

An excerpt from Chapter One of *Dogging Truth*

by Kevin Hughes

The three-bedroom ranch with an attached single car garage nestled on Marathon Drive was typical of the westside Madison neighborhood. It was a house of the fifties—white clapboard siding, dark green shutters, a three-step concrete porch and a roof of faded green shingles. The vintage yard was rich with silver maples and the fence encircling the backyard begged for a paintbrush to swipe its barren boards.

By today's standards it was a modest starter home, but ten years ago it had been a new beginning for Toby Jenkins after he and Elizabeth had parted ways. For TJ, the pain had never left him and probably never would. Although he didn't realize it until the end, he had proven two things: A cop could not be married to a lawyer, and the expression "love conquers all," was a big, fat lie. And he learned the hard way that time doesn't heal all wounds—especially those of the heart. But for a reason only the fates could explain, TJ and Elizabeth's relationship remained somewhat intertwined, perhaps because they were lost souls in the grip of a powerful, romantic love.

As the Packers assembled to battle the Bears over a hundred yards of grass turf, TJ and Billy huddled on the threadbare beige couch, eyes trained on the screen of their twenty-seven inch Toshiba TV. The edict of the homestead was that these Sundays belonged to TJ and Billy, and woe-betide anyone who dared to intrude.

The Bears' field goal was right down the middle and tied the score at seventeen. With a minute and change left in the game, TJ and Billy were crazed, rocking back and forth, when a black Jaguar XJ pulled into the driveway.

"Elizabeth is here," Billy said.

TJ briefly diverted his attention to confirm the rumor. "Shit. Don't answer the door."

"She knows we're home because your car's in the driveway."

"I don't care. We're busy."

"Maybe it's important," Billy said.

"Then she should have called first. I hate it when people drop in."

The doorbell emitted a quick ring as if pressed by a hesitant hand and TJ remained seated as if stitched to the cushion. The bell rang again and Billy stomped to the door in a huff.

Elizabeth gave Billy a hug and accepted his invitation into the living room. She thought his features and mannerisms so closely matched those of TJ that anyone would assume he was TJ's biological son: Brown hair, brown eyes and an underlying smile that hinted he had a secret. He was a handsome young man of fifteen with the same demeanor of subtle gentleness TJ possessed, but tried to conceal.

Without saying a word, TJ motioned Elizabeth to sit.

Taking the rude gesture in stride, Elizabeth shook her head and chose a chair facing TJ. She watched in amazement as the male primates screamed, cussed and nearly cried when the Bears intercepted a pass and ran it back for a touchdown. With only ten seconds on the clock, the score spelled the end of the game for the Packers, who were devoid of time-outs. The Bears' kickoff went deep into the end zone and finally, from the Pack's twenty, a futile Hail Mary pass ended the show.

“Who won?”

TJ motioned downward with his hands. “Silence, please.”

“I assumed the verbal blackout was over since your beloved Packers choked.”

“There’s a specified mourning period after we lose.” He folded his arms. “You can come back in a week.”

Elizabeth walked over and patted TJ on the head. “I feel your pain, Toby,” she said in a somber, insincere tone. “But I need a few minutes of your time.”

“Gee, and I thought this was a social visit.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Sorry. I could have called, but we need to talk about this in person.”

Billy shifted in his seat. “Is it about me?”

She stooped before the boy and clutched his hands. “No, no, no. I apologize for barging in here under a shroud of mystery—it was very inconsiderate of your feelings. Everything is fine and the adoption will be final as soon as we lock in a court date.”

“That’s okay; I wasn’t worried.” Billy’s enlarged pupils belied his calmness. “I know we’re lucky to have you helping us.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Then, with conspicuous fondness, Elizabeth said, “You certainly have a knack for the social graces,” which caused Billy to beam and left no doubt that their affection was mutual.

TJ leaned back on the couch and plunked his feet on the coffee table. “So, Liz, what *is* the purpose of this surprise invasion?”

Elizabeth fashioned her best smile. “I need some quality time regarding a sensitive matter.”

TJ’s left eye squinted slightly. “Why are my guts telling me to run as fast as I can?” He stood and stretched.

Elizabeth noticed that TJ had lost weight and looked much younger than his forty-some years. The pesky little belly he’d battled for years had disappeared, his soft brown eyes were clear and he’d added some length to his brown hair. Nice touch, she thought.

TJ raised his arms above his head. “I surrender. Let’s talk in the kitchen.”

Stopping at the edge of the faded-tan vinyl floor patterned with brown windowpanes, Elizabeth placed her hands on her hips and surveyed the surroundings. The old kitchen bore witness to the fact that no feminine influence was to be found in the household. Not that the place was a pit, but the kitchen—as well as the rest of the home’s decor—lacked the simple taste that extended beyond the purview of a man’s linear thought process.

The kitchen was a lifeless yellow with flat white trim. A tool calendar from Home Depot hung from a nail above a green plastic garbage can. Askew on the wall next to the table dangled a framed poster of a snowy mountain peak. And the crowning touch: Striped blue and white café curtains that hideously clashed with the bright green and white checkerboard plastic tablecloth.

Elizabeth watched her former husband pad across the floor in his grungy white socks.

“I can offer you water, coffee, soda or juice. Had I known you were coming, I’d have stocked up on some fancy wines with names I couldn’t pronounce if my life depended on it.”

“Didn’t I already apologize for the impromptu nature of my visit?”

TJ offered Elizabeth a chair.

Feeling she'd been—somewhat—invited into his Sunday, she removed her blue jean jacket and laid it on the side of the table. She sat across from him and folded her hands. A smile played across her mouth, her sky blue eyes shimmered, and her shoulder length blonde hair framed her delicately chiseled face.

TJ wistfully gazed at her until their eyes met. “How about a bowl of chili?” he said, as he sensed his stare had been far too obvious. “Billy and I made it for the game.”

Elizabeth feigned contemplation before she said, “It pains me to decline your offer, but I had a late lunch.”

“Yeah, right. You’ve always hated my chili.” He lowered his voice. “So, were you going easy on Billy? Is there a problem?”

“No, and if there were, I’d have been up front with him. He’s been through enough and doesn’t deserve any deceit.”

“Well, good for you counselor, you’ve broken ranks with your profession and grown a heart.”

Elizabeth began to point a finger but withdrew. “Aren’t you the least bit curious as to why I’m here?”

TJ walked to the counter, grabbed a cup from a wobbly, black, wrought iron mug tree, poured a cup of thick, pungent coffee and leaned against the fake oak cupboards. “I’m more afraid than curious. But get on with it, so I can gauge the severity compared to the other encounters of our past.”

“Have you,” she cleared her throat, “followed the Robert Weborg case?”

Coffee sloshed dangerously around the rim of his cup as TJ hastily returned to the table.

“Enough to know they’ve got him boxed, and I’m sick of the media obsessing over the idiot. This town drives me crazy—they won’t let anything go. They drag it on and on and on.”

“I see you’ve developed an opinion.”

“There’s no other opinion to develop, Liz, and if he wasn’t a cop, by now nobody would give a damn.”

“Do you think he’s guilty?”

“Duh.” His eyes narrowed. “Oh my God. You’re not involved in this mess, are you?” A tense pause, then his body language transmitted relief. “Oh, sure, you represent the children. Poor kids. The agony they must be going through. First their mother gets murdered, then their father gets charged and then—”

“I don’t represent the kids,” she said softly.

He gawked in disbelief. “You represent Weborg?”

“Yes.”

This excerpt is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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