

Chapter One

Verdict Day – Early Evening

Palpable tension filled the conference room at the Newton Police Headquarters. Out of twelve jurors, eight anxiously waited for a family member or friend to come and pick them up. “What’s the big deal with having our cell phones off now!” someone complained testily. Being sequestered for seven weeks had smothered any remaining sparks of excitement of being a juror on a high profile trial.

Earlier, in Trenton, NJ, extensive media presence and a sizable crowd had gathered in front of the Trenton Court House. After the verdict was announced, angry chants rose up in protest. When the trial judge debriefed them, he’d said, “I’m concerned for your safety. I’ve issued an order for you to be transported and released from the Sussex County Seat in Newton. I know Belvidere is closer to your homes, but we’ve got the same situation there.”

Now, their jury liaison, Officer Edwards, entered the conference room. He glanced down at the paper in his hand. “Juror 1389.”

Dorsie Renninger quickly rose from her seat. “That’s me,” she said. She handed him her Court ID card.

He quickly checked her details against the Jury Release Form. Satisfied they matched, he asked, “Security Name?”

“Harold Raines, brother.”

“Thank you ma’am,” he said. He walked over and picked up her bags. “Now, if you’ll come with me.”

Dorsie said nothing to the remaining jurors. She offered no warm goodbyes or the social nicety of we’ll-keep-in-touch. The ordeal was over. The jury’s verdict announced and officially entered into the State of New Jersey Criminal Justice Database to be retrieved at any time but never to be changed. Behind her, she heard

the conference room door click shut. One thought, and one thought only, ran through her mind.

God forgive each of us for what we've done.

Left alone at the door leading to the station's vehicle bay, Dorsie reviewed what was known about her in relationship to the Tracy Ann Maddox trial. She was Juror 1389 in the court system but designated as Juror Four to the media and public. Now, she was within minutes of being officially released and able to assume her own identity and to go about her day-to-day life. She stood at the bay door counting the minutes as they went by. She glanced down the hallway. It was empty, devoid of any activity one would expect to find in a police headquarters. She concluded it was for security reasons. It eliminated the possibility of any personnel recognizing a juror and minimized the risk of a juror's name finding its way to any media source. Their names were ordered sealed by Judge Howard. Now, she was deeply grateful for that order. The interior door to the bay swung open and she quickly backed away.

"Sorry Ma'am," said Officer Edwards. "Didn't mean to startle you. You're cleared. Good to go. Bags are in the car."

Dorsie entered the vehicle bay then climbed into the passenger side of her silver Honda and thanked Officer Edwards before he closed the door.

Seconds later, Dorsie turned to her brother. "Harold, thank you. And thank God!" She slumped back in the seat with a deep exhausted sigh. "As far as I'm concerned I should never have to do jury duty again. Being hustled about, guarded and hidden makes you feel like a prisoner. Like you've done something wrong. Seven weeks!" She rummaged in her handbag and withdrew a small, well-worn maroon leather organizer then flipped it open. "Gawd, how am I ever going to catch up on things? This list . . . umm . . . I'm going to have to call Rose and thank her for helping you mind Diva and Pavarotti. Oh! What's today?" Her fingertips brushed along her forehead. "Yes . . . yes, of course, of course. Labor Day. Damn, I'm going to miss another Habitat Board Meeting. It's tomorrow! And I'm sure my clients have been satisfied with Brandon stepping in but I'm going to have to touch base with them anyway. Then there's . . ." She rattled on and on in an agitated stream of chatter.

Harold wasn't listening as he gave his twin sister a quick

once-over. He noted her silver mane was haphazardly pinned up, her clothes were a bit rumpled and she'd lost some weight but otherwise she still appeared to be the same sister he loved dearly. She wasn't going to like it when she found out the media described her as Juror Four, an elderly, not-yet-retired businesswoman. He turned his eyes back to the road getting more and more uneasy with her non-stop recitation of things that could be labeled unimportant in lieu of what she'd just done in the last seven weeks.

