

FREE SNEAK PREVIEW: FIRST 50 PAGES.

JON REISFELD



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THE REFORM ARTISTS



A Legal Suspense, Spy Thriller

THE REFORM ARTISTS

A Novel by:

JON REISFELD



HOT GATES PRESS, LLC.
COLUMBIA, MD

Who are the Reform Artists?

That's the question plaguing Martin Silkwood, successful CPA and devoted father of two, as his life spirals out of control. Martin has only six days in which to prove he's innocent of the domestic violence charges his estranged wife has brought against him. If he fails, he could lose everything.

Martin can either play by the rules and hope for the best or accept help from this shadow organization that goes to extremes to achieve its ends. Whatever he does, his life will never be the same.

Follow the action as the clock ticks down to a climactic courtroom showdown in this speculative, legal-suspense/spy novel about the perils of modern-day divorce.

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places or incidents
either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,
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establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To Zach, a young man with a big heart and an even
bigger gift for writing and storytelling.

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Prologue:

Heather Barnes pounded, impatiently, on the steering wheel as her red Mini Cooper raced through the residential neighborhood at twenty-five miles per hour above the posted speed limit.

When the green light suddenly turned red, she slammed on the brakes. The car came to a screeching halt, hurling her against the seatbelt and scarring the pavement with broad, incriminating, tire marks.

Heather's eyes darted everywhere, looking for police cruisers. Finding none, she glanced at her wristwatch. Six-thirteen. I should have reported in to Tim eighteen minutes ago, she thought, as a wave of panic overtook her. God only knows where that twisted mind of his has gone!

Sweat poured down Heather's forehead and into her eyes, stinging them and making her mascara run. She couldn't believe she had allowed her boss to buttonhole her on the way out the door with more questions about that new ad account. I should have told him I'd call him from the road! But, Heather realized, her demanding boss was now the least of her problems.

She glanced again at the red light, then at the lifeless cell phone lying beside her on the passenger seat. "Come on!" she screamed, grabbing the phone and staring at it. "What the hell's wrong with you?" She shook the phone fiercely and whined, "Pleeease, please charge!"

Then, Heather saw it for the first time. The left side of the phone's charging jack was slightly ajar. "Oh, my God!" she screamed, cramming it back in place. She wanted to cry, but there was no time.

Heart racing, Heather nudged the car forward, looked left, then right, and gunned it. Tires screeched, houses flew by and neighbors looked up in alarm, as she tried to make quick work of the remaining three blocks to her home.

When Heather finally pulled into a parking spot in front of her house, the cell phone suddenly sprang to life. She glared at it, threw open the car door and leapt out.

Tim, tall, thin and muscular, stood motionless in the front doorway, watching her.

At the sight of him, Heather instinctively slipped her right hand back onto the car-door handle. Then, she thought about her two young children. She frowned, bracing herself against the coming onslaught, and ran toward her husband as if her life depended on it.

The quadruple murder-suicide dominated the evening news in Maryland and across the nation. At McCredie's Sports Pub, in downtown Silver Spring, every flat screen TV offered a different channel's take on the tragedy, which had become breaking news shortly before 7:00 p.m.

The screen facing the rear corner booth, where two middle-aged men sat nursing drinks and talking, showed James Holt, star reporter for WQDP News, standing just outside the victims' family residence, in Rockville – site of the tragedy. Crime scene tape and flashing police cruisers littered the background.

"In the latest case of domestic violence taken to extremes," Holt said, "Tim Barnes, a 35-year-old unemployed construction worker, slit the throats of his two school-aged children, Donald, 10, and Amy, 7. Then, he raped and murdered his wife, Heather, shortly after she returned home from work. His brief reign of terror ended moments later, when Barnes shot himself in the head."

As Holt talked, pictures of the victims, taken in happier times, flashed across the screen. Elementary school yearbook photos of little Donald and Amy were followed by a business promotional shot of Heather, a strikingly beautiful 32-year-old graphic designer with a sleek figure and dirty-blond hair; and finally, by a family photo of Tim, a six-foot-three, tautly built man with a thick moustache and a wild mane of dark, curly hair. Tim was holding up a metal spatula as he posed, in his chef's apron, beside the family grill.

"At 6:33 p.m. a neighbor called 911 and reported

hearing a single gunshot coming from the Barnes home. Police arrived minutes later and discovered the gruesome murder scene.

"I am standing with Penelope Trask, a neighbor and friend of Heather's. Penelope, did you know, or suspect, that Heather and her children were in any danger?"

"Heather, yes," Trask said. The plump redhead, who looked to be in her late twenties, repeatedly rubbed tears from her eyes. "But she denied it. Several times, I saw big bruises on her arms, and once, she even had a black eye.

"'Is Tim doing this to you?' I asked her the last time. Heather nodded and began to sob. She said Tim had become insanely jealous. 'You've got to get out of there,' I told her. 'It's not safe!'"

The two men in the booth watched the report and grimaced.

"Cassie," the older one said, signaling his waitress, a skinny, energetic fortyish brunette with hair pinned up in a hot mess. When she looked his way, he continued. "Another scotch on the rocks for me and a Tom Collins for my friend, here."

"Sure thing, hon!"

The older man turned to the Tom Collins drinker. "What a mess, huh?"

"It doesn't get much sicker than this."

"No."

They both shook their heads.

Then, the Tom Collins fan continued. "So, are you cancelling the Face Off?"

"Why would I do that?" The older man's voice grew

clipped.

"I don't know."

"We go forward. You be there, tomorrow, when he gets on the train. This guy needs us now more than ever. And, like most, he's probably clueless. His picture's in here," he added, tapping a manila envelope lying before him. He slid it toward his companion.

"This makes our work so much more difficult," the Tom Collins drinker said.

The older man stared at him. "So, what's your point? Is this suddenly about how tough we have it?"

His companion thought for a moment. "No. I guess I don't have a point. Forget it."

"Already did." Then, he looked up and smiled. "Here come our drinks!"

Cassie put their new drinks down, collected their empties, smiled and turned away. The two men raised glasses and clinked.

"To the Face Off," the older one said.

"To the Face Off ... and all that follows."

Chapter 1

The incident occurred at the D.C. Metro's Farragut North stop, as Martin Silkwood boarded the northbound train for his return commute to Maryland. It ended as quickly as it began, and no one — save the participants — seemed to notice or care. But it would forever change Martin's life.

