

Prologue

Beau Calhoun sat watching the man who was staring out his office window. He had known Spencer Evans since they were small boys and he had never seen him look so distraught. He studied the silhouette, noticing the gaunt appearance and worry lines. Spencer was a master of secrets; Beau thought he knew them all as his attorney but now as he sat watching him, he wasn't so sure that he did. He waited patiently; Spencer would speak when he was ready.

Eventually Spencer did speak, but he didn't turn from the window. "Beau, I need you to revise my will. I need to make some changes to my estate and I need them done immediately and quietly. I also have a letter that I need you to personally deliver to my oldest daughter, Shawn. I've written her address on the envelope. I trust that you will do so immediately when the need arises." He turned then, looking directly at Beau. "I know I don't have to tell you what I mean by 'quietly', do I?"

Beau held Spencer's gaze as he took the envelope being held out to him. "Since when have you ever had to question my loyalty and ethics Spence? I've been your attorney for thirty years and your friend for almost fifty years. I've never questioned your reasoning for keeping your secrets, I'm not about to start now." Beau smiled a sincere smile, hoping to put Spencer at ease. Whatever was bothering him was serious.

"Thank you, Beau. I didn't mean to insinuate anything. I just know how Dahlia can be when she gets notion in her head; she's like a dog with a bone. Under no circumstances are my revisions to be discussed with her until it's absolutely necessary." Spencer gave Beau a brisk hug and hand shake before walking quickly out of the office.

Beau sat reflecting on his good friend's visit. The signs of stress were obvious on Spencer's face. Those combined with the revision of his will and the uncharacteristic show of affection when he had hugged him, left Beau unsettled. He had known Spencer since they were five years old; both were from 'old' families and had every comfort afforded to them growing up. Correction, Spencer had all but one; the love of his family. Beau stared out the window unaware of time passing.

Forty five years prior

"Spencer Anson Tradd!! What in the world are you doing? Have you completely lost your mind young man? Get those off immediately! Georgia!! Georgia!! Get in here now!" Dorothy Tradd shrieked for the nanny as she stood looking at her son in horror.

Georgia came hustling in, eyes wide. She knew how temperamental the lady of the house could be and that was putting it mildly. "Yes ma'am, what seems to be.. oh.."
Georgia stared at young Spencer, slightly shaking her head. "Don't you worry ma'am, I'll get him straightened up right away." She hustled Spencer quickly into his bedroom, hoping to shield him from the tirade she knew was coming.

"What in God's name are you trying to do to me Spencer? Why did I have to have such a worthless excuse for a son, you shame me every day. I can't even show my face in public half of the time because I'm just sure everyone is talking about that little Tradd boy, you know the one who plays with dolls and wears girls clothes. Thank goodness your father isn't still alive to see what an embarrassment to the family you've become. He's probably rolling over in his grave. You'll be the death of me yet Spencer!" With that she spun, heading for her bedroom.

Georgia was sure she'd be incapacitated in a matter of an hour with some sort of sedative so was so fond of taking. She turned to look at the little boy cowering against his bed, his head down. She could see tears running down his cheeks but he made no sound. She caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. "Beau Calhoun, you best come out of that closet and get on home now." She watched as the closet door swung open and a little brown haired boy emerged, he glanced mournfully at his friend Spencer as he quietly passed by, slipping out the door.

"Now Mr. Spencer, let's get you changed into some pants before your mama loses herself." She patted the boy's shoulder with affection. "Come on now, it'll be alright. You know how she is; she just likes to yell a bit."

Spencer was only eight years old, but somehow he knew things would never be alright. He had no way of knowing just how true that was or how much his life would change that night.

Randy sighed inwardly as they responded to a shoplifting call at the local mall. She hated the mall. Even at twenty five, it represented a teenage life she never had and she found teenagers grated on her nerves.

She trudged alongside her partner, Jeff, in to the store that had placed the call. She signed again, apparently this time it was audible because Jeff looked at her questioningly.

