

When I was 27, I met my partner, my other half, my soulmate. When I was 37, he was murdered. I kissed David goodbye that June morning and we got into our cars. I backed out first and was onto the street when his exploded, sending pieces of car and tree and David all over the yard, the street and my windshield. The police investigated, of course, but after months and months of running down leads, they came up with nothing. And they stopped coming around except for Lieutenant Drake. He continued to drop by every few weeks. As for me, life stopped at 7:14 that morning. I was still breathing, still had a heartbeat, but there was no longer any spark left. For the next two years I went to work, functioned, almost adequately, and came home. Friends surrounded me at first, but I didn't respond and eventually they left me alone.

David was an ADA - Assistant District Attorney for the city of Phoenix. I worked at a research lab - head of the microbiology department. We had actually enjoyed talking about our very different work and experiences, which is why I knew a bit about the cases he had been handling. And I had my suspicions. So when the cops came up empty, I hired a private investigative firm to probe a lot deeper than the police could - at least legally. And they found evidence suggestive of involvement by Henry Hoskins, the Secretary of State for Arizona.

I had the agency turn over everything to Lt. Drake and then I waited. It seemed to me that the only thing I had to live for was getting justice for my husband's murder. I watched from the sidelines as Andrew Drake did what he could to make a case against Hoskins. But he was trying to fight against a very powerful man.

The last time Andrew came over, his face was haggard, showing lines that hadn't been there two years previously. When I answered the door, I could see the anger and defeat in his dark

blue eyes. This had become a personal battle for him as well. We sat in the plush green chairs I had added to the room David had used as an office. Floor to ceiling bookcases alternated with floor to ceiling windows, creating a comfortable, inviting room full of light.

"This is the end, Katherine." He stared at the creamer swirling in his coffee. "I've been blocked at every step. And now the Mayor and the Commissioner of Police have formally ordered me to drop the case." He looked up, his eyes infinitely sad. "I am so sorry." And his gaze returned to his coffee as he sat slumped, shoulders hunched under the burden of his assumed guilt.

"It's not your fault, Andy. You shouldn't feel bad after all the work you've done to push this investigation. I'll always be grateful to you." I smiled warmly, not wanting him to feel responsible for the failure, but knowing that was a forlorn hope. Andy Drake was the kind of man who takes things personally.

About a month later I opened my Sunday morning paper to see Hoskins' picture on the front page. He had died, apparently of food poisoning according to the story. My teeth bared in a smile that had nothing to do with friendliness. I started to laugh. *May he burn in Hell.*

The newspaper indicated that he had gotten ill after coming home from a banquet on Tuesday night, developing nausea and vomiting. Over the next three days he continued to have symptoms but refused to seek medical attention. On Friday night he went to bed, telling his staff not to disturb him. They found him on the floor in the morning.

I sat with my coffee staring out the window at the palm fronds blowing in the breeze for a long time that morning, musing on life and death and justice. I couldn't tell whether I was thrilled that the murderer had gone to his reward or whether I was saddened that I could no longer reach him. And it brought up a question I had been avoiding. When was I going to start living again? I decided that I wasn't ready to answer that one yet. I had been so wrapped up in the

need for justice - or was it revenge? - for so long that I wasn't sure I could live again. But my soul felt lightened and I went to work with more energy and enthusiasm than I had managed for a long time.

I was still pondering that when Andrew Drake showed up at my door one afternoon a couple of weeks later. As I invited him in, I looked at him a bit strangely. I guess he noticed because he said "I was in the neighborhood and decided to stop by." A pause. "To see how you were doing." I continued to stare. "You know. Since Hoskins' death." Another pause. "Hey, I just wanted to see if you'd been out to piss on his grave."

In spite of myself I started to laugh. And I continued laughing and then I was still laughing, but also crying and then sobbing, great wracking sobs that tried to tear my chest apart. And Andy had his arms around me and we were sitting on the couch. After what seemed an eternity, I calmed down. He had been holding me tight and rocking me, murmuring soft words to me. Now I pulled back a little and stared in horror at his suit and shirt, which was wet with tears and snot and smeared with mascara.

"Oh my God! Your suit." My voice was nasal and whiny since my nose was totally blocked. He glanced down and laughed. "I guess it does need a cleaning, doesn't it?"

"I'm so sorry." I grabbed some paper towels from the kitchen and started wiping ineffectually at the mess. He took the paper towels from my hand and wiped my eyes with them. I snatched them away from him and blew my nose noisily.

He smiled. "Actually the reason I stopped by was to ask you if you'd care to have dinner with me tonight." And he took one of the snotty towels and began rubbing at his suit with utmost concentration.

I stared at him astonished. This was not something I would have predicted. And yet, when I

thought about it, I realized that my heart had given a leap of joy when I saw him at the door. He glanced up while I was still ruminating. "It's ok if you're not interested. I'll just be going now." And he stood up.

"No! No!" I jumped up. "I mean yes! I mean I'd love to have dinner with you tonight."

"Are you sure? You seemed a little hesitant."

"You startled me. Oh my God, I must look hideous!" And I turned and ran into the bathroom. I heard him laughing behind me.