Martin had entered the subway car at the head of a surging crowd that heaved and pressed against him with the dumb force of an enormous beast. He was pushing back and maneuvering toward an empty seat, when a casually dressed man, with the look and bearing of a drill sergeant, suddenly sprang up, lurched forward and rammed into him.

"Watch it!" the man barked, his steel-gray eyes underscoring the challenge.

Martin recovered his balance, if not his senses, and pushed back hard. “No, you watch it!”

For an instant, the two squared off. Then, as a faint smile appeared on the stranger’s face, his right arm shot forward, palm out, catching Martin square in the diaphragm. Martin doubled over in pain, gasping for air, as the stranger grabbed his arm and drew near.

“I already have watched it, Martin,” he said under his breath. “Now, it’s your turn.” Then, he turned up the collar on his beige windbreaker and slipped out the door, disappearing into the crowd.

Martin struggled to breathe as he dragged himself toward an empty seat. He swung his left arm wildly to clear a path and steadied himself by grabbing onto a nearby handrail with his right. When he finally reached the seat, he turned around and gingerly dropped into place.

As he did, Martin felt something in his left pants pocket. Hand shaking, he dug in and retrieved a tiny video disk in a slim vinyl case. The disk was silver, unmarked and small — only half the diameter of the videos Martin normally played on his home entertainment system.

“Huh,” he grunted to himself, between steadily decreasing — but uneven — chest heaves. He flipped the disk over in his hand several times. He had no idea what it was, why the stranger had given it to him or how he had known his first name.

After a few moments, Martin put the disk away. He decided he would deal with it later, when he got home, but try as he might, he couldn’t get this latest incident out of his mind. Martin kept wondering if it somehow fit into

the disturbing chain of events that had begun to unfold the previous Friday night, when he had returned home to an empty house — without Katie, the kids or the dog. All he had found was a brief note, in Katie's handwriting, lying on the kitchen table.

"I tried, Marty. Really, I did," it read. "I'll contact you when we get settled." That was the last time he had heard from any of them.

Martin spent all night Friday calling around to Katie's friends. (He used to consider them his friends, too, but now he knew better.) Had they seen her and the kids? Did they know anything about where she had gone or what was up?

Some of them, the nice ones, apologetically said they couldn't discuss it. They had promised Katie to keep her whereabouts a secret, but, they said, everyone was safe, not to worry. Others, her "true sisters," uttered startled, indignant gasps at the mere sound of his voice and then hung up the phone.

The nastiest, most self-righteous ones said things like: "Really, Marty! Haven't you caused enough trouble already? Leave her alone!" — Or — "If you call here again, I'm going to report you to the police! Do you understand?" both of which were followed by a sudden resumption of the dial tone.

Martin couldn't believe these were the same women who had welcomed him and Katie into their homes for years on end, the same women who had joked with him, occasionally flirted with him, and who, once or twice, seemed to forget themselves and sent him signals he wisely

chose to ignore. And, he wondered, where were their husbands — his supposed friends? Only one of them ever picked up the phone to say anything to him at all, and it went something like this: “Hey, Marty, I was sorry to hear about you and Katie. Let’s grab a beer sometime soon.” And then, when his wife realized he was speaking to Martin, “Oops, got to go now,” and again the damned dial tone.

Martin wondered what Katie had been telling these people and how they could possibly believe her without first hearing his side of the story. But these thoughts quickly evaporated, as Martin grasped, for the first time, the full impact of Katie’s decision. Disillusion turned to anger, fear and finally desperation as Martin realized that, in leaving him, Katie had stolen nearly everything that gave his life meaning: his children, his marriage and his home life. Of the three roles Martin dutifully performed each day, those of husband, father and breadwinner, only the later remained.

Katie had left the one thing she couldn’t take: Martin’s senior partner position at the accounting firm of Findley, Feldman and Santori. Martin had earned senior partner status through years of hard work, self-discipline and self-sacrifice. While he drew some personal satisfaction from this, he found accounting work, in general, to be rather dull and unfulfilling.

Martin had long ago realized that he did his job, day-in and day-out, primarily to pay the bills. His partner’s salary made possible the life, and future, he had been building for himself, Katie and the kids. Now that his marriage

appeared to be unraveling, Martin felt the wind go out of his sails. He wondered where he would find the motivation to continue to put in the long hours and to suffer the painful deprivations that life on the road, as an auditing team leader, demanded.

Deep down, Martin sensed he only had one option. Somehow, someway, he would have to get his children back in his life. He could not accept the harsh, new reality Katie was forcing upon him.

Despite this realization – or perhaps because of it – Martin had a hard time accepting the fact that his marriage to Katie was over. In the first place, her timing made no sense to him. Yes, they hadn't been getting along that well lately, but only a few months earlier, when the trouble started, Katie had agreed to see a marriage counselor with him. They hadn't even attended their first session yet!

Why, he wondered, would she 'throw in the towel' now? Could she really just walk away from our marriage -- especially after starting a family and bringing two new lives into the world? Good parents – and Katie and I clearly are that – Good parents don't just 'bag it' when the going got rough, do they?

The next day, Martin gained further insight into the depths of his problems, when an ATM machine rejected his debit card. The joint household account that previously held \$9,600, now claimed to have "insufficient funds" to cover his one-hundred dollar cash withdraw.

As these thoughts once more flashed through his mind, Martin's stomach began tying itself up in knots. He hated feeling this way, and since all he could do for now was spin mental wheels, he redoubled his efforts to put his

troubles out of his mind. He decided to focus, exclusively, on his accounting work. That usually helped.

Martin began by taking stock of preparations for the upcoming Great Plains Company audit and by mentally reviewing the members of his newly formed auditing team. Martin always handpicked his auditing crews. The following Thursday, they would all fly out of Dulles airport to Chicago for an extensive review and compilation of the food processing giant's books.

There was so much to do. Gradually, ever so slowly, Martin slipped back into the endless sea of accounting management minutiae, and soon he found himself back in that numb, safe place his work often provided. Before he knew it, the train had reached his suburban Maryland stop, and he was crossing the parking lot to his car.

Chapter 2

It was nearly seven o'clock when Martin finally turned his Acura off the rural road that ran past his gated community in Olney, Maryland

He drove by the guardhouse and turned into his asphalt driveway, following it to the oversized brick colonial that occupied a hilltop at the center of his five-acre lot. As expected, Katie's car was not in the driveway. The house looked dark, empty and abandoned, even under the intense glare of the floodlights Martin had installed the previous summer. He got them so Katie would feel less isolated, and vulnerable, when he was away. She only had complained a few times, in passing, about how empty the house felt when he was away on audits. She didn't make a big deal of it when he had them put in, but he was sure she

appreciated that he had really “heard” her. At least, he thought so at the time.

