

Chapter Two

Detective Theo Barnes lit a smoke, a rare allowance to tamp down the adrenaline. His brain buzzed as the nicotine hit all the right spots while watching a squad car containing Andrews drive away. He texted his wife, reminding her today would run long. A few cases ago he'd forgotten and caught hell for missing dinner. Rayna was sexy when she was angry, but it wasn't worth missing sleep to stay up arguing.

Once he hit the filter, he'd oversee the bag and tag efforts at the scene and head to the Charlottesville county jail for the interrogation. Raids of Andrews' home and Senate office were executed simultaneously. The limitations of being in one place at a time drove him nuts. He inherently trusted his team of Virginia State Troopers. Just not as much as himself.

He had always been this way. Those aware of his origins don't blame him. His unyielding dedication compounded as he aged, particularly in the four years since he'd taken over the Internet Sex Crimes Division. Convictions hang on the smallest detail. Considering how far he'd stuck his neck out, he'd be hip deep in every aspect of the investigation until prison doors slammed shut on Senator Andrews.

"You ever think about the irony of a sex crimes investigator who needs a cigarette after every bust?" said the blonde as she approached. Among many contributions, Shannon Williamson served as Barnes' lure for the stings.

"Funny. Here I was concerned about Rayna raking me over the coals and you gotta toss in some Freudian shit to boot." Defiantly, Barnes took one last deep drag and flicked the butt into the motel parking lot.

Barnes knew he'd hit the jackpot having her on the squad. A rising star at the FBI out of college, promoted early and often, she'd made it as a profiler. Then came her father's stroke. Her mom passed on when she was in elementary school. With no caregiver, she came home to Charlottesville, signing on with the Troopers once he'd recovered.

"Deep psychological analysis of your soul is why you pay me so large." She glanced up at him. "No matter how many times we do this, I'm always surprised at how much they cry. Between you and me, it's my favorite part with these scumbags."

"He thought you were fourteen and he got me instead. Your pigtails in those pictures sold it. Sorry you're always the worm on the hook for these, but, well—" He shrugged.

"I'm thirty-five but look like jailbait. I don't mind. I like the field action. But you'll need to recruit a new carrot for these sickos. I won't fit what they're looking for much longer."

Her hand rested on her stomach as she exaggerated a baby bump.

"Really? That's great! You and Rick must be over the moon."

"It's a seesaw between thrilled and freaking out. Need you to keep me level since you're the parenting expert. I do wonder about the world I'm bringing the kid into."

"One with another predator off the street. And as far as parenting goes, Rayna does the heavy lifting with the boys. I come off the bench to give her a breather. When are you due?"

"Thanksgiving. You've got me six more months, but don't go giving my job away. I'm coming back."

"Don't know what I'd do without you anyways. Let's make sure everything is tight as a drum. I can't wait to sit across the table from this asshole."

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Barnes, having shed motel customer garb for a shave, suit, and tie, watched the shackled State Senator Andrews shuffle into interrogation. Of all the post-sting grillings, he can't recall a suspect this calm. Andrews' light, self-satisfied smile suggested a guy up for a promotion inside The tears he'd shed were a distant memory.

"You're wasting your time. I'm not talking without my lawyer," Andrews said.

Barnes reflexively clenched his fist. He paused before plowing ahead with the time-tested approach. "I understand why you'd want your lawyer. This is the worst day of your life. We've got you dead to rights. I'll even allow that you're sorry. I know you're scared. We have chat transcripts of your conversations with the girl, the way you groomed her. All of it directly traceable to you."

Despite his previous statement, Andrews can't allow the challenge. "Maybe I don't even need a lawyer. This is a set-up. It's fake news. Nothing happened. In fact, she's the one who led me on."

Barnes shook his head and smiled. This revelation was his favorite part. "Actually, Senator, I was the one leading you on. But we both know you did the grooming."

The initial review of Andrew's home and office computers had returned zilch. Andrews couldn't possibly know this. His slimy bullshit sourced elsewhere.

"I can prove that you thought she was fourteen and intended to have sex with her. When we parade the things you brought to the motel in front of a jury, the sex toys, the lube, and most damning, your secret video camera, they won't buy your excuses. You know, people like you tend to have a rough go in prison."

Andrews' breathing hitched. Some of his cocky attitude faded. His head shook involuntarily. Barnes stood and put a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, you'll be ok. Can we get him something to drink here?" The guard brought a bottle of water.

Andrews drank and tried breathing deep. Barnes returned to his seat. "There's no turning back the clock here. But if you help me, you'll make things easier for yourself when you go before judge and jury. I can be a friend."

Andrews snorted. "How kind. That was my first thought, this guy is my friend. Trust me, I've already got the right friends."

