

Chapter Three

Courtroom

Amanda woke early on the day of Mark's courtroom appearance. As soon as she left her cottage she debated whether or not to expend energy going outside the stone to check on him, then decided against it. For the past two weeks she'd been carefully husbanding as much energy as she could help the stone collect without endangering Mark. This consisted mostly of making sure the necklace was exposed to sun and moonlight and pulling what it could from those sources. It had gotten supercharged at the Church, but she'd used a lot of that surplus up. She wondered if there were other places where she could convince Mark to go that would help.

Impatiently she waited for the day to lighten up. As it did Mark stirred.

"Morning son." She heard their father say. "You need to get up now and get ready."

Their mother came in and kissed Mark on his head.

"Breakfast will be waiting for you downstairs." She said. "Don't forget your tie and act like a gentleman."

"All right mom." Mark said nervously.

When their parents had left Mark slumped back on the bed. Stroking the necklace, it absorbed some of his energy. Amanda just about popped out of the rock to smack her brother upside the head. What was he thinking? He'd need that energy before the end of the day!

"I'm sure glad you're here, sis."

Her heart melted, the anger evaporating faster than a popped soap bubble. He wanted her near him during the case! Of course he did, and she would be there, after all.

For the thousandth time she wondered if she ought to make a visible appearance during the proceedings and point to her killer. That would certainly...be interesting.

Her mind easily pictured the scene, her standing tall and straight, dressed in nun's robes of all things, pointing to her murderer who cowered back from her righteous anger and pleaded for forgiveness as the judge handed down the verdict of guilty. It would be glorious, but not likely to happen. If she appeared there would most likely be a panic, Steve could get free, and she would end up putting Mark in worse danger.

Steady girl. You can't go making appearances like that. It plays to him. I have to wait until he makes a move. If he comes after Mark, then I go to town on his ass.

Her jaw firmed. Glancing down she realized her fists were clenched and forced her hands to unclench. To distract herself, she went to the stones and started to climb. At the top she knew there was a flat, clear space ontop a massive crystal. There she would watch and see everything.

From her new vantage point she watched her brother ready himself and leave with their parents. During the car ride their parents didn't talk at all but looked nervously at one another. It wasn't long, maybe a half hour to the courthouse. It seemed an eternity, and her brother's gloom infected Amanda. Her shade flickered in the light. Other changes were there but she did not notice them, yet.

When they stepped up to the front door of the court a guard met them and asked what business they had. Her father answered.

"Name?"

"Daniel and Mary Fox."

"And the child?"

"Markus Fox."

"Business with the court?"

"Mark has been called to testify against Steven Ballock."

The guard's eyes jerked to Mark and back. "Jesus." He muttered. "He's just a little kid!"

He glanced down the list until his eyes found the entries.

"All right. You are in Courtroom Five today. Please let the clerk know of your arrival and then wait on the bench until you are summoned. One adult is allowed with the child in the courtroom during proceedings. However the adult must remain quiet during testimony so as to not unduly influence the child during his statement. The guardian may be asked to leave if the judge feels that is best for the case. Your courtroom is upstairs down the right hallway three doors."

"Thank you."

As they went inside their parents broke into a furious whispered argument. Amanda could hear them clearly however, as could Mark who hunched smaller and smaller into himself as he walked between them.

"I can't believe that we can't both be in there with him!"

"I get that they are wanting to limit influences but--"

"It's outrageous!"

"Not necessarily, dear. But I really think--"

"They better not have--"

"But--"

"Or I'll--"

"Hello there!"

Everyone jerked at the smiling, blond-haired woman in a neat black blouse and skirt standing in a small doorway marked "Court Clerk's Office". She looked them over and glanced at her clipboard.

"Are you the Davidson family?"

"No." Their father said uncomfortably. "We're the Fox family."

She looked up sympathetically and ushered them into the clerk's office.

"Of course, of course. Please, come inside the office. Due to the celebratory nature of the case, it is better if you wait here. The Media is having a field day on this one and they are waiting outside the courtroom."