Martin entered the house through the garage, which, as always, smelled faintly of sawdust, cardboard, turpentine and a blend of the various solvents that comprised his arsenal of touch-up paints and building-repair products. He put his briefcase down on the breakfast table, took off his jacket, and prepared to make dinner.

The house, which usually greeted him with the sounds of kids, pets and people — and with the inviting smell of Katie’s home cooking — was now lifeless, odorless and silent. Somehow, it seemed as if it had grown several sizes larger and more than a few degrees colder. He was surprised to discover just how much he already hated coming back to this empty reminder of his suddenly “former” life.

By now, had his family been there, Martin’s six-year-old son, Justin, would have paused his game console and come running across the living room floor, determined to intercept his dad in the foyer. He would have wrapped Martin in a knee-high embrace that would have made any NFL special teams coach proud. Monica — only three — would have been in her gated play area in the kitchen, playing with her toys, grabbing at the dog’s tail as he walked by and watching her mom prepare dinner. And Katie? She would have leaned away from the kitchen sink as he approached her from behind, given him a peck on the cheek and handed him a glass of their favorite California Cabernet or Riesling to “take the edge off” his day.

Instead, this evening Martin received a cold blast of air from the freezer as he inspected the assorted frozen dinners he had picked up at the supermarket over the weekend. He took one out and started to pry open the lid while he listened to messages on the flickering answering machine. There was nothing from Katie, just a concerned call from his mother, checking to see if he had heard anything yet.

Martin put the video disk on the kitchen table and fixed himself a frozen Salisbury steak dinner. He ate it alone, in silence, staring at the disk. After a quick clean up, he headed for the den.

Martin placed the disk in the entertainment center and pushed "play." He grabbed the remote and sank into the leather couch, not knowing what to expect. The screen went dark for several moments. Then, the phrase, "Decoding Image Overlay," appeared in red, at the center. He watched as the words gradually faded to black and the screen dissolved into the image of a middle-aged man in a dark-gray business suit.

The man sat alone in a leather armchair, his face partially obscured by shadow. He appeared to be speaking from a private, residential study. He looked to be in his late fifties or early sixties, had short-cropped gray hair and the proud bearing and rugged build of a professional athlete or soldier. As he started to speak, a small register of white numbers appeared at the bottom right-hand corner of the screen and steadily began counting down from 300.

"Hello," the man said. "Please excuse me for not introducing myself, but, for security reasons, I must

remain anonymous. We even have altered my voice, slightly, to prevent identification. I don't know who you are or the year in which you are viewing this. I may not even be alive anymore. But the underground organization my associates and I started, an organization uniquely equipped to help you right now, lives on.

"Since you're viewing this video, we can assume that my associates have determined that you are currently facing some imminent form of personal threat. My guess is that sometime within the next twenty-four hours, you will learn the details. Don't be surprised to discover that at least one branch of our government may be involved and that it will attempt to deprive you of certain protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.

"You may think you are immune to government assaults on your liberties, but I assure you, you are not. Every member of our organization previously has had his or her hand bitten by government institutions we supported and, in many cases, bled to defend.

"We formed our 'volunteer network' to stop these kinds of civil-liberties abuses. We love this country and we would never harm it. But we will not allow its sacred institutions and principles to be turned against the very citizens our founding fathers intended for them to serve.

"That's why we've contacted you. Very soon, you will need our expert help — and we're prepared to give it, provided you are willing to meet certain conditions.

"One of our operatives will contact you within the next forty-eight hours. This is important: We will only give you one opportunity to meet with us and accept our

assistance. Should you refuse our help, we will withdraw our offer immediately — and forever.”

“Good luck.”

With that, the image turned to snow. Martin got up and pressed “play” again several times, but nothing happened. He even restarted the entertainment center and reinserted the disk: still nothing. Martin sat there on the couch staring at the snow-filled screen for some time, before finally switching it off.

The silence that followed should have filled the room with a comforting, reassuring peacefulness. But that night Martin sensed something altogether different. A hungry, uneasy dread had somehow slithered inside the house, and Martin could feel it weaving its way toward him among the shadows.

At first, Martin thought it was the man’s warning that had set him on edge. But gradually, he realized he was worried about this self-proclaimed patriot and the mysterious, underground group he represented. For reasons still unknown to him, these people — an organized and determined outlaw element — had him in their sights and possibly under surveillance.

Martin suddenly stood up, strode to the front door and switched the floodlights back on. Then, he returned to the den where he poured himself a tall glass of Scotch. As he put the cap back on the bottle, Martin caught his reflection in the bar’s mirror and stopped dead in his tracks. His face was drenched in flop sweat.

He fumbled in his pocket for a handkerchief and used it to wipe his face and forehead. Then, he killed the lights

and slowly sank back down into the couch. There, in the comfort and anonymity of total darkness, Martin polished off his drink in one long, hot, desperate gulp.

Chapter 3

Martin had heard that sound before, he was sure of it, but where? Then, he remembered. It was the sound of the back porch door smacking against the wood frame of his grandparents' summer beach house in Cape Cod. It always did that before a squall, if he or his brother, Jeb, forgot to secure the latch when they went out. Where was Jeb, anyway? Maybe he had gone looking for shells again. Martin knew he was going to have to get up, eventually, and fix the latch, but he was too comfortable to do so at that moment. "Jeb did it," he muttered to no one in particular. "Ask him."

"Mr. Silkwood! Mr. Silkwood!" voices shouted as the banging continued.

Martin shot up, alert, awake and terrified. This wasn't the beach house after all, and it was far too dark for late afternoon. He heard the men's voices and the pounding

again, and he realized he was back in his suburban Maryland home. He was a grown man of forty-one, not a thirteen year old, and the pounding sounds and strange voices were coming from his front door. Could they have found him already?

“Sir, we know you’re in there!” a voice shouted. “We need to speak with you. Police business.”

Now, Martin’s head was reeling. Police business? What do the police want with me? Have those subversives done something to Katie and the kids? He rose and felt his way through the dark, along the edges of furnishings and walls, until he reached the door.

“Hold on. I’m coming!” he shouted. He put his eye up to the peephole and saw the tan, festooned hat that he was sure only Maryland State Troopers wore. He opened the door and found himself confronted by two sheriff’s deputies.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Are you Martin Silkwood?” the younger, taller deputy asked as he held up his Sheriff’s Department I.D. and pointed a flashlight in Martin’s face.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Martin said. Out of the corner of his eye, he could have sworn he saw the older deputy unfasten his gun holster.

