

Sample Chapters: One For The Money – Murder in the Metroplex by Ryan Hale

**One – An introduction to Blake Franklin**

**Two – Meet the Franklin team's humble beginnings**

**Nine – A series of revelations**

**Sixteen – The plot cloths – Blake is in it deep now**

## **One      One Time Too Many**

It was hot in Fort Worth, Texas, in August. The temperature hadn't hit below one hundred degrees since late June. Some folks might even say it was too hot. But the alternative would be to live up north in one of those godforsaken cities with all the snow, wind chills, and crime. *The criminal activity might be okay* because it would keep a Detective Second Class busy, and that's what he would be as soon as he aced the exam. What a strange way to think. It must be the building anxiety.

Blake Franklin, son of Fort Worth Police Chief Kent Franklin, was just an hour from sitting down with the detective's examination for the third time. Passing would move him from patrol to the Detectives Bureau. This was a stepping stone necessary to move up into administration, like his father had. After that, who knows, maybe he would jump into politics. He had plenty of time to plan his next steps, but this one was "in the bag."

Blake, a thirty-six-year-old with nine years in patrol and four years in the Coast Guard after college, was behind on his life goals by about five years, so the day was exhilarating. One hundred six degrees outside, but no sweat on the exam. He had the knowledge and experience to pass it with flying colors. His friends asked him questions about interviewing techniques designed to elicit confessions, all the nuances of case law about police work, and how to investigate crimes so that arrests could be made and felons could be prosecuted.

Blake knew all the answers and was more ready than ever. He couldn't figure out how he bombed the first two attempts, but to his embarrassment and amazement, he had. If only he had the actual tests to go over, he could see where he messed up, but department policy required the tests be electronically shredded.

Blake dressed in lightweight khaki pants, a sports coat, and a tie and even polished his brown loafers to look like a Detective. He checked himself in the mirror before heading out, and other than the growing bald spot on the crown of his head, he felt he looked decently ready for prime time. The important thing for Blake now was to look like a Detective and think like one.

He brought a uniform to change into after taking the test and hung it from a plastic hook in the back of his crew cab. Then, he climbed into his Ford pickup truck to drive from Euless to the testing center in downtown Fort Worth. The metal tip of the seatbelt was as hot as a branding iron, and it was only eleven. Blake pressed play on his MP3 player so George Strait would serenade his twenty-minute drive.

He showed his badge at the parking garage and found a spot on the top deck where he wouldn't have to repeatedly pull in, back up, pull in, back up, and back up to park straight. He was still getting used to the long bed of his new truck. His ex-girlfriend, Mindy, was the reason he changed from a Honda Civic to a truck like any true Texan would. Then she dumped him before he had time to master parking the damned thing.

Blake exited the elevator on the fifth floor and made his way down a long hallway to the testing center. He made the trip too many times already, and this would be the last.

"Morning, Ms. Leach," Blake said cheerfully. Tristan Leach, a training specialist in charge of implementation, was sitting at her desk reading whatever was on her computer screen with great interest. She looked to be a few years shy of thirty and was very fit, blond, and blue-eyed. She carried herself like a woman in charge, and she was. She looked up to see Blake standing just inside the door.

"Please find a seat...Bret, isn't it?"

"Blake. Like Blake Shelton or..." Blake couldn't think of another famous Blake at the moment.

"Blake. I got it. Officer Franklin, please sit at any station and let me know when you can commence. I'll explain what you can expect during the testing."

"Oh, I've been here before. I think I know what to expect." Blake couldn't wait to get started. He knew the test would be administered in five sections on a PC and that each question would be multiple choice or essay. Each section would take no more than forty-five minutes. All Blake had to do was click a little radio button or key the answers that came to his mind first.

He sat at the back, well away from the four others who had started testing earlier. Three female officers and another guy, who appeared slightly younger than Blake, were concentrating on the monitors in front of them. This was a big and important step for them as well. He removed his jacket, hung it over the back of his chair, and said, "I'm all set."

Tristan walked back to his station and logged in to the PC. A large gold detective shield appeared on the screen. She had Blake enter his badge number and date of birth, and the instructions for Module One appeared on his screen.

"Let me know if you have any questions or problems. Remember, anything you write down has to be left behind, but there are pens and paper in the basket at the end of the table if needed. Good luck." Tristan was walking away and heard Blake say, "No problems here today."

The great thing about using PCs for testing is that the system scores the completed tests immediately and enables the testing coordinator to hand a pass or fail to the candidate as they exit the training center. There was no mystery or anguish, wondering if a candidate would be moving forward. They were told the testing was just one part of the interview process and that no one step was more important than the other, but Blake didn't know of anyone who failed the test and went on to be interviewed by command.

Blake finished each module ahead of the allotted time and was sure he was taking a big step toward his goal with each one. So when he signed off the PC, he stood and stretched, put his jacket on, and walked to the front of the room with a spring in his step. An in-depth interview

with a Detective Supervisor would be next. Failing had delayed his rise in the department, much to his humiliation since his father was Chief of Police for Fort Worth. He had never tried to use his dad's influence, but at this point in his career, he wouldn't mind if it positively affected the process—just a little.

