



It is the duty of an attorney to do all of the following: To maintain inviolate the confidence, and at every peril to himself or herself, to preserve the secrets of his or her client.-
Business & Professional Code

Prologue

He hung his head out the window like a dog on a Sunday drive. The whipping wind roared in his ears and slicked back his long hair, baring a wide high forehead. His eyes narrowed, squinting against the force of hot air hitting 75 miles an hour.

Sinister. That's how he looked. Like he could take anyone down.

Women could fall at his feet and he wouldn't give two cents even if they were naked. That's the kind of man he was. But if they were naked, he'd give 'em a grin for sure.

"Hah!" he laughed once, but it was more of a shout, just to make sure he was still alive and kickin'.

He was feeling neither here nor there. He had a woman. She didn't make him happy.

Thinking about her, he stepped on the gas and the ribbon of road blurred, turning molten under his wheels. The asphalt was hot as hell; still steaming, though the day had been done for hours.

Hot! Hot! Good when you're with a woman, bad when you're in the desert.

Lord, that was funny. True things were the biggest kick of all.

But damn if this wasn't the most lonesome strip of land in all New Mexico and him a lonesome cowboy ridin' it on the back of some hunkin' old steed. Cowboys were the good guys. Had a code to live by, guns to carry. And cows and horses, they just needed a stick in the ribs, a kick in the rear to get 'em going. No need to talk. No questions. No answers.

Do you feel happy? Sad? What are you feeling now? Good. Good. You 'll be going home soon.

Do you feel anxious? You're so quiet. Do you feel? Good. Good.

He was hot like a stovetop. Hot like a pot about to boil and damn if he wasn't sitting right on the burner, all these thoughts in his head making his lid start to dance. He'd blow the top of his head right off and out would tumble all those good jokes, and lines that would make women weep. Hot damn. Make 'em weep.

He shook his head hard and wrapped one hand tighter around the steering wheel while he pushed farther out the window, head and shoulders now. The old car swerved but he got it back on track, straight on that dotted line.

He loved those dotted lines. Man perforating the world. A place to rip it in half. Tear here. Send the part with him on it back for a refund.

He shook his head like the dog he was pretending to be. His lips went slack and he heard them flapping, even over the noise of the wind. What an ugly sound and he wasn't an ugly guy. So he turned into the wind and it blew his head empty. When he turned it back, the hot air ran straight at him and made his eyes tear.

Life was wonderful again. Television a blessing. Doctors cured themselves of cancer with a thought. Smart and fancy women could be had with a smile and a wink.

Damn, life was good.

It had taken a while but he was cookin'. He was the most scrumptious thing on the menu. "Whoeee!" he hollered, and the wind lashed that sound around and threw it right back at him as he hung his head out the window. He pulled it back inside just a snail's trail before the semi whizzed by.

He thought about that close call and making love and a cigarette all at the same time. The close call was past so he tossed aside the image of his head rolling around on the asphalt. His lady was a pain in the ass, so thinking about her was idiotic. The cigarette, though, he could do something about that.

Two fingers burrowed into his shirt pocket. He was already tasting that first good drag and swore he could feel that swirly smoke deep in his lungs. But the pack was empty and crinkled under his fingers. His smile was gone. He didn't feel like hollerin' anymore.

Two hands slapped atop the steering wheel and he drove with his eyes straight forward on the lonely road. He just wanted one lousy cigarette.

But anger wasn't right. He plastered a grin on his face. The new him. New and improved. He accelerated down the four-lane, singing at the top of his lungs in a voice that he was almost sure didn't belong to him. It was too smooth.

Smooth like the turn of the wheel, the slide of the stop he made four miles down. He was still singing when he palmed the keys and unwound his long legs, and stood like a rock 'n' roll god in a pool of fluorescent light at the Circle K convenience store.

He took a minute to admire himself in the side mirror. He didn't like the way his dirty ice eyes looked, so he admired the night sky. Nothing like these black New Mexico nights. Stars as plentiful as rice at a weddin'. He tucked in his shirt so he looked really good. Handsome.

Damn, life was fine.