“Mr. Silkwood, we have a court order demanding that you vacate this house. You have fifteen minutes to gather your belongings and go, sir.”

“What, are you crazy?” Martin protested. “This is my home. I’m not going anywhere!”

“Sir,” the younger deputy said, handing him a stack of papers. “Your wife has sworn out a petition for a protective order against you. Take your time and read it, if you would, but you have to leave.”

Martin took the stack of hand-filled forms and official-looking papers from the deputy and began flipping through them. The first page was a temporary restraining order, signed by a district court judge. It required him, the “respondent,” to vacate his house and refrain from contacting his children, visiting their schools — including their Sunday school — and from going anywhere near his wife or her place of work for the next seven days. The reason given was his “repeated acts of violence, threats, and abusive behavior” against his wife and children.

The judge, the documents said, had awarded his wife “temporary custody” of the children and exclusive use of their home, pending a hearing on the charges. The judge had not required him to surrender his car — since his wife had one of her own — and he had not yet specified any child support amount. But the issue of enforcement was quite clear. If Martin violated the temporary restraining order to any extent, the document said, he would be in contempt of court and subject to arrest, fines and imprisonment.

“I can’t believe this,” Martin said, as he turned the page. “Not one word of this is true!” He looked intently at the deputies. “How can something like this happen?”

The deputies stared back at him awkwardly. Martin’s hands already had started shaking from the panic-induced adrenalin rush, when he flipped to the page in the petition

that his wife had filled out against him and had signed under oath. As he read it, shock turned to panic and panic to nausea. He thought he was going to vomit.

Martin could not believe what he was reading. His wife, the woman he had been married to for eight years, the person he had trusted more than anyone else in his life, had accused him, under oath, of committing repeated “escalating acts of physical and verbal abuse” against her and the kids. What’s more, she wrote, “the police have been called to the house on numerous occasions.”

“What’s this about the police being called here on ‘numerous occasions’?” Martin asked the deputies. “As far as I know, the police have never come to our house, at least, not when I was here.”

The younger deputy directed him to the next page, where his wife had elaborated on her charges. There, he found a chronology of fictitious, or, at best, grossly distorted accounts of past arguments they had had. But far worse, he found four “occasions” on which his wife claimed he had been so abusive and threatening that she had called 911 and had the police come to the house. Then, he noticed something strangely familiar about those dates.

“My God!” he said, looking at the deputies. “Every time she says she called the police, I’ve been out of town on audits. I’m a senior partner in an accounting firm, and we routinely take audit teams to our clients’ businesses to review their books!

“Didn’t anyone check out the facts about these ‘alleged’ incidents before issuing her a restraining order?

And, shouldn't I have, at least, been present in court? Don't I have the right to tell the judge my side of the story?"

Now, the deputies were looking a bit uncomfortable. "It was an ex-parte proceeding," the older deputy said. "See there, where it says that?"

"Ex parte? What's that?" Martin asked.

"In cases of alleged domestic abuse" the deputy said, "the courts routinely hold emergency hearings with just the party seeking protection. This ruling's only temporary. You have a right to a hearing within seven days. It's all there in the papers.

"See," he said, taking the report from Martin and flipping to the appropriate page. "You're scheduled for a hearing before the judge at 9:00 a.m. next Monday, a week from today."

"This is unbelievable," Martin said. "What am I supposed to do until then? And what about seeing my kids?"

"You've got to vacate, sir," the younger deputy repeated. "I'd suggest checking into one of those low-cost, extended stay motels until the hearing. Or, if you have family in town, you could arrange to stay with them. But you cannot see your kids."

"Wait a minute," Martin said. "She signed this under oath, right?"

"That's right, sir," the older deputy said.

"So, she's committed perjury! She's going to have to answer for that, isn't she?"

By now, the deputies seemed to have lost all enthusiasm for their work. "Well," said the older one, "I suggest you contact an attorney as soon as possible, sir. He or she can advise you about what to do. But, we've really got to get going. We have a whole stack of these to serve tonight."

"But this is nothing but a pack of lies!" Martin protested.

"It's not that uncommon" the older deputy said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd say, on average, about half of the temporary restraining orders we serve are based on bogus charges." The deputy smiled sheepishly as he wiped the back of his neck with a handkerchief.

"Half?" Martin repeated, in amazement. "Then, why do you bother serving them at all?"

"We have to, sir," the younger deputy explained. "It's our job."

"I don't know how you guys can stand doing this kind of thing to people day-in and day-out," Martin said. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"The judges make the rulings, Mr. Silkwood," the younger deputy said. "Nothing's going to change until they do. Please sir, we've got to get going. Can you get your belongings together, now?"

"I guess I have to," Martin said as he gestured for the deputies to come inside. He went upstairs, quickly packed a suitcase and returned.

"We're sorry about all this, Mr. Silkwood," the older deputy said.

“That’s OK. I know it’s not your fault.”

As Martin began leading them out the door, the older deputy paused for a moment and cleared his throat. “Uh, sir, we’re going to need your copy of the house key.”

“Oh, of course,” Martin said. He nervously worked his key chain until he had removed his copy of the key and handed it to the deputy. Then, he waited outside while the deputies tried the key in the door before locking up the house.

Chapter 4

Celia Gardner frowned when the doorbell rang at 8:45 p.m. Who could that be at this hour? she wondered, as she hurried down the main staircase of her sprawling Tudor home. Celia had just finished tucking her two-year-old daughter, Jessica, into bed.

“Ted, are you expecting someone? Ted?” she shouted in the general direction of the great room, where her husband was preoccupied, watching an NBA basketball game. No reply.

“Predictable,” she chuckled to herself as she looked through the peephole and saw Martin Silkwood standing on the doorstep.

“Marty, what a nice surprise!” she said, opening the door. Celia flashed him a big smile as she shouted, over

her shoulder, "Ted, it's Marty! Did you hear me?" She adjusted the storm door's sticky latch to get it open.

"Come on in, stranger!" she said, grabbing Martin by the arm.

A petite woman, with soft, delicate features, fashionably coiffed, shoulder-length brown hair and stunning, turquoise eyes, Celia looked considerably younger than her thirty-eight years. She stood on tiptoes to plant a kiss on Martin's cheek as Buddy, the Gardner's Labrador retriever, bounded toward them with eight-year-old Timmy close behind.