Tristan talked with another candidate, so Blake hung back a little to give them privacy. The young woman fist-pumped Ms. Leach and thanked her for a large yellow envelope she was carrying, and Blake moved up to the coordinator's desk. The printer was humming as it came to the end of a print job when he arrived, and Tristan reached beneath her desk to pull a piece of paper up that Blake knew would be his passing certificate and his passport to the future he had planned. Tristan looked at it and then picked up a large yellow envelope, but before she could slip the certificate inside the envelope, Blake asked, "Can I see it first?"

Tristan stopped and handed him the printout, which wasn't a certificate. It simply said across the top of the page, *Candidate Failed*. Blake's life flashed before his eyes like he had a near-death experience. In a sense, he was having one because there was no question that his career had just died. He walked to the door in disbelief and felt so sick inside that he went to his truck and called out for his shift, which was due to start at four.

He drove back to Euless and thought about returning to bed but decided to drink a cold one instead. His cold ones were iced tea since Mindy had dumped him. Not because he wouldn't drink alcohol anymore but because he couldn't afford to without someone paying part of his rent. He also had a lot to think about and wanted to do it with a clear head.

Nine years earlier, when Blake applied to the Police Academy, he was coming off a four-year tour of duty with the Coast Guard, during which he had progressed in rank to Lieutenant. When Blake returned to Texas, he thought his father would welcome and encourage his desire to become a cop, but it was the opposite. His father did everything possible to convince him to pursue another career path.

At the time, Kent Franklin was a division commander, and Blake was incredulous about his father's lack of enthusiasm for him becoming a cop. He had even encouraged Blake to work for his Uncle Lewis in his oil business. His mother's younger brother Lewis had made millions in oil and real estate businesses. He owned hundreds of wells in Anadarko, encompassing parts of Oklahoma and Arkansas and a large and productive field in east Texas.

Working on an oil rig, whether in a dusty field or even at sea, a place he grew to love in the Coast Guard, was not something Blake could see himself doing. Blake thought his uncle would probably care for him, but he needed to make it himself.

Blake's phone chirped, the ringtone for his mother, who somehow knew he had failed the exam again. She claimed she had not spoken to his father, and he believed her. Since their divorce three years earlier, they had little to say to each other. Blake talked to his mother for a while, and she offered encouragement like she always did. Blake knew that having failed three times in the past two years, the department would move on to other candidates, and there were plenty to choose from. She told him not to give up hope, to keep an open mind, and then to hung up.

Blake's most overwhelming feeling was not letting his father down but the shame of proving him right. When he first applied, his dad told him to find anything else to sink his teeth into.

Blake listened respectfully and then pushed forward to join the Police Department. Now, he was at a crossroads. His vision of the police work he wanted to do included becoming a detective and following his father's career path into leadership.

Unfortunately, it was apparent that it was not going to happen. Blake looked around his apartment. He could barely afford the furnishings. A mixed bag of items given to him by his mother, a garage sale entertainment center with a missing shelf, and water skis leaning in the corner were the only decorative items in the room. Mindy had taken everything else, including the comforter and the four annoying pillows, from the bed, which was fair because she brought them into the relationship. He was happy not to see any reminders of her anyway.

Blake's phone rang again with a ringtone of a laser, which was assigned to his Uncle Lewis, and he knew before he answered that his mother had called him to share Blake's misfortune.

"Uncle Lewis, what a surprise!" Blake answered, trying to sound as upbeat as possible.

Lewis Dewars was just ten years older than Blake, having been a big surprise to Blake's grandparents, and he was the most successful person Blake knew. Lewis was what Blake had always called a 'man's man.' He was tall, ruggedly handsome, and as strong as an ox due to his time working in the field and his commitment to staying in shape.

Lewis was a Texas Tech alumni and played football there until his senior year. He quit focusing on grades when he realized pro football wasn't in the cards for him, but business was. He worked hard for every drop of oil or foot of natural gas his wells pumped out; his net worth proved it, and Blake admired him greatly. Though not enough to go into the oil fields to work for him, he was building the courage to shut him down. Working for his uncle was not the answer to his dilemma.

"Hey man, tough day, I hear. Those exams, I'm sure, are a mother." Lewis tried to comfort his nephew, but being gentle was not natural to him, so it sounded a bit forced.

"Oh no, it's all good. I'm rethinking a few things and developing a new strategy. Oh, what the hell. Yes, they are a mother. I admit it! I can't believe I failed the stupid thing three times! God, this sucks, Uncle Lewis." Blake tried to keep the whine out of his voice but failed.

"Well, that's why I called. I know how important it is for you to make your own way, and I think that's great. But the first time we talked about you coming to work with me, I blinked, and you ran off and joined the Navy!"

"Coast Guard," Blake corrected.

"Whatever, man, they both have boats. The point is, I know the oil business isn't something that 'floats your boat.' How'd you like the way I worked that in?"

"Hilarious. But you're right. I never dreamed of being a roughneck or a drill dude, whatever you call them. After college, I wanted adventure and found that in the Coast Guard. We had choppers, too, by the way." Blake continued, "Then I just wanted to follow a path similar to my dad and do it on my own," he said.

"Well, you made it where you are today without any influence or help from him, as far as I can see." Lewis had taken his sister's side in the divorce and didn't try to hide the animus he felt.

“Right, Uncle Lewis. I want always to be my own man. Beholden to nobody. I never want it to be said that I made my way by accepting charity from anybody or by using someone else’s influence. Does that make sense?”