"Thank you." Their parents said uncomfortably. Mark didn't say anything, but his emotions roiled off him like a living wave. The crystal was having a field day. Amanda couldn't stand it anymore. She left the crystal and went to stand by Mark's shoulder, invisible. He jumped at her touch on his shoulders. Leaning in to his ear, she whispered,

"Don't worry short stuff. I'm here with you. You've got this."

"Amanda!" he gasped out loud.

Everyone looked at him.

"What?" Their mother said.

"Mom! I heard Amanda!" Mark said excitedly. "She's going to go in with me!"

Amanda saw her mother smile sadly at him while her father looked...conflicted. The clerk looked curiously back and forth.

"Amanda?" she asked.

"She's my daughter." Her mother explained, taking Michael in a tight hug. "And they were very close...before...before her..." tears soaked Mark's hair.

"I see." The clerk said with a smile.

Amanda experienced a surge of annoyance. They were doubting her little brother! He always told the truth! Even when it would get him into trouble he did so! That was one of the many things she loved him for.

Casting her eyes around she lit on a full teacup. She grinned and reached for it.

"My mother often said her father hung around after his death." The clerk was saying, "and she believes it still. I saw her last week and when my keys disappeared she scolded him for making another little prank, and sure enough right after that we found my keys on the counter. I still can't explain it, but my mom says it was Harold plain and simple."

"So maybe he hangs around too?" Mark asked shyly.

"Maybe, sweetie." The clerk said with a smile.

CRASH!

Everyone jumped at the unexpected noise. The teacup shook where it had crashed onto the saucer, the brown surface roiling wildly in the cup which now sat a full three feet from where it had been. The sugar spoon lay upside down a little ways away on the desktop. Despite the ruckus not a drop had spilled.

"What the hell?" the clerk gasped, staring at the cup.

"Amanda?" her mother whispered wonderingly.

"Yep. I'm here mom." Amanda said to her. No one looked like they'd heard her. Amanda grimaced, she wasn't going to expend anymore energy though. That stupid stunt had drained too much as it was already, in case Steve tried something.

Just then the bailiff appeared in the room.

"Markus Fox?" he asked in a stiff, no-nonsense manner.

"Y-yes?" her brother tried to sound brave.

"The court will see you now. Which of your parents would you like to accompany you, or would you like to go alone?"

"Dad?!" Mark squeaked as the huge, uniformed muscleman looked at him. Even Amanda felt a little afraid, he looked like he could take on the entire State Pen singlehanded and come back for the rest at Guantanamo Bay too!

Their mother opened her mouth angrily but at her husband's look she subsided. Accepting another cup of tea, she watched with worried eyes as her father walked with Mark and the Bailiff out of the office, Amanda pacing right beside Mark.

Down the hall from the office they found a crowd of people waiting outside a door marked with the number 5 and two benches flanking it. A couple of people hunched over on them as if trying to protect themselves from the crowd of reporters that hovered around them asking millions of questions in the space of a single breath. They spied the strangers approaching and immediately went on point.

"Excuse me, are you Mark Fox? Of course you are I'm--"

"Mark! Mark, look over here for the camera!"

"What would you like to tell people about the murderer on trial?!"

"Please!"

"What--"

The din became overwhelming and the muscular bailiff began to force his way into the crowd, knocking aside the reporters as he kept a firm grip on her father's arm. Mark seemed to disappear into his father and kept his head down. Amanda glared angrily around her, power flooding every inch of her body. A shimmer appeared in the air beside Mark, and reporters began shouting, but for a very different reason.

"Hey! My camera just died! What the hell?"

"Mine too! I can't get--"

"We're off air! Quick, get us back! Get us back!"

"Hurry! Get the other camera out of the van!"

"Mic's dead too!"

"What the hell?"

"Hey! What gives? Even the phones are down. Studio's gone."

The door slammed shut firmly in their faces. They were in the courtroom! Amanda held on to the energy. Her gaze crossed the void straight to the defendant's bench and the single, well-dressed son of a bitch that sat calmly there looking back at them between a dozen lawyers. His eyes seemed to lock with hers even across the gulf. Amanda shivered at the amusement she could see in them, and the hatred.