Buddy barked excitedly, wagging his tail as he tried, unsuccessfully, to break his momentum by back-peddling his paws against the foyer's highly polished marble finish. No such luck. He slammed into Celia, who quickly grabbed him by the collar to keep him at bay.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you guys," Martin said over the fray.

"Don't be silly," Celia said, glancing up at him as she struggled with the dog. Then, turning to Buddy, who was drooling and still trying his best to get past her to Martin, she scolded, "Knock it off, you big galoot!"

Little Timmy stepped forward. "Hi, uncle Marty."

"Hey, kiddo." Martin said, rubbing Timmy's mop of dirty-blond hair.

Celia gestured in the direction of the great room. "Ted's sitting in there, like a zombie."

Martin raised his eyebrows and stared at her blankly.

"Wizards basketball. Remember? Your buddy's their biggest fan?"

“Right!”

“What’s with you tonight?”

Martin shrugged. “Would you join us, Celia?”

“Is everything OK?” she asked, following.

“Not really.”

Ted was seated on the couch at the far end of the great room, watching the game on a large, flat-screen TV that hung, like a painting, above the fireplace. The Wizards were closing in on the Nets with just two minutes left in the first quarter. The score: twenty-eight to twenty-two. He glanced briefly in their direction as Buddy wedged himself between him and the coffee table, licking his hand and angling for attention.

“Hey, Marty,” Ted said. “Grab a seat!”

“I’m going to join you too, honey,” Celia said, after Timmy had raced ahead and sat down on his dad’s left. “Marty’s got something on his mind.”

“Can it wait till half-time?”

“Sure,” Martin said.

“Ted —!” Celia chided. “Your best friend has come by to talk. Don’t you think that’s a little more important than —?”

“It’s all right, Celia, really,” Martin interrupted. “Frankly, I could use the distraction.”

Ted glanced up at his friend. “Guess who’s got a C-note riding on this — with an eight-point spread?”

“Someone with more money than sense, I guess.”

“Marty,” Celia said, “can I get you a beer in the meantime?”

“Sure.”

"Would you get me another one, too, hon?" Ted asked, dangling his now empty bottle before her at arm's length, without taking his eyes off the game.

"Sure, Ahrrchie," she said in her best Brooklyn accent. Then, to no one in particular, "How about some nachos?"

"Yeah, Mom!" Timmy said. "And can I stay up till halftime, please?"

"If I let you, mister, you better jump out of bed in the morning."

"I will. Promise!"

By halftime, the score was fifty-one to fifty. Timmy kissed his parents goodnight, gave Martin a hug and reluctantly stomped off to his room alone. Then, Ted put the TV on mute and turned to his friend. "So, what's up?"

"Well," Martin said, "I've got bad news and really bad news."

"Let's start with the bad news," Ted said.

Martin sat up. "I'm homeless."

"You're what?" they both said in unison.

"Homeless. Out on the street."

Ted smiled. "So, the repo man finally caught up with you?"

"Hah hah," Martin said. "I still own the house; I'm just not living in it. And that brings me to the really bad news. Katie and I have separated."

Celia gasped. "Oh my, Marty!"

"As of when?" Ted asked.

"Friday night. I found out when I came home to an empty house, with a note from Katie waiting for me on the kitchen table."

"I'm so sorry, Marty," Celia said.

Ted frowned at his friend. "So, why are we only hearing about this now?"

"Well, I spent Friday night calling Katie's close friends, trying to figure out where she was. I was in shock, and I guess I was hoping the whole thing would blow over. Telling you guys only would have made it seem more real."

"So, you spent the weekend alone?" Celia asked.

"No. My brother and mother came by taking turns keeping the 'wounded soldier' company."

They all sat for a moment in silence.

"I'm confused," Celia said, at last. "If Katie moved out on Friday, why are you suddenly without a house now?"

"I had one until about an hour ago," Martin said. "Then, two sheriff's deputies came and kicked me out."

Ted looked appalled. "They did what?"

"They knocked on my door at about eight-fifteen and served me with a temporary restraining order that Katie had gotten. Then, they told me I had fifteen minutes to gather up my belongings and leave."

"Just like that?" Celia asked. "No warning?"

"Uh huh."

"They must have had some kind of grounds to do it, didn't they?" Ted asked.

"Yeah," Martin said, blushing. "Katie had accused me of repeated acts of verbal and physical abuse against her and the kids, for Christ's sake! Can you believe that?" Martin shook his head, grunted and threw his upturned hands into the air, as if to say, 'What's the world coming to?'

"Well ... Marty," Celia began hesitantly, clearing her throat. "Have you ever threatened her ... or the kids?"

"What?" Martin asked, taken aback. "Are you kidding me, Celia?"

"No need to attack me, Marty," Celia said. "I'm just asking."

"I wasn't. But do you actually think I'd be capable of doing something like that?"

"Well, a restraining order, that's pretty serious stuff, Marty," Celia continued. "Doesn't a judge have to sign it?"

"Let's be clear," Ted interjected, "there was a hearing, right?"

Martin nodded as his blush deepened. "It's a temporary restraining order, guys. It expires in seven days."

"Unless the judge makes it permanent," Ted interjected.

"I-I can't believe you," Martin said, shaking his head.

"Marty, do you understand how serious these charges are?" Celia asked.

"I'm the one who just got kicked out of his home, Celia. I think I have an inkling."

"You could go to jail for this."

"Now, Celia," Ted said, trying to diffuse the situation a little. He waved his finger at her mischievously. "Remember the O.J. Simpson trial, honey? Let's not 'rush to judgment.'"

"Interesting choice, dear. O.J. was a celebrity, and no one had any idea of what he was capable of, either – no more than they could have predicted what that horrible Barnes man would do."

“What?” Martin said, leaping up, shaking his head and waving his hands in the air. “Tell me the two of you are not comparing me with those psychos!”

“Whoa, whoa,” Ted said. “No one’s suggesting anything of the kind.”

He turned to his wife. “And, for the record, honey, the jury found O.J. not guilty, remember? ‘If the gloves don’t fit, you must acquit!’”

Celia shook her head and waved a finger at Ted. “O.J. was guilty as hell, dear. The prosecution never should have allowed his defense team to put so much weight on those gloves. Instead, they should have been telling the jury, ‘If the shoes fit, you must nail this shit!’”

Martin broke in as he resumed his seat, “Hey guys, remember, I haven’t been tried — or convicted — of anything.”

