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It Should Be a Crime

Do Not Disturb

Nothing but the Truth

The Best Defense

# THE BEST DEFENSE

*by*

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## PROLOGUE

**W**ould you like to take a break, Detective Keaton?”  
Skye breathed deeply and shook her head. A break would only prolong the agony. “No thank you, Your Honor. I’m fine.”

She wasn’t fine. She shook and fumbled through her testimony. She didn’t need a mirror to know she was probably also pale. The edges of the room loomed and faded by turns, and she struggled to be present. Trained to deliver tight, simple answers, instead she found herself rambling, her voice trailing off into whispers the jury strained to hear.

The last time Skye felt this nervous was the first time she testified in court. Fresh from the academy, she was called to testify in her first arrest. Her vocabulary consisted entirely of cop speak, and she’d become downright surly under cross-examination. Her lieutenant had pulled her aside and told her to spend a couple of her days off watching seasoned professionals on the witness stand. Skye had quickly learned to adopt a professional, engaging demeanor designed to win more convictions. Over the years, the prosecutors in the District Attorney’s office were relieved when they learned she was the lead detective on a case. She could sell even the sketchiest set of facts as grounds for a conviction.

Today was different. Skye was at the center of the case, but this time she was the complaining witness—the victim—not the lead detective. A year earlier, while investigating a case, Skye had

been badly beaten, almost killed, by a suspect. Today, that suspect, Theodore Burke, was on trial for the attempted murder.

Ironically, while investigating the murder of Theodore's sister, Skye had done everything she could to pin the death on someone else, the family handyman. When her former partner on the force, Parker Casey, pushed her, Skye had elected to do the right thing, and she came forward with evidence sure to exonerate him. What she hadn't realized was how much of a vested interest Theodore had in the outcome of the case. When the handyman was cleared, Theodore came unglued at the prospect of becoming a suspect himself. Furious at the detective who threatened his security, Theodore Burke, son of an elite Dallas family, broke into Skye's house, tied her up, and beat her. Skye shuddered to think about what he would have done next if Parker hadn't come looking for her and interrupted his crazy scheme. After an unsuccessful attempt to kill them both, Theodore Burke was arrested and charged with attempted murder. Today was Skye's day in court, as well as his.

She flashed back to the dozens of times she had encouraged crime victims to take the stand. *Just tell what happened. Focus on the jury. Don't look at the defendant. He can't hurt you anymore. Your courage will keep future victims safe from harm.* Platitudes and promises, all of which were designed to finish the job she'd started when she had arrested the bad guy. Had she ever cared about the victims as much as she cared about clearing the cases? Did anyone care about her now that she was the victim?

Theodore had sexually abused his sister, Camille, and drove her to commit suicide. Without Camille alive to testify about the abuse, there was no credible evidence to prosecute him for his crimes against her. Plus, Skye's meddling with the crime scene evidence would taint any prosecution for Camille's death. The assault on Skye was the only way the prosecutors would be able to bring Theodore to justice. With her credibility in the tank, would they have even bothered without Parker's testimony to corroborate her account? This trial had nothing to do with avenging her personal harm. She was a means to an end.

Skye stared across the room, breaking her own witness rule, daring Theodore Burke to look her in the eyes. His gaze was steady, mocking even. Skye summoned all her inner strength and fought back the memories of his mad visage and waving gun. She had both physical and emotional scars as evidence of his madness. She would always have them. She couldn't change what had happened, how she had handled it, or what she had done to cause it, but she could do everything in her power to make sure no one else suffered at the hands of Theodore Burke. Skye reached for a cup of water, took a quick drink, then a deep breath. Fortified, she answered every question thrown her way with the professional and engaging manner that had earned her commendations throughout the years.

After what seemed like hours, she finally heard the words, "I have no more questions for this witness." The judge released her and she found herself standing in the hall outside.

"Hey, Skye."

Skye looked up into Parker Casey's eyes. After all they had been through together, more downs than ups, Parker still cared about her. Skye was more embarrassed than appreciative.

"Hey, Casey. They tell you to stick around?"

"No, I'm done."

Skye knew Parker wanted to ask if she was okay, but didn't want to imply she wasn't by even asking. She should be a big girl and acknowledge how she felt, but she didn't want to break down. Not here in the hallway outside the courtroom.

"Want to grab a drink?" Parker asked.

Skye couldn't think of anything that sounded more appealing. A stiff shot of whiskey would be the perfect antidote to whatever she was feeling, but in her experience medicinal drinking was best done alone. "I need to get back to the station. I have some paperwork to clear out," she lied.