Lewis admired his nephew’s drive and determination and respected his sense of pride and individuality. “I want you to think about the things that interest you, anything at all. If you say you want to continue being a cop, no sweat, be a cop. If you say you want to be a barber or a baker, just not a candle maker. We don’t need more scented freaking candles. But anything else that does float your boat, including boat captain is fine, if that’s your thing.

Whatever it is, I’ll back you. I will put up the funding and be a silent partner in whatever pursuit you come up with. Your first instinct is to reject this offer because you think it’s charity. I do charity work for sick kids, not adults who can make their own way. I see this as an investment in somebody who can succeed at whatever he sets his mind to. I expect a return on this just like any other investment.” Lewis finished and waited silently on the other end of the line.

Blake considered what he had just said to his uncle about wanting to be his own man and make it without help or influence. To have him come back with something like this was just incredulous. Finally, he spoke and said, “Anything?”

“That’s what I said. Anything. I will bankroll you, help you get established, and provide some business oversight as your silent partner, but whatever the business is, it’s yours. So, anything. I don’t expect an answer right now, but I want you to think about it before you reject it and run off to join the French Foreign Legion.”

Blake said, “I want to be a detective.”

“Yeah, I know that, Blake, but we’re talking because it fell through with Fort Worth PD,” Lewis replied.

“No. Uncle Lewis. If you’re serious about this, I accept. I want to open a private detective agency. I want to get a license and do real detective work. That’s what I want to do with my life if you are for real.”

Lewis had not expected Blake to go in that direction. This was completely unexpected. “Okay. Let’s make it happen, Blake. I will help you set up a little office in one of my buildings in Fort Worth, get the initial advertising fired up, and we can get this ball rolling. When do you want to get started?”

“Is right now too soon?”

## 2 One is the Loneliest Number

Blake's next four months were a blur of activity. First, he gave Fort Worth PD a two-week notice. Due to the department's liability policy, he was allowed to leave that day, with his pay continuing for the two weeks after his notice. He also received two additional weeks of severance for having over five years of service.

Next, he applied for his Private Investigations License, and his time as a police officer helped him meet the qualifications. However, the license required him to take a college course in criminal justice, so he took a mini-term class at Texas Tech, his alma mater. The online class lasted six weeks, and the last week of the course had to be taken on campus, so Blake drove the five hours to Lubbock.

Lewis had a corporate apartment there, so he would have a place to stay when he came to the Red Raider's home football games and the occasional basketball game. Blake remained in the apartment and appreciated the opulent surroundings, hoping he could earn nice digs, too.

Blake walked around campus one evening to see some of his old haunts. The pub he and his buddies spent too much time in was still thriving, with fresh young faces at every table and barstool. Blake was surprised at how much smaller it seemed, and the air was much cleaner since smoking was no longer permitted in any buildings in the state. The clothing store he used to shop at was still open but under a different name. You couldn't find raider gear there in his time, but the window was full of their clothing, hats, cups, and banners, so they caved.

The little pizza shop he had frequently dined at, Red's Brew and Pizza, was still open, and Blake stopped in for a slice of beer. He opened the old glass door, and the bells above it jingled loudly to announce him.

A college-aged girl behind the counter with tattoo sleeves down both arms and pieces of metal decorating her face looked up briefly from her phone and said, "Sup?" Her hair was dyed a mixture of green and yellow and cut into an extensive Mohawk, and Blake thought she resembled an angry parrot. The weight of all the metal made smiling impossible, and the effort of saying entire words was out of the question.

Blake had fond memories of sitting around the table in the back corner with several of his buddies or with girlfriends, enjoying a hot pie and cold pitchers of beer. He glanced at the back of the dining area and saw that his favorite table was gone, and a karaoke stage was in place. Nothing stays the same, he thought.

He placed his order and sat at a chair near the counter to wait for Ms. Congeniality to pour his ice-cold beer into a room-temperature plastic cup and plate up a couple of slices of pizza. As he sat there waiting, he heard the girl complaining about the beer keg needing to be changed because all she was getting was "freaking foam" and then arguing with someone over who would change it. Blake stood up and was face-to-face with the Manager, according to his nametag, which read Kegan. It was his roommate from college, Kegan Langley,

"Kegan, is that you?" Blake asked incredulously.

“It's me, dude, how can I.....Blake! Blake Franklin? Oh my God, man, what are you doing here?”

Kegan came around the counter, and the two hugged while the colorful lady stood frowning behind the counter with a solo cup full of foam. Finally, she set it down hard enough to splash foam over the sides and onto the sticky counter and said, “Keg ain't gonna change itself.” Then she went back to her phone.

Kegan excused himself to run into the cooler and returned with a full pie in a couple of minutes. He asked the counter girl to bring a couple of beers to their table, and she did so in time.

Kegan said, “Thanks, Venus, for your usual fine hospitality,” with sarcasm dripping heavily from every word. She rolled her eyes and muttered something unintelligible as she returned to her phone.

“Man, if I had a dollar for every time that girl smiled, I still couldn't afford basic cable. So catch me up, man, it's been ten, twelve years?” Kegan said.

“Try fourteen years! I can't believe I ran into you. What are you doing here? You're from Abilene, aren't you?”

“Yeah, but nothing happened in Abilene when I left school, and I eventually found my way back to Lubbock. I tried selling insurance for a few years but couldn't get it rolling. I worked at one of your uncle's oil rigs for about a year. After I'd injured myself on the freaking equipment a few times too many, the field supervisor suggested I find something safer to do. Asshole gave me a first aid kit as a going away present.” They both laughed at that.