Whistling softly, he moved on. Pushing open the glass door, he stepped inside, surprised at how vibrant everything seemed now that he was straight. Michelle Pfeiffer looked like she could just walk right off the cover of *People* and give him a little hug. The Slurpy machine's neon blue and pink letters quivered as if overjoyed to be colored pink and blue.

He ambled over to the register. Little Fourth of July flags were taped all over the place: flags next to the Smokey Joe Hot Salami Sticks, flags wavin' over the stale donuts under the Plexiglas counter box, flags pokin' out of the almost-hidden condom place on the shelf behind the counter.

Hot damn! Independence Day. He almost forgot. Good day for him. He did what he liked, when he liked; no one around to tell him anything. Only his cowboy conscience, only his roamin' man code, to keep him in line.

The smokes were neatly stacked on a metal thing above the counter. He looked for the Camels. Left, third row down. Filters one row lower than that. It was the same at every Circle K. What a mind! He could remember everything.

He wandered toward the counter, put his hands atop it, and peered over, half expecting a pimply-faced clerk to pop up like a stupid kid's toy. Nobody. Just worn linoleum, a wad of gum stuck to it turning black. Great. He could take a pack. Just reach up and be on his way. But he knew right from wrong. He wanted to follow the rules and felt bad when he didn't. It took a while sometimes for that feeling to happen, but it always did.

Then he saw her.

She was fixing coffee at the big urn right next to the two-for-ninety-nine-cent burgers in those shiny gold and silver wrappers behind the glass, under the red lights that never kept the damn things hot. Whooooee, he loved those burgers.

The woman was another matter. He could tell what kind of woman she was right off: fat and fussy. She was wearing a stupid little Uncle Sam hat that didn't fit. The store manager probably made her wear it, but he still hated it. She should have some pride. He hated her. She didn't even care he'd come in. She was supposed to care.

Hop to it. A little service here.

With that thought, the heat caught up with him. Just exploded his head like a potato too long in the fire. This time it wasn't funny. This time he felt sick. The lights were too bright. Too much pain inside his head. Hand out, he found the door and pushed it hard, his other hand held tight to his temple.

The heat smacked him good when he walked out of the white light and frigid air of the store and back into the desert night. He pressed his temple harder as he walked to the car and got in.

He checked himself in the rearview mirror. His hair was a mess. He'd feel better if he looked better. Get the comb. He leaned over to the glove compartment thinking his head would split wide open, and laced his hands around the first thing he found. It was cool and it was metal and he held it to his head.

No comb. He needed a comb. Maybe that damn clerk would notice the second time he walked into her store and sell him some smokes and a comb. Then he'd feel better.

He looked through the window of that Circle K again. She was still making coffee. Ignoring him. He needed a cigarette bad. He needed a comb and now he needed some aspirin. He hurt so bad he could cry and she was just standing there making coffee.

Inside again he turned right, and walked up to the woman who was putting the big lid on top of the huge steel urn that would brew coffee for whoever it was that might come to a godforsaken place like this in the middle of the night. He walked right up to her and she felt him coming because she turned around. Her eyes were hazel and real clear and he saw himself in those eyes, reflected back the way people saw him.

Hot damn, he was a good lookin' cowboy.

And when he smiled at himself, she smiled right back. She didn't have a clue. They never did.

Chapter One

Tara Linley was the last of a long line: a family that had started with the Indians and bred with the Spanish until the Anglos put in their two cents over the course of a hundred years. Her cheekbones and blue-black hair were a legacy of the ancient pueblo dwellers. Her tawny skin was a credit to her great-great-grandfather, Juan Montero. The blue eyes were Irish, but had never gazed upon the Emerald Isle. Old family photos showed a succession of handsome women to whom credit could be given for her height and slim-hipped, lush-chested figure.

From her mother, an artist, came Tara's spare sense of style and her love of home and hearth. From her father came Tara's confidence, but not his fondness for power and prestige. Her mother had died before Tara could talk. Her father had raised her until his death. The law was her sister, politics her brother, and both were poor excuses for family but Tara hardly noticed.

Now her father was dead, and at times like this, she felt his absence so keenly it hurt. He would have been sad to see her alone. For all his success, the most important thing in his life had been his daughter. She missed his friendship and his counsel, especially now when Albuquerque was changing and she was standing still.