"Okay then." Parker looked like she wanted to say something else, but she just shook her head. "If you need anything, you know where to find me."

Skye nodded assent if only to make her old friend go away. Parker was a lawyer now, married to another lawyer. The two

women had a thriving practice representing folks like Theodore Burke. Skye had no intention of seeking Parker out for anything. All that had ever bound them together had been severed with the conclusion of this case. As Parker turned and walked away, Skye wondered how much more she could lose.

## CHAPTER ONE

I need your badge too.”  
Skye pulled the shield out of her pocket and placed it on the Deputy Chief’s desk alongside her department issued Glock 9mm. She didn’t care so much about the gun. She had plenty of those at home. Her detective shield was a different matter. The soft, worn leather holder encased the badge she’d worked hard to earn. Through the years, she kept it shiny. The irony of the shiny badge pinned over her tarnished reputation didn’t escape her. She wanted to crack a smart remark, even opened her mouth to do so, but words wouldn’t come. She stared at the badge. Shiny, defiant, and no longer hers.

“I’m sorry about this.”

Skye looked up. His apology was sincere. She could tell. Chief Henry had been her biggest champion on the force. Even after his own promotions meant he was no longer one above her in the chain of command, he took a special interest in her career. He’d been a second father, a mentor, a teacher. She assumed that was why he took responsibility for relieving her of her duties himself instead of assigning the task to her lieutenant.

She knew coming clean on the Burke case would result in disciplinary action. She had used the guise of justice as an excuse to break the rules numerous times in the past, but each time her actions and the motivations behind them were safely concealed behind the blue veil of her brethren. When she admitted her transgression

to a defense attorney, she crossed the line and became an outcast. Although the disposition of the disciplinary action against her had been put on hold while the Burke case was pending, she'd been given two options: resign and maintain her law enforcement certification, or put the department through a protracted termination proceeding and be stripped of all that she had worked to earn. It wasn't much of a choice.

She shrugged. The chief might be sorry, but it didn't change anything. His loss was short-lived. He would find another young cop to groom, someone to whom he could teach all his well-honed shortcuts. Someone who would crave his admiration and respect so much that he or she would shove the rules aside in favor of meting out real justice, quick and sure. Her replacement would be one of many waiting in the wings. She sincerely hoped that person would benefit more from breaking the rules than she had.

She shook his hand and left his office. The walk through the corridors was interminably long. The halls were lined with offices of the powerful elite in the Dallas Police Department. Chief Henry had chosen headquarters for their final meeting instead of her precinct, probably out of respect for her privacy. Here, there would be less of an audience of her peers to watch her dishonorable exit from a career distinguished by high profile arrests and solid convictions. What he probably hadn't counted on was that this particular walk of shame led to a sharp sense of loneliness. Neither her partner nor any of the other detectives from her squad were there to commiserate with her, pat her on the back, mourn her loss as one they could easily have experienced themselves. She was a pariah now. She'd broken the code, but the real transgression had been revealing her shortcomings to a defense attorney. The enemy. Having allowed the other side to glimpse a flaw in the mechanics of law enforcement, she'd never be welcome on the right side of law and order again.

Skye strode from the building, refusing to betray any embarrassment in her carriage. She walked through tall glass doors and crossed the street, counting the seconds until she could get on her bike and ride away.

“Skye! Hey, over here.”

She looked in the direction of the voice, spotting her partner standing on the side of the building she'd just left. *Former partner.* She stood in place while he walked toward her, huffing at the exertion.

"You okay?"

She nodded. She wasn't. She might never be, but she wasn't going to talk about it.

"Are you coming back to the station?"

His subtle way of asking if she'd been fired almost amused her. "No, Ed. I'm never coming back to the station."

"I'm sorry."

Everyone was sorry. *Well, everyone should stick it. I'm the one who should get to be sorry, but instead everyone wants to say it first and have me reply with platitudes: it's okay; I'll be fine; don't worry about me. Well, fuck that.*

Skye didn't speak.

"Do you want to grab a drink?"

She did. She wanted to hold on to a big, tall glass of whiskey with both hands. She wanted to feel the burn as it crossed her lips and coursed down her throat, searing a path to her gut. She craved the slow, building buzz of warmth simmering in her belly and rising up until her ears reddened and her thoughts floated out of her head. She'd get what she wanted, but she didn't need company.

"No, thanks."

"Okay."