"What?" She said defensively.

"Somewhere else you have to be?" Jeff said arching his eyebrow.

“No, I just hate malls and I hate spoiled brat teenagers. Let’s get this over with.” She headed towards the cashier.

Jeff stopped in front of the register and eyed the young man standing behind it. “We are here in response to a shoplifting call. Are you the manager?”

The young man shook his head. “No, he’s standing back in the office with mall security and the little freak.”

Randy squinted her eyes at the young man, assessing him quickly. He was the typical teenager that should despised. Faded khaki pants, name brand shirt, name brand shoes. A freak to him was probably someone who didn’t wear name brands. She moved towards the back of the store in search of the manager’s office.

As they entered the small area used as the store office, she noted a young girl sitting a chair in the corner. Her makeup was disheveled like she had been crying. *It sucks to get caught doesn’t it?* She focused back on the store manager, who was describing to her partner what had occurred.

“So we followed him back to the dressing rooms and when he came out with just two pairs of pants, that’s when we grabbed him up!” The store manager said smugly. Clearly he was proud of his apprehension.

He? Randy turned to examine the young women sitting in the chair. Her head was down, hands twisting in her lap. She could tell they were shaking.

“Young lady, what is your side of the story?” Randy asked calmly.

The store manager laughed. “Officer, she is a he. That freak was trying to steal clothes from us and should be put in jail!”

Randy glared at him, quickly silencing his laugh but he continued to look at the girl with disgust.

“Do you have any identification on you?” Randy re-addressed the young lady. “What is your name?”

The girl shook her head no never raising her head. “I have my school ID ma’am. I really am sorry. I know it’s wrong to steal, but I only have this pair of jeans I’m wearing and...” She began to cry again.

Randy looked up at Jeff, who led the store manager out of the office, talking to him as they went. She knew Jeff would find a way to keep the manager from pressing charges. The clothes never left the store, so nothing was lost and this kid clearly was not a hardened thief.

She squatted down in front of the girl, careful not to touch her. "Hey, it's going to be ok. Can you tell me your name?"

The young girl slowly looked up; her face was red and puffy from crying. "It's Peyton Marshall, ma'am. Are you going to arrest me?"

"No, but I am going to have to call your parents Peyton. You're a minor and I can't release you unless they come pick you up." Randy said as she studied the girl.

The girl began to cry again. "They won't come to get me, they don't want me anymore."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true. I'll give them a call and I'm sure we can work this out." Randy said quietly. She dialed the number the girl had given her and stepped outside the office to talk but kept a watchful eye on her.

"Yes ma'am, my name is Officer Cash with the CMPD. I have your daughter, Peyton down here at the mall. There's been a little misunderstanding and we need you to come down and pick her up." Randy explained to the woman who answered the phone.

Confused, she looked up at the girl and then spoke again. "I'm sorry ma'am. Okay, I understand that but I still have your child that needs to be picked up. I'm sorry what? No, I don't know what it's like ma'am." She turned away slightly and lowered her voice before speaking again. "What I do know ma'am is that she's your child regardless." Randy took a deep breath as she tucked her cell phone in her front pocket.

Jeff was standing near her and motioned her over. "The manager has had a change of heart and won't be pressing charges. Did you get a hold of her parents?"

Randy frowned. "Yes, I did. Apparently they are in the running for the worst parent of the year award and don't intend to lose. Listen, this kid is trans. Her mom said they kicked her out four months ago and want nothing to do with her. I think she's homeless."

Jeff's face went pale. He felt like he was going to puke right there on the spot and he looked desperately for a trash can or something that he could use just in case. Much to his annoyance, tears sprang to his eyes. "Listen Randy, we have to find somewhere for her to go. I can take her home with me; I'll call Sherry right now!"