On the North Rio Grande, horrid East Coast clapboard mansions were being constructed by immigrant yuppies, springing up faster than Tara could blink. The interlopers planted trees and bushes imported from parts of the country where water was less valued and more readily available. They complained of the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter, leading one to wonder why they chose to live there in the first place. Thankfully for Tara, all was not lost.

The glorious Sandias, mountains that had stood watch over this land since the beginning of time, remained stalwart: pink and surreal in the sunset, formidable in the light of day. Real New Mexicans preferred to live properly on the land, respecting it as they blended into their surroundings. Here, in Tara's Albuquerque, adobe houses with their flat roofs and long porches, low walls and weathered gates were the norm; brush, sage, and cottonwoods the natural landscaping. Wreaths of chilies still hung on front doors. And, five days into the new year, Christmas luminaria still lined roofs and walls, lighting the way of Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

Tara's home was like these. It had been in the Linley family for generations, on land they had claimed when a neighbor was the person a hundred miles to the south. The souls of all those who had gone before still dwelt in the walls, looked out of the deep-set windows, held tight to the heavy beams that crossed her ceiling, and warmed themselves by the cavernous fireplaces. Each ancestor had added something more to the original structure: a barn, a small nursery (now her office,) a corral, the lean-to by the river, a guesthouse. Her

home was Tara's reward for a young life at the mercy of politics, spent in cities so alien they might have been half a world away. She loved this house and the tradition and the stability of her life.

She hated change, but her life was changing. Carlos, the man who had tended the Linley land for as long as she could remember, was needed elsewhere to deal with family business. He had stood on this porch, hat in hand, explaining how it was.

Tara watched him drive away. She pulled the blanket she had thrown over her shoulders tighter even though she couldn't see the truck any longer. It had been an awkward conversation, since Carlos was a man of few words, but already she missed him.

She poked her hand out from beneath the blanket and looked at the note he'd given her. Neatly printed were the phone number of the place he'd be in Arizona, and the name of the boy who would come to take care of her horse for the duration: Joseph. She hoped he would be as good as Carlos said. She knew he wouldn't be.

"Tara, hon? Where do you want the gold ornaments?"

Tara closed the door and sloughed off the blanket. She'd half forgotten she wasn't alone. Folding the blanket as she went, Tara entered the living room just as Charlotte finished packing the gold ornaments from the tree into the wrong box. Charlotte looked up and smiled with prettily bowed, very pink lips.

"Is this the right box?"

"Sure." Tara tossed the blanket onto the couch and took over the dismantling of the Christmas tree. "You shouldn't do that. I don't want you to get messed up before— wherever it is you're going."

"The high school. Woodrow's giving a speech. Reception afterward so he can listen to everyone's complaints." Charlotte waved a cigarette, unapologetic for her displeasure at the upcoming event. "You don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

"Woodrow thinks you quit," Tara said. Charlotte arched one well-defined eyebrow. "All right. Your secret's safe with me." With her hands full of strung chilies, Tara nodded toward the fireplace. "There's a lighter over there."

"Don't think I need one." Charlotte snapped open her purse. "Oops, wrong."

She was across the room in three long steps. Tall, slender and substantial. She was a doer, and a perfect political wife for Woodrow. Charlotte could sit with her ankles daintily crossed for hours, or run roughshod over a room full of volunteers until they dropped from licking too many envelopes.

They'd known each other since high school, and Charlotte Weber still intrigued Tara Linley with her single-mindedness and generosity. Thankfully, she always managed to get what she wanted, too.

The cigarette was lit, the first drag taken, and Charlotte was happy.

"Oh that tastes good." She leaned back against the huge fireplace. "You know, I still can't figure out how you managed when you were a kid. Keeping up with the schedule of a man in public life is difficult even for an adult. Knowing what to say, when to say it, what to do..." Another drag and a thoughtful expulsion of a spirit of smoke. "But you followed your father around through three federal appointments and an elected office. That was a big career for a man on his own with a little girl." The next puff was more perfunctory. "The gang and I didn't sympathize very much. We went out cruising while you hung out at the high school watching him give speeches."