Maintaining the good cop persona grew increasingly harder. "You've got one chance to help yourself and you're blowing it. Confess, save us the trouble of a trial. How'd you locate those sites and chatrooms? They don't pop up in a Google search. Come clean. Maybe we can close a loophole. You throw us that info and I'll see that it earns points with the judge and the District Attorney."

"I have something to offer people much higher on the food chain than the local D.A. Prison isn't in my future." Andrews leaned back in his chair. "Lawyer, now."

Now Andrews got the uncompromising Barnes, who'd walked through fire to get here. "Fine, lawyer up, but let me tell you this. There are a few ironclads in this life. Don't mess with the church's money, don't piss off people who handle your food, and don't ever, and I mean ever, threaten children. Even if you think prison's not in your future, jail most definitely is. You're spending tonight in County's general population and I swear every last inmate will know why. Sleep tight."

Barnes trusted Andrews' the worst visions were his best ally. He'd turned the doorknob when he heard a sigh of resignation.

"Wait. I might know a few things. Maybe a couple of names. But then I want my lawyer. You swear to keep the animals away?"

"For the next few days," Barnes pushed a pen and paper across the table.

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Captain Butch Holland, Barnes' commanding officer, stewed behind the two-way mirror. His bushy mustache resembled a walrus, matching his bulk. His police hat covered up his hair's disappearing act. Vanity wasn't quite enough to get him on a treadmill though. As Barnes entered the room, Holland's face flushed, and he opened at peak volume.

"Happy? I ordered you, very clearly, not to pursue this. But you know better than everyone and look where we are. No confession, half a case, and a big pile of shit."

Barnes eyed Holland with disdain. "I know better than you. We've got him because I do my job. You worry about kissing ass upstairs. I don't give a shit if it's a state Senator, an ambassador, or the goddamn President. He's garbage and he's going down."

Holland had tabled his retirement, desperately hanging on to walk with a Major's pension. He bristled at the accurate insinuation that he played the political game.

"You've got the Governor's office breathing fire and I'm not taking heat for you."

Sure, Barnes thought. The only thing you take is credit. He'd spent a lifetime internalizing beatings, verbal or otherwise, and spinning them out as motivation. It usually worked, as long as nobody undercut his integrity.

He balled his fist over and over. "You don't have to take anything. We're on our way. Sometimes it takes a minute, but they always break in the end."

"Explain that to Colonel Prescott tomorrow. He's coming down and bringing the Attorney General. Let's see how Saint Barnes handles that."

"Fine, Captain." Barnes poured tabasco on the big man's title. "I'll promise you something. Nobody walks on my watch. See what happens to anyone standing in my way when I'm dragging someone to hell."

Holland's mustache twitched with the hint of a smile. "So, you say. Before the day's out, I want the originals on all your paperwork and a full tick-tock. It's going straight to the Colonel." The Captain's smirk irritated him but frustration over the request took precedent. "Christ, let me do my job. I've got to get out to reinspect the house and office. Bureaucracy doesn't close cases."

The Captain pointed a pudgy finger. "Prescott demanded it. When the head of the State Police barks, you do it before he fucking bites."

Holland stormed from the room, almost steamrolling Shannon. An agile spin kept her from becoming roadkill. She leaned against a filing cabinet, the only furniture in the spartan room beyond two steel folding chairs.

"Congrats on another successful interaction with the brass. Never thought I'd see a detective with the best closure rate universally hated by the higher ups."

Barnes seethed. "Fuck him and fuck the rest of them too. I'm not playing their games, I'm doing the job." He kicked a chair and it slammed into the wall with a satisfying bang.

"Easy, I'm not the enemy. The martyr act won't get you anywhere. You might consider playing nice."

Occasionally, Shannon glimpsed behind Barnes' carefully constructed wall. While he was certain it unnerved her, she still spoke her mind. "Sorry. Someone's always gunning for me. Being the best doesn't allow time for anyone else's agenda. I'm not about to change."

"Fine," passing on a losing battle. "What's our next move? I only heard Holland's side. You solid on what we did today?"

"Andrews is a pervert. We've got enough, but tonight's a paper night. Prescott's coming and we make sure it's watertight."

Shannon frowned and rubbed her temples. "Holland wants to show everyone he's got his thumb on us. I don't care that he takes credit sometimes, but this is taking away from the real work. Damn him."

A sly smile materialized. "Now who needs to play nice?"

"Shut up. I'm not the one with four reprimands for insubordination. You think Andrews will spill? It's a long time since you didn't get the confession right away."

"It's not insubordination when I'm right. Andrews dropped a few names, but I think they're bullshit. He'd stick his hand in a pit of rattlesnakes to draw a get out of jail free card." He paused. "A night or two in a cell will do it."

But Barnes didn't believe that. Three cigarettes and creeping concerns consumed his trip to the Barracks. He couldn't shake the idea there was something rotten about this case, and not just around the edges. Andrews' arrogance held court in his mind. What's up your sleeve, you sick son of a bitch? What do you know about what's coming my way I don't?