Ed Peterson didn't move. He seemed rooted in place, as unable to move as he was to come up with something appropriate to say to the partner who had taught him the ropes. She may be leaving the force while he continued to ascend the ranks, but their roles would never be reversed. She walked toward her bike and signaled for him to follow. Once there, she reached into one of the saddlebags, shoved aside the contents she'd hastily packed when she'd emptied her locker earlier, and pulled out a revolver. Ed looked around wildly, obviously afraid they were being observed. She ignored his frenzy. She didn't care who saw them.

She didn't recall where she'd gotten this particular handgun. It was a thirty-eight, common enough, though not the preferred weapon on the street. As a throw down, the gun would serve its purpose. Reliable, easy to fire. Skye could count on it to do in a pinch. Now Ed could. She wondered if he ever would, but not enough to discuss it with him. Instead, she said, "It can't be traced. Save it for a special occasion." He would either understand or he wouldn't. He was no longer her responsibility. She shoved it toward him, grip first. He stared into her eyes as if to divine her intent, but Skye didn't give him anything. Finally, he took the gun from her grasp and placed it in his jacket. Wisely, he didn't offer thanks.

Skye unlocked and pulled her personal weapon, a Sig P228 9mm from the special compartment inside the saddlebag and slid it into her shoulder holster, where her duty Glock had been. She'd always preferred the Sig, but the missing Glock left a big hole. The gun, the badge, the rank, the camaraderie—the list of things now lost to her was long, and the emptiness ran deep. Filling the space was an insurmountable task. She'd never shied away from the impossible before, but now...Now, all she wanted was a drink, a strong, deep glass of forgetting to wash away her memories and aspirations.

She threw her leg over the seat and started the Harley's engine. Ed shouted over the noise. "See you around?"

Skye didn't bother shouting her response. "I doubt it."



Her first stop after leaving police headquarters was the nearest liquor store. She sat in the parking lot and contemplated how many bottles would fit in the bags on her bike alongside all the property she'd cleared out of her locker at the station. Not enough.

She considered her options and ruled out a stop at home to make room for a liquor run. Instead, she roared out of the lot and steered her bike in the direction of Oak Lawn. She may not want company, but strangers didn't count. A short trip later, she parked in one of the several empty spots in front of Sue Ellen's. It was just

after five o'clock. She stowed her helmet and shook out her shoulder length hair.

As she walked toward the bar, she noticed a few groups of women on the patio. Outdoor heaters took the edge off the crisp fall evening. It was the perfect weather for sitting outside. As Skye unzipped her jacket she remembered two things: she was packing, and she wasn't allowed to take her gun into a bar anymore. Like most law enforcement officers, Skye had a concealed handgun license. Losing her job didn't take that away from her, but only cops with CHLs were allowed to carry just about anywhere. For regular citizens, like she was now, there were limits. Liquor stores and bars, the two places she'd wanted to be tonight, were both on the list of forbidden places. Resigned to her new status, she strode back to her bike and subtly placed her weapon in the locked compartment inside the saddlebag.

Moments later, she was seated at the downstairs bar with a cold mug of beer and a shot of Bushmills. Skye wasn't alone, but a lesbian bar seemed the safest place to be, since the likelihood she'd encounter any of her police brethren was slim. She'd always taken special care not to let her orientation become an issue on the job, and it was a relief to sit in a bar with women holding hands, kissing, and dancing in each other's arms, without the slightest worry she might be seen.

The androgynous bartender deftly poured Skye's drinks, then offered to assist her with anything else she needed. Skye didn't respond to the remark, but filed it away for future use. Right now, all she cared about was the dulling promise of the alcohol in front of her. She drank swiftly to fulfill her end of the bargain.



"I can't possibly dance after that ten course food festival you and Nick whipped up. It's my birthday. Just let me sit on this nice barstool and watch you lovebirds sway to the music. That's my wish." Aimee Howard slid into the nearest seat and dared her friends to drag her away. This was the first dateless birthday party she could remember, but the choice had been hers.

“Fine, but let me at least get you a drink.” Mackenzie Lewis, Aimee’s best friend, stood waiting for her order. Aimee pushed her playfully away. “You’ve been waiting on me all night.” Aimee called out to Mackenzie’s lover, “Dr. Wagner! Oh, Dr. Wagner!”

Jordan Wagner strode over to Aimee’s perch and inclined her head. “Yes, Birthday Mistress?”

“A Cosmo for me and one of whatever my friend slash personal chef here is having. Oh, and do get something for yourself.”