"I liked being with him. I didn't need any sympathy." Tara pulled a box toward her with her toe and laid the dried chilies in a nest of tissue paper. The mislabeled gold ornaments went in after.

"Yes, you did. You're just too proud to admit it," Charlotte said.

"Okay, a little would have been nice." Tara grinned. "Happy to know you were right?"

"No. I like guilt," Charlotte sniffed.

"You've never felt guilty in your life." Tara laughed.

"You're right. But it's only because I've never really done anything to feel guilty about."

Charlotte put her hand to her neck, tired of rehashing history and uninterested in delving into her psyche. "Do you think these pearls are too much?"

Tara looked over her shoulder and shook her head. "No, they're fine. You look like you could take over the governor's mansion tomorrow. Hand me those scissors, will you?"

Charlotte looked around, tossed what was left of her cigarette into the fireplace, and grabbed the scissors off the mantle. Though she handed them to Tara, her eyes were locked on the cards neatly displayed on the rough-hewn wooden mantle.

"You got one too, I see," Charlotte said evenly.

"What?"

"Ben's announcement." This time her voice was flat. Tara's snipping stopped but she remained stooped over the box. Finally, pulling a piece of tape across the seam, she sealed it tight.

"I think everyone did," she said. "I saw Charlie in court the other day and he mentioned getting one. No big deal."

"It might not be a big deal to Charlie," Charlotte said, conversationally nudging the opening into Tara's private life wider. "But he kept in touch with Ben. You haven't."

Tara nodded and lifted the box, neatly stacking it on the one she had managed to pack before Charlotte arrived thirty minutes early. It gave her an excuse for not looking Charlotte in the eye. She could kick herself for even bothering to display that card.

"He sent flowers when Dad passed last year. He was in Los Angeles, I think. Didn't even mention coming back. Not that there's any reason he should. It's been over twenty years."

Tara straightened and put her hands on the small of her back. She smiled at Charlotte.

There was less sparkle and more strain in her expression. "Look, I've just about had it for tonight. You can toss those Christmas cards in the fire. At least the mantle will be cleared. I'll finish packing up the tree tomorrow."

"You don't want to save Ben's card, just in case?" Charlotte ignored her given task and fingered the red card resplendent with gold cherubs, one with its hand on the other's breast. Ben always did have a subtle, but healthy, libido. Fleetinglly Charlotte wondered if it was still intact. If someone like him could even manage to—

Tara interrupted her thought. "No. Thank you very much. And if I hear another word about it, I won't go to your fund raiser tomorrow night."

Charlotte quietly put the card back. "In that case, I'm out of here." Charlotte gathered her things, the subject of Ben Crawford closed. She glanced in the mirror above the hearth, gave her St. John suit a tug, and grinned. "I'm really sorry I couldn't stay longer. I hate leaving you alone tonight of all nights."

"Not the first birthday I've been alone. Besides, Caroline took me out to lunch and the court reporters sent flowers to the office. Two judges even remembered. The bouquet you

brought was icing on the cake, and I'm thrilled you thought of me, considering how much you have to do tonight."

"It was nothing," Charlotte said, lifting her chin a tad. Tara leaned in for an air kiss and walked her friend to the door.

"Tell Woodrow hello for me and wish him luck."

"Certainly will," Charlotte murmured, her spouse voice fully in force, her face closing, changing into the public one that no one could read but every voter loved. When she looked up, her smile was in place and wouldn't droop until the last reporter had left the high school. Tara had long since ceased to be amazed. She'd watched those in public life morph since she was ten. It was an art she'd never perfected.

"Night then." Tara opened the door and shivered. It was a cold, clear January night. The last place she wanted to be was in the high school auditorium listening to Woodrow Weber wax poetic on various and sundry political agendas.

"We could meet you for a late dinner and celebrate," Charlotte offered.

Tara shook her head, too quickly. "No, thanks. I'll see you tomorrow. Where is it again? What shall I wear?"

"La Posada Hotel. Right after work. Everyone will be in suit and tie. Do me a favor. Wear a dress instead of pants. I'm going to put you in front of the cameras with Woodrow and your legs are fabulous," Charlotte said. Suddenly, her arms were around Tara. "Wish us luck tonight."

