

In the shadow world of black-market kidneys, a single mother and FBI agent faces a terrible choice. Can she conspire with the killers she is investigating to get her daughter a kidney? What is she willing to do to save her daughter's life?

Mortal Choice

A Medical Mystery

by David Shactman

Order the complete book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13961.html?s=pdf)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13961.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



MORTAL CHOICE

A MEDICAL MYSTERY

DAVID SHACTMAN

Copyright © 2025 David Shactman

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-959622-55-0

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-959622-56-7

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-960-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2025

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Shactman, David

Mortal Choice by David Shactman

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025901119

Prologue

Cassandra

The most unlikely event can shake the ground beneath you and change how you see the world. It can compel you to make choices that might otherwise seem distasteful or immoral— especially if such an event involves the life of your child. I know, for that is how my story begins.

I had taken my daughter, Keri, to visit her grandmother in rural Alabama. My mother still lived out in the country in her old cottage with the faded asphalt shingles and sagging front porch. The double hung windows, crooked and halfway open in the summer heat, were the same ones that used to rattle as I slept in my little girl's bed. The kitchen had one of those wooden screen doors with a rusty metal spring that closed like a slap in the face. It was that noise I heard when Keri scampered in from the back yard yelling, "Mommy, I have to go potty."

I led her to the bathroom and watched as the little girl sat on the old wooden toilet seat. Her tiny tush was not wide enough to stretch across, so she held herself up with both hands on the sides of the seat. I can still see her in my mind, my precious six-year-old; pastel blue shorts bunched around her ankles; big brown eyes set over a little snub nose; tawny brown hair falling in tangled curls down the sides of her cheeks. When she smiled, the corners of her mouth turned up, revealing tiny, white teeth. Her laugh was an innocent, joyous giggle. Less than four feet tall, she weighed only forty-two pounds, but my happy little girl was a bundle of energy.

In her tinny, high-pitched voice, she was singing a song from *Sesame Street*. Neither of us had looked down into the toilet bowl. We hadn't noticed the black head of a pit viper just below the surface of the

water. It must have slithered into the old, galvanized pipe from the septic tank in the back yard. Yes, it happens. There was an episode from *Inside Edition*, the television program, about a North Carolina man who found six snakes in his toilet over a four-year period.

The snake—a long, skinny, black, water moccasin—had wriggled all the way from the back yard to the toilet. The heat-sensitive pits between its eyes must have detected warmth from Keri's behind. Its pea-sized brain would have registered danger; a threat looming inches above its head. But the serpent was probably hungry, foraging for food, and not about to go away.

Innocent of the danger, I left the door open and went into the adjacent room to make the bed. I have played it through my mind a thousand times, imagining what happened next. The tip of its snout must have quietly broken the surface of the water. Then, uncoiling, rising through the space between the basin and Keri's behind, the serpent's head would have emerged above the toilet seat pausing midway between my little girl's thighs.

Keri was sitting on the seat singing, her head bobbing up and down with the melody. Suddenly, she must have looked down and spotted the triangular head of the black snake, its upper body coiled like a backward "s," its beady eyes, vertical like a cat, staring at her naked belly. Sensing danger, the snake would have opened its jaws displaying its bright white "Cotton" mouth. That must have been when Keri screamed and jumped off the seat. But the sudden movement would have spooked the snake, who could thrust its head much quicker than my tiny girl could rise off the seat. It struck her in the belly, penetrating her skin, injecting its poisonous venom into her abdomen. "Snake, Snake, Mommy! The snake bit me," she cried.

When Keri screamed "snake," I figured it was the child's imagination. Maybe she was stung by a wasp or bitten by an insect. But when I ran into the bathroom, I saw the long, black tube halfway in the

toilet and half wriggling on the tile floor. I screamed and snatched Keri away and laid her down on the half-made bed in the next room. Keri pointed to her stomach where I saw two puncture marks. Her skin was turning red and starting to swell.

I was terrified. Would she have convulsions? Stop breathing? Lose consciousness? Die before I could get help? I had no idea. All I knew was that I had to get her to the hospital. Hoisting her in my arms, with my mother hurrying behind, I raced out to the car. They say it's best to extract the venom within five minutes of the bite, but no way that was happening. The nearest hospital was a twenty-minute ride, and I drove like a maniac, pulling up and leaving the car right in front of the entrance to the emergency room.