Her father glared daggers down the chamber.

"What the goddamn hell is he doing here?!" he snarled.

"The defendant has the right to listen to the testimony against him." The defense lawyer said.

An older man with balding hair and a thin, pinched look like a starving dog shook his head on the other bench.

"It should be waved based on the age of the witness and the threats that have been enacted by the defendant against the witness."

"Objection! The threats are only alleged and must be proven first." The defense lawyer said.

"Sustained." The judge, a fat man with jowly neck and flat brown hair over his big head like a flowerless dandelion said. "The current proceedings will continue. Mr. Ballock shall have his sworn right to listen to the testimony against him."

"Will the witness please take the stand."

His father growled something under his breath. He bent over and whispered,

"All right Markie. Just go with the Bailiff here and tell your story. Don't embellish things. Tell the truth and ignore whatever those pinheads say."

Mark hugged him and followed the bailiff to the strange bench the judge sat at as Amanda followed.

"Neat!" he said, as the bailiff opened the door and guided him inside to sit down.

"Name?" the judge said, looking down at him from his high chair.

Mark gulped.

"M-Mark sir. Most people call me Markie though. Jackie calls me Sharpie."

"Mark is fine." The judge interrupted.

"Are you prepared to be sworn in?"

Mark fidgeted.

"Um, no? Momma and Amanda say swearin's wrong, sir." He said nervously.

A frisson of amusement went around the courtroom and the judge actually smiled. Amanda shook her head. Oh, Short Stuff!

"That's not actually what I meant, son. And your momma's right, swearing is wrong, when it's dirty and against God. But when I ask you to swear here, you are promising before God that you are going to tell this court nothing but the truth. It is a solemn pledge, so that we may trust your words in the court of law."

"Oh! Like pledging to the grape club!" Mark said. Amanda rolled her eyes.

The judge blinked.

"Grape club?"

"Yeah. We couldn't think of anything else to call it and Jimmie had this grape soda he'd brought from his house so we all promised to be faithful to each other and remain friends forever and stuff. The grape soda sealed the oath. It was Jack's idea."

"Um...you know, close enough." The judge said, releasing his breath slowly. The bailiff looked to be struggling against a smile and the people in the raised benches to Mark's left were all grinning.

"Knock it off, short stuff." Amanda warned.

The bailiff brought out a heavy bible and Mark placed his hand on the cover and vowed to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God. Then he sat back down.

"Now, in your own words, please tell the court what happened when the defendant returned to your house." The judge said.

"Def...defendant?" Mark frowned, exploring the word. "What's that?"

"The person who allegedly attacked you. Can you point him out."

"I wasn't attacked with a ledge, sir. But that rat fink (he thought he could get away with it) there came in and said he'd killed Mandy! He said he'd kill me too!"

"Why don't you start at the beginning." The judge said. "And we'll listen."

"Short stuff, say nothing about me." Amanda hissed in his ear, realizing that Mark might talk about her. "It's important! Say nothing of how I appeared! Just tell them that...er, Steven's words."

"All right." Mark told her.

"Very well." Said the judge. "When you are ready."

"I woke up past my bedtime." Mark began.

He recounted walking down to his sister's bedroom and finding it empty, with nothing having been disturbed. She was always home by eleven, and when he checked his mystery machine clock it was after midnight.

When he heard the key in the lock of the front door he ran to see why his sister was getting home so late. But it was Steven. He was surprised to see Mark but told him his sister was outside with a surprise for him, something for going to the movie they wanted to see.

"What movie was that?" the judge asked.

"The Lord of the Rings." Mark said solemnly. Tears filled his eyes. "We were going to go see it together! Just Mandy and me! I'd been looking forward to it and she got us tickets and everything!"

"Easy son. The defendant came into the house and said your sister was outside waiting. Then what happened?"

