

Chapter 1

Katie Brandt wasn't just any pretty woman. She was that woman one dreamed about. The one with long dark hair and flashing brown eyes that danced when a smile spread across her full red lips. She was that woman men and women would kill for . . . and die for. She had it all: beauty, wealth, intelligence, and charisma. She even had something she didn't know about—a stalker.

Dr. Shaylor Copeland was the first to reach the woman as she stumbled into the emergency room. She collapsed into Shaylor's arms. Trained personnel moved efficiently to stop the bleeding from Katie's nose and stitch up the gashes across her torso and back.

No one noticed the figure lurking in the waiting room. A black hoodie hid the stranger's features.

##

Shaylor's shift ended at two in the morning. She walked to the cafeteria for coffee. Maybe a cup of the strong liquid would keep her awake until she reached home. She carried the coffee with her as she took one last look at Katie Brandt.

To Shaylor's surprise Katie was sitting up, her head resting on a stack of pillows. Her penetrating eyes were surveying her room.

"You're awake." Shaylor smiled as she approached the woman.

"And alive," Katie scoffed.

"Yes. What happened?" Shaylor pulled a chair to her bedside.

“You are . . .?” Dark, Belizean brows punctuated the question.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Shaylor blushed slightly. “I’m Dr. Shaylor Copeland. Everyone calls me Dr. Shay.”

A twisted smile played on the woman’s full lips as she scrutinized Shaylor. “I’ll call you Shay.”

“Call me whatever you like.” Shay chuckled. “Can you tell me what happened to you?”

“Um, yes. My husband tried to kill me.”

Something turned over in Shay’s stomach at the thought of Katie being the victim of domestic violence.

“The police will be here in the morning to take a statement,” Shay informed her. “You need to file charges against him.”

“It won’t do any good. Don’t you know who my husband is?” Katie scowled.

Shay shook her head.

“He’s Dr. David Brandt, your chief of staff.” Katie seemed to shrink into herself.

“Dr. Brandt isn’t married,” Shay pointed out. “I know because I date him.”

“Yes, you and every other female in this hospital. If you’d be kind enough to leave, I’d like to rest.”

Shay stood and looked down at the beauty lying back against the pillows. “Why would David try to kill you?”

“I asked him for a divorce,” Katie sighed.

Returning to the doctor’s lounge, Shay tried to sort out Katie Brandt’s accusation. Dr. David Brandt was a highly respected physician and one of the kindest men Shay had ever encountered. She had been with St. Peter’s Hospital for three years, and no one had ever mentioned that David was married. Shay wondered if the woman was delusional. Her wounds were certainly real, but Shay couldn’t see David harming anyone.

Dr. David Brandt walked through his palatial home, searching for his wife. It took him fifteen minutes to look in all the rooms and outside. Katie was gone. He wondered where she was, how she'd gotten out of the house.

He returned to the den and called the police. "Yes, this is Dr. David Brandt. I need to file a missing person's report."

David waited patiently as he was transferred to the right person. After several minutes, a female spoke into the phone.

"Dr. Brandt, this is Detective Beverly Wyatt. How may I help you?"

"Beverly, thank heaven I got you. My wife is gone again. I have no idea where she is."

"Don't worry, Dr. Brandt. I'll do a quick check of the hospitals and jails. I'll get back with you."

A call rang in before David could put down his phone. He smiled when Shay Copeland's face appeared. "Hello, darling," he cooed.

"Dr. Brandt, we have a patient you must see. Can you come to the hospital right now?"

Shay's doctor-voice told David to move quickly. "I'll be right there."

##

Shay was tired but she didn't intend to leave without talking to David. They had been dating for over a year and had started discussing marriage—something that was out of the picture if he was married.

"Honey, what's going on?" David said as he burst through the emergency room doors. "How serious is it?"

Shay motioned for him to follow her to the elevators. "I have a patient I desperately need you to examine," she informed him.

Shay studied David as the elevator glided to the sixth floor. He was extremely handsome. His six-foot frame was slender and muscular like a cyclist. His thick, black hair had a hint of silver at the temples. He was every woman's dream.

The ding of the elevator interrupted her reverie. “She’s in room 601,” Shay said, leading the way to the patient’s room.

Katie was sleeping on her back. The soft sweetness of the woman’s face made Shay’s breath catch.

David looked at Katie. His eyes darted between Katie and Shay. “Why is she here?”

“Someone brutalized her.” Shay watched David’s face closely as a darkness spread across it.

“Is she okay? What happened?” he whispered.

“Let’s go to the doctors’ lounge. We can talk over coffee.” Shay led the way from the room.

##

They carried their coffee to a table in the corner of the lounge. Shay wasn’t certain where to start. David hadn’t indicated that he knew Katie, and his concern for her as a patient seemed sincere.

“Do you know her?” Shay finally asked.

David stirred cream into his coffee. “She’s my wife,” he mumbled.

“That seems like pertinent information one should know while dating.” Shay scowled. “I mean, what future can one have with a married man? And where has she been? No one seems to know you’re married.”

“They know.” David avoided looking into her eyes. “They just don’t talk about her.”

“Why not?”