They spent an hour reminiscing, and Blake explained why he was back on campus and everything he had done since graduating. He learned that Kegan had left school a semester early and was nine hours shy of graduating, so he didn't have a degree or a plan for his life. He was freewheeling it to see where life took him. Kegan had to get up a few times to help with orders. Blake, while sitting alone in the warmth of his memories, decided he had an idea he wanted to share.

Kegan returned and sat down, and Blake said, “My Detective Agency will open its doors in about two weeks. Unless this place has a retirement plan you can't walk away from, how about coming in with me? You can take the next class offered here in criminal justice. You get four credit hours for it. Then, take a couple of other classes so you get your degree, and we can get your private detective license. We can go solve crimes and save the world together!”

“You want me to become a private dick? Investigate people's dirty laundry. Sneak around taking pictures of cheating spouses?” Kegan said.

“Well I mean, there would be some of that, and I know it doesn't sound glamorous,” Blake started.

“I'm in! Are you kidding me? I'd rather look at happy, cheating wives than Little Miss Sunshine over there. Her grandpappy owns the place, so she's not going anywhere. You can call me John Law or Dick Tracy. When do I start?” Kegan was so excited he started taking his sauce-stained apron off.

“Slow your roll, bro!” Blake said, “We are private investigators, so you want to be low-key.” Then he started laughing raucously. “This is going to be great!”

Blake completed his course and with funding from his Uncle Lewis, paid the tuition for Kegan to take the Criminal Justice course and the remaining courses needed to earn an undergraduate degree.

Kegan would have to move out of Dewars Petroleum’s corporate apartment early the following spring. He would move his belongings to the Fort Worth metroplex, and he and Blake would become roommates again.

## 9 One for the Record

Blake arrived an hour early for his meeting with the Tarrant County District Attorney. He parked his rental in the structure next to the old, ornate building. He carried his evidence notebooks in a banker's box through the front door and got in line with thirty others who appeared to represent all sides of the law: victims and enforcers, attorneys and offenders.

He set his box on a conveyor belt to go through an X-ray machine operated by several Bailiffs. He walked through a scanner and had to be wanded by a Bailiff for his suspender buckles. He was dressed for success in khakis, a white shirt, a red tie, and a blue blazer Mindy had bought him for his thirty-sixth birthday. The suspenders gave him peace of mind because he hated repeatedly pulling his pants up, having lost ten pounds since leaving the Fort Worth Police job.

He sat in the waiting area outside the Criminal Division, and people watched for about forty minutes. Then he went inside the glass doors to let the clerk know he was here for his one o'clock meeting with Assistant District Attorney Pat Mallory. He took a seat across from the counter to wait. Ten minutes after the hour, a man in his fifties, completely bald except for salt and pepper sideburns and a wide mustache, came around with his young, attractive assistant. He looked like he had been cast as a Texas Ranger in a western movie, and she looked like a recent graduate of Texas Christian College – blond, cute, and professional. Blake stood, offered a hand, and said, "Mr. Mallory, thank you so much for meeting me today."

The man smiled, shook his hand, and responded, "Good to meet you, Mr. Franklin. I'm Investigator Clyde Tinker, and this is Assistant District Attorney Pat Mallory."

Blake hoped he hid the instant foot-in-mouth condition he was choking on and said, "So pleased to meet you, Ms. Mallory."

She smiled, shook Blake's hand, and invited him back to her office. Blake picked up his evidence and followed, trying to think of how to overcome the horrible start to their meeting. He was hopeful that he was not the first to jump to that chauvinist conclusion, but maybe he was. He should have taken five minutes away from preparing his case to look up the District Attorney staff online. They entered an office not much bigger than his own, and she asked Blake to put his box on a small table near the door.

"The message I received when you made this appointment indicated a criminal conspiracy to defraud the elderly, is that right, Mr. Franklin?" She asked. Her voice was firm, intelligent, and very Texan. She wore a no-nonsense outfit, a yellow blouse, and seafoam green pants that were almost the color of her eyes. She pointed to a seat, and Investigator Tinker took the chair beside him. She sat on the other side of a very orderly desk, and behind her was a photo of the governor and one of the presidents. Next to them sat her undergraduate diploma from Baylor and a Juris Doctorate from Rice University.

Blake began telling his story, beginning with Sharon Longstreet and then Madeline Bailey. He told her that one of his clients was in protective custody with an associate, due to harassment and threats from the Peña. He laid it all out for her. After ten minutes of what Blake thought to be

ironclad case points, Tinker asked, “Other than your clients, do you have any eyewitness testimony about the threats or harassment?”

“We have the video I mentioned. Oh, and some of my client’s videos showed one of the men in her backyard trying to open doors and him going into an outbuilding on her property.”

Tinker said, “OK. Good. And she already has a TRO or Trespass on this guy?”

“No. There isn’t anything filed on anyone yet. All we have is in that box, demonstrating a criminal enterprise going back almost twenty years. It’s a paper trail that starts with a seventeen-year-old washing car in Haltom City and then becoming a millionaire in Arlington with no education and a Cartel thug for a partner.” Blake was getting a little angry that Tinker and Mallory were not doing backflips to take the case and run with it.