A couple of patients were lined up at the intake window and looked askance as I cut in front of them. I was frantic and must have looked like a crazy person. "My daughter was bitten by a poisonous snake," I blurted out to the intake nurse. Fortunately, the nurse reacted quickly. They rushed Keri to a trauma room and injected her with antivenin. "How long has it been since she was bitten?" the doctor asked.

"About a half hour."

The doctor was reassuring. "Usually, the antivenin is sufficient to counteract the poison," he said. "In all likelihood, she will be fine. However, she's small and the poison has been in her body for quite a while, so we'll run some routine tests and keep her for observation."

They brought Keri upstairs to a hospital room, and I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking everything was going to be okay. But two hours later, when the doctor came in, I could tell by the look on his face that something was wrong.

"I'm sorry to give you bad news," he began in his formal doctor speak, "but Keri has sustained damage to her kidneys. Her urine indicates severe kidney injury, and there's been no additional urine output since a catheter was placed in her bladder. In a small number of

snakebite cases, patients develop tissue necrosis—dead tissue, resulting from the poisonous venom, blocks the tubes in the kidneys and can cause acute renal failure. It will take a few days for us to determine whether her kidney function will recover. A kidney biopsy may be necessary to provide a definitive answer.”

The next few days, my mother and I lived at the hospital, staying by Keri’s bedside, meeting with her doctors, checking and re-checking her urine bag. But there was virtually no output. The doctor decided to perform a biopsy. When he entered the room to report the results, I searched his face for any sign of reassurance, a pleasurable look, a smile, some eye contact. But his face was impassive, stony, his lips tight together, his forehead wrinkled. He looked like a state trooper making a traffic stop. But to me, he was not just a state trooper. He was a god who carried the fate of my only child. What he was about to say could change both of our lives forever.

The doctor asked me to step out of the room. I was shaking. If the results were positive, he would have greeted me happily, smiling, blurting out the good news. He had done nothing of the kind. He led me to an empty room down the hall.

“I’m sorry Ms. Crawford. I regret to tell you that the biopsy confirmed our diagnosis. Aside from her kidney function, Keri is a healthy little girl. However, she has sustained irreversible kidney damage. Because her kidneys aren’t working, she will need renal dialysis to replace the kidneys’ function.

“What does that mean, Doctor? Will she ever recover?

“Not until we can find her a new kidney. Meanwhile she will have to undergo dialysis. The procedure is not painful, but she will likely need three treatments per week, each of which will last about four hours. Aside from that, she can enjoy a relatively normal life. When they find her a new kidney, she can undergo a transplant. The operation

has become quite routine, and your medical centers in Boston are among the best.”

Chapter 1 – Two Years Later

Cassandra

I enter the corner office and feel my body stiffen as Donaldson drapes his arm around my shoulder. He is the director of operations for the Boston office of the FBI, and I am a senior investigator. Twenty years ago, I was hired as a lone, black woman in a white man's job. I got little respect. Had to start working undercover, insinuating myself into places a white person couldn't go, sometimes doing shitty things with dirty men. I reported directly to Donaldson before he became the director. I couldn't stand the man. He was always putting his hands on me. Somehow, I persevered and gradually moved up through the bureaucracy. Now my work is mostly supervisory and administrative, which is why I was surprised to be summoned to his office.

I look at Donaldson and think he is typical FBI. A tall, white guy with a crew cut, blue eyes, and thin nose. Graduated from Choate and Princeton. Fits the Bureau like an old pair of slippers—a comfort I will never have. He's in his late fifties but still thinks younger women find him hot. I've heard rumors about the way he treats other women on his staff. Apparently, he hasn't outgrown that frat-boy mentality from when the Bureau was all white and male.

With his hand on my back, he steers me over to a chair. I want to shove it off, but I can't. My job depends on him. And my health insurance. As a single mother with a health compromised daughter, I can ill afford to be unemployed.

Donaldson sits facing me, and I cross my legs, glad I'm not wearing a short skirt. Fortunately, I dressed conservatively this morning in a high-necked cotton blouse and a blue suit. "Cassandra," he says (not Agent Crawford), "I got an ugly case and need your help. Last week, I

got a call from our people in Mexico. A local hunter was walking through the woods when his dog got excited and began digging in the earth. The dog uncovered a body in a shallow grave. He notified the authorities who took the body to the coroner for examination. The report was gruesome. The young man no longer had his liver, pancreas, or kidneys, and his eyes were hollowed out.”

“Was he one of ours?” I ask, wondering why I should be involved.

“No, not connected. He was a twentyish, Hispanic male, five foot nine, with numerous tattoos. Turns out, police had a bulletin on a missing Hispanic American with a similar description. His name was Miguel Sanchez, and he came from Fall River.”