“You haven’t, Marty?” Celia said with surprise. “How can that be? There was a hearing. You said so yourself.”

“It was an ex-parte hearing,” Martin repeated.

“What kind of hearing?” Ted asked.

“Ex parte. Only Katie and her attorney were present.”

Celia looked puzzled. “I thought both sides always had to be there.”

“Me, too, but the deputies assured me that ex-parte hearings are ‘standard operating procedure’ in domestic violence cases. I get a hearing ... eventually, but it won’t be till next Monday. And Katie and her attorney will be there as well.

“Meanwhile, the judge has thrown me out on the street. He’s ordered me not to speak with Katie or the kids

— or to have any contact with them at all. I have to put myself up in a motel. And, believe it or not, I'm lucky. He could have confiscated my car and given it to Katie, if she didn't already have one."

"Wow," Ted said, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's like they've tried and convicted you in advance. And this is America?"

"Apparently."

"That's really something," he continued. "And none of this has anything to do with your separation —?"

"Oh, I think it has everything to do with it," Martin said. "Katie made the whole thing up. It's all lies!"

"Well, didn't Katie have to make those charges under oath?" Celia asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you really think she would be reckless enough to lie then?"

"What's your point?"

"All I'm saying is I've known Katie a long time. She's smarter than that. I'm wondering ... is it possible, Marty, that you might actually have done something wrong?"

Martin shook his head, "I haven't."

"Marty, did you ever hit her?" Ted asked, abruptly.

"No!"

"What about the kids? Did you ever lose it with your boy? I mean, kids can get extremely frustrating at times."

"No, no. What, are you both out of your minds? I love my kids! I would never strike them. This is sick!"

Ted stared intently at Marty for a moment. Then, his expression gradually relaxed. "Are you sure you haven't

stashed a riding crop in your nightstand, Marty, just in case the wife might need a little ‘disciplining’?”

Martin wasn’t sure what to make of this last remark, until he saw the edge of his friend’s lips curl upward.

“You jackass!” he said, shaking his head and starting to laugh. Martin looked away for a moment and took a deep breath, but as he did, his smile suddenly disappeared.

“Wait a second,” he said, coming to a dead stop. He raised his index finger near his forehead, as if catching himself in mid-thought. Then he turned back in Ted’s direction. “You really don’t believe me, do you?”

“I want to. I’m trying to. My instincts tell me I should.”

“But, you have your doubts?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about you?” he said, now facing Celia.

She just sat there shrugging her shoulders.

“Listen, you two,” Martin said, determined to make them understand. “Katie’s lying. What she claims happened never took place — and I can prove it.”

“How are you going to do that?” Celia challenged.

“Katie says she called the police to our house four different times. Now, maybe she did call them. That’s possible. But I was never there when she did. I wasn’t even in town on the days she claims all this stuff happened. I was away doing audits.”

“Oh—?” Celia said, surprised. She hesitated for a moment before continuing. “But that still doesn’t explain why she would be foolish enough to lie under oath.”

"Beats me, Celia, but from what I hear, she's got plenty of company. No offense, but women apparently lie about this stuff all the time."

"Really, Marty? Celia said, folding her arms and raising an eyebrow. "Where did you dig up that plum?"

"The deputies told me. They said half the Temporary Restraining Orders they enforce are based on, and I quote, 'bogus charges.' I'll know more when I speak to an attorney, which I need to do as soon as possible."

"You don't have one yet?" Ted asked.

"No. I could ask our firm's counsel, or a few of my D.C. lawyer friends, for referrals, but I don't have that kind of time. And I'd prefer to fly under my firm's radar on this, if I can help it. So, I was wondering, do you know anyone locally who is good and who handles divorces?"

"Yeah," Ted said. "Jeff Bishop, one of my construction supers, went through a nasty divorce two years ago, and he was represented by a guy with an office right here, in Olney. He said the guy saved his ass. Do you want me to call him and see if I can get a name and number?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

Ted excused himself and went to his study to make the call.

"I'm sorry, Marty," Celia said, after a moment. "God knows we have no reason to doubt you, but Katie has accused you of something truly awful. You claim she's lying ... which would make her actions wholly unforgivable ... and yet I don't get it. Why would she turn on you like

this? What could possibly make her hate you that much ... unless —?”

“Unless I did something to warrant it? I get it, Celia.”

“I know, I know. I feel terrible about it. But domestic violence, Marty? It’s such an ugly, scary thing. Just look at that awful Barnes case! I’ve never known anyone accused of it.”

“So, that’s another first for me? Nice!”

“God, I’m sorry!” Celia said. “Listen, you’ve always been a gentleman to Katie around us. You’ve always seemed extremely attentive and considerate. You’re a great dad, too, from what I’ve seen. And, for what it’s worth, I really don’t think you could hurt a fly.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“The problem is ... no one really knows what goes on in other people’s homes, you know? I mean, who could ever have predicted that a young father would slit his own kids’ throats, murder his wife and then take himself out. It’s inconceivable to me! But I’m really worried for you, Marty. I’m also a bit shocked. We had no idea you two were having any problems. You always seemed like such a solid couple.”

“We were,” Martin said. “For years. Rock solid. Did I ever tell you how we met?”

“No.”

“It was a blind date, when we were both in our early thirties. A ‘fix up.’ We hit it off. I think we were both looking to settle down.

“I’ve never told this to anyone, but the night of that first date, after leaving our friends’ house, we slipped away

to a little hole-in-the-wall bar and sort of 'interviewed' each other."

"No kidding, like Larry King?"

"Yeah. I had never done anything like that before. We compared notes about what we wanted in life, and we discovered we pretty much wanted the same things. So, we began dating exclusively, and not long after that, we decided to get married.

"We were always, to borrow your term, 'solid.' We were extremely comfortable with each other. But I'll tell you what we weren't, Celia," he said, looking at his friend. "We were never madly in love, like you and Ted. At best, we were mildly in love.

"Our marriage may not have been perfect, but it was still pretty good most of the time. And once we had the kids, which happened pretty soon in our case, it was over for me. I believe adults have special responsibilities to their kids. Once they're here, we need to do everything we can to give them our best."

Martin felt a sudden chill as he heard himself saying those all-too-familiar words. Could Katie's actions wind up rendering them meaningless? Even before he was old enough to articulate them, those principles had become his life's mission and private mantra – the salve, and promised cure, for his own secret pain.

As a child, Martin repeatedly had promised himself that, when he grew up, he would give his children the positive, stable and secure home life his parents had never been able to provide. He would do everything in his

power to insulate them from the senseless cruelties and hardships of the adult world.

