

An excerpt of Paper Hanger, by Linda Daly...

Chapter Two

THE GILDED CAGE

The silence inside the sprawling Falls Church estate was never peaceful. It carried weight, as though the house itself were listening for the slightest disturbance and deciding whether to report it. Candice Gibson had learned to move through that silence without giving it anything useful. She knew which floorboards complained beneath a careless heel, which cabinet doors required a guiding hand before they closed, and how far sound traveled from the east wing to the rooms Colin considered his private territory.

Standing before the floor-to-ceiling mirror in the master suite, she let her champagne-colored silk robe slide from her shoulders. The fabric whispered down her body and settled around her feet, leaving her exposed to the cold air Colin preferred and to a reflection she avoided whenever possible.

Her face offered no hint of what the rest of her body carried. The pale blue eyes were clear, the blonde hair arranged in the soft waves Colin liked, and the faint powder along her jaw concealed the sleeplessness that had shadowed her for years. Anyone who saw her at a Bureau reception or charity dinner would have noticed the elegant posture, the expensive clothing, and the practiced smile of a woman born to privilege. They would have seen the daughter of the late Judge Barrette and the wife of Supervisory Special Agent Colin Gibson, two names that opened doors throughout Washington.

They would not have seen the bruises.

Candice lowered her gaze to the purple and yellow marks darkening her left hip and the inside of her thighs. Three nights had passed since Colin had put them there, yet the flesh still throbbed when she moved. He had become careful with age and experience. During the first year of their marriage, he sometimes struck wherever his anger directed his hand, then blamed her for forcing him to invent excuses when someone noticed. Later, as his reputation grew and his promotions carried him into more public rooms, he learned to keep his violence beneath clothing. A split lip inspired questions. Bruises hidden under a skirt did not.

She stepped into a cream-colored skirt, drawing it slowly over the tender skin. The touch of the starched lining made her jaw tighten, but she refused to hurry. Haste caused mistakes, and mistakes had always belonged to Colin. Her survival depended upon leaving him none.

At the vanity she lifted the silver-backed hairbrush that had belonged to her mother and began drawing it through her hair. The steady motion, familiar enough to require no thought, loosened a memory she had spent years trying to contain.

Their wedding night had taken place ten years earlier in a bridal suite overlooking the Potomac. Candice had been twenty-two, newly graduated near the top of her class with a degree in criminal law, and convinced that she had married the most honorable man she

knew. Colin had courted her with old-fashioned patience. He opened doors, sent flowers to her father's chambers, and listened with flattering seriousness when she spoke about law school and the career she intended to build. He had kissed her with restraint during their engagement, presenting desire as something he respected enough to control.

The reception at the Alexandria Country Club had looked like the fulfillment of every promise made to a cherished daughter. White orchids spilled from silver bowls. Senators, judges, federal officials, and their wives raised crystal glasses beneath chandeliers that scattered light across the room. Her father had wept during the toast and called Colin the son he had always wanted. Candice had believed him. She had believed all of it.

The man who entered the bridal suite with her was not the man who had stood beside her at the altar.

Colin had been drinking throughout the reception, though he carried liquor well enough that few people would have noticed. Once the carved mahogany door closed behind them, the warmth left his expression. He no longer needed to persuade her of anything. The tenderness she expected became impatience, then anger when fear made her resist. He used his greater strength without hesitation and silenced her protests with one hand while he took what he believed marriage entitled him to take.

Hours later, Candice lay awake in the darkness, aching beneath the sheets while he slept beside her. His breathing remained deep and untroubled. She remembered staring toward the faint outline of the hotel curtains and telling herself that champagne, nerves, and exhaustion had changed him for one terrible night. By morning he would be ashamed. He would apologize. The man who had courted her would return.

He did return, but only when other people were watching.