“What was he doing in Mexico?”

“Apparently, the kid’s father had prostate cancer and needed an operation before it metastasized. But he was undocumented with no health insurance and couldn’t afford the operation. The family was desperate to raise money, and Miguel told them he made a deal in Mexico to get the money. They thought it must be a drug deal and begged him not to go. That’s the last they heard from him and reported him missing.”

“Do his parents know they took his organs?”

“No, they already blame themselves for his death. That would only make them feel worse. Besides, on top of losing their son, they now could be subject to deportation.”

“Yuck! You think he went to Mexico to deal drugs or to sell a kidney?”

“Could be either, but the Bureau has been investigating rumors about trade in illegal organs in the Fall River and New Bedford areas. Organ traders find people who are desperate for cash. They offer five to ten thousand for kidneys and have the operations performed in countries where authorities look the other way. We think the kid might have agreed to sell a kidney to raise money for his father’s operation.

Whether they botched the operation or always intended to kill him for his organs, we don't know."

"If they were only after his organs, why did they gouge out his eyes?"

"Corneas. Good corneas, especially young ones, go for about \$25,000."

"Nice."

"Cassandra, this isn't the only case of organ trading we're hearing about. I understand there have been some suspicious cases in New Bedford. This could involve an international criminal ring. We think the best way to penetrate it is to go undercover. I hesitate to ask you this, but I know your daughter, Keri, has kidney failure. You would be the ideal agent for a sting; a mother whose daughter needs a new kidney. I know you haven't worked undercover for a long time, but the Bureau needs you here."

"You're not serious!" I tell him. I'm shocked he would even suggest involving my daughter in an FBI operation. "You expect me to involve Keri?"

"I'm afraid so. I know it's asking a lot, but lives are at stake. These people are vicious and will kill more people for their organs."

"No, I won't do that to her. Besides, involving my daughter is totally against regulations. You have no right to ask me that."

"Cassandra, sometimes, under extraordinary circumstances, regulations have to be waived. This is a matter of national security. Foreign criminal organizations are killing American citizens for their organs."

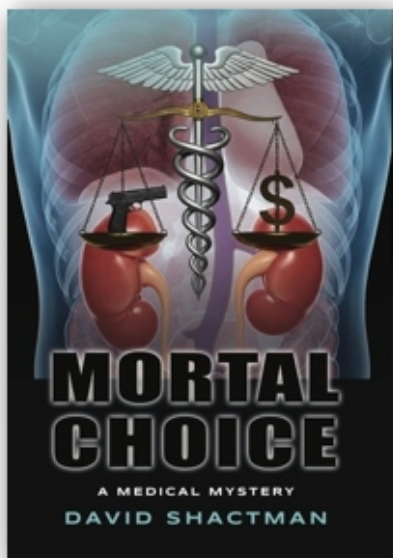
"You're asking me to endanger my daughter's life."

"We'll protect her. You'll have plenty of backup. We all take risks in this job."

"With all due respect, sir, I've taken plenty of risks for the Bureau. No way I'm involving my daughter. That's going way too far."

“We need you, Cassandra. Go down to Fall River tomorrow and interview the parents. Then, think about your future. This could be a prominent case. You’ve come a long way in this organization, and there’s a directorship coming up. Some people would like a person like you in that position. Perhaps we can have a drink sometime and strategize about it,” he says, rising dismissively from his chair and letting me know the conversation is over. He stands near me as I get up, and then leads me to the door with his hand resting embarrassingly low on my back.

Conniving son-of-a-bitch is all I can think when I leave his office. I know perfectly well what he meant by “a person like you” and didn’t miss his impish grin when he suggested a drink. He has no right to involve Keri, but he will step on anyone to get the big score. “It’s for the good of the country,” he told me. But, in the end, it would be good for him. Meanwhile, if I refuse, it will be a cloud on my record. In the Bureau, it’s not good to turn down an assignment. The bastard is making me choose between my daughter and my career. What’s in it for me? Putting my daughter at risk. Involving her in this shitty business. If it works out? Maybe I get the promotion and the raise. And all the fucking guilt that goes with it.



In the shadow world of black-market kidneys, a single mother and FBI agent faces a terrible choice. Can she conspire with the killers she is investigating to get her daughter a kidney? What is she willing to do to save her daughter's life?

Mortal Choice

A Medical Mystery

by David Shactman

Order the complete book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13961.html?s=pdf)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13961.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**