

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark blue or black suit, is running through a city street at night. The background is heavily blurred, showing streaks of light from cars and buildings, suggesting a sense of urgency and motion. She is holding a black bag or folder under her arm.

**DYING FOR  
LOVE**

**CARA  
PUTMAN**

# DYING FOR LOVE

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CARA PUTMAN

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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. It looked like she'd even beat opposing counsel, David 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 onto 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 expected, 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. David 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 David were both late.

Where was David? 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 the chambers. "Ms. Glenda?"

She closed her eyes as David's smooth baritone called for Judge Banter's assistant. While she'd relished her clerkship with the judge, David 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?" David's steps approached the door.

She turned, pasting a smile on her lips. She refused to let him know

that two 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.” David 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.”

David frowned. “That’s not like him, especially when he issues a summons like this. He always made us come in early with him when we clerked.”

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

“Doubt it.” David 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. “David—”

He glanced at her, a question in his eyes.

“Is that Judge...Banter?”

The next moment David 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 cartwheeling 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 David’s other request. She looked at him, still kneeling next to the judge. “David 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.



DAVID EVANS LEANED over the judge, praying he’d feel a puff of breath or the flutter of a pulse. Instead, his mentor lay too still. David fought to control the anger that rolled over him like a rouge wave swamping his sailboat. What did the judge have now that would cause someone to kill him? Child support and custody didn’t usually lead to more than violent words.

David glanced at Ciara. Her quiet voice filled the space, soothing even as she played her thumb back and forth across her fingers...a nervous habit when she felt out of control. She had no idea it was her tell that would ruin her chances in many card games. He’d never told her about the gesture because he needed every advantage he could wrangle when fighting her in court.

He pressed two fingers against the judge’s carotid artery again, then

held his breath. What was that? The faintest flicker seemed to pulse beneath his fingers. He inhaled sharply and checked for breath. Maybe he'd written the judge off too quickly.

In a rush, the outer door banged open and soon paramedics pushed him out of the way. He eased back, relieved to let someone else worry about what to do and how to save the judge's life. If it could be saved...

Not long after the paramedics, a couple of Alexandria City sheriff's deputies and someone in street clothes walked into the chambers. Soon the time rushed past in a flurry of questions, few of which he could answer. A detective took Ciara across the room. David tried not to concentrate on her instead of the officer in front of him. He needed to focus, intent on giving answers that might help them find whoever attacked the judge.

"All right." Detective Middleton flipped his notebook shut and reached into his pocket. "Here's my card. Call me if anything comes to mind. I'll be in touch."

David slipped the card into his breast pocket, then glanced to Ciara. Her cheeks were pale as she accepted a card from the other detective. The two conferred in a corner of the judge's chambers, so David moved to Ciara's side.

"Hey."

She glanced at him, then down at her hands. The knuckles were white from the way she clenched them. "Can you believe this?"

"No." David ran a hand across his hair. "I've tried to think who would do this."

"And why. I saw him last week at Inn of Court." Ciara hadn't missed one of these by-invitation-only gatherings of attorneys, judges, and law students since she had attended George Mason. "He didn't mention any cases that bothered him."

David wasn't surprised Ciara was active in that monthly professional gathering. "He didn't sound any different than normal when he called us in early either."

"I know." Ciara bit her lip. "But someone didn't want this."



He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"What if it was someone involved in our case?"

"Over custody?"

"Your client seemed pretty intent."

"He's the dad. Of course he's intent on doing what's best for his kid. It's what dads do." As soon as the words slipped out, David wished he could yank them back. Especially when Ciara's face shut down and that old familiar distance erected its wall between them. Why did he have to poke at her today of all days?



CIARA FOUGHT to keep from lashing out at David. Of course, he'd start his familiar refrain about how all fathers were perfect and deserved full custody of their kids. She couldn't go there.

Not today.

She wanted to pray the judge would be okay, but he'd looked so pale and still. And David's client had jumped a witness during the last hearing. She'd decided to file today's motion in part to rein him in. Sometimes hitting people in their pocket book reminded them a lot more was at stake.

How had David ended up on the wrong side of these cases?

When they had clerked, they both had been passionate about protecting children, and family law was the best way to do it. They'd seemed on parallel tracks as their clerkships wrapped up. Then David decided to start a firm on his own. His ability to care for the children seemed to evaporate with his responsibility to pay the bills. After that, she'd ended their relationship. She couldn't pretend a future existed with someone who saw the world in such a different vein than she did.

If only he still cared. But he didn't, so today she'd fight the attraction and focus on what thrust them together.

The clients that brought them in front of the judge.

Hopeless. That's what she was.

"Come on, say it." David's words pulled her from her thoughts.

“Say what?”

“The words on the tip of your tongue. The ones that paint me with the same brush as the evil fathers I represent.”

“You aren’t the same.”

“You don’t believe that.” A flash of something appeared on his face. “We used to think we could fight together, Ciara.”

