial. The jury pool has been sequestered and you are free to interview the alternates if you’d like.” The room grew silent.

I seethed inside. It was a ballsy move to bribe the jury, but one that didn’t surprise me. I didn’t think it was any of these attorneys that did it—they were too afraid of the consequences. But Williams, he would not be above such things. This meant he had a network to work with, people on the outside to do things for him.

If this cost the case, so help me. I’d hunt that network down.

“We object, your Honor,” Sawyer said. “The jury pool has been tainted. How do we know more have not been paid off?” Sawyer shot a look of disgust my way and I gave him a death glare.

I spoke up, my voice calm. “Why would we pay anyone? Other than being unethical and downright absurd, we have no reason to mess this trial up.”

“You overestimate the power of evidence and underestimate the power of a jury,” the judge said in a snide voice. He suddenly blinked at me, as if realizing who he was talking to. He turned to Dan. I tensed at the slight, but then relaxed when I remembered that he just wanted to get me worked up. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. “Mr. Butler,” he said, “there is no such thing as an open-and-shut case. Surprises are always possible. Nothing like this can happen again or I’ll declare a mistrial.”

My expression sobered. It was just sinking in how close to losing this case we were before we even got started. My heart sped up, and I willed the judge to decide in our favor.

He continued. “There will be a full investigation into this matter, but my ruling is final.”

The four sharks consulted with each other. One of them, a white-haired man with a pink tie, was more animated than the rest. I leaned in, trying to hear what they said, but I couldn’t. Finally, they turned and said, “No objections.”

“Good. We will continue as planned and I will see you in my courtroom in one hour. And when I find out who is behind this, I will seek to have the culprit charged to the full extent of the law. Good day.”

Chapter 3

WHEN I STEPPED INTO the court hallway, the buzz assailed me. Everyone was fired up about something. Cops were running down the hallway, attorneys were whispering to each other and frantically passing papers, and everyone's eyes were alarmed.

Adam Boden, a nice man who graduated at the same time I did, rushed past me. I caught his arm. "What's going on?" I asked. Dan came up to us and leaned in to hear the answer.

Adam met my eyes, serious, and then looked at Dan, and back at me. My throat tightened. In a low voice, he said, "One of the forensic techs, Joel McFay, came into work today stoned out of his mind. And they found cocaine in his locker, and traces of it all over his car and apartment." He stopped and his eyes widened.

"So?" I said, not ready to relax but not yet seeing the significance. "They'll fire him and get a new one."

"No." Adam frowned. "There's no telling how long he's been going to work toasted. They're declaring all the evidence he's catalogued for the past year null. He's swearing he was set up, but can't prove it."

Dan still stared at him, as if not understanding. But the full reality of what it meant sunk in for me.

"So the DNA he's ran could be off," Dan said slowly.

"No DNA test he did will hold up in a court of law," I whispered.

He had to have done hundreds in the past year. And now, in one moment, they would all be trashed. How many criminals would go free because of this? I grasped my briefcase and shuffled through the papers until I reached the right one. My eyes tore down the page until it lit on a name.

"Joel McFay, you said?"

Adam's face creased in compassion. He nodded.

For a moment my mask cracked, my face wrinkled in rage and I groaned. "No! No! No way!" My voice echoed through the hall. The din quieted. People stared at me in shock, then glanced away.

Adam stepped back. Dan put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey," he said in a soothing voice. "It's going to be okay." But even as he said the words I could tell he didn't believe them.

I closed my eyes and collected myself, drawing from deep within me, willing myself to hide that wild side.

Adam looked at me as if he'd never seen me before, then inched away, turned, and walked off. Dan still had his arm on my shoulder, which seemed to burn through my blouse. I stepped forward and his hand fell.

My mind raced, already going through the case in light of the recent setback. No, it was more than a setback. It was enough to get most cases thrown out of court. I mentally filtered out the DNA evidence from my presentation and concentrated on what I had left.

There was no doubt that the tech could've been set up. And I had no doubt Hank

Williams could've done it. Ten years ago he'd been charged with possession, but got out with only a hefty fine and some community service. Since then I was sure he was in on the drug trade, he'd just been successful at not getting caught.

