

Bitch Factor

PROLOGUE

Friday, May 1, Houston, Texas

If Betsy Keyes had known about the car waiting at the curb that morning, waiting for the moment she stepped into the intersection, she would have worn the purple shirt. Purple was for special days, days she marked with stars in her diary. The *most* important days got the purple shirt and three stars.

Hopping over a jagged hump in the sidewalk, she shoved a hand in her pocket and pressed a thumb-sized metallic noisemaker: *Click!* Released it. *Click!*

Sometimes the dark secret Betsy held inside made her feel exactly like a teakettle about to boil over. Squeezing her toy clicker allowed tiny bits of worry to escape, like steam from a teakettle's whistle. The shiny black cricket painted on top had worn thin from rubbing against her finger. Crickets were supposed to be lucky, weren't they?

Click, click.

But today's worry wasn't the bad kind. Today she would read her story to her sixth-grade classmates, which was worth two stars in her diary, at least. The story was exceptional. The class would love it...Betsy hoped they would love it. They would laugh, certainly, and clap.

A honeybee zipped from a smelly wisteria vine trailing a chain-link fence and buzzed past her hair. She dodged it, skirting a puddle from last night's rain. Maybe she'd write a story about an angry honeybee that could only buzz-buzz-buzz while its secrets stayed locked inside forever.

From the time Betsy was five years old, reading picture books out loud to her younger sisters, she'd known she would someday be a fabulous writer. She often skipped the real words and made up her own, inventing new adventures, new characters. Her sisters liked the made-up stories best.

She wished Courtney and Ellie hadn't played sick today. If they'd walked to school with her, she could have practiced her story. She'd whispered to them, before Mama went out to jog, that she didn't think they were really sick. After all, they were both fine at Daddy Jon's party last night.

An empty school bus rumbled past, snorting like an old bear. Betsy wrinkled her nose at the smell. Maybe she'd write a story about a girl bear with two lazy sisters.

She liked going to school early, before engine roar and car horns and the crossing guard's whistle cluttered the morning with noise. It gave her time to think about...things...like what she might have done to make her real daddy go away. She remembered his dark eyes and the way his hair flopped over his forehead like Courtney's, but she could no longer remember his smile.

Click, click.

Sidestepping a pink and yellow buttercup that had poked up through a crack in the concrete, dewdrops glistening on its petals, Betsy pushed the empty feeling away. Today was for happy thoughts. As she neared the intersection, she recited the first line of her story over and over, because teacher said the opening was so important. It had to grab a reader and pull, like reeling in a fish.

Betsy was so caught up in her words, she didn't notice the car waiting for the moment she crossed the street. She didn't hear the engine ripping toward her until it was too late. As the shiny black cricket bounced from her hand, Betsy knew she should have worn the purple. Today was the last important day of her life.

HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT
ACCIDENT DIVISION

RECORDED INTERVIEW: JANUARY 4, 19—

I felt the bump and looked in my rearview mirror at the body lying beside the road.... I honestly thought the killing would end there.

CHAPTER 1

Wednesday, December 23, Houston, Texas

From the forty-seventh floor of the grandiose Transco Tower, the law offices of Richards, Blackmon & Drake command a panoramic view of the city. Dixie Flannigan scarcely noticed the view as she pushed through the mahogany doors. Pine needles clung to her denim jacket from shouldering a Christmas tree into the back of her pickup, and her hands smelled of pine sap. A janitor, lazily mopping an inch of water off the women's rest-room floor, had refused to let her enter—even the men's—and Belle Richards' message had said *hurry*.

Pausing at the receptionist's desk, Dixie tossed a green and red handful of Hershey's Hugs on a document the woman was proofing. The military-strict assistant glanced up.

"Cheers, Sergeant!" Dixie grinned.

The woman's scowl lifted almost a centimeter. "What's cheery about adding another damned inch to my hips?"

The law firm had hired receptionist Sally Grimm, former martial-arts instructor, after a client stormed through the offices hell-bent on shooting the firm's senior partner. Such mayhem would never happen on Sergeant Grimm's watch. Today Dixie couldn't resist trying to break through the woman's armor—after all, 'twas the season to be jolly. Didn't that include stone-faced door wardens? Leaning across the desk, Dixie lowered her voice.

"A copulation consultant once told me a woman's chances of getting laid increase proportionately with the size of her derriere."

Grimm's thin lips twitched at the corners, then rippled into a tight, reluctant smile. Dixie beamed back at her, dropping a few more candies on the desk. As she continued down the hall, she heard a low chuckle, followed by the sound of a foil wrapper ripping open.

Turning the brass handle to Belle's office, Dixie found the defense attorney on the phone, pacing behind her desk. High heels *thumped* into plush gray carpet, marking

cadence with a Muzak version of “Little Drummer Boy.” Attractive, fortyish, and tough as boot leather, Belle Richards had once been described by Fortune magazine as Texas’ hottest female lawyer. Today Belle looked rattled. Her hair sprigged out where she’d been running fingers through it, her lipstick was bitten off, and her white silk blouse had a coffee stain on the left tit.