As she met his gaze, that old attraction exploded through her chest. She tried to erect a shield between them, but failed. Instead, the same feeling returned. The one that made her wish they could be something more than adversaries. That they could reclaim the easy friendship they had as clerks. No, she had to steel her heart and order herself to treat him as the enemy. Otherwise, all she got was the sense she could spend the rest of her life with him and she’d never find anyone else to compare. If only he didn’t specialize in tearing families apart—and she got stuck trying to salvage something from the wreckage. Not what she’d imagined when she invested years in law school.



“Look, I’m sorry about that.” David sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m a little rattled.”

Ciara considered him, as if weighing his words. He could feel the scales tip against him. Sometimes he just wanted to ask when she’d decided to hate him. They’d left their clerkships eager to tackle the legal community. Somehow their paths had diverged, and he stumbled around whenever they worked a case from opposite sides. It was hard to pay attention to a client when advocating for them required calling her and bearing her scorn.

Why couldn’t she accept every story had two sides? Nobody was 100 percent right or wrong when a marriage fell apart. And like it or not, if either party wasn’t committed to saving the marriage, there wasn’t anything he could do to change that person’s mind.

He glanced at his watch and straightened. “I’ve got to get to Arlington.”

“Hearing?”

“Meeting with a client.” His gaze swept over the judge’s chambers. Several officers and plainclothes detectives worked the room. He prayed they found what they needed to nail whoever attacked the judge. “Guess they’re done with us now. I’ll call you later.”

But the rest of the day sped by without even five minutes to follow through on the call. He could just imagine how she’d take it when he did snag a few moments.



CIARA STARED AT THE PHONE, then wanted to lecture herself. Some things never changed, from her willingness to believe David or her insane longing to hear from him about something other than a divorce.

Case files lined her desk, each representing a wife or child who needed an advocate. She had to direct attention to their cases, but each time she picked one up, she saw the judge.

She’d checked online news services repeatedly, but hadn’t found anything about the morning’s events at the court. She played with the card one of the detectives had given her. Should she call him? See if he would update her?

The thought was ridiculous. He had to have a zillion more important things to do than answer inane questions from someone who found a half-dead man.

She dropped her forehead on her arms. *I have to focus.*

“You all right, Ciara?” Linda Troxel, her paralegal, stood in the doorway when Ciara looked up.

“Just grand.”

“Then get moving. You’ll miss your meeting with opposing counsel in the Forsythe matter if you don’t hoof it.”

Ciara groaned. “Any way to postpone that one?”

“Only if you call. I’m not telling Ms. Snooty Pants her matter’s been delayed again. You know she’s hot to trot to Vegas with that boyfriend of hers. What was he? The pool boy?”

“Cliché, Linda.”

“It’s the truth.”

Ciara laughed at the expression on Linda’s face. The woman kept Ciara’s spirits lifted with her running commentary on their clients. Especially when she laid on a heavy Southern accent like she just had.

“Can you do a favor for me?”

Linda shrugged. “Sure. What do you need?”

“Call this man.” She handed the card to Linda. “See if you can find out how the judge is.”

“I’ll do one better and call Judge Banter’s assistant. She’ll know everything.”

“Great idea. Thanks.” Ciara grabbed her trench coat, briefcase, and the file Linda handed her as she rushed from her office. If she hurried, she might arrive in time since Mr. Forsythe’s attorney’s office was only two blocks away.

As soon as she exited the townhouse where she worked, she lifted her face to the sky and let the sun warm her face. Spring hinted at its impending arrival with the soft scent of tulips and the cheery faces of pansies lining the flowerbeds of the storefronts she passed. She slowed long enough to wait for the walk signal, then picked up her pace again.

The meeting went well, and she headed home after it. She drove until she reached the end of a line of townhouses in Cherry Blossom Estates. Then she pulled her sporty BMW convertible into her parking spot. She bounded up the couple steps to her porch and unlocked the front door. As soon as she entered the living area, her shoulders slumped from the fatigue pressing against her.

Her knee-high boots clicked against the wood floor as she crossed the living room. She placed her briefcase on the dining room table, and then shed her trench coat and hung it on the coat tree in the corner. Her answering machine blinked a message from its spot on the kitchen pass through. She hit the button and waited for the message as she flipped through the mail, tossing half of it into the kitchen trash can.

“Ciara, this is Linda. I finally reached Glenda. I don’t know how to say

this.” Linda paused after sounding choked on the last few words. “Judge Banter didn’t make it.” The message continued in silence for a few moments, then ended with a beep.

Ciara startled, then hit the button again. Nothing changed the second time she listened. She stumbled backward and sank onto the nearest dining room chair. “Poor Judge Banter.”

Did David know?

She reached for her cell and dug it from her purse with trembling fingers. As she scrolled to his number, she tried to frame what she’d say. How did one tell someone his mentor had been murdered?

David wiped a band of sweat from his forehead and dropped back to a crouch. Across the racquetball court, Austen Billings pointed at him with a cocky grin. “You’re going down if you can’t focus, old man.”