"Of course." Tara patted Charlotte lightly then held her away. "I always do, you know that."

"He just wants it so much, Tara," Charlotte said quietly.

"I know."

What else could she say? Woodrow was a politician. There was always hurt for the women who loved that sort. Hurt and joy. Rejection and acceptance. It was all the luck of the draw, the whim of the people. Thank goodness her fortunes were dependent only on her actions. Charlotte's public face had slipped. She took a moment to put it in place.

"All you can do is your best, Charlotte," Tara reminded her. Charlotte fingered her purse as if the thought made her nervous.

"I know. I guess I just keep thinking there's more somehow."

"There isn't. Just keep smiling. That's what the voters want."

"Guess you should know. See you tomorrow. Happy birthday."

With that, Charlotte was gone in a cloud of lavender perfume. Tara closed the door with a chuckle, picked up the mail that the cleaning lady had laid neatly on the hall table, and wandered back to the living room.

Bills, an invitation to speak at a women's conference in Taos, a letter from Franklin, the last in her short list of lovers, and the dearest. She opened that envelope swearing she smelled his aftershave as she pulled out the card. Franklin was getting married. Good for him. He would make some woman a marvelous husband. At one time she thought she might have walked down the aisle with him. But Franklin wanted to live in the bustle of New York, and Tara clung to her Albuquerque roots, unlike many of her friends and family. Those she had liked, and some she had loved, had left. But now Ben was back and that wasn't something Tara had counted on in this lifetime. Thankfully, Albuquerque had grown. They wouldn't be running into one another anytime soon.

Impulsively, Tara stepped up to the mantle and gathered the Christmas cards into a haphazard stack. They were in the fire, curling at the edges, before she could think twice.

The red card with the gold cherubs was the first to go. Watching awhile longer, Tara finally turned away. Knowing Ben was close again made her feel lonelier than ever. She didn't want to question the choices she'd made, not on this particular birthday, anyway. Feeling antsy, Tara went to her bedroom, and peeled off her sweater and her too-short-for-court skirt. She pulled on her jeans, tossed on a flannel shirt, tied back her hair, and grabbed her denim jacket. A night ride was in order. Shinin' would love it as much as she. Tara tugged her boots on, groaning with the effort, and heard a knock on the front door at the same time. Her heels sounding an echo on the tiled floor, Tara flipped on the lights in the living room and reached for the doorknob. Charlotte must have forgotten something. She pulled on the huge knob. Impossible to fling, the massive door opened slowly but it wasn't Charlotte who waited on the other side.

"Surprise!"

"Oh, my God," Tara breathed, sagging against the door, her forehead resting on the thick wood. She lifted her head.

"You didn't think I'd forget did you, Tara?" The woman on the doorstep burst into Tara Linley's house, handing over a bouquet of roses that had half hidden her, pressing on Tara a magnum of champagne. "God, if you only knew what it took to get here! You have no idea. I swear. Happy, happy, happy, you old broad, you!"

Tara laughed as Donna Ecold filled every available bit of space with her gifts, her chatter, her laughter, and her presence.

"I don't care what it took to get here. I'm just glad you made it." Tara kissed her friend's cheek, holding her shoulder as if she were afraid she might flit away.

"Of course you are, my love," Donna trilled. "I knew you'd be bummed. Everyone is bummed when they hit forty. So here I am, to get you through your birthday crisis."

Donna chattered, but not without noticing that Tara wasn't listening any longer. The tall woman's face had fallen to a look of bewilderment. Donna looked over her shoulder and giggled. She flung her arm around Tara's waist, pulled her close, and gave her a little squeeze.

"Okay, so it's a little more than me, myself, and I. Tara Linley, this is Bill Hamilton. Bill, this is my very, very best friend in all the world. The smartest woman you'll ever meet. The best attorney on the face of the earth, Tara Linley."

Donna's little head swiveled from one person to the other. Her grin could have lit up Albuquerque from one December to the next, but its radiance was lost on Tara. Her eyes were locked with Bill Hamilton's and she had the strangest feeling that she should shut the door before he stepped over her threshold.

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