The first blow came three weeks after the honeymoon. Candice had questioned a discrepancy in the household account after Colin demanded to know why she had spent more than expected on groceries. The conversation began with a clipped correction and ended with the back of his hand splitting her lower lip. For several seconds she stood in the kitchen too stunned to understand what had happened. Colin stared at the blood on her mouth with an expression closer to annoyance than remorse, then told her to clean herself up before the gardener saw her.

She waited until he left for the Washington field office the following morning. With one suitcase and hands that shook so badly she dropped her keys twice, she drove to her father's estate in Reston. Relief rose in her the moment the familiar house appeared beyond the trees. Her father was a federal judge, a man whose voice could quiet a courtroom and whose signature could change lives. Whatever mistake she had made in marrying Colin, Judge Barrette would correct it. He would protect his daughter.

Candice burst into his study with blood still crusted along the corner of her mouth. Her father looked up from behind his desk, and she watched horror cross his face before she had spoken a word.

"Daddy, I need your help."

She expected him to come around the desk and gather her into his arms. Instead, he hurried past her and locked the study doors.

"Where is Colin?" he asked.

“At work. He hit me.” Her voice broke as the words finally made the humiliation real. “I packed what I could. I want an annulment, and I want to go to the police before he comes looking for me.”

Her father stared at the swelling along her lip. The color drained from his face, yet the fear she saw was not for her.

“Candy, you have to go back.”

For a moment she thought she had misunderstood him. “What did you say?”

“You have to go home before he realizes you left.”

“He hit me, Daddy. Look at me.” She crossed the room and clutched the lapels of his suit, needing to force his attention onto the injury if he would not look willingly. “I am not going back there. You can stop him. You know every judge and prosecutor in this city.”

Her father seized her upper arms. His fingers dug hard enough to hurt, and his eyes darted toward the locked door as though Colin might already be standing outside it.

“You cannot go to the police. Colin knows things about me, things that would destroy my career and everything I have built. If you embarrass him publicly or attempt to leave, he will not allow you to walk away. He will kill you, Candice, and then he will kill me.”

The room seemed to tilt beneath her. Until that moment, she had believed her father's authority was as permanent as the marble columns of the courthouse. She had grown up watching powerful men wait for him to speak, and she had mistaken their deference for proof that no one could frighten him. Now the Honorable Judge Barrette stood in his own locked study, begging his injured daughter to return to the man who had beaten her because he feared what that man might reveal.

“What does he know?”

Her father released her and turned away. “It is complicated.”

“No, it isn't. Either you committed a crime or you didn't.”

He flinched at the cold legal precision in her voice. “There are decisions a man makes over the course of a long career that cannot be explained to someone who was not there.”

“Then explain them to me.”

He would not. He poured himself a drink instead, splashing scotch onto his hand because the bottle trembled against the rim of the glass.

Less than an hour later, Colin entered the study without knocking. His badge caught the lamplight as he crossed the room, immaculate in a dark suit and wearing the calm smile he reserved for witnesses who had already lost. Candice looked toward her father, still hoping for some final act of courage. Judge Barrette lowered his eyes and poured Colin a drink.

“Ready to go home, darling?” Colin asked.

His arm settled around her waist. When she did not move, his fingers found the ribs he had bruised the previous night and pressed until pain stole her breath. He never raised his voice. He did not have to.

Candice walked out beside him while her father remained in the study. The physical pain faded long before the memory of looking back and seeing the closed door.

After that day, she stopped expecting rescue.

Colin dismantled her life slowly enough that outsiders mistook the process for marriage. He discouraged friendships by humiliating her in front of guests, then complained that the

women she knew were shallow or jealous. He monitored the mileage on her Mercedes and demanded receipts for purchases down to coffee and postage. The joint bank accounts carried both names, but he held the passwords, reviewed every transaction, and gave her an allowance generous enough to maintain appearances while ensuring she could not disappear.