By the week before Christmas that year, I realized that I was in love with Andy. Somehow it felt right. I didn't feel like I was betraying David. It was more like I had recovered from a long illness. I was looking forward to the holidays with an enthusiasm I hadn't felt since David's death. I bought a real tree and spending hours decorating it. It was so beautiful. Andy would be with me Christmas Eve all through Christmas Day. And I had bought myself a present as well. She was whining behind the gate in the kitchen, but I didn't want her 'helping' me decorate. I went back in the hall to talk to her and that's what saved my life. The living room window exploded as a hail of bullets tore through it. I dived over Tori's gate and grabbed her, scuttling on my hands and knees to the back door. Another crash and then the front of the house blew off in an explosion that probably shook the ground in Las Vegas.

Holding tight to my puppy, I slipped out into the back yard and into the shrubs alongside the house. Tori was terrified and peed all over me. That was ok because I felt the same way. And that's the way Andy found us ten minutes later, cold, wet and covered with mud and dog pee. I saw his face when he spotted us, standing by the fire truck shivering. The utter relief and joy I saw put an end to any questions I might have had about him. Then I saw that face turn to stone when he looked at my house and I suddenly realized that I had fallen in love with a very

dangerous man.

Tori and I moved into Andy's house then. And I bought another tree and decorations. On Christmas Eve we took Tori and drove out into the Superstition Mountains. We had a midnight picnic under the stars after Tori had had a run. She went to sleep in the car and I was leaning back against Andy staring up at the stars when we heard gravel crunching nearby as someone approached. Andy moved quickly, racing to the car. I heard the door open and the inside light came on. Andy was kneeling down, reaching inside. Then the sound of gunfire exploded the silence of the desert night. Andy fell as I was running to him.

He lay facedown with a spreading red stain on the back of his jacket, his gun by his side. I heard him moan. Grabbing the gun, I slammed the door shut to keep Tori inside, putting out the light and knelt by Andy waiting for any noise to tell me where the attacker was.

The night was deadly silent except for Tori's whining. Andy tried to push up to a sitting position, but I leaned on him. "Stay down!" I hissed.

Crunch. Crunch. Whoever he was, he was moving again. Slowly he approached the front of the car, while we crouched on the passenger side. There was no moon that night, but the stars were radiant in their billions and the light was sufficient to show a dark shape moving closer. I flipped the safety off and, praying that there was a round in the chamber, carefully aimed at the blackness within the night. When he moved again, I fired and heard him cry out.

But the injury didn't stop him and suddenly he was around the car and grabbing for me. I fired again, but the shot went wild and he yanked me up, throwing me on the hood. The gun fell to the ground.

"Bitch!" he snarled. "You miserable fucking bitch! You did it, didn't you? You killed him!" and

he struck me across the face with his gun. The pain was incredible, unbearable and I fell sideways onto the ground, stunned. The man leaned forward, looking me in the eyes and raised his revolver.

"You killed my father. Bitch!" His lips parted in a travesty of a smile and he aimed at my face. I raised an arm in a futile attempt at self-protection. And a gunshot split the silence. The man's head exploded in a dark spray and he fell on top of me, spattering me with blood and brains. Desperately I pushed and shoved the corpse off of me. Andy had collapsed again after firing the shot that saved my life. I dragged him into the car and took off like all the demons of Hell were after me. I was not going to lose another man. I called 911 and the ambulance met me halfway back to town.

Andy was whisked away on a gurney in the ER and I was hustled off to a room. Nurses began cleaning up my face, ignoring my pleas to see Andy. Xrays were negative and the doctor sutured the long laceration across my cheek. Then I got to sit and wait for what seemed like eternity, surrounded by most of Andy's colleagues. They kept me sane.

Finally a surgeon came out, face inscrutable. I jumped to my feet, but he reached out and took my arms. "He's going to be okay." he said.

Andy came home a week later. I had gone to visit him daily, but it was so good to get him home. He slept a lot the first couple of days. But on the third day he was out in the living room watching me take down the Christmas decorations. I felt his eyes boring into my back and turned to face him.

"What is it, Andy?"

"Hoskins' son said you killed his father. I was just wondering why he would say that." His face was shuttered.

I went and sat beside him. "Are you sure you really want to know?"

His eyes went dark and cold, the eyes of a cop. And he sighed. "The autopsy revealed that Hoskins died of botulism. I need to know, Katherine."

So I told him. I told him about preparing the *Clostridium botulinum* cultures at work in my own little lab for special projects. I told him about the laborious task of filtering the toxin in sufficient concentration, how I plated the toxin onto the gummed flap of an envelope, how I addressed the envelope and put a stamp on it, placing it in another envelope with a letter and two photographs. Hoskins didn't care about David's murder. That investigation was dead. Why should he care? But he did care about his wife finding out about his affair with a newspaper reporter. So he destroyed the photographs and put the cash in the envelope and licked the gummed flap and sent it on its way, undoubtedly setting his goons on my trail. I had worn a wig and carried a cane when I went to the Post Office box I had rented under an assumed name. I destroyed the envelope and cleaned up the lab.

Andy was stretched out on the couch. When I finished, he lay his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. I sat very still, waiting. I waited a very long time for his decision. Finally he looked at me. "I'm a cop. What in Hell am I supposed to do now?"

I looked at my shoes, refusing to meet his gaze. "I guess it depends on how you define justice." There was silence except for Tori's snores. I could hear the clock ticking on the mantle. An hour passed. He just lay there with his eyes closed. I was starting to think he was asleep when he began to laugh. I stared at him, unsure, unable to believe, but he gathered me into his arms, with a moderate amount of groaning and wincing and he kissed me. And all the ghosts were banished.

