

# Chapter One

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*October, two-and-a-half years later*

**R**iley flinched as the prison security door clanged shut, the sound echoing through the concrete-floored corridor.

Would she ever get used to it? She'd been at this for five years now, yet it still made her pulse race and blood run cold every time. At least she'd be leaving this place at the end of her meeting and not returning to a ten-by-four cage shared with a roommate of questionable repute.

Like Shane would.

She'd helped others escape a life behind these barbed-wired-topped walls when they should've never been here to begin with. But the jury was still out on Shane.

Well, not exactly. The jury had come back with a resounding *guilty* six weeks ago, after a mere three hours of deliberation, followed by a life sentence. Without a miracle, he wouldn't breathe free air for thirty-five years. And then only if the parole board deemed him worthy.

After news of the verdict reached her in her office that

afternoon, the evidence and arguments she'd seen and heard every day she sat in the courtroom gallery replayed in her mind. The same evidence and arguments the jury heard.

Did she get it wrong? Or did they?

She handed her Texas bar card and driver's license to the man behind the glass partition. He scanned them and typed her info into a computer before returning them.

His unsmiling dark eyes narrowed on her. "You here to spring another of our upstanding guests, huh? Everett already dissatisfied with our accommodations?"

Her stomach roiled. She still wasn't sure why she was here. Why she'd agreed to come. Why she felt compelled to meet with the man twelve people unanimously agreed had slaughtered her friend. Would this prove to be a waste of the three-hour round trip?

Or could she trust her gut?

Pushing her second thoughts aside, she gave the guard a half-smile. "Hard to believe there isn't a line of folks outside itching to take advantage of your five-star amenities. But I don't know yet about Mr. Everett. Just a prelim today."

"Don't let him charm ya. Sometimes these pretty boys are the worst of the vermin we got in here. And what he done to that girl ... no forgivin' for that."

Her smile slipped and skin crawled with irritation. He'd have never made that comment to a male attorney. As if she were a frail, docile little thing who could be swayed by a handsome face and a velvet tongue.

*Father, forgive my pride, and may I be as gracious with others as You've been to me.* The two-second prayer helped her shake off the guard's ill-worded advice. "Don't you worry about me. I've heard it all."

He put his hand under the counter, and an obtrusive buzzer sounded before another metal door clicked open. "Regardless. Watch yourself, Miss Hudson."

Ignoring his warning, she walked through the door, her long ponytail brushing against the back of her navy pantsuit while she followed another guard to her designated meeting room. As with every prison visit, she wore a dark suit with slacks, little makeup, and her hair pulled back. Most of the inmates she met hadn't been alone with a woman even in their distant memory. It was imperative that they see her as a professional with their life in her hands and treat her accordingly.

Minutes later, inside the stark, gray room with a white tile floor and no windows, she laid out her yellow pad, two pens, two pencils, and three different colors of highlighters on the cold metal table. Next to that, she placed the case file she and her assistant had cobbled together over the last couple of weeks since Shane's letter had come.

When the door opened, a guard in a uniform the same color as this depressing room ushered in a man wearing white pants and shirt, with his last name and newly assigned prisoner number stamped on his shoulder.

Shane Everett. Convict. Caitlyn Mulaney's boyfriend.

Murderer?

The man with the slumped shoulders, hooded eyes, and sunken cheeks hardly resembled the one Caitlyn had been so excited to introduce her to little more than two-and-a-half years ago. She'd never seen her friend so smitten, despite her powerful father's objections to the relationship.

Shane wasn't one of *them*. Hadn't been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Didn't have a trust fund. His parents were nobodies, as far as Judge Mulaney was concerned, and his baby girl deserved so much better. Better than this intelligent, self-made man who only had a club membership because he'd overhauled their computer system.

She stood by the table until the guard left the room, knowing he would remain on the other side of the door with its

rectangular window. Otherwise, as this was an attorney visit, they would be alone.

“Shane. Have a seat.”

Without a word, he walked to the other side of the table and folded his lanky frame into the hard, metal chair opposite her. He’d been more muscular the last time she’d seen him with Cait, before spending two years in a cell waiting for trial and another month in diagnostic processing after the verdict. He’d been delivered here thirteen days ago, his new place of residence.

He cleared his throat. “I wasn’t sure you would come. Considering.”

Nodding, she swallowed. She’d changed her mind a few times over the past week, but her conscience wouldn’t let her go. She had to at least hear what he had to say, knowing how desperate he had to be to reach out to her, someone who had loved Caitlyn.

“I have to admit, I was a little surprised to get your letter.”

His chuckle held no humor. “I’m quite sure. I don’t know—there’s nobody—my defense team—” He stared up at the ceiling for a long moment before bringing his anguished gaze back to her. “I don’t know where else to turn, Miss Hudson.”

“Call me Riley. Like you did—” She bit her lip.

Tears flooded his eyes. “Before.”

“Yes.” She studied him for a moment, the plea in those eyes otherwise devoid of joy. Of peace. “How are you holding up?”

He shook his head. “I don’t belong here. I know you hear that a lot, but I don’t.”

He was right. She heard that a lot. Sometimes it was true, but more often, it was not. Thankfully, she could usually determine within an hour if she was being played.

“My savings are gone,” he continued. “And I still owe thousands to my defense team. My parents have depleted their savings, taken out loans, and put a second mortgage on their

house to help cover my legal costs. And, to be honest, I wasn't impressed with the way they handled my case to begin with."

Neither was she, but she held her tongue, having learned early on not to burn bridges. She would likely need his former team's assistance in providing her with all they'd done in their efforts to prove him *Not Guilty*.

Which was their first mistake. They didn't argue he was *innocent*, only that the prosecution didn't have enough to overcome reasonable doubt. An argument the jury clearly disagreed with.

"And I don't belong here." The vehemence in his voice matched the intensity in his eyes. "I did not kill Caitlyn. We hadn't been together long, but I was crazy about her. I believe she felt the same."

"So, you didn't send the flowers?"

"I didn't. I don't know where they came from or what the note meant. *Give me a second chance. I can't live without you?* Why would I send a card like that when we weren't having any problems?"

"She hadn't broken it off with you after her dad gave her his ultimatum?" A fact that hadn't surprised Riley when Cait told her about the icy reception Shane received upon being introduced to her father. Caitlyn had stood her ground then. But had she changed her mind as the weeks wore on with no contact from her family?

"No. I told her I didn't want to come between her and her father, but she said she was done with him controlling her life. I told her if God had it in His plan for us to have a permanent future together, I could take care of her. I made a good living with excellent potential for career growth. We would've been fine if we ever got mar—"

His voice broke and tears fell down his cheeks. This man had loved her friend. And he was correct. Cait had been just as crazy about him.

She crossed her arms on the table and leaned in. “Who do you think killed her?”

With a slow shake of the head, he pulled a tissue from the box in the middle of the table and swiped at his eyes and nose. “I have no idea. She was so kind and funny and beautiful. Everybody I knew loved her. I can’t think of one person who would be that angry. To do that to her.”

Riley couldn’t either, but it wasn’t a random killing.

Someone had targeted Caitlyn. Someone angry enough to continue plunging that knife into her body long after she was dead.

Contemplating the man on the other side of the table, her mind reeled. Time to reach her own verdict. Was Shane Everett guilty? Or an innocent man doing someone else’s time?