Martin and Jeb had not been so fortunate. As kids, they had watched, helplessly, as their father's unrestrained gambling addiction wrecked his life and theirs. Charles Silkwood made a good living as a construction project super, but his need to stay constantly "in the action," and to offset steadily mounting losses, led him to bet on everything and anything: baseball, football and basketball games; the ponies -- even the stock market.

While Charles Silkwood occasionally enjoyed big, even spectacular, wins, the family saw little of it. He might have taken the boys and their mother out for a celebratory dinner, but then he would plow every remaining cent of his winnings right back into making his next big score.

The family's collective fortunes rose one week, on hollow hopes and empty promises, only to crash the next. But their overall trajectory soon became apparent: The Silkwoods were steadily slipping toward financial ruin and into ever-deepening desperation and despair.

Martin remembered late-night yelling matches between his parents, when his father would stumble in from high-stakes poker games, reeking of liquor and, more often than not, smarting from fresh, new losses. As his gambling debts mounted, Martin's father blew through his salary, the family savings and even much of his aging parents' retirement nest egg, in ever more desperate attempts to reverse his fortunes. Yet, it seemed, each new attempt only left him deeper in the hole.

Finally, with nowhere else to turn, he approached the loan sharks. This proved to be his undoing. To pay their exorbitant interest rates, Charles began taking bribes at work. He would 'look the other way' when vendors substituted inferior goods for the first-rate materials his company had ordered. When he finally got caught, Charles lost his job and went to jail.

No one in the Silkwood extended family had ever sunk so low. The trauma and shame were palpable. Martin's immediate family never spoke of it to anyone; but the shame, though not his own, left an indelible stain on Martin that had dogged him for the rest of his life.

For a moment, Martin considered telling Celia what those words really meant to him. He wanted her to know why he would do anything in his power to preserve the peace, stability and innocence his children had enjoyed. He wanted to share why he would have taken his own life before he ever would have allowed himself to behave in the awful manner Katie had alleged.

Celia and Ted were among his closest friends. It would be so easy to let them in, if he could just say the words. But he realized he couldn't. Martin had allowed Katie in, only to have her betray him. He simply could not risk another betrayal, no matter how unlikely. The invisible wall of separation that had served him so well, for so long, would remain in place -- at least, for the time being.

Celia had listened intently, nodding her head, as Martin had discussed his marriage and his child-rearing philosophy. She liked what she heard, but that only made her feel more confused.

"Marty," she asked when he finished, "why do you think your marriage fell apart now? Was there a triggering incident of some sort?"

"I wish I knew, Celia," he said. "I know that sounds like a cop out, but I lay awake nights now, struggling with just that question.

"All I can tell you is, a couple months back, something in our marriage changed. I'm not sure what. Katie started picking fights with me all the time. Our shared beliefs seemed to go out the window.

"I pushed for us to see a marriage counselor, and she agreed, in principle," he continued, "but it never amounted to more than lip service."

Martin's eyes began to water as the realization gradually hit home. "My God," he said. "It's really over, isn't it? The marriage and the life Katie and I were building together for the kids? It's like I'm witnessing some horrible train wreck and can't do anything to stop it."

Celia stood up, walked over and sat next to him. She placed her hand on his shoulder. "It's awful, Marty. I don't know what else to say."

Ted returned with the attorney's name and number. They called him at his home and scheduled a meeting for the first thing in the morning. Then, Ted and Celia tried to convince Martin to spend his first 'homeless' night as a guest in their home, but he declined.

"Under the circumstances, it just doesn't feel right," he said. "Besides, I've got a motel room."

Martin said goodnight to his friends and let himself out. He walked slowly to his car, bent over and mumbling

to himself. He looked like a death row inmate, who had just learned that his desperate, eleventh-hour appeal had been denied.

Chapter 5

Early Tuesday morning, Martin met with Chester Swindell in the restored Victorian home that served as his law firm's Olney office. The meeting did not go well.

Swindell, one of the area's most noted divorce attorneys, sat behind his large mahogany desk in a cluttered office that smelled of equal parts freshly brewed coffee and stale cigar smoke. He shook his head from side to side as he reviewed Martin's copy of the Temporary Restraining Order and petition.

As he read, Swindell repeatedly made the same "zzt, zzt, zzt" sound doctors often make when reviewing particularly disturbing test results. He wore a pained look on his face that Martin found appalling but that Swindell had discovered, over the years, to be particularly useful in

preparing his clients for the gargantuan legal bills divorce matters he tried typically generated. At his \$300-an-hour rate, litigation clearly wasn't going to be a bargain.

Swindell, at sixty-eight, was a tall, aristocratic-looking man, whom nature had blessed with the constitution of a rhino and the face of a terminal lung-cancer patient. The combination gave him the good fortune of looking much older than his years — and far more sympathetic than his conduct usually warranted.

Swindell's sole hint of vitality was the shock of gray hair he combed straight back from his forehead. Everything else about him suggested weariness and infirmity. His naturally loose olive skin, painstakingly weathered to a rawhide-like appearance under an endless succession of sun lamps, had the look, and feel, of a well-broken-in baseball mitt. His considerable jowls, darkened eye sockets, and droopy eyelids — all suggestive of long nights spent “burning the midnight oil” for his clients — were a convenient accident of birth. He was, in fact, the spitting image of his father, who had spent most of his adult life as an under-employed “gentleman” farmer.

Swindell came from an old Maryland family of tobacco farmers and horse breeders. His ancestors were distant relatives of the Lees, a family of pre-revolutionary war origins noted for two things: its extensive real estate holdings and its claim of direct lineage to General Robert E. Lee. This historic connection was a source of great pride for Swindell — so much so, in fact, that he affected a slight southern lilt whenever he spoke.

Swindell fancied himself to be a true “southern lawyer,” and he played the part to the hilt. His southern affectations made him seem like an anachronism in the progressive, increasingly cosmopolitan Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC.

“Your wife,” Swindell finally said, looking up from the papers and over the rims of his reading glasses, “appears determined to skin you alive and then keep your hide around as some sort of souvenir.”

“None of the charges are true,” Martin insisted.

“Of course, of course” Swindell replied, with what appeared to be a pained effort at a smile. “Unfortunately, Mahr-tin,” he said, “she has the court, if not the law, on her side.”

“How’s that?”

“You saw how easy it was for her to get a temporary restrainin’ order against you?” Swindell offered.