"Whoa buddy. What is going on? You know it doesn't work that way. We have to call social services and she'll be placed in foster care until they can get this worked out." Randy said calmly. Inside, she was anything but calm. She had spent eleven years in foster homes herself and she knew the odds of finding a foster home willing to take in a trans kid was minimal. "As much as I don't want to, we have to follow protocol."

Jeff looked like a wild animal about to bolt. “Randy, please! Isn’t there something we can do? You know as well as I do, she’ll get lost in that system and God knows what will happen to her!”

Randy pulled Jeff further away from the office. “Hey, what is going on with you? I realize this situation sucks but I’ve never seen you act like this before.”

Jeff’s eyes darted around the store briefly and then fixed on Randy. He made a swiping motion across his mouth with his hand, wiping sweat from his upper lip. “Randy, my older brother was trans. He hung himself in our basement when he was seventeen because he couldn’t take the bullying from kids at school or the scorn of our father.”

Randy closed her eyes tightly for a moment. “Okay, we’ll figure this out. We still have to call social services. We can’t break protocol, but I have an idea. Stacy’s sister and her fiancé are licensed foster parents, let me call Stacy quick and have her get a hold of them. It’s going to take some string pulling and some favors owed but maybe we can get an emergency placement with them. She’ll be safe there until we can figure something permanent out.”

For a moment Randy thought Jeff was going to hug her right there in the store. Instead she watched as he knelt down in front of the crying girl and gently tilted her face up to look at him. “Hey, we’ve got your back ok? We are going to figure something out for you ok? Please don’t cry, it’s going to be ok you just have to trust us, please.”

This was a side of her partner she had never seen. She knew he was a good guy, she thought she knew most everything about him after partnering with him for three years but apparently she was wrong. She watched as a small glimmer of hope lit in the girl’s eyes. *We better make good on this somehow.*

Jeff drove the cruiser towards the station. He glanced constantly in the rear view mirror, trying to gauge how Peyton was doing. She was staring out the window but was no longer crying. He smiled to himself. *This time, I can make a difference. I have to make a difference.*

Randy sent a text message to Stacy as soon as they pulled away from the mall. She explained as briefly as she could and asked Stacy to call her sister, Sam. She dialed her contact at social services.

“Hi Barb, this is Randy Cash. My partner and I are on our way back to the station with a minor that we need your help with. Okay. Yes, I’ll see you there. Thank you so much.” Randy hung up and nodded at Jeff. Randy had known Barb for longer than anyone on this earth. Barb had been her social worker when she had been placed in foster care

following the death of her parents. Barb had been the one constant thing in her life and she knew she could count on her to help with Peyton.

Her phone vibrated in her hand. She swiped the screen and read the response from Stacy. *Talked to Sam and Jenna. They are on board. Call Sam and let her know.*

Randy smiled and closed her eyes briefly. She was so lucky to have a wonderful girlfriend who had equally wonderful siblings. Sam and Jenna already had two boys of their own and were expecting a third by the end of the month. It spoke volumes about their character and compassion for them to open their door and arms to another kid in need.

They pulled into the station and parked. Jeff opened the back door of the cruiser so Peyton could get out. He smiled at her. "It's going to be okay Peyton."

She looked up at him tentatively and gave a wobbly smile. "If you say so, sir." She followed him into the station house and sat waiting quietly while they did paperwork.

Twenty minutes later, an older lady hustled into the squad room carrying a large shoulder bag. Peyton watched her warily. She figured this was the social services lady. She looked grouchy.

Barb's tired countenance changed the minute she caught sight of Randy. She held out her arms and engulfed Randy in a strong hug. "Miranda, you are looking terrific. I'm so proud of you." She said as she backed away. "Love looks good on you girl!"

Randy blush as she pulled away. "Thank you Ms. Barb. You're looking terrific too, are you losing weight?"

"Girl, the only thing I'm losing is my mind!" The older lady chuckled. "Now, tell me what we've got going on that's so important you got me out of my nice, warm bed?"