Aimee’s tone was teasing. She, Mac, and Jordan had been friends since college when, while attending UT in Austin, they all discovered they had several things in common including the fact they were all from Dallas, and they were all lesbians. They became fast friends and, recently, Jordan and Mac had become lovers.

But Aimee was still holding out for the love of her life. She’d engaged in what her friends had nicknamed serial monogamy for years. Her friends teased that she kept a moving company on retainer to escort the flavor of the month into and out of her home. Aimee protested, but she had to admit she was generous at the onset and often displeased with the end result. Her wealth and status was a definite handicap when it came to finding a mate who loved her more than the trappings that accompanied her devotion. After years of perpetually picking the wrong women, she seemed doomed to let the swell of first date lust sweep away any trace of skepticism.

Just last week, Aimee had turned out the latest woman allowed to grace her home after she learned the fiend was gathering material for a book about the adult lives of children of Dallas socialites. Aimee thought the idea behind the book was thoroughly unengaging and unlikely to be picked up for publication, but Aimee wasn’t keen on the idea of her lover going through her mail and trash looking for tidbits that might be interesting to her readers. She took swift action and hired movers to send the woman packing.

Following this latest relationship crumble, her circle of friends were determined she wasn’t going to spend her birthday alone, and they had rallied to show her a great time. Another couple in the group, Meaghan and Haley, were her designated drivers. After they picked her up at her home in Highland Park, the evening started

at MacKenzie's East Dallas restaurant, the Lakeside Grill, with a tasting menu personally prepared by Mac's chef, Nick Walters. After dinner, Jordan insisted they adjourn to Sue Ellen's to dance off dinner. Aimee dreaded this part of the evening. Dancing usually meant pairing off. Even though it was her big night, she was the fifth wheel, despite the obvious efforts of the other two couples to include her in her own celebration.

Jordan placed her Cosmo on the bar alongside another for Mac. She grabbed Mac and Aimee and pulled them both toward the dance floor. "Remember in college? The three of us used to dance together all the time. Come on, let's show 'em what we got." Jordan's magnetism was difficult to resist. Aimee reached for her drink, toasted the air, and drank half of it down. *What the hell. It's my birthday.*



Skye lost count of how many drinks she'd consumed. At some point she stopped ordering the beer back, and concentrated on whiskey as her drug of choice. Her dealer, the bartender, seemed happy to keep them coming. Each new glass was delivered with an increasingly heavy side dose of attention, a brush against her hand, a whispered comment, a knowing smile. Skye wasn't sure whether the bartender was motivated by the prospect of dollars in the tip jar or a chance to get in her pants, and she didn't care. In her current state, Skye was likely to give her anything she wanted. Sex would be just another drug to soothe her pain.

It must be late, she thought. The bar was crowded and most of the women were well on the way to inebriation. Skye noticed a good-looking group of women on her left. She wasn't sure how long they had been there, but it was obvious they all knew each other well. They were older than many of the patrons, and they carried the look of professional success in their classy wardrobes. A sporty blonde was pressed up against a tall, dashing redhead. A couple. Another couple, nursing Perrier, watched them indulgently as if they had been the matchmakers.

The last woman in the group was the one who caught Skye's attention, a voluptuous blonde. Her hair was perfectly coiffed and framed her face in well-tamed waves. Despite her strong buzz, Skye could tell her lapis blue eyes held just a hint of sadness behind the twinkle she put on for the crowd. Her body was full-figure perfect, every curve rounded out her designer dress with promises of pleasure beneath, except for the neckline, which did more than promise. Low-cut lines displayed perfect cleavage, and for a brief moment, Skye imagined herself running her tongue down the side of one breast and back up the other as she explored the valleys of this woman's offering. She flicked a glance at the blonde's hands, perfectly manicured French nails. Her tiny feet were encased in tall pumps, with slight openings for her painted toes to peep through. Her makeup was flawless, and her diamond jewelry shone bright. Everything about her spoke expensive, high-class socialite. She was the antithesis to Skye's rough, windblown look.

Skye shrugged. She had no business lusting after picture-perfect divas. Raised with five brothers, she was pure tomboy. While she might appreciate girly beauty from a distance, she didn't understand it. Why would anyone go to all the trouble of layering over the attributes they were born with? This woman's body spoke volumes about her natural beauty. Skye was willing to bet she was even more gorgeous when the makeup, hair products, and jewels were stripped away.

