

Trial By Fire

by Cara Putman

(EXCERPT)

Thursday

Another broken fairy tale sat on her desk.

The phone ringing on her desk pulled deputy county attorney Tricia Jamison from her work. She glanced at her watch. The afternoon had evaporated while she flipped through new case files and absorbed the dashed hopes each one represented. She'd taken the job as deputy county attorney because she'd wanted to help people. But each time another domestic violence case crossed her desk it was hard not to grow discouraged. Too many times the hope of fairy tales and happily-ever-afters had gone horribly wrong. She shook her head and grabbed the phone.

"Tricia Jamison, deputy prosecutor."

"Trish, this is Caleb. There's a fire at Mom's." Her brother's voice had an edge of tension she hadn't heard in awhile. As a police investigator, he usually kept his emotions tightly controlled. He hadn't sounded so rattled since last year when a stalker set his sights on Caleb's girlfriend Dani Richards.

Her breath caught in her chest as she shut the file on her desk. "How bad?"

"Don't know. I heard it on my scanner before Mom called."

"I'll leave now." Her jaw clenched. Images of flames lapping at her mother's home raced through her mind. The home encapsulated so many memories, both good and bad.

Tricia grabbed her purse and keys, and ran toward the elevator. She slid to a stop at her paralegal's desk. "Mom's house is on fire. I'll be back tomorrow"

“I’ll cover for you.” The woman leaned back in her chair, a concerned expression on her face.

“If anyone asks, call it a family emergency.” Tricia tightened her grip on her purse strap and jogged the rest of the way to the elevator. She punched the down button and paced until the doors opened.

Twenty minutes later she’d crossed town and pulled into her mom’s neighborhood. Flashing lights drew her toward the small ranch home. She parked several houses down, and rushed to join Caleb and their mom in the neighbor’s yard. Caleb had his arm around their mother’s shoulders, and she’d sunk against his side, unusual posture for one who liked to stand firmly on her own two feet. The heavy smell of smoke curled through the air, but no matter how Tricia squinted against the western sun, the house looked intact. In fact, there weren’t many firefighters in the front yard.

“Are you okay?”

The petite woman tipped her chin up, brown eyes flashing. “Of course. Some kid decided the garage made a good fire-starter.”

“Where’s Frank?” Tricia’s step-father usually rushed to his wife’s side anytime she whimpered or looked a little cross. Tricia couldn’t fault his devotion to her mom.

“At work. He wanted to come home, but I told him not to hurry. It’s a small fire.” A tremble in Mom’s voice belied her strong front.

“From Caleb’s call I thought the flames engulfed the house.”

Mom poked him in the ribs. “I told you not to make a big deal.”

“A fire is never small.” He rubbed his side with a frown. “The wind blows the wrong direction, and the outcome could change. It almost reached the house.”

“But it didn’t. Relax.”

“Sure.” Caleb grimaced over her at Tricia. “We’ll never worry about you when panic fills your voice. Fires are everyday occurrences.”

“You can’t protect everyone.” Even as she said the words, Tricia knew he wouldn’t accept them.

“You believe that?” He rolled his eyes. “Sure. That’s why you’re a prosecutor.”

“Someone has to do it.” Tricia grinned at him. She’d had a lifetime to perfect poking his weak spots. Tell Caleb he couldn’t take care of everyone, and he bristled like a porcupine. Good thing she was a pro at side-stepping his quills.

“All right, you two. You can bicker all you want inside. I want out of this yard before we trample the Johnsons’ grass. You know how fastidious George is.” Mom tugged his sleeve until Caleb joined her.

A couple of firefighters turned the corner from the backyard into the front. One pulled off his helmet and ran a hand through smooshed hair, sweat streaking his face. He caught Tricia’s glance and grimaced. Her heart stopped, and she took a shuddering breath. Noah Brust. In the flesh, and looking better in his turnout coat with soot on his face than he had the last time she’d seen him in the courtroom.

“Mrs. Randol?” His voice was low with a rich timber to it. It tickled her senses, and her stomach tightened even though the man ignored her.

“Yes,” her mother answered.

“I’m Noah Brust with the Lincoln Fire Department. We’ve contained the fire. The shed will be a total loss, but we kept it from the house.”

Mom put a trembling hand to her mouth, then nodded. “Thank you. We’ll replace the things in the shed. Frank will probably enjoy the excuse to buy more tools.”

“Investigator Caleb Jamison, LPD.” Caleb extended his hand, and the firefighter shook it. “This is my sister Tricia Jamison.”

Noah turned a blank expression her way. “We’ve met.”

Tricia nodded, searching for a hint of emotion. Even anger seemed better than the nothingness he registered when looking at her. Instead, he wore a look of schooled

indifference. This from the rugged fireman who'd almost swept her off her feet when she'd prepped him for his testimony during the Lincoln Life fire trial. Despite the attraction that zinged between them, he'd made it clear at the close of his testimony he wanted nothing to do with her.

