

The Judge's Wife Part 4

by Daniel Harris

Three Months Later

Margaux, still in her exercise gear, and the judge dressed in a suit, sat in the breakfast nook of their Sarasota home. The judge was reading the local newspaper.

—Margaux, are you going to Jack Mahler's studio today?

—No, I have an organizational meeting for the half-marathon on Siesta Key this afternoon. Jack doesn't make art in the mornings, he writes.

—Well, I think you're spending too much time with Jack. My intuition tells me that everything is not all art when you visit. And my intuition is nearly always correct.

And my intuition is nearly always correct, said Margaux to herself, in chorus with the judge. For most of the twenty years that he had been a judge, that was his mantra. It drove her and their children away from him.

—Well, are you having an affair with Jack Mahler? he asked, searching her face for any giveaway signs.

—Of course not. Don't be silly. Jack's a happily married man. Why would you say that, other than your intuition?

—Mrs. Mahler came to see me at the courthouse. She wants me to keep you away from her husband. She suspects you and Jack Mahler are having an affair.

—Did you tell Mrs. Mahler that you are paying Jack \$10,000 to make the statue of me? That as the subject of the statue, Jack needs me available for modeling. Do you still want the statue?

—Of course, but I don't want you becoming his convenient mistress. It's detrimental to my reputation as a judge for my wife to be carousing with another man.

—Look, I've slept in our bed every night of our marriage.

The judge gave her his best judge's ray over his reading glasses and took a sip of coffee.

—The opprobrium of your transgressions is palpable, said the judge. Everyone can see it in your face and body language. You're having an affair with Jack Mahler. It's obvious to anyone who sees you.

He folded the newspaper and pushed his chair back.

—I have to go to court. I want you to move to our Santa Fe house and stay there until Mahler delivers that statue. He has to have enough sketches and photographs to finish the job. I don't need rumors and innuendo about my wife circulating in the community. I overheard two court stenographers gossiping about you and Jack Mahler. Make plans to stay in Santa Fe until Jack is finished with the statue. I'll be coming out to ski over Christmas recess.

Margaux watched the judge's back as he walked to the garage. She was starting to hate the man. She was weary of his overbearing manner. While he was a good provider and could be a good companion, their marriage was dry. After Liz was born, their sex life declined to zero. The judge became a prudish middle-aged epebe. His vanity was boundless; so much so, that now she wondered if maybe her husband was a closet gay and using her and their children as a foil. She shook her head. That couldn't be true, or could it?

Theirs had been a happy marriage before her husband became a judge. He had been the youngest partner in the law firm where he worked. They had money for two get-away homes. Their children were healthy, talented and good students. It was the "perfect" marriage and family. Then the bar nominated him for a judgeship and the governor appointed him. It was a political move on the governor's part to thwart her husband's political ambitions. Since his appointment, he handily won every retention election. He would probably serve for another nine years. He'd then be seventy and required by state law to retire. He would retire to a plum position in a big law firm.

She cleared the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. Standing in the shower, she thought about Jack's hands on her body. She made up her mind to visit Jack after the meeting on Siesta Key.

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Jack was modeling Margaux's head in clay when he heard a car in the driveway. He looked and saw it was Margaux's Honda. She wore a colorful full-length peasant dress and sandals.

He was washing the clay off his hands as Margaux walked through the door. He dried his hands and turned to embrace her.

—Why do I miss you so much? said Margaux, relishing his embrace.

—Because you make me so happy, said Jack.

After the initial greeting, Margaux sat on a stool opposite Jack's worktable.

—You look troubled, said Jack.

—This morning the judge said your wife came and told him that you and I were having an affair. He's sending me to our Santa Fe house.

—When?

—Soon. He said he would talk about it tonight. Tonight is his poker night, so I'll be asleep when he comes home. I'm not looking forward to this.

Two police cars pulled into the driveway. There was a detective and uniformed officer in each car. One of the uniformed officers knocked on the open door frame.

—May we come in? asked the uniformed officer from the doorway

—Of course, said Jack.

—Are you Jack Mahler? asked one of the detectives, flashing his shield. He held a piece of paper in his left hand.

—Yes. What is this all about?

—We have a judicial restraining order forbidding any contact between Jack Mahler and Margaux Howland. Are you Mrs. Howland, asked the detective, knowing full well she was Margaux Howland.

—Yes, I am, but I didn't file a restraining order against Jack.

—Mrs. Jack Mahler filed the complaint.