Pat Mallory could see the frustration boiling up and said, “Mr. Franklin, our job is to prosecute criminals who violate the laws of Texas and the United States. We are tasked with doing it vigorously and according to the Constitution. It sounds like you have encountered some people we will eventually see across the aisle from us in a courtroom. How long have you been a private detective, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I got my license two months ago, and before that, I was a Fort Worth cop for almost ten years. Please don’t let my lack of experience be the stumbling block that allows these guys to continue to prey on elderly women. Or very likely continue to murder younger women, for that matter. I would say, based on Peña’s track record, his current wife doesn’t have long to live.” Blake was frustrated and lost his cool, and he tried everything he could to control it.

Tinker, who had a voice like Wilford Brimley, said, “Mr. Franklin. Nobody says you haven’t done good work or that what you have in that box falls short of the evidentiary guidelines we work with here. But first things first. If Ms. Mallory agrees there is something here, I will pay the cousins Peña a visit at their garage and get an official investigation going. You see, this is the Criminal Division, and when we go to court, Ms. Mallory has all the burden of proof on her. She can’t go in there with hearsay, or *you say*, because she gets just one bite at those bad apples.”

Pat Mallory said, “I’m sure that as a former cop you already knew that before you came in, but it is important enough that it bears repeating. Let’s see the paper trail you have established and we’ll determine if the next steps involve this office and my Investigator, or if it means you start closer to square one with the Arlington Police Department.”

Blake pulled the two notebooks out and presented the case against Rogelio Peña first. Then he followed up with the notebook detailing the acquisition of cars and wives Mateo Peña had been involved with over an eighteen-year period. The only thing he didn’t have was the autopsy and toxicology reports for Charley Longstreet, Larry Bailey, and Jorgé San Gabriel. Investigator Tinker and Assistant District Attorney Mallory were impressed with the paper trail and asked a few questions as they reviewed each notebook. Mindy had done an excellent job of putting it all together in a cohesive way that was easy to explain. She had even entered margin notes that included pertinent questions and important answers.

After more than an hour of going through the evidence, Mallory asked, “Do you have copies of this evidence?”

Blake said, “Not all of it, but I have copies of the Border Patrol papers.”

Tinker got a look from Mallory and said, "I'll go have Greg copy everything and bind them. I'll be back shortly," and left the room with both notebooks.

"This shouldn't take long, Mr. Franklin."

"Please, just call me Blake. Mr. Franklin is my dad," Blake said. He was trying to sound friendly and down-home neighborly but was so excited that his first case might become a prosecution that his legs shook. He thought he sounded nervous. There was no reason to be nervous. He had been to court hundreds of times. He had dealt with a lot of ADAs, lawyers, and judges. However, testifying in a traffic violation or criminal misdemeanors was not the same, and this time, his pass or fail left lives in the balance. The lives of his clients.

Mallory said she had a hard stop at three o'clock to meet with an attorney and his client, so if Tinker weren't back by then, Blake would have to wait out at the counter. She said she wanted to assure him of some things while they waited. "The first thing I will do is contact a friend at Homeland Security.

I can run Wants and Warrants on Rogelio Peña. If he is here illegally and has violated a deportation order, we can get him off the street immediately while we build our case around the information you have provided. Your work is exceptional, but our case must be established independently from yours because this is a criminal matter with life-altering consequences for the accused. We can use yours as foundational, but anything we present at trial, if it goes that far, must be our own work or that of a law enforcement agency within our jurisdiction."

"So, you're not saying all of our work was for nothing, just that it can't be a part of the prosecution," Blake confirmed.

"Essentially, yes, that's right. If you practice in Tarrant County, try to bring us into the loop a little earlier in cases once you have identified criminal activity or work closely with law enforcement. I'm sure you still have a lot of contacts at Fort Worth PD, don't you?" Mallory asked.

"Yeah. I know a few detectives and a lot of Patrol folks from South Command." Blake answered.

"Any Supervisors or Lieutenants you know personally would be a big help in getting cooperation from rank and file. Sometimes there is a bit of rivalry between cops and PIs, so any relationships you have that could get you past those hurdles will help."

"Yeah. I know some brass, but I have never wanted to use that connection before. I'll come up with something. I appreciate the advice." Blake had no intention of ever asking his father for assistance or even an introduction. He would make it on his own. With the help of Mindy, Kegan, and his uncle Lewis, of course.

Tinker returned with his two notebooks and a three-inch, plastic spiral-bound book with a case number on the cover. He handed the two notebooks to Blake and said, "Ms. Mallory has her three-p.m. meeting waiting, so why don't you and I head down to an interview room quick and get our calendars caught up." "You need me for the plea meeting at all?" He asked Pat Mallory.

"No Clyde. It should be cut and dry and it won't last fifteen minutes. You go ahead with Blake and meet me back here afterward."

Blake stood and thanked her, saying, "I really appreciate you, Ms. Mallory. I'm looking forward to getting these guys off the street."

Blake and Tinker went into a small conference room, and they discussed Blake's plan to make contact as Mr. Dewars, the prospect looking to buy two cars. Blake wasn't sure if Rogelio could identify him or if he only knew his truck, which was now parked out of sight. Tinker thought it was best to allow him time to get with Homeland Security and have Rogelio Peña picked up before he goes back to meet with Mateo.