Dixie shed her jacket and settled into a red leather guest chair. She hoped the attorney hadn’t put her heart and soul into another case that was going sour. She and Belle had been friends since law school, and normally Dixie didn’t mind rallying forces to help slay a few legal dragons, but at Christmastime, family outranked even the best of friends. On the long elevator ride to the forty-seventh floor, Dixie had practiced seventeen ways of saying “no.”

Ending her conversation with a “Thanks, anyway,” Belle cradled the phone and pushed an open file across the desk.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy, Flannigan. Dann and I left the courthouse together only three hours ago, but I think he’s skipped.”

Dixie glanced at the file: *Parker Dann, Intoxication Manslaughter*, which was Texas Penal Code language for driving while drink and accidentally killing someone. Evidently, he’d also left the crime scene—a hit-and-run case.

“Three hours is a short call.” She thumbed the file open to flip through the pages. “Tough spot in the trial for a holiday recess?”

Belle bit the last flake of color from her bottom lip.

“A very tough spot. The jury has my client ninety-nine percent convicted already. And you know how strong public opinion gets in the death of a child—”

“Foolish sentimentality.”

Belle ignored the sarcasm. “Dann can’t leave his house without being harassed, sometimes physically attacked. People throw eggs, beer bottles—”

“Baby killers make terrific targets.”

“Something in his eyes told me to call and check on him this afternoon.” Belle tapped the desk with the eraser end of a well-chewed wooden pencil. “He was too cheerful, just too damn cheerful.”

“So you think he’ll run during the holiday break.”

Belle nodded. “Expecting no one to miss him until court reconvenes after New Year’s.”

“By then he’ll be as gone as a spit in the Gulf.” Before Dixie resigned as a Harris County Assistant District Attorney, she and Belle had often found themselves opponents: Texas’ Hottest Defense Lawyer vs. the State’s Courtroom Bitch, as one yellow-press headline had put it.

Dixie didn’t mind a good fight; justice demanded it. But after ten years as ADA, with one too many bad guys beating the system, her bitch quotient had maxed out. Being a continual badass hardened a person, first on the outside, like a beetle’s armor, then on the inside. When Dixie felt her very core turning stone-cold mean, she hadn’t liked herself much. Now she was content working the legal fringes, rounding up bail jumpers and runaways. Someday she’d figure out what to do with the rest of her life.

She studied Parker Dann’s mug shot; thick brows, an insolent stare, a hard mouth. He looked guilty as hell.

“From Dann’s point of view, Flannigan, and considering the way the trial has gone so far, running could make sense. Sometimes justice is a damn poor gamble.”

In Belle’s eyes, her clients were never guilty. But Dixie remembered this case from local news reports. Driving while intoxicated, Parker Dann had allegedly struck and killed eleven-year-old Betsy Keyes. The cops found Dann’s car parked in his driveway, three blocks from the crime scene, front headlight smashed, the girl’s blood and tissue on the bumper. Dixie was afraid her friend’s loyalty might, this time, be misplaced.

A snapshot clipped inside the folder showed three brown-eyed, smiling girls seated on a brick hearth hung with Christmas stockings. *The Keyes children*, the photo was labeled, *Courtney, Betsy, Ellie*. Betsy, the oldest, sat in the middle, arms spread wide to embrace her sisters’ shoulders.

Beneath the snapshot was a news photo from Dann’s arraignment—Betsy’s family in the courtroom, the mother wan and teary-eyed, the father flushed, angry. Courtney, about nine, perched at the edge of her seat, studying Parker Dann with serious eyes and a determined mouth. Wisps of dark hair had wriggled free from a tightly drawn ponytail to flop across her forehead and feather around her ears. One hand clutched the bench in front of her; the other arm rested protectively around her smaller sister, who sat solemnly turning pages in a worn picture book.

Dixie looked back at the Christmas photo, dated five months before Betsy’s death. Big grins spread across all three young faces. If Dann was guilty, he had ripped this family’s life apart and deserved whatever the jury handed down.

“I know what you’re thinking, Flannigan. It looks bad. Hell, I know it looks bad, but trust me, every piece of evidence against him is circumstantial.”

“The kid should’ve waited for an eyewitness before crossing that street.”

Belle tossed her a fierce glare, crossed her arms over the coffee stain, and *thup-thumped* behind the desk to stare out the window.

“The DA is still trying to come up with someone who saw Dann driving the car on the morning of the accident. And I’m still looking for a witness who saw *somebody else* driving Dann’s car.”

Belle had good instincts. Dann might actually be innocent—not likely, but possible. Dixie decided to ease up on the needling. “The DA’s staff could be digging as dry a hole as you are.”

“Could be.” Belle turned and slapped her pencil down hard on the desktop. “But that *idiot* will *clinch* a conviction by running.”

“Maybe he hasn’t skipped. Maybe he’s doing some last-minute shopping.” Which was exactly what Dixie should be doing. “Or tying one on. You’ve tried his favorite watering holes, I take it?”

“He swears he hasn’t touched a drop since the accident.”

“And you believe him?”

“Don’t be such a skeptic. People *can* change, you know.”

“Right. And the government can reduce spending.”