He also studied her. He learned which threats frightened her, which silences made her speak, and how to turn her father's corruption into a chain around both their necks. Whenever Candice raised the possibility of leaving, Colin reminded her that her father's reputation would be destroyed and that the investigation would not end with a disgraced dead judge. She could be implicated. Her degree would become worthless. Friends would recoil. Every newspaper in the country would print her photograph beside the word conspiracy.

For years she allowed him to believe those threats had reduced her to obedience. She attended Bureau dinners, stood beside him at political fundraisers, and laughed at stories she had heard many times. She learned to select dresses by the location of the newest bruise and to smile without allowing anyone close enough to recognize the effort.

What Colin mistook for surrender was study.

Candice knew the combinations he favored, the names he used when conducting business away from the Bureau, and the nights he drank heavily enough to neglect ordinary precautions. She knew which telephone calls made him close the office door and which envelopes he burned in the fireplace rather than placing in the household trash. She knew that his relationship with Agent Lauri Shipp had continued long after professional necessity could explain their late meetings, and she understood that Colin's arrogance had grown in proportion to his belief that no one inside his home possessed the courage or intelligence to question him.

He had forgotten whom he married.

Candice set the hairbrush down and checked the small gold watch at her wrist. It was 1:15 in the afternoon. Colin had left nearly two hours earlier, claiming he and Lauri were conducting surveillance connected to an organized-crime investigation. His overnight bag had not gone with him, which meant he intended to return before morning. Still, the combination of a safehouse, Lauri, and Colin's appetite for secrecy should keep him occupied for several hours.

Several hours were more than she needed.

She put on the matching cream jacket, smoothed the lapels, and studied herself one final time. The suit made her look composed, respectable, and untroubled, precisely the appearance expected of a woman meeting a jeweler's business associate at Fair Oaks Mall to discuss a gift for her husband. Jake Spencer had arranged the appointment after telling her that his out-of-state partner, Mr. Vittelli, could show her pieces not yet available in the store. Candice had accepted because the meeting provided a credible reason to be away from the house until late afternoon.

She had another appointment first.

Leaving the master suite, Candice crossed the upstairs hall and descended the grand staircase without touching the rail. The formal rooms below were arranged for admiration rather than use. Fresh flowers stood beneath museum lighting, books selected by a decorator

filled shelves no one read, and the white furniture in the living room remained as untouched as the photographs of Colin and Candice smiling from silver frames. The house was beautiful in the way a locked display case was beautiful. Everything valuable had been placed where it could be seen, and none of it was free.

She continued into the east wing and stopped before Colin's office.

The oak door was the only interior door secured by a deadbolt. Colin had installed it himself after dismissing two locksmiths whose questions irritated him. He kept the key on the same ring as his Bureau credentials, either in his pocket or on the nightstand beside him. For years, Candice had regarded the room as the physical center of his power. Whatever he feared losing, whatever tied him to her father and to Rick Kingsly, was kept behind that door.

Six months earlier, she had begun planning how to enter it.

The first step cost less than five dollars. At a pharmacy across town, Candice bought a child's modeling-clay kit with cash, along with greeting cards and toiletries so the purchase would appear ordinary. She hid one unopened block inside an old sewing basket and waited.

Two weeks later, Colin returned from a celebration following the arrest of a trafficking suspect. He drank in the limousine, continued drinking in his office, and finished the evening in bed with his shirt half unbuttoned and his keys tossed carelessly onto the nightstand. Candice waited until his breathing deepened, then pressed the office key into the softened clay. She worked in darkness, guided by touch, and returned the keyring to the exact angle at which it had fallen.

Obtaining the copy required more care. When Colin later asked her to collect a newly tailored suit in Fairfax, she recognized the opportunity. She left Sherry's Tailoring with the suit hanging behind the passenger seat, then drove to a shopping center where a Mexican restaurant shared a parking lot with Metro Locksmith. From the car she called Colin's voicemail and reported that she had completed the errand. Afterward, she put on a dark wig and oversized sunglasses, entered the restaurant, ordered iced tea, and crossed the lot through a side exit.