He glanced over at Dorsie again. With force, or it seemed that way to him, she was scratching out items on her list. Dorsie and her lists, he thought, knowing firsthand how, to her, these were not frivolous things. In the beginning, they were the roadmaps that built their family business. How many lists had she made during the duration of the trial? He glanced over at her again. With jerking, impatient movements, she flipped back and forth between pages in her organizer. He could count on his hand the number of times he'd seen her in a state of agitation. Dorsie usually was the cool cucumber type, always in control even in the most trying circumstances. *Stay true to form, Ole Gal*, he telegraphed silently. He was absolutely certain she was going to need the protection of that cool exterior just as a law enforcement officer needed a bulletproof vest. When she reached out to turn on the radio, he brushed away her hand, "Dorsie, I don't think that's such a good idea right now."

Dorsie struggled, fighting the seat belt in order to face her brother. She could tell from his profile that his brows were furrowed, a sure sign he was worried or upset. "Harold?"

"You just don't know the whole of it. It's . . . its bad. The verdict, well . . . What can I say? Don't listen." His mouth settled into a grim, tight line.

"Judge Howard warned us. He ordered for our names not to be released for . . ." She waved her hand helplessly. "Right now, I just I can't remember for how long, but I'm sure it's in the juror packet they've sent us home with." She reached for the radio button again. "I saw some CNN and the Fox News reports while I was packing my stuff. After weeks of having our TV viewing monitored . . ." She snapped her fingers in the air. ". . . just like that we could watch anything we wanted. I have to hear and see it all. I have to!" She fiddled with the station seeker until she found a station at the start of a special announcement.

“Jack Roberts for NPR News reporting live from Trenton, New Jersey. It’s quiet here in front of the courthouse now. Earlier in the day, in a rare judicial occurrence, a jury elected to deliberate on a holiday. Today, Labor Day, at 10: 35 a.m., the jury in the Maddox trial rendered their verdict. Tracy Ann Maddox, the young mother charged with murdering her two year old daughter, Jenna Maddox, was found not guilty. Jenna was last seen on June 17th in 2008 with her mother. Her remains were found on November 12th in a wooded stretch of land not far from the Maddox family home. Maddox failed to report her daughter missing for 30 days and created a tangle of lies to cover up the absence. Deliberations began mid-afternoon yesterday with the jury breaking at 10 p.m. They resumed their deliberations at 8:00 a.m. on this Labor Day. Even though it’s a holiday people began to gather in front of the courthouse as early as 4:00 a.m. Many had remained here throughout the night. By 7:00 a.m., the crowd had swelled to well over 300. Stunned silence followed in the initial seconds after the verdict was announced. Once the crowd grasped what had happened, outrage exploded and chants filled the air. “They Got It Wrong! Twelve Stupid People!” reverberated non-stop. The jury, in the second unanimous decision of the day, declined to meet with the news media. However, Maddox’s defense attorney, Alberto Diaz, addressed . . .”

Dorsie kept flipping between stations. It was all the same. Public outcry. Comparison to the OJ Simpson trial. Disbelief of how justice could fail an innocent victim. Doubts that the jury hadn’t taken enough time. Questions about the jury’s IQ. She shut the radio off. The cold, hard reality of the public’s outrage struck like an electrical jolt of a Taser gun. She struggled to breathe. Her heart began to pound rapidly. She crumpled forward, head to knees. “What have I done? What have I done!”

Alarmed, Harold pulled off the highway to the side of the road. Gently he pushed her upright. “Dorsie?” He waited for her to say something. Now, he could see she was extremely pale. He took her hands in his. They were sweaty. “Do we need to turn around and head for the ER?”

“No . . .no . . . just drive.”

He pulled back onto the highway and continued on, glancing over at his sister often. Just as reported in every news clip she heard,

he himself was in disbelief, had questions on how and why his sister cast a not guilty vote on all the major counts brought against Tracy Maddox. He knew his sister just as well as she knew him, the good, the bad and the ugly. Each knew the complex and bruising details of each other's lives and shared the same moral values. They both possessed abilities to be analytical; both skilled at viewing scattered information and putting it together into a cohesive whole. She had another skill, one he lacked. Dorsie was very, very good with people. She connected. That's what made her an exceptional interior designer. She listened to clients with sincere interest and paid attention to small details in their conversations then catalogued them for further use. Without a doubt, she would have listened just as intently throughout the Maddox trial. For Dorsie to vote not guilty did not fit with how her thought processes worked. He mulled it over for long minutes then concluded something major had to have happened. She seemed fine at the last family visitation day less than two days before the trial's closing arguments began. But for now, he decided he wouldn't press, wouldn't bombard her with questions or ask for explanations. He'd wait, knowing eventually she'd tell him. He reached over and took her hand in his, holding tightly, just as he always did when he knew she was scared, hurting or in need of support "Ole Gal, you'll make it through this. It's a bump in the road."

