

Paths of Judgment
First 3 pages of Chapter One

“Oh, no! No! No...!” Margaret Haywood’s anguished wail shattered the quiet of the mausoleum atmosphere that haunted the elegant home. What she’d just seen felt like a sucker punch straight to the gut, and she staggered and almost fell. “Just look at this,” she cried. “Look what he’s done to my beautiful house. How... how... could he?” The attractive blond woman with a framework of metal around her left arm clinched and unclenched her one good fist in anger.

The once fashionable family room that had earned decorator praise lay in shambles. Little had escaped the destruction. Margaret grabbed for the nearby arm of her friend, P.C. Dunigan. Then she closed her eyes and allowed her weakened knees to buckle, as she lowered herself to the floor. One mutilated wall in the family room provided support for her back.

Oh, God, please, when I open my eyes, let me see that everything was just my imagination.

But it was not to be.

The fabric covered sage walls bore evidence of many vicious slashes, too many to count. The machete that likely inflicted the damage was anchored in the middle of the chimney breast. Its sinister blade pierced an original canvas by one of Margaret’s favorite north Georgia artists.

“Hey, friend,” she heard through the darkness that strangled her. “Are you still with me?”

Margaret opened her eyes, only to be terrorized again by the wrecked remains of what had been one of her favorite rooms in the Haywood residence. Three antique wall

sconces she and Don had found in a New Orleans salvage yard caught her eye. Their delicate wrought iron frames were bent into shapes as grotesque as Margaret imagined the mind of the vandal to be.

Don, how could you have done this? Why didn't I ever see this side of you before?

“Oh, P.C. I would never... never have believed that Don would go... this far.” The breaths in her chest came with ragged cadence and she feared she might faint. Even though she closed her eyes again, as she fought to maintain consciousness, the image of the decorator showroom that had been her personal creation still haunted her. What had once been a thing of beauty now hung in shreds of its former glory.

Just like my marriage.

“Hang with me, Margaret. Just stay here until your head clears and you feel like getting up again.”

“Why, P.C.? Why would he have done this?”

Her friend's voice penetrated the haze that captured Margaret's consciousness. “Are you certain it was Don?”

“Well, yes. I mean... who else would have...?”

“Vandals, maybe? Teenagers? You're close enough to Atlanta that you probably have some gang activity here. And your house has been unoccupied for quite some time.”

“No,” Margaret answered. “This was Don. His fingerprints are all over it.”

She could sense P.C. settling beside her on the floor in the house on Red Bud Way. Her house. Or at least it had been. Once.

Everything's changed. Nothing will ever be the same again.

“Help me get up, P.C. I've got to see what else he's done.”

If someone had been looking in, Margaret thought later, they'd have vowed the two women were under the influence of some illegal substance. Between Margaret's still weakened state, and the awkward cage of steel rods that encased her left arm, it was a cumbersome waltz as P.C. did all she could to pull her friend from the floor and help her to stand.

"You're convinced Don's responsible?"

"He's the guilty party alright." Margaret let her eyes roam the room where they had shared so many happy moments. It grieved her to understand they would never know such joy again. "If you know what to look for, you can see the pattern." Her breath caught in her throat. "Don had no intention of allowing me to put this house in the Tour of Homes. He's not about to do anything that would help battered women. Now he's made certain that I can't."

He was determined to show me that this is HIS house.

As if to validate her theory, she caught sight of the room's oversized sofa, its gold chenille upholstery hanging in threads.

"You're going to need to let Alice and Annie know that you're one home short." P.C. was referring to Margaret's co-chair on the tour committee and Annie Campbell, the director of the Carter's Crossroads Shelter Against Domestic Violence.

"I will, I will... just as soon as I can accept it myself." Margaret leaned against the doorway. "Everything that's destroyed is something we disagreed over. Don thought it was too extravagant to cover these walls with fabric. He wanted to use carpet. Naturally."

"That could be a coincidence."

“You don’t see any damage to the large screen TV do you? But the three wall sconces were favorites of mine. And the sofa. He thought it was too massive for the room.”

“His chair... at least I assume that brown leather recliner is his chair... isn’t damaged either.”

“Now you’re seeing it the way I do. Come on, let’s check out the rest of the house.”

A few minutes later it was a heart-sick Margaret who sat down at the foot of the back staircase to take stock of the situation.

“The family room window treatments, the beautiful gold and wine striped fabric she’d fashioned herself had been ripped from their massive wooden rods and lay scattered about the room. But the damage hadn’t stopped there.

“You see what I mean, don’t you? About how selective Don was in choosing what to destroy and what to spare?”

P.C., who had been checking out the kitchen, stuck her head around the doorway. “And can I guess that this kitchen – or at least what’s left of it – was your personal kingdom?”

I hadn’t even thought about the kitchen. Oh, Don, you didn’t?

The evidence spoke for itself. Outside of the bed in the guest bedroom, which they had discovered in pieces and the shattered remains of the fiberglass jetted tub in the master bathroom, only the kitchen had been hit harder.

“I would have thought Don was too conscious of the dollar to have inflicted this much damage.” P.C.’s hand traced around a deep depression in the stainless steel door of the sub-zero refrigerator. “What made this, for Pete’s sake? A sledge hammer?”

Margaret sheltered her caged and recovering arm as she moved from appliance to appliance. There wasn’t one single piece in the kitchen that didn’t show evidence of wrath.

“He can do whatever he wants. He explained it to me the night he wrecked the family dining room; it’s his money. And it’s in his name. Besides, it’s all insured.”

Even now, weeks later, I’m still unable to believe how ballistic he got that night. But I can’t deny he’s capable of violence, because I’ve got the souvenir to prove it. She fingered what her father called the tomato cage that encased her arm. I just wonder how many more of his surprises I can handle.

“It’s all about control, you know. Absolute control. I finally found the courage to deny him that, and he’s determined to make me regret it.”

Damn you, Don!

There had been a time when she would have been too goody-goody to use any swear language. There was also a time when she had two good arms. *Yes, times have changed. I just can’t let this change me for the worst.*

“He’s sick,” P.C. announced. “We’ve said that before but now I’m convinced of it. He’s dangerous, too.”

“You’re telling me? This is the same guy you had to pull out of a ten-day contempt sentence in Tennessee because he wouldn’t listen to his very capable attorney. Surely you haven’t forgotten that?”

“Representing Don Haywood is an experience I’ll tell my grandchildren about. But I’m talking about a different kind of danger. He’s out to get you.”

“I’m walking proof of that.”

“Come outside with me. Now. We’ve got to get out of this house.”

Margaret took one last look at the beautiful kitchen where she’d prepared so many meals for her family and friends. *I always tried to be here when the kids got home from school. I can still hear them piling in the door now.*

“He can’t hurt me again, P.C. What more can he do?”

“Plenty.” She held out an arm to Margaret who took it to steady herself as she came down the steps. “For starters, this could all be a set-up. He could be planning to pin all this property destruction on you.”

“Me? Why would I wreck my own house? I love this place. This was home.”

“Exactly. But whose name’s on it?”

The light bulb came on. *He wouldn’t stoop that low.* But in her heart, she knew now that Don was capable of anything.

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