"Then his eyes got all big and scaredy-looking. He started screamin, "Bitch! I killed you! I killed you! Get the fuck away from me! I killed you and I'm going to kill your brother and their ain't nothin you can do about it!"

Mark trembled.

"He killed my sister. I can't believe...he killed my sister. I don't remember much, just them words rolling around my head. I heard poppa shout and start wrestling Steven and then Momma had picked me up offa the stairs and took me to her room and locked the door and got on the phone and called policemen." Mark said in a rush. "I told policeman this. Why'd I have to come back here if I told him? Don't he work for you? Like Poppa works for Mr. Grazier?"

"Yes and no." the Judge said slowly. "We'll cover this a little later on. When you get older you will understand."

"Does the prosecution have anything for the witness?"

The pinched man glanced at his notes and shook his head.

"No. It was very succinct and clear."

"Defense?"

Amanda held her breath, watching Steven closely.

The defense lawyer stood up and came over to Mark.

"Mr. Fox could you please tell the court what the lighting was like in the house at the time of the incident?"

Mark stared at him. "Incident?" he asked, tasting the word.

"Er, the event in question." the defense lawyer said.

"Oh! Well, it wasn't stormy, so there wasn't any lightning." he began.

"No, uh sorry. Not lightning, the light was it bright, dim, dark, shadowy?"

"Um. There was the light over the stairs." Mark said. "I turned it on when I heard the door. So it was pretty bright." he admitted.

"Could you see my client's face clearly then?"

"Yes." Mark answered worriedly, wondering what was going on. Amanda didn't know. She knew the lawyer was trying to cast doubt on Mark's story, but what was his goal?"

"Did the man in the doorway have on a hood or mask?"

"No?" Mark cocked his head, clearly confused. "Why would he do that? He knew the house, he'd been there before with Mandy?"

"To obscure his identity. It seems strange that a man entering a house with murder on his mind would do so without taking some pains to obscure his identity and make it difficult to find him later." the lawyer said.

"Maybe so he could-" Mark started

"Objection! Supposition on the part of the witness." the defense lawyer said over him.

"But you asked..." Mark said, surprised.

"Sustained. Mr. Fox. I know that this is weird for you." the judge said. "But please remember that while in the witness stand you are not to guess at any of your answers. It must be based on fact."

"But he said that he was confused. I was just tryin' to help him." Mark objected.

"I understand." the judge said. "But it is important for you to understand the difference between a court and casual conversation." the judge said.

"Easy short stuff. That guy's job is to make you look bad." Amanda whispered in his ear. "No! Don't look to me or respond. Just wait to see what happens."

I will keep an eye on him though, she said, disliking the defense lawyer. Her eyes narrowed as she watched his heavy, chunky frame strut about, speaking to the jury about how unlikely he thought a premeditated murderer would not take explicit care to make sure he wouldn't be recognized, especially when going against a house with multiple occupants.

"If this crime were to be committed in the heat of the moment, then yes it is conceivable that the individual may be not as completely prepared. But all the testimony and evidence stated before now have indicated that the murderer is an extremely careful individual that leaves nothing to chance. This does not seem to indicate my client, who acted rashly to be sure in entering a house without the company of his girlfriend whom he has already attested to parting ways earlier and intending to meet up at the house later, instead entered into a brawl with the homeowner over a misconceived notion of wrongdoing on the part of the client. A dreadful mistake that has led us here, due to the police desperately needing someone to pin the blame of the Elwood Ripper on."

"But he threatened to kill me!" Mark frowned.

"Is that true? You are upset already, as you testified to the fact that your sister wasn't home already. Can you be certain that you didn't imagine it after your father got into the altercation and in the midst of shouting, heard something garbled that you *thought* might be those words?"

Mark glared at him.

"He said those things before papa came down those steps!" Mark insisted.

"Allegedly."

"No! No ledges were there. Our house has none!" Mark said heatedly, "He said those things to me!"

"Son, please settle down." the judge interrupted. "Allegedly simply means that he is accused of saying or doing something without physical evidence such as tape recordings or video image of him doing it."