They both remained silent for the rest of the drive home to Blairstown, a small township within Warren County. After granting Maddox's attorneys' request to have jurors picked from outside the Trenton, East-West Windsor and Princeton areas, Warren County was selected to pool the jury from. According to census information Warren County had similar education, income, age and race balances as those in Mercer County where the State vs Tracy Maddox trial was held. Blairstown was a quiet place and often referred to as "God's Country" by those who came to escape the crush of city life. Rolling hills, elite estates, up-scale housing enclaves and farmland all were within driving distance to the Delaware Water Gap and skiing venues in the Poconos. It's other notable locations included Blair Academy, a prestigious prep school, Alina Lodge, a long term drug and alcohol addiction rehab facility. And, most famous and of high interest to horror film fans, on the outskirts of town was Camp No-Be-Bo-Sco, the actual location for the first of the Friday the 13th motion pictures. Blairstown was full of good people, decent people

with shortcomings, quirks, opinions, worries, disappointments and joys who held fast to strong family values and community pride. Ask any of its residents and they'd tell you it was a great place to start a family, raise a family and even take your last breath, in a place with good, clean air.

"You're almost home," Harold said as they passed the Blairstown Diner and turned onto Stillwater Road. "Things will look different in the morning once you get some rest. Rose has been helping out at the shop. Everything's under con . . ."

Whoop. Whoop. Whoop.

"What the hell?" Harold glanced in the review mirror and saw the flashing red and blue lights of a police cruiser then immediately pulled over to the side of the road.

Dorsie twisted in her seat and looked out the back. "That's Bud Eckley. Something's wrong. I can feel it. You weren't speeding. Nothing to stop you for a traffic violation." Flustered, she ran her hand over her forehead. "Inspection sticker. Damn. I can't remember the expiration date. I shouldn't have told you to bring the Honda. I just thought it needed to be driven after sitting." She pounded her fists on her thighs. "How stupid! How stupid!"

Harold rolled down the window as Bud approached.

"Evening, Harold." He touched the brim of his cap. "Dorsie," then turned his attention back to Harold. "Mind steppin' out for a sec?"

"What's wrong?" Dorsie asked.

"Just gotta' talk with Harold, Dorsie. Won't take long."

She watched as Bud and Harold stood near the cruiser. The flashing lights had an eerie effect. Every muscle in her body tightened with tension as she saw her brother repeatedly run his hand over his bald head then quickly glance back at the van. "For Gawd sakes!" She climbed out of the van and approached them while muttering under her breath. "Tell me!" she said testily. "I know you, Harold, as well as I know myself. All that rubbing and glancing. Big signals that something's not kosher."

Bud Eckley answered for Harold. "Dorsie, I'm gonna' be goin' up before you on Stillwater and then down Ward Road," he said. "Edwards is a buddy. Gave me a heads up when you left and I've been waitin' for ya since. Now, Dorsie, this ain't gonna' be pretty. Vince Di Paolo tipped us off. At first he thought there was

somethin' goin' on down at the dry-out lodge. But when them news vans stopped at your house, Vince's nose for trouble kicked in. He guessed what happened. Somehow those news vultures got ahold of your name. Cars are parked up and down the street. There's a sizable crowd and they ain't just neighbors."

Unnerved by what she'd just heard she felt as if all the air rushed from her lungs. She swayed slightly. "What? How? Judge Howard said . . ."

Bud took hold of her arm. "Let's get you back in the van." He gave her a minute to get settled in the seat. "Di Paolo made the suggestin' that you stop at his house. Stay until things look a little better. Since his house is the first after the turn, them news people won't be lookin' there. And I just keep goin' up Ward Road as if I'm doin' a patrol sweep." He looked to Harold. "Sounds like a mighty good plan to me, don't ya think?"