“It’s possible he’s out shopping or visiting someone...but he doesn’t have any family here—”

“And you have a hunch.” Dixie grinned. In law school, she and Belle had both been chastised for listening to some inner voice that goaded them to inexplicable

decisions. Ordinarily, she'd have been glad to help her friend follow a hunch. "Look, Ric," Dixie hoped the college nickname would soften her refusal, "I have to pass—"

"Flannigan, I know this is the worst possible time, with the holidays, and all—"

"—on this one. I'm already in Dutch with Amy for being gone at Thanksgiving."

Belle sighed. "How *is* your sister?"

"Stubborn as ever. Still wants me to lead the kind of storybook life she does."

"You're all she has left. She doesn't want to lose you."

"Bullshit. Amy has a money-magnet husband and the world's greatest son—who, by the way, will be disappointed as hell if I don't show up on time for tree-trimming in two hours." Dixie hesitated. "Besides, the bail bondsman won't issue a contract until Dann's officially missing."

"I don't want the bondsman involved." When Dixie frowned, Belle hurried on. "If we can get Dann back here before court convenes on January fourth, no one else will have to know—"

"Including the jury."

"*Especially* the jury. Dixie, trust me, he won't have a chance, otherwise."

"Ouch! You sure know how to pass around the guilt." Though she didn't share Belle's conviction of Dann's innocence, she had to admit the jury would crucify him if they learned he'd jumped bail. "Despite my bleeding heart, I must remind you of one other minor consideration—"

"Your fee. Of course. I'll pay it myself."

Dixie raised an eyebrow. "You?" Belle Richards could squeeze a buck hard enough to make George Washington weep green ink.

"Well...not me, *personally*, but Richards, Blackmon and Drake."

"Which means it ultimately comes out of Dan's substantial retainer." Dixie's grin widened. "Now that's a bit of irony I can appreciate." She skimmed Dann's background sheet. It listed seven residences in five different states in the past three years. "A drifter."

"A salesman. And a damn good one, according to his tax returns."

"Forty-two years old. This doesn't mention any exes." One of the most frequent places to find a skip was with an ex-spouse.

"Never married."

Dixie looked up. "Is he gay?"

Belle shrugged. "He tried to hit on me."

"No priors?"

"Picked up twice for DWI—"

"And you want to put this hairball back on the road to kill another kid?"

"He's *innocent*, Flannigan, until *proven* guilty. Remember?"

Dixie shook her head. "You'll always be a soft touch, Ric."

Dann's file listed next of kin in Bozeman, Montana, and a second contact in Canada—a long haul if he decided to head for home ground. Most Houston skips beat feet for the Mexican border, scarcely a day's drive, but since Dann wasn't a local, he'd probably opt for familiar territory. If so, it'd take some heavy traveling to round him up and get back in time for dinner on Christmas night.

"Look at it this way," Belle persisted. "If he's skipped, then he's already on the street where he can 'kill another kid,' as you put it. The only way justice can be served is if we bring him back to stand trial."

“Yeah, well, you know what I think of Texas justice.” Dixie slid the Christmas snapshot of the Keyes girls from under its paper clip and compared it to the news photo taken the previous May in the courtroom, the two girls looking bewildered and older than their years. Her mouth filled with bitterness. It galled her to know the man who killed Betsy was running free while the family sat with an empty chair at the Christmas table this year.

She turned the snapshot over. On the back, in big, loopy, girlish script was written, *The Keyes 3—2gether Forever*.

“You know I wouldn’t ask you to do this,” Belle coaxed, “if it wasn’t important. I hope you can find him quickly—”

“Ric, he’s probably draped over a bar stool within a few blocks of his house. Which means that *if* I decide to look for him, this will be the quickest ten thousand bucks I ever made.”

“*Ten thousand?*”

“He’s out on a hundred thousand dollars bail, right? At ten percent, you’re getting my preferred customer discount.”

“On second thought, I hope he gives you a merry damn chase.”

Dixie got to her feet. “Tell you what. If I find this guy tonight, I’ll keep him tucked away nice and tight until midnight on January third. That way you can worry all through the holidays and feel grateful as hell when he walks in before the judge drops his gavel.”

“You’d really do it, wouldn’t you?” Belle said. “Keep Dann hidden away and let me sweat.”

“Just want you to feel you’re getting your money’s worth.” She closed Dann’s file and slipped the Christmas photo into her pocket.

“Flanni?”

Dixie raised her eyebrow at the familiar nickname.

“If I’m wrong, if Dann really is guilty, he won’t be easy to bring in. He’s already facing a manslaughter charge. Adding one more felony to his record won’t seem too high a risk to a desperate man. He could be dangerous.”

“Don’t let Amy hear that. She already worries too much.” Dixie snapped a rubber band around the folder.

“Dixie, this case—”

“I’ll let you know later tonight whether you’ll need to find another skip tracer.” Dixie grinned and rained a few Hershey’s Hugs in the middle of Belle’s desk. “Meanwhile, sweeten up, Ric. It’s almost Christmas.”

But as she pushed through the mahogany doors, thinking of those two dark-eyed girls with a dead sister, Dixie’s own holiday spirit fell like loose gravestones.

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