Walking fast, I weaved in and out of the busy hallway, not meeting anyone's eyes, in my own world. I'd lost Dan, who was probably finding the nearest judge to try to get some privileged information.

My case was DNA rich, no doubt about it. But was there enough evidence without it to prove him guilty? I thought of the stun gun they'd found in his hand, the murder weapon. There was a witness, a neighbor who saw his car at the barn that night. And then there were his fingerprints all over the place. That had to be enough.

I gritted my teeth. It would be enough. I wasn't going to fail Tracy just because some cokehead had been caught, or framed.

Besides, the judge might allow for our case's DNA. You never know.

Chapter 4

THE JUDGE PUT HIS hands together in a prayerful position and said mournfully, “Because Joel McFay completed all of the DNA evidence for the case, none of it can be used as evidence.” He sighed. I had a feeling behind his morose attitude he was enjoying the drama. “In light of this recent setback, I will allow you to convene another day, if you so choose.”

“No, thank you, your Honor,” Sawyer said quickly. “We don’t want to reschedule.” He looked down to where Williams sat, and nodded. Williams looked at me. His eyes glistened with pleasure.

I shuffled my papers, picked up my pen, and then set it down again, thinking hard. Dan’s eyes were boring into the side of my face, but I didn’t meet them. I knew what he would say: wait. But the murder had taken place eleven months ago. The thought of Williams getting away another week set me on edge. There was enough evidence to convict him, I knew it. The witness would seal the deal for us.

Raising my eyes to the judge, I copied Sawyer word for word. “No, thank you, your Honor. We don’t want to reschedule.”

It was as if the room audibly sighed. Everyone hated delays.

Dan Butler sat on my left with the intern, Joshua, who took notes and tried not to look nervous. Dan was there for support and to make sure I didn’t screw up. I hated being babysat, but being a newbie came with its baggage. Mine was Dan. He would only sit in on high profile cases, and this being the biggest case of the year, it was understandable he was keeping a close eye on me. I knew I was a Cinderella figure. Sure, I was riding in the carriage now. But I was one mistake away from landing on my butt on the curb with pumpkin all over my dress.

Chapter 5

THE COURTROOM WAS PACKED. Not only was the media there, keenly observing every move we made, there were family members, tense and agitated at the sight of Williams, and then there were the citizens who came for the show, for the gory pictures and dramatic courtroom speeches.

I pushed everyone out of my mind. All that mattered now were my witnesses and my jury. At the beginning of each case I claimed the jury for myself. It helped me speak to them as if I knew them; as if we were longtime friends I was telling a horrific story to. It was my greatest strength, working the jury, and it's what Dan had seen in me that had got me hired.

The first witness of the day was Hank Williams' mother. In my interview with her she mentioned how her son had a porn addiction and I hoped to use it to show that Hank Williams was into girls, young ones. But she folded on the stand. She all but vouched for his character with tears in her eyes. She backed up his not guilty claim by saying how he never lied, how he had been a boy scout and a model student, and how he treated women with the utmost respect. I masked my anger with a smile and cut my questions short.

Then came Kathleen Perry, an elderly lady—big boned, thinning hair, teeth that had half an inch of tar coating them, and a skull and bones tattooed on her neck. She didn't exactly look like the type of person you'd leave your children with, but she was a neighbor to the abandoned farmhouse Williams had kept Tracy in.

I was halfway through my interrogation, and had already pulled out a few tears from her as she recounted the experience. But she wasn't as confident as she'd been when she was alone with me. Kathleen's eyes were shifty, and she answered with, "probably," "maybe," and "kind of," more often than I'd like. It was more than just jitters, too. I could tell. This was something different. Something had spooked my witness and I didn't know what. I plowed ahead, though, ready to hear her witness that he was there the night Tracy died. And then I would get her out of here.

Cross-examining witnesses was always an adrenaline rush. There was no other feeling like an open conflict between two people with a silent audience.

"Now let's jump to the night of the murder," I said. "Did you see anything out of the ordinary at the barn?" I asked. I sneaked a sideways glance at the jury. They were listening with rapt attention.

"Yes. I saw a silver car in the driveway. You know, one of those nice ones that you see on TV a lot? I'd seen it in the driveway off and on for about a month."

I walked back and took a photo Joshua was holding out for me. He always knew what I needed before I even asked. "'May I approach the witness with State's Exhibit No. 65, your Honor?'"