"No," Dorsie said forcefully then continued on in a weary tone, "I want to go home. I want to sleep in my own bed. Eat a meal I've made." She leaned her head against the backrest and closed her eyes. Long seconds passed as she felt burning anger rise up from her stomach into her throat. *Damn you, Tracy Maddox. How many more lives are you going to impact?* She swallowed hard. Her eyes snapped open and she stared straight ahead. "I don't have to talk to anyone. They can shout questions. Push mikes in my face. Take my picture. Do whatever they want. I don't have to talk to them," she said vehemently.

"I understand," said Bud. He threw Harold a questioning glance and when Harold responded with a nod, he said, "Ok, Dorsie. Harold, just follow me."

The drive down Ward Road seemed to happen in slow motion, all a continuous blur of colors, people, cars and sound. Dorsie sat straight in her seat, eyes focused forward with her chin slightly raised while intense tension coursed through her entire body. She never glanced right or left. Gave no indication she heard the rude shouts being directed at her. When Bud's cruiser approached her house then slowly passed it, she had a clear view of her driveway. The tension wire within snapped and unexpected hysterical laughter burst from her lips. Her hands flew to her mouth in order to squelch it. There blocking the bottom of her driveway sat Di Paolo's beefy sons. All three were sitting in lawn chairs with coolers at their sides

and handing out bottles of water and sodas. A makeshift sign displayed the price – \$1.75. When they spotted the Honda approaching, they swung into action, clearing the way like traffic cops, waving in Harold, giving him a non-stop route straight into the garage.

“Do you believe that?” Harold exclaimed as the garage door closed blocking out the scene outside.

“Believe what? Everything? The sight of the Di Paolos? Oh-my-Gawd, it feels sooo good to just laugh!” Dorsie gasped still trying to gain some control.

The door leading into the house from the garage swung open before Dorsie and Harold were out of the van. Vince Di Paolo stepped into the garage and opened the van’s door for Dorsie. “My boys sure are somethin’, aren’t they?” In spite of his wide smile, his heavy drooping eyelids gave his face a sinister expression. “It was all part of da plan,” he said continuing on non-stop, his Brooklyn accent getting stronger and stronger. “You needed to get in withoutta hitch. Got ya spare key from the Wilson’s next door and came in by way of Norton’s pasture on the ATV. Brought in supplies. Coffee, bread, eggs, milk, bottle of scotch, bottles of wine, cheese, crackers, etc., etc. Marilyn knew you’d wanna sleep in your own bed after being in lock-down in a hotel for seven weeks.”

Once inside the kitchen, Dorsie turned to Vince Di Paolo and touched his arm lightly. “Thank Marilyn . . .”

“Jesus Christ, Dorsie. What the hell happened? Where you guys nuts? It was a slam-dunk. She did it and you guys let her go free. Why’s that?” He stared hard at her, the kind of in-your-face glare.

Stunned, Dorsie took an involuntary step backwards.

“Whoa! Whoa! Take it easy, Vince,” said Harold.

“Nothing! Everything!” Dorsie shouted back. “The jury foreman . . . he . . . the others . . . they wouldn’t. Diaz, he . . .” She sank into a chair. “Gawd damn it, Vince. I can’t talk about it. I can’t talk about it!”

Vince Di Paolo held up his hands in a backing off motion. “Sorry . . . sorry, Dorsie.” He turned to Harold and said in an apologetic, self-effacing tone, “The wife, she’s always tellin’ me I violate what she calls . . .” He made quotation marks in the air. “Social etiquette.”

Dorsie put her arms on the table and rested her head against

them. Vince Di Paolo's questions, asked with such brutal bluntness, made her heart turn over in a sudden and sickening way. For a moment she felt as if her heart was going to stop beating. But as seconds ticked by its, rhythm remained steady, she could hear it. Tha-thump. Tha-thump. Tha-thump. Suddenly, her inner voice rose above the sound.

Not Guilty. Not Guilty. Not Guilty. Too late. Too late. Your fault. Your fault.

"What a fuckin' mess!" Harold said. "The whole town's out there."

The phone began to ring.