The locksmith barely looked at her. He examined the clay impression, selected a blank, and cut the key while speaking to another customer about a storm expected later that week. Candice paid cash, returned through the restaurant, collected her untouched drink, and used the drive-through lane to discard the wig, sunglasses, and paper receipt in an overflowing trash bin. The brass duplicate went into the hollow compartment of an old eyeshadow case she kept beneath ordinary cosmetics in her purse.

Since then, she had carried it through dinners, charity events, and nights spent beneath Colin's roof, waiting for a moment when opening the door was worth the risk.

That moment had arrived.

Candice removed the eyeshadow case from her purse and released the false bottom with her thumbnail. The key lay beneath a thin square of felt. She held it between two fingers and listened.

No car moved along the circular drive. The kitchen refrigerator hummed at the far end of the house, and somewhere inside the walls an air-conditioning duct contracted with a faint metallic tick. Otherwise, the estate remained still.

She inserted the key.

For the first time since making the copy, fear threatened the steadiness of her hand. If Colin returned and found her inside, bruises would be the least of what followed. He would not risk another escape attempt or trust that intimidation could contain whatever she had seen. A shot to the head during an alleged break-in would be easy for a decorated federal agent to explain, especially one surrounded by colleagues prepared to accept his version of events.

Candice tightened her fingers and turned the key.

The deadbolt withdrew with a heavy click.

She slipped through the opening, closed the door behind her, and locked it again. The office smelled of leather, lemon oil, cigar smoke, and the sharp gun solvent Colin used at his desk. Dark paneling covered the walls. Framed commendations and photographs presented an orderly history of service: Colin beside senators, Colin accepting an award from the Bureau director, Colin shaking hands with police chiefs and prosecutors. His career surrounded her in polished wood and gold lettering, every plaque another layer of protection between the public hero and the man she knew.

Candice ignored them.

The desk drawers contained the records he expected an intruder to find: case notes, financial statements, household documents, and correspondence bearing official seals. The important material was kept in the reinforced filing cabinet behind the desk. Its bottom drawer held a leather portfolio secured by a three-number combination lock.

Colin believed the combination belonged only to him. Months earlier, Candice had watched his reflection in the hallway mirror while he opened the portfolio. He shielded the lock with his body, but his shoulders moved subtly as his fingers turned the dial. She repeated the sequence later until the pattern made sense.

Four. Seven. Two.

The clasps opened.

Inside lay a thick stack of shipping manifests, customs forms, insurance documents, and incorporation records. Candice carried them to the desk and began reading. Her legal training took over, separating ordinary language from concealment. Dates repeated across unrelated companies. Restoration costs exceeded declared values. Goods described vaguely as canvases, decorative panels, or antique frames moved through freight handlers with no visible relationship to art. Several shipments traveled through shell companies registered in Panama, the Cayman Islands, and Aruba.

She reached a manifest dated three weeks earlier.

Item Twelve: Oil on canvas, seascape. Restoration of severe edge fraying. Declared insured value: \$1.2 million.

The description was deliberately bland, but the routing information was not. The shipment originated with a private storage company outside Boston, passed through a Virginia restoration firm that appeared nowhere in Colin's legitimate financial records, and ended with a holding company in Oranjestad.

Candice read it again.

A seascape. A Degas sketch listed on another page. Unusual movements of insured art beginning in the same year Colin shot his former partner and dismantled what the Bureau described as a counterfeiting operation. Her father's unexplained meetings with men who entered through the service drive. The fear in his study. The secrecy that had survived his death.

The year had been 1990, the same year thieves entered the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and disappeared with works whose value was almost impossible to calculate.

Candice lowered herself into Colin's chair because her knees no longer trusted her weight.

“My God,” she whispered. “You took the art.”