That could also throw Mateo Peña into a panic, which could cause him to react erratically, so they had to be cautious. Blake was perfectly willing to wear a wire if Tinker wanted to hear what was going on, and they kicked that idea around before deciding to seek a warrant for audio surveillance. Tinker said to give him until Thursday to have the cousin picked up and approval for a wire. Blake thanked Tinker and was picking up his banker box with the binders when Tinker said, "That little mistaking who was who earlier? That happens sometimes and that's why I always walk out first. I want to be between her and any threat, which puts defense attorneys slightly off when they make that mistake." Clyde laughed roughly.

Blake could see how that might help. He thanked Clyde, who said he preferred to be called Tinker and carried his box out. He exited the elevator and came across the big lobby when he saw a familiar face coming through the scanners. He waited for her to gather her things from the conveyor, and when she turned, he said, "Ms. Leach? What brings you over here?"

She was caught off guard and looked surprised and confused. She said, "Ben? No, not Ben Franklin. I'm sorry, I don't remember your first name."

Blake replied, "It's Blake. And yours is Tristan if I remember correctly."

She said, "That you do! It looks like you made it to Detective after all! Congratulations. I always felt so guilty about the way things were going."

Now, Blake was confused. "No reason to feel guilty, Tristan. It was just one of those things, and I eventually had to face down my demons and take control, you know?"

She smiled sheepishly and said, "I never thought of your father as a demon, but yeah, I know what you mean. But I'm so happy you got him to back off, and now look at you, a detective!"

Now Blake was really confused. "You think my dad is why I couldn't pass the detective exams?"

"He had to be the one with the overriding authority. Nobody else has that kind of clout, as far as I know. But it was those kinds of games that caused me to leave. I work in HR here now. It's funny, I know politics are at play everywhere you work, but I never expected it to be as rampant as it was there. For a Chief to intentionally hold an officer back like that, I don't know, it just seems wrong, and there was a lot of that going on." Tristan explained.

Blake felt like he had just been kicked between the legs. His own father had given an override order to make him fail the detective examination. How could he justify ruining a career for his own son? Hell, for anybody? What kind of an asshole does that to people? Manipulate their lives like their dreams and aspirations don't matter! Providing for their families doesn't

matter! Blake asked, “Of the three times I took the detective exam, do you know how many times I failed it?”

“I honestly have no idea. Once the override was entered for your badge number, none of your answers were recorded, and the system assigned the Fail status. You may have passed all three, or you may have failed all three. I could not know any of the candidates who received the override order. So, how did you get Chief Franklin to change his mind? I left the police department over a month ago and never heard anything about you moving up.”

Blake was fuming about his dad’s callous and arrogant treatment, but it wasn’t this woman’s fault, so he needed to reign it in just a little. He took a deep breath and said, “I left the Fort Worth PD the day after my last failed exam. I’m now a Private Detective, so I can help people without the interference of my dad.”

Tristan knew she had misread the situation and spilled some information she should have kept to herself. She was right to leave a job she felt was tainted by poor ethics from above, but as a Human Resources professional, she knew better than to talk out of school or reveal a previous employer’s dirty little secrets.

She said, “Blake. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything, but I just assumed, seeing you here and not in uniform, that you had made the leap to Detective Two. I’m truly sorry.”

Blake could see in her eyes that it did bother her, and though he hated what his father had done to stifle his growth, he was glad to know that he wasn’t failing. Or at least maybe he wasn’t. There was no way to know at that point.

Blake said, “Tristan, it’s okay. It’s the kind of manipulation I expect from my dad. It’s not on you, and I appreciate knowing the truth. Honestly, I do.”

She felt responsible for the hurt and the doubt Blake must have experienced. She felt guilty for hiding the truth from him and other targeted candidates, but she wasn’t in a position to do anything about it then, and even less so almost two months after leaving the Fort Worth PD. She thought it best to move the conversation away from the topic as much as possible. “Are you in court or seeing someone?”

Blake said, “Neither. My case isn’t ready for court and my girlfriend left me eight months ago, so.”

Tristan’s eyes widened with embarrassed shock, and she said, “Oh no, I didn’t mean. I mean. I was asking about...”

Blake’s smile spread quickly, and he said, “I know what you meant. I was busting your... I was kidding.”

“Good to know, though,” Tristan said, and her smile made Blake’s breath catch for a moment. She reached into her purse to retrieve a business card. She wrote a number on the back and handed it to Blake. “This is my office number on the front and my cell number on the back. Call me sometime if you’re in the neighborhood.”

Blake felt like a million bucks walking to his car on the garage’s second level. He was full of mixed emotions and feelings of accomplishment. He was so angry with his father that he wanted

to confront him and tell him what a horrible dad he had been. He was pleased to know that there was at least a chance he had passed all of the exams, as he thought he had.

He felt great that the DA was taking on the case he began just three weeks earlier, and he was certain it would certainly end in at least one indictment. He was happy about the prospect of the deportation of the most threatening of the two Penas. He looked forward to working with Tinker to pull it together so that Ms. Mallory could present it to the Grand Jury.

And at the top of all of it, as shameful as it seemed, he was on cloud nine, and Tristan Leach seemed to show genuine interest in him personally. He'd jump up and click his heels together if he thought he wouldn't drop the banker box.

Blake returned to the office in the middle of the afternoon. When he walked in, a man stood at the counter talking to Mindy. Blake was immediately on alert due to the threat from Mateo Peña. Thankfully, he could see very quickly that the man wasn't a threat.