"Don't answer it!" Vince Di Paolo ordered. "Don't answer the phone. Don't answer the door. Or your cell. You both got caller ID, right? Christ, Harold. The whole damn town knows Dorsie was on that jury. Everyone watchin' the trial. A lot of them together down at the Inn. Not just the regulars either. Hell, the recluse Elma came outta' hiding. All of them, hangin' on every word the talkin' heads were spittin' out. Not missin' one minute of that HLN bitch." He snapped his fingers rapidly. "Nancy somethin' or other had to say. Shit, nobody believed the story – Dorsie off in Europe. Antiques buying trip. They asked ya nothin' 'cause they knew."

Harold sat down heavily across the table from Dorsie. "I know! Old Wilbur came into the shop. Gave me a wink-wink-nudge-nudge while holding up four fingers." He glanced over at Dorsie. She still had her head buried in her arms. "Every day he came in asking for you. Didn't trust me to pick out something his wife had her eye on. Said you would know what it was but I didn't want to bother you with it. You had enough to . . ."

The phone began to ring again and when the answering machine picked up a reporter's urgent-sounding voice leaped from the speaker. Di Paolo yanked the phone cord and disconnected it. Harold's and Dorsie's cell phones rang simultaneously. Di Paolo shook his head and finger, warning them not to answer.

"Shut the damned things off." A progressive sound of chimes rang out from the doorbell. Harold started to rise from his chair. "Didn't ya hear me?" Di Paolo barked. He waved his hands in a sit down motion. The chimes kept sounding and sounding, repeating and repeating. Di Paolo marched to the door, unlocked it and flung it open. A hand reached out with a mike as camera lights

blazed into the dark foyer. He batted the mike away. "Get the hell offa' this property. You creeps have rules," he sneered. "Follow 'em. If not, I'm gonna' kick your asses all the way down the driveway." He slammed the door shut and came back into the kitchen. He glared at Harold. "Either of ya got a gun? For protection?"

Harold glanced up at him and shook his head.

Di Paolo pulled a small semi-automatic from his windbreaker pocket then laid it on the table. "Unloaded. Point it. Scare the shit outta anybody bein' a nuisance. Got it?"

Harold closed his eyes and rubbed his hand across his mouth. "Damn it! Get that thing out of this house! This is Blairstown. Not the City."

"Get this straight in your F'in head," Di Paolo said. He picked up the gun from the table. "Blairstown shmerstown." He waved the gun with each word for emphasis. "Dorsie's name is out there. Get it? Out there! Lots of crazy people." He stopped in mid-sentence and glanced over at Dorsie. "Dorsie, ya ok?" She was staring at the gun in his hand, shaking, arms wrapped around herself as if to hold herself together.

Dorsie felt nausea rise up and collect at the back of her throat. She rose from the chair unsteadily and lurched towards the granite counter top. She felt hot. Her vision blurred. She gripped the edge of the counter to keep herself from falling. *Deep breaths. Deep breaths*, her inner voice commanded. She took them and slowly her vision cleared but her stomach revolted. She pitched herself forward, lowered her head then vomited into the shiny stainless steel sink.

Chapter Two

Day One Post-Trial, Early Morning

The next morning Dorsie woke feeling as if someone were shaking her awake, telling her she was late. Late for what she didn't know. It took her seconds to realize she was in her own bedroom not in a room in the Westin Hotel. She lay staring at the ceiling, knowing what time it was, 5:30 a.m., give or take a minute or two. For seven weeks, six days a week, she snapped awake around the same time. In those days, she'd felt the full weight of the kind of wired-tiredness that resulted from being in a highly charged atmosphere like that of the courtroom. So, she'd relished the silence in the hotel room. The hum of the air conditioner had acted as white noise, creating an atmosphere for her to dig deep and recall the previous day's witnesses' testimonies. Never before had she given much thought, or much credit, to her ability to catalogue subtle details found in events, conversations and even body language. But, every morning when she woke at 5:30 a.m., she knew what happened in the courtroom would be another supreme test of those abilities. By eight, she was dressed, ready and waiting for the guard to rap three times on the door, letting her know it was time to gather with the other jurors in the hallway and go down as a group to the vans waiting to transport them to the Trenton Court House.