She stifled the urge to grab his collar and force him to acknowledge her. She gritted her teeth and crossed her arms. Mom threw her a questioning look, and Tricia shook her head. Now was not the time to explain.

"Any clues yet on how the fire started?" Caleb pulled the focus back to the fire.

Noah focused on Caleb. "The captain will likely call in the fire investigation team. Until they work their magic I can guess at a cause, but that's it. We'll keep an eye on the fire while we clean up. We'll leave only when we're sure the fire's out, but it's safe to go inside your home."

"Thank you." Mom pulled the collar of her jacket tight around her throat against the October wind as she hurried toward the house.

Heat climbed Tricia's face, and she turned to find Noah watching her. "Thanks for helping Mom."

His stance hardened. "You're welcome."

She fought the urge to rub her arms, try to generate some warmth against the chill emanating from him. "You're still angry about the Lincoln Life case? I did everything the law allowed."

His blue eyes that had so captured her attention before had frosted. Noah snorted and shook his head. "Thanks to you, I read a dozen articles accusing my father of negligence in his duties." His voice rose with each word. "He died a hero, but you didn't stop a finger to stop them from slandering him in court."

She looked around for a way to escape the barrage of words. "I'm sorry you don't appreciate the rule of court and its limitations. And don't forget, we won." Tricia turned at the sound of more cars pulling into the cul-de-sac. The Channel 13 Jeep jerked into park as Caleb reappeared at her shoulder.

“You okay, sis?” Caleb furrowed his brow until the eyebrows merged.

“Fine. I’ll be there in a minute, Caleb.” She turned to Firefighter Brust and twisted her lips into what she hoped passed for a smile. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more to protect you and your father. Now, if you don’t want to create another scene worthy of the papers, let me pass. The media has arrived.” She tipped her chin and pushed past him and marched to Caleb’s side. “Take me inside now, please.”

Tricia refused to look back as Caleb hurried her into the house. She tried to ignore the tremble in her limbs when she sat on the couch next to her mother.

“Anything you need to tell me?” Caleb stood in front of her, arms crossed, in full big brother mode.

“An unpleasant reminder of a case from last year.”

“Looked like more.”

“No.” Tricia shook her head. “He feels like I didn’t do my job. There’s nothing I can do to change his mind. If I’m lucky, I won’t run into him again.”
Today had been a fluke. That’s all.

Then why did the pain hiding in his cold eyes cut?

Noah watched the media park on the cul-de-sac. He stood straight and prepared for the onslaught. “The vultures descend.”

Graham Jackson groaned and yanked his helmet off. “Come on, man. Hold it together.”

“You’re right.” Noah frowned and ran a hand over his face. Some days he felt so tired, he wondered how long he’d be able to keep up with the job. Fighting through the lingering impact of the knee he’d injured in the Lincoln Life fire seemed impossible. He tried to hide it on the job, but rarely succeeded. “So I lost my composure.”

“Yep.” Graham climbed onto the fire truck, tossing his helmet on the seat next to him. He grabbed two bottles of water and tossed one to Noah. “Fortunately, the press arrived late, and didn’t see your show.”

Noah unscrewed the lid and sat opposite Graham. He forced the image of Tricia's face from his mind. She looked as beautiful as she had when he'd met her the year before. He'd been instantly smitten with the spunky lawyer...but couldn't let himself think about that now. Not after the way she'd let him down. "Hope you're right about the media." He swiped the cool bottle against his forehead. "I keep waiting for it to get easier. You'd think it would after a year."

"Don't push so hard. This was a simple outbuilding fire, and you barked orders like flames engulfed the Cornhusker Hotel."

"I acted crazy." Noah ran his fingers through his hair and grimaced.

"No. A little over-zealous, but it's okay. Temper it. That's all I'm saying."

An hour later, the firefighters cleared the scene and headed back to the station. The rest of the shift dragged as Noah tried to focus on the paperwork in front of him rather than Tricia Jamison. That night long after he should have slept, Noah sat in bed and couldn't quit thinking about the prosecutor and trial. Before he'd taken the stand, he'd had a dinner invitation planned for Tricia. Test the sparks between them. Then she'd let him down during what she'd said would be an easy cross-examination. He forced the memory from his mind, but thoughts of his father's death marched into its place. His chest tightened at the memory of how close he'd gotten to his father, but not close enough. When the ceiling collapsed between them after he'd run back into the building, he'd known he'd failed. Waited too long. Tried too hard to save everybody else. Failed to save his father, and thanks to Tricia Jamison, he hadn't salvaged the man's reputation. That he couldn't forgive. No matter how beautiful she looked.