“Katie has some . . . um . . . mental problems,” David said, sighing. “She’s been in an institution.”

“So, you were just going to . . . what? Marry me and forget about her?”

“No, of course not.” David inhaled deeply. “I was trying to tell you. It’s . . . it’s just not easy.”

“She said you tried to kill her!”

“What? No!” David gasped. “I’d never do that.”

“David, she’s been beaten and stabbed. How did this happen to her? Is she in your care?”

“She was, but she ran away. I filed a missing person’s report. Check for yourself. Detective Beverly Wyatt is handling the search for her.”

“You should call her and let her know you’ve found your wife.”

David nodded and called Beverly. Shay watched his face as he spoke with the detective. “Yes, of course . . . No, I’ll be here.

“She’s on her way,” he muttered. His misery was obvious in his eyes. “Katie said I tried to kill her?”

“Did you rape her?” Shay made a wild guess.

“I’d never force myself on her.” David’s loud declaration caused the few people in the lounge to look their way. “Shay, this isn’t the best place to discuss this. Can we talk tomorrow after we’ve both gotten some sleep?”

“That’s probably a good idea.” Shay stood. “I’ll leave you to wait for Detective Wyatt.”

##

Shay punched the elevator button and scuffed the toe of her shoe on the polished floor as she waited for the door to open. Maudine Trent was on duty tonight, and Shay intended to find her.

“Maudine, can you spare me a few minutes?” Shay leaned over the counter of the nurses’ station.

“Anything for you, Sweet Cheeks,” Maudine said, flashing a toothy grin.

“I need a rape kit processed on Katie Brandt in 601.”

Maudine sobered. “It may be too late, hon, but I’ll do the best I can. You mind officiating?”

“Not at all,” Shay replied. “I know rape kits are useless after seventy-two hours, but she was admitted thirty-six hours ago, so it will hold up in court.”

Maudine gathered her kit and a couple of sheets. “Why wasn’t this done when she came in?”

“No one suspected rape, and she was in no condition to report it.”

“But you suspect it?” Maudine furrowed her brow. “Why?”

Shay shrugged. “Just a gut feeling.”

“Yeah, well, your gut feelings have saved lives on more than one occasion. You explain to her what’s about to happen, and call me when she’s ready.”

Shay slipped into Katie’s room and stood for a few seconds, watching the beautiful woman sleep. *How could anyone hurt a woman like that?* she thought.

Katie began to tremble violently and cry out. Shay didn’t touch her but spoke to her in soothing tones.

Katie’s eyes opened wide, like those of a trapped animal, and darted around the room. “Please, please don’t,” she cried.

“Mrs. Brandt, it’s me, Dr. Shay.” Shay turned on the light at the head of the bed so Katie could see her face.

It took the patient several minutes to calm down and recognize her surroundings.

“Shay.” A twisted smile worked its way across sensuous lips. “What time is it?”

“Almost morning,” Shay answered.

“Have you been home?”

“No, I’ve been watching over you.” Shay wanted to put her patient’s mind at ease. “I need to ask a favor.”

“Okay,” Katie cautiously agreed.

“I’d like to have the nurse do a rape kit for you.”

Tears ran down Katie’s face. “I didn’t say I was raped.”

“I know,” Shay whispered. “But we need to do this. It’s important.”

“Alright,” Katie sighed. “I couldn’t be any more humiliated than I already am.”

“I’m going to bring in the nurse now,” Shay informed her.

“Could you sit up here by my bed and talk to me during this ordeal?” Katie pleaded.

“Of course.” Shay pulled a chair to the head of the hospital bed and took Katie’s hand in hers. “Feel free to crush my hand if you need to,” she teased, pushing the nurse’s call button.

Katie nodded and squeezed her eyes tightly shut, trying to stop the tears.

##

Maudine went about her task, softly humming as she draped a sheet over her patient. “I’ll be taking photos to document trauma,” she explained. “Then I’ll swab your body for any DNA evidence.”

Two hours later, Maudine described the final phase of the exam. “I need to be more invasive. This will be uncomfortable and take a while.”

Katie gripped Shay’s hand and kept her eyes tightly closed. She made mewling sounds when Maudine did the speculum examine, taking swab samples and securing them for DNA testing.

“Do I need to do an anal exam?” Maudine glanced at Shay.

“Please, no,” Katie pleaded. “It’s not necessary.”

“I think you’ve done your usual thorough exam.” Shay tried to hide her exhaustion as she signed off on the many plastic bags containing samples Maudine had collected.

“Would you personally make certain Detective Wyatt gets these when she arrives?”

“Sure,” Maudine said. She placed her work from the last three hours inside a box, sealed it, then signed and dated it.

Shay followed Maudine into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her. “Maudine, was she raped?”

“I’m certain she was,” Maudine answered. “There is a lot of bruising and trauma that is consistent with rape.”

After Maudine left, Shay returned to stand at Katie’s beside. “Are you going to be alright?”

“Dr. Shay, I haven’t been alright for a very long time,” Katie murmured.

“We’ll take care of you,” Shay promised, patting her patient’s arm.

Katie clutched Shay’s hand. “Please don’t leave me alone.”

“I won’t,” Shay said.