Now, there was no need to meet a schedule. She stretched her body then let out an audible groan. I feel as if I've run the New York Marathon, she thought, acutely aware of how every muscle in her sixty-two year old body ached. How are the others faring? she wondered. Did any of their names go public? Were they confronted with the same chaos she faced last night? Her thoughts ran rampant. How was her name discovered? Who would do such a thing? A court clerk? Some reporter who knew someone who knew someone in the court system? She was certain she ran every scrap of paper,

envelopes, magazine covers with address labels through the shredder in the hotel room. Prescription label, she thought. No. No. She'd made sure the label was shredded to bits before she threw the empty bottle in the trash. Did she forget and throw something in the trash? No, she thought discarding the likelihood. The court guard had collected their trash, and there had to be a protocol for disposing of it. Her thoughts leaped to her fellow jurors. They never used their last names with each other no matter where they were. A family member? Had a juror slipped and mentioned names to anyone cleared for family visitation times? How? How had this happened? She had to call Judge Howard immediately. Did he know? Of course, he must know. Surely someone from the Blairstown police would have notified him. Oh Gawd, would they have known to do that? She reached for her cell while frantically thinking, did I put the number given to us in my contact list. A search on her cell showed nothing. Damn, damn. The information packet is in the kitchen or maybe still in the van. The word kitchen triggered a flash of Vince Di Paolo placing a gun on the table. She shook her head as if to dislodge the image. "Did that really happen?" she ask aloud clutching the cell phone as if it were the only real thing she was sure of at that moment.

Her thoughts continued to go on unbridled. How did I even end up on that jury? At the time when the notice arrived in the mail to appear for jury duty, it seemed like an annoyance, like a chink thrown into a schedule packed with things to be done for two big clients. Almost as if she had a photogenic memory, an image of the Jury Voir Dire Questionnaire appeared but she couldn't read it, couldn't see what was checked and what wasn't. Next she saw herself looking at Judge Howard. In her mind she was right there again listening to his instructions.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Judge Marvin Howard and I will be presiding over all aspects of this trial. I'll start by giving you a brief description of what this trial is about." He went on to give the details of the charges brought by the State of New Jersey against the defendant, Ms. Tracy Ann Maddox. First Degree Murder, Second Degree Murder, Voluntary Manslaughter, Abuse, Abandonment, Cruelty and Neglect of a Child, Four Counts of Lying to Law Enforcement and Four Counts of Obstructing Justice. These charges will be explained to you fully again at the end of the trial," Judge Howard said then continued to address the jury pool.

“The attorneys for the State are Mr. Gregory Ashcroft, Ms. Susan Tyler-Burke and Mr. George Sullivan. Mr. Alberto Diaz is Ms. Maddox’s lead defense attorney with Mr. Grayson Felding assisting. These are the primary men and women you will see taking center stage during the proceedings.”

Absolute stillness filled the room as she and the other jurors looked towards the table where Tracy Maddox and her legal team sat.

Judge Howard continued, “You’re being handed a list of potential witnesses. Please review it. I’ll give you a few moments.” The courtroom remained hushed except for the normal sounds found anywhere where people were trying to be quiet, a clearing of the throat, a seat creaking under the shifting of weight, the rattle of papers, and the hum of the air conditioning. “Now,” said Judge Howard after minutes had passed. “I will ask by a show of hands if your answer is Yes to the following. Do you know Ms. Tracy Maddox? Do you know any of the lawyers?” He paused and looked over the potential jurors. Satisfied no hands were raised he continued, “Do you know any of the potential witnesses? Look at your fellow jurors. Do you know any of them? Two hands were raised. Sir, Ma’am you are excused. Please follow the court clerk.”

All eyes followed their exit from the courtroom then turned back to Judge Howard.

“The attorneys are going to be asking you a series of questions, answer them to the best of your abilities,” he instructed. “At the end of the questioning I’m going to ask you to tell me a little about yourself, what kind of employment you’ve had. General things.” He shook his head slightly and a small smile spread across his face. “I’m even going to ask you what kind of bumper sticker you have on your car. Political ones are excluded. Also, I’m going to ask what you do in your spare time. I always like that part. Gives me ideas of what do with my spare time.” he said with a hearty chuckle. He saw potential jurors expressions relax. Satisfied his tried and true statement lowered the tension level in the courtroom he said, “Mr. Diaz, we’ll begin with you.”