Amanda looked at her murderer, sitting calmly in his bench with a sympathetic expression on his face. Oh, he was good! He was trying to make Mark out to seem to be supporting their father in an unprovoked attack on his person! If only her glare would melt the smug bastard!

Mark tried to settle, but the defense attorney seemed determined to make Mark out to be a child fed lies by his parents in a misguided attempt to fix the blame for their daughter's death on Steve.

"What happened after the event?" the lawyer asked. "Did your mother take you to their room to hide while your father hit my client after he surrendered?"

"Objection!" the prosecution shouted.

"Sustained." the judge agreed. "Rephrase your questions, counsel."

"Were there any unusual remarks made by your mother when she took you to hide in the privacy of their rooms?" the lawyer asked.

What is he implying?

Amanda gaped openly at the lawyer. Surely he couldn't be indicating that their mother had brainwashed Mark!

"Momma called the cops." Mark said. "That what you mean?"

"No. I'm simply asking if she said anything to you."

Mark frowned, thinking.

"No. She was on the phone."

"She didn't tell you to say, maybe, to tell the police that Steve had attacked you?"

"She not have to tell me that, he did that!"

"And before the police arrive, did she tell you to be careful around them?"

"No. Why would she do that?"

"Why indeed?"

"Counselor, is there a point to this line of questioning?"

"There is, your honor. And I am coming to it very rapidly. I believe that if you will indulge me for a few more questions, it will become very obvious to this court that my client was framed for the murder of Amanda Fox...by her own father!"

Amanda blanked. She couldn't have heard him right, could she?

An uproar erupted in the back as Amanda's father shouted obscenities and tried to force his way past the bailiff who held him back with some difficulty. The defense lawyer glanced back at Steve and saw the slight smile and nod, and Amanda knew exactly who had suggested that line of attack against her family! Against Mark!

Mark!

She looked back and saw him gaping open mouthed at the lawyer, confusion and pain writ large on his face. He didn't have a clue what was happening! The lawyer was trying to use him and he knew he was being used and--

She hurled her hate at the smug priss. This was NOT going to fly! No one was going to do this to her family!

As the judge called order to the court the lights suddenly flickered. With a crash and bang all the blinds on the three big windows on the left side of the courtroom fell to the floor at the same moment making everyone jump in shock. People gasped and pointed towards the stand. Amanda's felt herself become more solid, more visible. Papers flew into the air as high as the ceiling before fluttering to the ground in a blizzard around the defense table, slashing Steve with a thousand sharp cuts. He cursed and batted away the paper but they continued to swirl around him.

Amanda felt as an avenging spirit. She thought of Ceecee and the other women, trapped and alone in that godforsaken spot in the forest, patiently waiting for who knew what time. Of Mark's hopeful face when he thought she was coming home, of his anguish when he learned she was dead.

A solid wall of air raced outward from her in a ring that hurled Steve back and pressed everyone else into their seats.

"Murderer!" the word crashed on the ears of every person. "Murderer!"

Steve stared in shock and confusion as she started to walk towards him. Mark told her later that she was only a shadow, a shade of mist with human-like features. His face locked onto hers, anger overriding everything.

"I didn't imagine it! You fucking bitch! You were there! You stopped me!"

The defense lawyer tried to reach his client but he was trapped. Struggling against invisible bonds uselessly.

"You can't do anything to me, bitch!" he snarled. "I own you!"

"No." Amanda laughed, taunting him. "You do not."

"We'll see! I killed you! I cut your throat! I'll banish you yet!" he snapped, his eyes full of hate.

All he heard was Amanda's laughter. The lights turned back on. Papers settled onto the courtroom floor. Invisible, she came to stand by Mark's shoulder, smugly looking at him who realized what she had done.

"That...sounded like a confession." the judge wheezed, clutching his heart as he stared at where she had been. "Defense, is there ought which you can say?"

"I...uh...request a recess to...discuss this matter with my client." the defense lawyer said.

"No...further questions for the witness."

Their father collected Mark from the stand and hand in hand they walked out of the courtroom, Amanda hovering protectively over them all.