Mindy said, "Tate, this is my boss, Blake Franklin." The man turned and shook hands with him. It was a little too soft, and Blake hated that. "Blake, this is Tate McAllister."

Blake said it was a pleasure but still wondered who the man was and why he was in a private office.

Tate said, "Well, I have to get back, but it was nice to meet you Blake, and Mindy, a pleasure as always." He left the office after his goodbye.

Blake must have revealed something in how he looked because he had not said a word when Mindy said, "Just knock it off, Blake; you don't get to approve or disapprove of who I see. Remember, the past is the past."

Blake was caught off guard and said, "I know that! I don't care who you see or date. No matter how wimpy their handshakes are. That's your business! I had never seen him before and didn't know if he was dangerous. I know you're packing a pea shooter, but I want to be sure you're safe."

"Well, that's thoughtful of you, and he does not have a wimpy handshake. Handshakes are not supposed to be a pissing contest. But thanks for being concerned for my safety," Mindy said sarcastically.

As he headed down the hall to his office, Blake said, "I have to be. You're the last line of defense before they get to me!"

Mindy said nothing, but when Blake sat at his desk and looked up at the monitors, Mindy was flying a double eagle at him, and Blake laughed. He had messages on his desk, and he busied himself returning calls to Sharon Longstreet, Madeline Bailey, and Annie Granger. He also had one from Lewis marked URGENT and one from ADA Bachman.

"Uncle Lewis, I got your message, is everything alright?"

Lewis was in his car, and Blake could hear the traffic noises in the background. "Blake, thanks for returning my call. I'm in Albuquerque this week and just wanted to follow up with you on some things. Business good?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. I have a case that has turned into three and has many more touchpoints than I originally expected. Mindy has been a big help, and Kegan has been providing protective services to one of the clients." Blake felt like the overview was enough and stopped there.

"Okay, Great. So, I'm curious about a visit to my Dallas office that resulted in a couple of guys being arrested by Dallas Police. They were looking to 'speak with Mr. Dewars', and when the police patted them down, they were both carrying guns. In their car, they had AR Fifteens."

Lewis said. "I have never, in twenty-two years of building my business, had to deal with threats like that. Is it just a coincidence that it happens a month after you open your business? I am a silent partner, Blake, but if you want me to remain silent, take care of this bullshit and do it now. I can't have gang members coming to my office, scaring my employees, or possibly hurting someone. Buffer zones. Set them up. Keep me out of whatever shit you're in now or may get into in the future. Are we clear?"

This chastisement hurt worse than the ones he received from Mindy and Tinker. This one was warranted and entirely his fault. He should never have used the name Dewars. He will have to be smarter than that and never repeat the mistake again. He replied, "We are clear, Lewis, I'll handle this, I promise. I'm sorry this case spilled over."

Blake called Madeline and gave her an update, just so she would know the case was proceeding. She asked if it was possible to see the car sometime soon and he promised to set that up.

Sharon Longstreet told Blake she stayed as long as possible in a hotel and was checking out. She would fly to Phoenix the next day to stay with her daughter and spend time with her granddaughter. Blake thought that was a great idea. He called Kegan and told him that Sharon's intentions had his blessing. Blake told him that until he knew the threat had been neutralized, he would prefer that Kegan either remain there or find a short-term rental near the school.

He returned Annie Granger's call, and a younger woman answered the phone. "Hello, this is Lisa Carpenter; who is this?"

"Ms. Carpenter, I may have the wrong number. This is Blake Franklin with Franklin Investigative Services. I was returning a call to Annie Granger."

"No, this is the right number; Annie was my mother."

Alarm bells went off inside Blake's head, "You said, 'was'? Has something happened? Is Annie alright?"

"No. She's not okay. How did you know my mother, Mr. Franklin?"

Blake was sick inside. He said, "Your mother hired my agency to help her with a situation involving one of your late father's classic cars. She was getting pressured by a collector over the Shelby and asked me to intervene."

"Why would my mother need such help?" Lisa challenged.

"Look, I know this must be a very difficult time for you and your family, and I wouldn't have called had I known your mother passed. Was she involved in an accident, or can you tell me anything?" he asked. He was suspicious that somehow Mateo Peña was involved. If he were, Blake would prove it, and Peña would join his cousin on death row at Huntsville.

"She passed from an apparent overdose, Mr. Franklin. My mother was on a lot of medications, and she has always been so careful. She is on blood thinners, heart medicine, blood pressure pills, and thyroid medication, and she had something for arthritic pain that she took when it flared up. Somehow, she managed to take too much, and it took her. I don't understand her being so careless. Anyone who knows, knew my mother, knows what a careful woman she is. Was... I can't get used to her being gone."

“I understand, Mrs. Carpenter. When did she pass?” Blake asked. He was trying not to pry too deeply into the fresh wound of loss.

“Saturday morning or afternoon. My sister and I had been trying to reach her all day. I live the closest, so I drove up from Georgetown with my son, and we found her body. She was in the middle of my dad’s collection of old cars on the cold concrete floor.”

She was crying, and Blake hated that she was going through the pain of retelling what must have been the worst experience of her life. She said, “I honestly wasn’t aware my mom and dad had named these old cars. Which one is named Shelby?”