Dorsie listened intently as ten potential jurors were questioned paying very, very close attention to Alberto Diaz more than the potential juror he was questioning. During a pause in questioning of the fifth juror, she thought she heard someone whisper *Con Man*

and turned in her chair to scan the faces of the others then turned back around again. *Con Man*. She heard the whisper again only this time she recognized her own inner voice, the one that surfaced every now and then from the deep recesses of her subconscious. She took note then turned her attention back to what was happening in the courtroom.

Six jurors were dismissed after three or four questions from either the defense or prosecution. Every juror was asked a different set of questions. What are they going to ask me? she wondered then heard the court clerk call "Juror Number 1389." She stood and walked to the podium.

"Good afternoon," Alberto Diaz said with Old World politeness just as he had with each potential juror. "Thank you for your time especially since it's a beautiful day outside." He paused to review his notes, lifted his head then scrutinized her for a few moments.

"Ma'am, I beg your pardon for my first question. I'm not asking because of the color of your hair. Are you retired?"

"No. I'm an active partner in a small interior design business."

"You must have to pay special attention to detail. And be flexible . . . um . . . like if someone wants a round table but you think a square one would be better . . . more in line with design theory."

"I juggle and keep track of many things when working with clients. As far as what's right or wrong from a design point, in the end it really doesn't matter. Design theory isn't meant to be fixed. It's meant to be flexible. When all furniture, fabric, wall coloring and accessories come together only one-thing matters. The homeowner will find it all comfortable. Be able to live with it day-in and day-out."

Alberto Diaz glanced toward the table where his defense team was seated. Seconds passed before he turned back to her and asked the next questions.

"Do you have a daughter? How old? And if she works, what does she do?"

"I have a daughter. She's 40 and she's a nurse. I also have a son four years older than she is."

Again Diaz glanced at his defense team.

“As a mother, I’m sure you still remember their early years. Did either of them have any problems in school or with law enforcement?”

Dorsie was taken aback by the question but answered in a firm voice. “The worse thing my son ever did was throw snowballs in the mailbox in Candlewood Lake in Connecticut. He was ten. I found out by accident when I overheard him and his buddy laughing about their prank. They got a lecture on how if anyone had caught them they could have gone to jail. I had the local Deputy Sheriff sit the boys down and explain why. After that, he was grounded for a week or two.”

“I see,” he said with a grin. “Boys will be boys. That kind of thing. I remember doing some crazy things myself.”

Judge Marvin Howard cleared his throat loudly from the bench.

“No charges were filed?”

“No.”

Abruptly Diaz changed the direction of his questioning. “Tell us what magazines you read regularly.”

“Mostly ones concerning antiques, architecture and interior design,” she replied then added “Handyman, National Geographic, Discovery and lots of crossword puzzle books. The skinny ones like magazines.”

He followed with, “Do you read crime or detective/who-dunit novels?”

“No.”

“Do you work with or do volunteer work for any organization focusing on domestic violence, rape or victims of crimes?”

“No,” she answered then added, “But I am on the board of the Warren County Habitat for Humanity.”

He nodded then asked several more questions that seemed inconsequential to her then said, “Thank you. I have nothing further.”

George Sullivan, one of the prosecution attorneys, stood, glanced at his notes then faced Dorsie.

“We all thank you for your time,” he said matter-of-factly then launched into his first and second questions. “Have you ever been exposed to the scent of dead animals or rotting flesh? Have you ever had the opportunity to take a tour of a crime laboratory?”

“No and no,” she answered.

In rapid fire he continued asking multiple questions. “Do you have grandchildren? Have you known anyone you could say abused their child or neglected their child? Would you report child abuse to the proper authorities? “

“No grandchildren. I don’t know any abused children. Neglect covers a broad range of circumstances. Based on life experiences, what one-person sees as neglect another may not. If I suspected child abuse, yes, I would call the proper authorities.”

From the bench, Judge Howard said, “Tell us about yourself.”

Now, she remembered she stated she was a widow who lived with two Bengal cats, Diva and Pavarotti, who were more demanding than any husband. From the bench, Judge Howard had let out a hearty belly laugh breaking the heavy mood in the room. “Bengal cats. Just how big are these cats?” he had asked leaning forward in his seat. After describing the breed as tabby striped cats with leopard spots, he leaned back, thought for long moments as if he had to render a decision then said, “Little cats with big egos. I’ve seen quite a few of those from the bench over the years.”