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s because, in today’s ‘politically correct’ environment, no judge in his or her right mind ever wants to be accused of bein’ ‘insensitive’ to the plight of women who fear for their safety or for the safety of their children. They’d rather blindly issue a thousand of these TROs, as we call them — *carte blanche* — than risk denyin’ protection to one woman in real physical peril.”

“But what about the truth?” Martin blurted out. “Doesn’t that matter anymore? And what about my civil rights? Don’t I have a right to ‘due process?’ Aren’t I supposed to be protected against unreasonable ‘searches

and seizures'? And, more importantly, don't I have a right to see my kids and to stay actively involved in their lives?"

Swindell cocked his head to one side and squinted. "Yes, sir, Mahr-tin, those are all fine principles — the bedrock of American society."

"But —?"

"But, they don't amount to crap in these judges' minds, at least compared to the thought of them bein' ridiculed by the press for makin' a mistake that leaves just one abused wife lyin' face down in a ditch, beaten to death.

"They don't want to be caught sippin' coffee one mornin' while the TV news reports that a woman they denied protection to a day earlier — someone like that poor Barnes woman — had been summarily executed, along with her two children, upon her return home from court.

"You see, Mahr-tin, it's not really about justice or the law anymore. It's all about protectin' reputations: theirs, not yours. They want to position themselves for advancement, not embarrassment."

"But my wife's apparently been spreading lies about me to everyone we know, and now she can start using this 'TRO' as some form of 'proof'."

"That's unfortunate," Swindell said, "unfortunate, but largely unavoidable."

"Well, what about this hearing I've got in six days. Can we expose her lies then? And where will that leave me?"

"Of course," Swindell said, smiling to himself. "You should, and you shall, have your day in court. But just understand the position you're in."

“What position is that?” Martin asked, growing more and more exasperated.

“Well,” Swindell continued, “it’s hardly like you are goin’ in front of an impartial judge, now, is it?”

“You mean the judge already has made his mind up against me?”

“Well, what do you think? Hasn’t he put himself on record as believin’ you’re capable of violent, abusive acts?”

“Yes, but —”

“And won’t we be askin’ that same judge to now reverse that earlier decision?” Swindell continued.

“Well sure, but —”

“And, Mahr-tin, do you know anyone who likes to admit he’s wrong — and to do it publicly?”

“No, of course not. But the judge hasn’t even met me yet. If he’s received bad information from my wife, if she has misled him, then certainly, she’s responsible, not him, right?”

“Well,” Swindell said, “he’s still the fool who believed her, isn’t he? I mean, isn’t that the essence of the point you want me to make?”

“OK, OK. I get it.”

“You see,” Swindell added, “all of this nonsense — and excuse me, I don’t mean to trivialize your situation, Mahr-tin — but all of this could have been avoided, if the judge had simply asked your wife or her attorney some probin’ questions at the ex-parte hearin’. Then, they would have gotten much nearer the truth. But judges in these cases don’t want to ask probin’ questions. They want to

grant the petitions, so the less conflictin' information they turn up, the better.

"I mean, why go out of your way to question the propriety of a course of action you prefer to take? Wouldn't that be counter-productive?"

By now, Martin looked dumbstruck. He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and let out a mild snort.

"These judges don't care if they fail to establish future grounds for perjury charges, either," Swindell continued, "because they don't consider what they're askin' you to sacrifice to be such a big deal, after all."

"Are you crazy?" Martin said, with sudden fury. "I've been summarily thrown out of my house. My wife is dragging my name in the mud. My best friends doubt me. I've been denied access to my children, and now it looks like my entire case has been prejudiced, to boot."

"Yes, but that is not the way they see it."

"Well then, how do they see it?" Martin asked bitingly, throwing his hands up in the air.

"Since this is a civil procedure, rather than a criminal one, they see themselves as temporarily inconveniencin' you, but not doin' you any real, long-term harm. No matter what happens at the hearin', you won't have a criminal record doggin' you in the future. It will all soon be forgotten."

"Not by me, it won't."

"Of course not," Swindell said. "But they will be able to put this matter behind them. They will forget about your inconvenience a lot sooner than they'd forget about their

own embarrassment and guilt, if anythin' unfortunate happened to your wife or children."

"So, what you're saying is the whole system is rigged against me, because I'm a man — and all in the name of 'political correctness?' You're saying that I'm being judged on stereotypes about men being more violent — and that most judges care more about their personal reputations and careers than they do about making sure justice is served?"

"Yes," Swindell nodded, "that's it — precisely. But don't you dare go around quotin' me on that. I'll deny it, because I have to work with these judges. My livin' largely depends on my ability to influence them. And remember, Mahr-tin, filin' false petitions is still a drastic, risky, nasty, despicable act. Yes, women do it all the time, more and more. But it is still slightly more the exception than the rule. Unfortunately, your wife and her attorney appear more than willin' to make this a very dirty fight." (Swindell tried hard to let his smile shine only on the inside.)

"So what are my odds of getting this TRO, as you call it, reversed next Monday?" Martin asked.

"Dependin' on the evidence we can produce, probably somewhere in the range of fifty-fifty, but if you're lookin' for justice, or to give your wife her comeuppance for subjectin' you to this, I think that's a real stretch.

"Right now, your wife has everythin' she wants," Swindell explained. "She's got your kids, she's got your attention and she's got the court's sympathy. I would expect an offer to be tendered soon."

“You mean, like a settlement offer?” Martin gasped, looking dumbstruck.

“Somethin’ like that.”

“Well, she can forget it!” he said, slamming his fist down on Swindell’s desk. “I’d rather lose everything I have in a court fight than let her take what she wants from me in this manner.”

“I understand, Mr. Silkwood,” Swindell replied, growing all warm and mushy on the inside. “You want your day in court, and I’m goin’ to see that you get it.”

“Damned straight,” Martin said.

Swindell shook his new client’s hand, promising to be in touch.

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Acknowledgments

No work of fiction is written in a vacuum. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who read this manuscript in its various drafts, offered their encouragement and suggestions and helped make the final product stronger. In particular, I wish to thank Andrew J. Felser, Esq. for his thoughtful notes and corrections about certain aspects of the legislative process; Tom McKeon, Esq., for his generous guidance, coaching and legal representation in a time of great need. (Much of what I learned about legal procedure, I owe to Tom.); Lisa N. Farrell, for her help proofreading an early version of the finished manuscript and Zachary S. Reinfeld, for his ongoing encouragement and his many helpful story and scene suggestions.

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