Blake explained, “No, the name Shelby is the type of car. It’s the sixty-eight Ford Shelby GT500. I haven’t seen it myself. Your mother said it was your dad’s favorite car and that her grandson had shown interest in it, so he decided to hold onto it.”

Lisa said, “I’m walking out to the barn right now. Hold on a moment. Wally! Son, come with me, please. My son knows more about these old relics than I do,”

Blake heard her son run up and ask what she wanted. She explained that she needed her son’s knowledge of cars. She unlocked the padlock on the door, and she and Wally slid the big door open and turned on a set of overhead lights.

Then Lisa asked, “Which one of these is called Shelby?” Wally walked over and started lifting up canvas car covers, finding a Corvette under the first three he raised.

He was calling them out as he discovered what lay beneath the tarps. He called out “Mustang” and then said “Fastback”. Then, “Mustang. This is Pawpaw’s sixty-seven convertible.”

Wally pointed to a second row of covered cars and said those are the GTO’s mom; I can tell by their shape. “Mom, the Shelby isn’t here. Pawpaw’s Shelby was the black one he restored last summer, remember? He got new seats, ordered many engine things, and got a new paint job.”

Lisa remembered, “OK, yes, your grandma gave him a hard time about spending so much money and razed him about never spending as much on her.”

To Blake, she said, “Mr. Franklin, the car you mentioned is not here. Do you think this means something? I haven’t begun to review Mom’s paperwork, but do you think she sold it, or has someone stolen the car?”

Blake said, “Mrs. Carpenter, I’m going to find out, and I promise I’ll let you know immediately. I am so sorry for your loss. I only met your mother once, but she seemed like a wonderful lady, and I know she was dedicated to her family. I will be in touch. If you have any questions or need my help, please call me at this number.”

Blake looked up at the monitor and saw that Mindy was not at her desk just before she stepped into his office. “Did you get everyone called back?” she asked.

“I did, and it has been rough.” He told her about Annie Granger and the trouble at Lewis’s office. He told her it was time to involve law enforcement to ensure Mateo Peña was arrested. He then told her the biggest news regarding the girl hidden at the powder coating shop on Classic Concepts property.

Rogelio was keeping Mateo's stepdaughter for the past eleven years, and at some point, he had begun raping her. She was starved and beaten and kept in a five-by-five hole in the floor. There was no possibility Mateo was not aware of what the sick, sadistic pedophile had been doing. There were times Rogelio was out of the country for months, and someone took care of her, or else she would have starved or escaped.

Mindy could tell Blake had the weight of the world on his shoulders and she suggested he update Clyde Tinker on the Annie Granger development. Blake noticed she had a note in her hand and asked about it. She said, "Just a call from a possible client, but I think you have enough on your plate right now. I will put him off for now."

"Does it have anything to do with classic car theft," Blake asked.

"Nope. Employees stealing from the till. Not something you need to worry about. I'll handle the letdown you call Tinker," and she returned to the front.

Blake called Tinker and asked if he could call him right back from Mallory's office. Five minutes later, his phone rang, and he heard, "Mr. Franklin, it's Pat Mallory, and I have Clyde here with me."

"Hello, Ms. Mallory, Tinker. I wanted to update you on a development in my case." Blake said.

Mallory said, "Please do, Mr. Franklin; we want to update you. What's the latest on your end?"

"I ended up with three different elderly women experiencing the same thing with Peña. As you know, one is in protective custody; the other is safe because Peña gave up on getting her car. However, the third was Annie Granger, who lived in Granbury. Well, she died suddenly on Saturday. She died of an apparent overdose. It may be an accident, but I don't think so. Peña came to her home last Thursday trying to take her deceased husband's Shelby GT500. She called me and the local police and Peña left. Now Annie is dead, and her Shelby is gone. I want to go after that sonofabitch right now." Blake was incensed over the death of Annie Granger, and it was clear in his words and anger.

"We need to stop this now," said Mallory. "If we can find him with Mrs. Granger's vehicle in his possession, we've got him dead to rights. I wanted to tell you that we have independently reviewed the financial records you provided and even pulled a few others. Our case for the Grand Jury is solid. But, like you, I want this guy off the streets as soon as possible. This new car theft is the key we can use to get him, and then we'll throw it away after we lock him up. I'm going to leave the planning to you and Clyde. I have a plea agreement meeting to get to. Thank you, Mr. Franklin."

Blake and Tinker spoke at length and devised a plan to catch Peña in their snare. Before he knew it, the most interesting Monday Blake had ever experienced was just about over. He just needed to call Bachman back before calling it a day.

Bachman came on the line after Blake had waited for five minutes: "Mr. Franklin, thank you for getting back to me. I was wondering if you might be available to meet tomorrow morning for a few minutes."

Blake said, "I can certainly make myself available, Mr. Bachman. Does this have to do with Hope Olson or another matter?"

"A little in the way of a process question, a discussion about next steps for the young lady, as well as the federal subpoena and case structure," Bachman explained.

It went through Blake's mind again that Bachman would be a difficult opponent in the courtroom because he had just answered Blake's question, yet Blake had no idea what he had just heard. "I have time tomorrow between eight-thirty and ten if that works for you," Blake said.

"Perfect. I'll see you here at eight-thirty," Bachman said and hung up.

Blake sent a message to Tinker about meeting with Bachman the next morning, and he responded, asking Blake to swing by and pick him up. He said meeting separately on a case where they work together doesn't make sense.