That was when she heard Alberto Diaz give a small laugh so she glanced towards him. It was then that Tracy Maddox locked eyes with her and flashed a dazzling smile. She would forever remember it because she never saw Tracy Maddox smile like that again. She only saw that smile in pictures, the ones shown at the very end of Susan Tyler-Burke’s closing argument when she emphatically pointed to the video screen in the courtroom. Images of Tracy Maddox being young, sexy and having a good time while her daughter had been missing for 30 days appeared on that large screen one after another with a brief pause between them. “Ask yourself,” Susan Tyler-Burke had said. “Who would have benefitted most from Jenna’s death? We believe you can see the answer there.”

Now, vivid images of small, adorable, innocent Jenna Maddox asserted themselves. She gave a deep sigh and rubbed a hand over her face to blot out all the images cascading in her mind. Her cell phone vibrated in her other hand. She flipped it open and saw it was her daughter, Megan, calling. During jury questioning had she mentioned Megan was a nurse at North Carolina Children’s Hospital? A nurse yes. But not that Megs was a care coordinator in the

Newborn Critical Care Unit. Would that have made a difference in her being selected?

She hit the call receive button. “Megs, you’re calling early or maybe I’ve just lost track of what shifts you’re working. I know we talked every day, but my mind was elsewhere. I wasn’t retaining much other than what was said or going on in the courtroom.”

“It’s okay,” Megs said. “How are you doing? Did you sleep at all? Uncle Harold said things were pretty rough when you got home yesterday. Dave’s worried. He wants to fly up there.”

“No. No, Megs. There’s no need. Honey, I’ll let you know if I need help. I promise.” She heard Megan sigh on the other end.

“Mom, I’ve got to ask you a question. I know it may be too soon, but Dave and I want to know. We can’t stand it anymore. We have to know!”

With dread, Dorsie knew pretty much what the question was going to be. “What is it, Megs?”

“Mom! What about the cadaver dogs’ alerts in the car. In the yard? You don’t know this, but Dave knows those dogs. He certified them.”

“Megs, I can’t . . . Oh, honey, please. I just can’t talk about this yet. I need time. I promise I’ll sit down with all of you and explain,” she said, brushing away the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Megan heard the catch in her mother’s voice. “Mom. I’m sorry. Sorry. How insensitive of me to even ask right now. You know how passionate Dave is about K-9s and their abilities. He has questions, that’s all.”

“I know, honey. I suppose everyone’s got questions.” She grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and wiped her nose. “Can we talk about this another time? It’s not good for me right now.”

“Sure. Sure, Mom. Please take care of yourself. Rest as much as you can. Eat healthy. Get out in the sun. You need sunlight after being cooped up inside all that time. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Remember, we can be on the next plane out.”

Dorsie murmured, “I know honey. I love you,” then closed the cell phone and returned it to the bedside table.

She closed her eyes and burrowed her head deeper into her pillow. Talk about it. Talk about it, she thought with rising anger. *Tell us. Not guilty. What made you do that?* Over and over and over

the question bombarded her mind. And Dave, her son-in-law, a K-9 trainer and partner of K-9 WD Training, what was she going to say to him? She'd gripped the arms of her chair in the jury box to keep from reacting during the entire testimony regarding the cadaver dogs used to search Tracy Maddox's car and the Maddox's backyard. When Sgt. Gussard testified to his and his dog's training and certifications, specifying K-9 WD Training, she immediately knew the possibility existed that her son-in-law might have evaluated and certified one of the two dogs. Should she have said something? Would she have been dismissed as a juror? It didn't matter now, she thought. The trial was over. Nothing mattered now. She glanced at the clock on the bedside table then stretched her arms slowing towards the ceiling trying to ease the tension in the center of her shoulder blades. As she lowered her arms, she discovered bruises on the inside of the fleshy part of her left upper arm. She sat up in the middle of the bed, turning her arm so she could see the outer portion. More bruises were there, evenly spaced in a four finger spread. She rubbed and rubbed at them as if she could rub them away as menacing images of the jury foreperson's face rushed to the forefront of her mind. To stop it she threw back the covers and swung her feet to the floor grounding herself in the now. Don't think about it, she told herself. Don't go there. Ever!