

Cherry Blossom Capers by Cara Putman

(EXCERPT)

Dying for Love – Chapter One

Ciara Turner sucked in a breath, trying to calm the adrenaline addicted hummingbirds filling her stomach as she straightened her shoulders and adjusted her grasp on her attaché case.

She pasted a smile on and pushed into Judge Banter's still-dark anteroom. The judge had issued one of his infamous pre-hearing orders on Friday, so she'd rushed to the office extra-early for the first-thing-Monday-morning-appearance. His secretary's desk stood abandoned, but the judge would expect her to enter anyway. She strode to the judge's office door and glanced down the short hallway to the clerks' desks. Based on the silence, neither of them had arrived either. It looked like she'd even beat opposing counsel, Daniel Evans, to court. That in itself made the day an unusual one. They'd raced each other in when both clerked for the judge, a race that continued when they found themselves on opposite sides of a case like this one.

Ciara shifted her hold on her briefcase and rapped on the judge's door.

"Judge Banter? It's Ciara Turner." She pushed on the cracked door and stepped just inside. "Sir?"

A rustling sound reached her, and she stepped deeper into the darkened room. She frowned. Usually by this time in the morning Judge Banter would have opened the curtains and filled the room with sunlight. Most in the legal community knew Judge Banter usually arrived by 6:00 a.m. so he could capture the early morning peace. He liked to attack

whichever legal puzzles waited on his desk with the windows thrown open, no matter how cold. He'd always commented on how healthy sunlight was for a person.

With spring giving hints it had arrived, he should have the windows open. She'd worn a cashmere sweater under her suit in anticipation of the chill.

The door to his private restroom stood cracked with fluorescent light spilling on to the carpet and the walnut desk. The rows of bookshelves behind the desk were as crammed with books and papers as they had been during her clerkship. It all looked as she'd expect, except the judge wasn't sitting on his towering leather chair.

Ciara glanced over her shoulder at his assistant's desk. Still no sign of the woman. Guess she might as well pull out the motion she wanted to file. Daniel wouldn't like it, but she didn't care. Virginia still required alimony, and his client would not get away with the paltry amount he offered. If it took filing a motion for an accounting, then so be it. The cuckoo clock perched on the shelf behind the judge's desk wound into its song and dance. Now the judge and Daniel were both late.

Where was Daniel? He knew Judge Banter's intolerance for anyone arriving late for a hearing. The judge insisted each counsel be present when speaking to him about a case. Ciara set her bag on one of the wing chairs, then startled when the outside door opened. She jerked to attention. Maybe Judge Banter had returned after stepping out.

The strong strides of a man approached chambers. "Ms. Glenda?"

She closed her eyes as Daniel's smooth baritone called for Judge Banter's assistant. While she'd relished her clerkship with the judge, Daniel Evans was the do-over she longed for from that two-year stint. With his all-American looks and smile that could twist her insides into knots, she'd fallen head over heels the moment she walked into the tiny office and found him at the desk next to hers.

"Anyone here?" Daniel's steps approached the door.

She turned, pasting a smile on her lips. She refused to let him know that five years later he still made her heart somersault. "Good morning, Mr. Evans."

His slow, lazy grin stretched across his mouth as he took her in. She resisted the urge to shift under his inspection.

“Is my dad here?” He looked over his shoulder then caught her gaze as she shook her head. “I always look for him when someone says Mr. Evans.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, his stance relaxed. “Now this is the way to start a Monday morning.”

“I’m sure you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the ones who bring a ray of sunshine with them.”

Ciara bit her lower lip to hide an answering smile. “Are you ready to get to work?”

“Sure.” Daniel examined the room. “Where’s the judge?”

“I haven’t seen him or a clerk, but someone must be here since the door’s unlocked.”

Daniel frowned. “That’s not like him, especially when he issues a summons like this. He would have made us come in early with him for these command appearances.”

“I know. But I haven’t seen Glenda or a clerk.” Ciara shrugged. “Maybe he’s loosened up since we clerked.”

“Doubt it.” Daniel walked toward the judge’s large walnut desk. Stacks of legal treatises and briefs covered the surface, except for the desk calendar. “This doesn’t show anything but us until a ten o’clock hearing.”

Ciara followed him to the desk, then glanced at the bathroom. She froze when she saw a shoe. “Daniel—”

He glanced at her, a question in his eyes.

“Is that Judge...Banter?”

The next moment Daniel inched the door open, then eased to the floor. “Judge?” He touched the judge’s neck, then stiffened. “Call the sheriff’s office downstairs and ask for an ambulance and officers.” Without glancing at her, he started chest compressions.

She froze, her gaze captured by the image of Judge Banter’s lanky Abraham Lincoln frame splayed across the cold, tile floor.

“Ciara.”

She jerked to attention, reaching for the phone on the judge’s desk and sending a pile of briefs cart-wheeling from the top. Her fingers fumbled as she dialed. “This is Ciara Turner. I’m in Judge Banter’s chambers, and he’s unconscious on the floor. Please send an ambulance.”

She stumbled as she remembered Daniel’s other request. She looked at him, still kneeling next to the judge. “Daniel Evans says we need officers, too.”

The deputy on the phone barked at her. “You need what?”

“Medical help and officers.”

“In Judge Banter’s office?”

“Yes, sir.”

Muffled shouting filled the background as she waited for the deputy to come back on the phone. “Your name again?”

“Ciara Turner. C-i-a-r-a.” She rubbed her temples trying to stave off the building pressure.