Randy motioned towards Peyton, who was eating a sandwich Jeff had gotten her from the vending machine. "Ms. Barb, that's Peyton Marshall. We got a call out for shoplifting and when we got there, we found her. I called her parents, they are worthless. Her mom said they kicked her out four months ago because they have a son, not a daughter and they don't want anything to do with this 'abomination'." Randy's jaw tightened at the memory of the conversation. She knew people could be cruel, she thought of her girlfriend's parents.

Ms. Barb slowly eyed Peyton. "So let me see if I understand this correctly. Peyton is a transgendered and her parents won't allow her in the house? Do you know where she's been living for the past four months?"

“I haven’t gotten that far, I figured you’d be better equipped to talk to her about that.” Randy slyly smiled.

“Oh you did, did you? Well, you’re probably right. No one can resist talking to Ms. Barb for long! Let me just go on over and see what we can find out.” Ms. Barb headed over to Peyton with Randy trailing close behind.

Randy smiled at Peyton. “Peyton, this is Ms. Barb from social services. She needs to talk with you for a bit ok? Don’t worry, I trust her with my life.”

Peyton nodded silently.

Randy and Jeff moved away to give some privacy. “She’s been sleeping in the back seat of an old abandoned car near her school.” Jeff said quietly and then looked into Randy’s eyes. “Thank you for helping with this. I was a helpless kid when my brother killed himself. I’m not one now and if I don’t do something to stop it from happening again, I couldn’t live with myself.”

“No need to thank me Jeff. Thank you for trusting me with that.” Randy smiled at him.

Ms. Barb waved them over. “Okay, I have what I need from Peyton. I need to make some calls and see if I can find a home for her, at least for the night.” The look on her face said she was doubtful about that possibility. “If I can’t, I’ll take her to the group home for the night.”

“Ms. Barb, I’ve already got a place for her. My girlfriend’s sister and her partner are licensed. I’ve already gotten confirmation from them that they are happy to take Peyton in for now and see what happens.” Randy said sheepishly.

Ms. Barb arched her eyebrow at her. “Now why couldn’t you just tell me that from the beginning? Girl, you could have saved me at least five minutes of stress going through my mental call list.” She sighed loudly. “Give me their number and I’ll get it documented quick.”

Randy grinned. She knew Ms. Barb wasn’t really upset with her. “Do you want Jeff and me to take her over? We are technically done with our shift.”

“Well now, that’s the best thing I’ve heard all night. That is, if Peyton is okay with it. What do you say Peyton, are you okay with these two delinquents taking you to the foster home?” Ms. Barb said with a smile.

“Yes ma’am. I don’t mind.” Peyton said quietly.

Randy watched Peyton's body language with sadness. It told her all she needed to know at the minute about Peyton Marshall. She was all too familiar with the feeling of abandonment.

They packed up their things and headed out to the car. Randy glanced at her watch to see that it was now after ten. She sent another quick text to Stacy. *We are dropping her off at your sister's and then I'll be home. Keep my spot warm!* She smiled to herself.

Ten minutes later they pulled into the drive at Sam and Jenna's house. The front light was on letting them know they were still up and waiting. Randy expected Jeff to stay in the car, but to her surprise, he hopped out and walked with them to the door. She watched Peyton's observant eye taking in everything.

The door opened as they neared it. Sam stepped out on the front porch, followed by Jenna. Both smiled broadly at Peyton.

"Come on in everyone." Sam motioned them in the door.

Peyton looked around as they entered, her eyes taking in everything.

Randy broke the ice. "Sam, Jenna, this is Peyton. She's had a bit of a rough time as Ms. Barb explained to you on the phone. Thank you so much for taking her in on such short notice."

Sam smiled at Peyton and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you Peyton, I'm Sam and this is my fiancé, Jenna. The boys are sound asleep so you'll meet them in the morning. Let's get you settled in for the night."

Peyton looked at the two women. They had eyes filled with kindness. Somehow, she knew she was safe here. She smiled and nodded.