As if she could hear Skye's thoughts, the blonde turned away from her friends and looked in Skye's direction. Skye maintained her focus until the blonde locked eyes with her. She had no idea what her own expression spoke, but the blonde's look was curious, her lips turned up in a playful smile. Still, something lurked beneath the smile. A hint of loneliness?

Skye knew that feeling, even pretended she liked it. Was the blonde pretending too? Skye wasn't fooled by the entourage. Sometimes a crowd only accentuated the isolation. She stared at the blonde, unable, unwilling to break the connection.

She considered going to her, asking her to dance, but after countless drinks, she wasn't sure she could even walk. She resigned

herself to merely returning the smile, an invitation for the woman to approach her instead. Would she? The events of the day had shattered Skye's confidence more than she cared to admit. Her pals on the force called her cocky, but she knew the other not as nice words they used behind her back.

Maybe the combination of sex and alcohol was the perfect plan to take the edge off. She shrugged away the foreboding sense this encounter would lead to more. The blonde started toward her, and Skye broke their connection for a moment to take a drink. She looked back in time to see her plan unravel in a sequence of brief scenes. The tall redhead tapped the blonde on the shoulder. The blonde stopped moving and looked back. The redhead introduced her to a beautiful dark-haired woman who, like the blonde, sported a cocktail dress and all the appropriate accessories. The women shook hands. Skye could imagine the conversation, led by the redhead. *Meet this nice woman. She's like you. Much better for you than the rogue across the room. No need for you to slum it with her, when you can go out with someone in your same social class.*

The connection broken, Skye swiveled back to her drink. As she pulled the whiskey toward her, the bartender tapped the glass. "Another Bushmills, or are you ready to call it a night? My shift's over now." Her penetrating stare conveyed an invitation.

Skye couldn't help herself. She shot a look at the curvy blonde across the room before turning her attention back to the bartender. She read the full extent of the offer in her eyes. Drink or sex? The choice was hers. She was tired of making choices. Justice or truth? Quit or be fired? Be a cop or be...? She drained the last drops from the glass in front of her and pushed it toward the bartender.

"Why don't you choose for me?"



"Damn, where is she?" Aimee didn't try to hide her frustration. *It's my birthday, after all.* She had finally summoned up the courage to approach the hot blonde at the bar, when Jordan interrupted to introduce her to one of her friends. Cynthia Hanley had a cause

to pitch and was hopeful Aimee might toss some of the famous Howard fortune her way. Jordan had already contributed to the cause and was helping Cynthia line up additional donors. Aimee listened politely for a couple minutes before encouraging Cynthia to contact her office and schedule an appointment to make a full presentation. She'd barely heard a word she said. Instead, she'd been focused on scouting out the striking blonde at the bar. She looked around but didn't see her anywhere.

Mac waved a hand in front of her face, breaking her intense visual search. "Who are you looking for?"

"I saw this woman at the bar."

"And?"

"I'm not sure. I think she was asking me to dance or something."

"You talked to her?" Mac placed a hand on Aimee's forehead and lifted her Cosmo from her hand. "Honey, are you feeling okay? You've been with us all night. I think I would've noticed if a woman asked you to dance."

"It was more of a silent invitation. I could feel the request from across the room." Aimee knew she sounded crazy the minute the words tumbled out, but she couldn't deny the magnetic pull she'd felt when the woman had smiled her way. Now she felt a vacuum. She was certain the woman was no longer in the bar.

Mac continued to seek out the stranger. "What did she look like?"

"Long, windblown blond hair, lean body, but muscular. Dressed in worn jeans, tight black T-shirt, black leather boots." Aimee surveyed Mac's appearance. "Actually, she was an edgy version of you."

"Wow. You sure got a lot of detail from across the room."

"There was a connection. I can't explain it, but the air between us crackled." She laughed. "I know you probably think I'm crazy. She was totally not my usual type, but she was totally hot. And now she's gone. I can feel it."

Mac slid an arm around her waist. "I'm sorry." Then, as if Aimee's earlier remark had just penetrated, she asked, "What do you mean, totally not your type?"

Aimee smiled. “Wondered when you were going to snap. Face it, Mackenzie, you athletic babes are too much for a sedate gal like me to handle. I can guarantee she hits the gym first thing every day. I don’t need some chick who’s going to wake me up in the morning for anything other than to serve me breakfast in bed.”

“Breakfast?”

Aimee shared a wicked grin with her. “Okay, well, I would consider waking up early for something besides breakfast. Maybe if we wait here until then, she’ll come back.”