—This can't be real, said Jack, who felt a tightening in the pit of his stomach. Why is my wife filing a restraining order against Mrs. Howland? What are the charges?

—Sexual predation with intent to defraud.

—Are you kidding me? said Jack.

—I'm afraid not. Mrs. Howland will have to leave immediately. Jack Mahler, you are not to contact Margaux Howland. And you, Margaux Howland, are not to contact Jack Mahler, either in person, by telephone, e-mail, text or by United States mail until this order is lifted.

—What the ... I don't believe this, said Jack. How can the order be lifted?

—Usually by court action, like a divorce or challenge in a court of law.

—Mrs. Howland, you have to leave now.

—Show me the order, said Margaux, reaching out to take the paper.

—Not so fast. I'll read it.

The detective read the order out loud. It was very clear.

Margaux ran into Jack's arms. She began to cry, then sob. She clutched Jack's body. Jack tried to soothe her.

—Easy, Margaux, I'll get to the bottom of this, said Jack, rubbing her upper back.

Jack's brain was in overdrive. Who put his wife up to this? It had to be the judge. The bastard was using his influence to get the family court to issue the order. How can a fifty-five-year-old woman be a sexual predator against a healthy seventy-year-old man? This was all madness. But the cops were only the messengers. Arguing with them was futile and might lead to an arrest on more serious charges.

—Please, Margaux, said the detective, don't make this more difficult than it needs to be. Release Mr. Mahler and come with me. I'll let you say your good-byes for five minutes, then get in your car and drive away. If you're not outside in five minutes, I will cuff you and take you to the police station.

The four men left the studio, but stood with their backs to the couple just outside the open door.

—Jack, what the hell are we going to do? whispered Margaux, trying to regain her composure. The judge is on the warpath, and now your wife has gotten a restraining order. I'll bet the judge suggested this to your wife's lawyer.

—Don't panic. I'll work on this. If we make a scene here, it won't go over well later. I'll figure something out. I love you. It will all work out.

—I love you too, Jack. Don't do anything foolish. The judge is a powerful man in this community.

—Here wipe your tears and blow your nose, said Jack, giving Margaux a small packet of tissues.

—One last hug, said Margaux.

—This won't be our last hug. I guarantee it. I'll be hugging you again soon enough.

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Santa Fe, New Mexico

Margaux watched Carlos, the Peruvian gardener, trim the hedge along the adobe walls of her Santa Fe home. Carlos was a middle-aged Amazonian Indian, who was married to Maria, a Zapotec woman from Oaxaca, who was a potter. Her reputation was based on her artful anthropomorphic pots. Her pottery studio was a popular Santa Fe tourist destination. Carlos had an encyclopedic knowledge of plants and had an uncanny ability to take a dusty, barren yard and turn it into a lush high-desert garden.

There were stories among some of the longtime residents that Carlos was a Brujo, a spirit man. Margaux was not a believer in those things, but the native peoples and some of the Latinos in the area would seek out Carlos to cure illness, infertility, settle disputes, and to communicate with the departed. It was said that Carlos could change himself into animals and spirits, but Margaux didn't think that was true, probably only the hallucinogenic flashbacks of peyote users.

—Mrs. Howland, said Carlos, walking up to the patio to where she was sitting at a table reading. Have you seen rabbits in your yard?

—Yes, Carlos. They usually come in the evening. I notice they like to nibble on my plants.

—They are very destructive.

—How do I keep them out of my garden?

—Coyote urine. Works every time.

—Where do I find that? I don't think it's legal to capture a coyote, much less chain him up in my garden?

—I will bring some tomorrow.

—Where do you get it?

—I ask the coyote.

Margaux laughed.

—You're telling me you'll ask a coyote to pee into a jar?

Suddenly Margaux shrieked and put her hands up to her face. For a fraction of a second, she thought she saw Carlos's head change into the head of a coyote with a lolling tongue dripping saliva.

—Did I frighten you, Mrs. Howland?

—Well, I don't know, she said, her heart still raced from the vision and the adrenaline rush. I can't explain what happened. It's too crazy to say even, but it frightened me.

—Don't be afraid.

—You have to know that I've heard rumors that you are some kind of sorcerer.

—I'm only a gardener, Mrs. Howland. I use my knowledge of plants to cure sick people. Only that.

That night a coyote howling in her garden woke Margaux from a deep sleep. When she looked out the window, she did not see a coyote. Strangely, none of the neighborhood dogs barked.

To be continued.