The Judge nodded.

I slid the picture of the defendant's car toward Kathleen and her eyes lit up. "Yes, that's the one. I remember the sticker in the back window. It looks like a snake or something. I remember thinking it was a little creepy."

“Tell the Court what you heard coming from the farmhouse, if you can.” I leaned in and handed her a tissue. She took it and dabbed her eyes.

“Around eleven o’clock I went out for a smoke. It was a calm night. No wind at all. I noticed that car there by the barn. And I heard something. Screams ... they sounded muffled, and almost like an animal. I thought it might be a wounded dog or something.” She said it so low that everyone in the courtroom leaned in to hear.

I asked my next questions in a calm voice. “Why didn’t you call the police? Why didn’t you try to get some help?”

She looked up at me with red, puffy eyes, and then looked around the room apologetically. “I didn’t believe it was really what it sounded like. We have such a peaceful, little place and I never imagined it was more than a tomcat, or maybe a wild animal. I should have called, but I just didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think that someone could be this cruel and heartless to a helpless little girl, did you?”

“Objection!” Sawyer stood so fast his chair tipped over.

I turned and walked to my desk. “No further questions, your Honor.” I made my point and the courtroom felt it just as I did. After a few more expert witnesses, and slide after slide of Tracy Mulligan’s broken body, everything would wrap up like a Christmas present. I looked over at Williams. Through it all, he looked calm and collected.

What was he hiding?

Sawyer picked up his chair, red faced, and walked over to Kathleen. I tensed as if I were the one on the stand.

“Have you ever been convicted of any felonies, Mrs. Perry?” He spoke her name crisply.

Kathleen gasped.

“Objection, your Honor,” I said evenly. “Irrelevant.”

“Lends to character, Judge,” Sawyer said.

“Overruled,” the judge said. “Please continue, Mr. Sawyer.”

Kathleen looked down and wrung her hands. She wouldn’t meet anyone’s eyes and barely whispered, “Yes.”

“What were you charged with?” Sawyer asked. I couldn’t see his face but I was sure it was smug.

Kathleen shifted in her chair. I willed her to look up, speak confidently, and not look so darn guilty. “I was heavy into drugs. Got caught with possession. Served my time.” She looked up and said loudly. “It ruined my life, and my son’s life. I ain’t never gonna get a hold of that stuff again. We moved here and alls I do is smoke, nothin’ more. Everyday I’m sorry I ever introduced drugs to my family.”

“So there are no drugs in your family anymore?” Sawyer asked.

Kathleen took a shaky breath. “N-n-no,” she stuttered. Her rehearsed, clearlypronounced words slipped into her normal slang. I forced myself not to look down in defeat.

I glanced at the jury. Their eyes were distrustful. I tried to meet Kathleen’s gaze, but she wouldn’t look at me. This was going downhill, fast.

“So if I was to get the police to raid your house, we’d find no drugs at all?” Sawyer said. Kathleen’s eyes widened.

“Objection,” I said. “Threatening the witness.”

So this was what it was all about. Kathleen wasn't nervous for herself. I knew people on drugs and she didn't have the look of it on her. But she was protecting her son. I held my breath. How much would she do to protect him?

“Sustained,” the judge said, and I let out my breath.

But Sawyer had already done what he needed to. Kathleen looked like a cornered rabbit.

“So on those nights when you saw the defendant's car at the barn, and you heard those screams, you were in no way inebriated?”

She opened her mouth to say something, and stopped. Sawyer continued.

“You're absolutely sure, without a shadow of a doubt, that you saw that car parked at the barn and heard those sounds at eleven o'clock on May 14th?”

Kathleen swallowed. I could see what she was thinking. She was wondering if she said yes, a raid would be ordered on her house. So wrapped up in the moment, I nodded for her, as if it would help.

“Would you swear—” Sawyer pointed at Williams, “—on his life that you are absolutely sure you saw what you described?”

If anyone looked unsure at the moment, it was Kathleen. I internally groaned. The jury looked gone already, as if they didn't need to hear anymore.

Giving up, she shook her head. No. She wasn't sure.

Sometimes I wished I were a defense attorney ... all they had to do was just show reasonable doubt. So much for my eyewitness.