Usually, Austen’s good-natured banter would cut through the stress of the day as it had throughout law school. His successful Wall Street career kept him out of the city most of the year. Last night he’d called about catching up over racquetball. It sounded like a great idea, but now, David’s thoughts drifted back to the judge. “Maybe I should concede.”

“And rob me of the opportunity to beat you fair and square? Won’t let you.”

“Really, Austen. I need to go. Before I get hurt.” Get away and think about what had happened.

Austen frowned then nodded. “I guess I understand. I wanted to get your thoughts on something. Maybe we can try again before I head back to New York?”

“Yep.” If he didn’t get hit by a truck or jumped by who knew who at his office.

As he cleaned up in the gym’s locker room, David tried to imagine who would want to hurt Judge Banter. The man was firm but fair from the bench. Parties could find themselves in front of much worse judges. Sure there were always those who believed the world was out to get

them. But that wasn't the judge's fault.

His phone sang an old country tune from somewhere in the depths of his bag. He sifted through the corners until his fingers clamped around the small piece of metal. He pulled it out and unlocked it. "Hello?"

A shuddering breath echoed in his ear.

He glanced at the phone's screen. It showed an unknown number. "Can I help you?"

"David?" Ciara's voice didn't have the strident tone he hated in the courtroom. "Have you heard the news?"

"News?" Why did the woman speak in riddles? A thought struck him, and it was his turn to haul in a rough breath.

"Judge—Judge Banter didn't make it. Linda just called, and... I thought you should know."

David eased onto the bench. Lockers clanged open and shut around him, the aroma of dirty socks and sweaty bodies adding to the surreal backdrop. "Dead?"

"Whoever attacked him succeeded."

"Okay." His mind spun with images from that morning. "I'm headed over." He hung up before she could sputter any type of protest. Whoever did this would pay. A good man had died. Someone who strived for justice in all he did. Who made the hard decisions. David hoped one of those decisions hadn't led to his death.

"Everything okay?" Austen asked.

"Yeah. No. Judge Banter died."

Austen sucked in a whistle. "That's nuts. The guy never hurt anyone."

"I'm sure some of those who appeared before him don't agree. Still... murdered." David couldn't shake the image of the man sprawled across his bathroom floor, the back of his head coated with blood from some kind of wound. "I've got to run."

"Sure." Austen shook his head. "Sometimes I don't understand this world."

"Makes two of us." David grabbed his gym bag and hightailed it to his car. Austen hadn't clerked out of law school, heading straight to high-

powered corporate America, so he wouldn't understand the bond between a clerk and judge. Ciara did. On the phone she'd sounded as shaken as he felt.



CIARA TURNED on the burner beneath the teakettle. She couldn't get warm and needed something hot in her hands. What if she had arrived at the courthouse a bit earlier? Would she have seen the murderer? If she'd been a few minutes earlier, could she have prevented the murder? Since she discovered the body, would the police think she'd somehow been involved? She tried to remember...what happened in all those crime shows?

Outside of a criminal law and a criminal procedure class in law school, she'd avoided that area of law. She purposely built her practice around helping the defenseless. And now she wondered what it all meant.

She might need to cancel her next couple days' appointments. Tomorrow would be soon enough to make a decision. A soft breeze fluttered the curtains at her front window. Even the sound of her neighbors returning home from their evening's activities couldn't distract her from the questions racing through her mind.

Maybe she should go outside. Join them in an attempt at normalcy. Ciara opened her front door and stood on her stoop a moment. Having the end townhouse allowed her to observe the activity without joining in.

"Ciara! Where have you been hiding, girl? You should have heard the buzz all over the White House. A judge was murdered."

Tiffany Weber, the adorable gal who owned a condo across the cul-de-sac from Ciara, barely paused to take a breath before she covered her mouth. "Did you know him?"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry. There I go again, speaking before I think." Tiffany heaved a dramatic sigh, smoothing out her suitcoat. "Like most things, it



leaked in the cafeteria first. A couple Secret Service agents.”

“I was there when his body was discovered.”

“Oh, Ciara, that’s horrible!”

Ciara swallowed against the lump the size of a dollar coin that seemed lodged in her throat.

Tiffany squeezed Ciara in a tight hug. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.” Tiffany hurried to the main door of the building housing her condo before disappearing. Ciara considered following her. Being alone didn’t seem right. Maybe she’d take a walk instead. The neighborhood lawns and trees had begun to show evidence of spring. Any day now the cherry blossoms would erupt alongside the pansies and daffodils. Then it would be official. Spring had arrived. . . only shrouded with a tinge of black.

She shoved her hands in her jeans pockets and hunched her shoulders. The breeze seemed to whisper in her ears—if only it would whisper who had killed Judge Banter. Ciara exited the cul-de-sac and headed up the slight hill through the neighborhood. A car pulled to the curb, but she ignored it.

“Ciara.”

David? She turned around. “You came.”

“I told you I would.”

“Sure, but why?”

He stepped on the sidewalk next to her, and suddenly she didn’t feel so alone. She almost stepped closer before remembering nothing had changed. They were still going different directions in life. Opposing directions. Diametrically diverging directions. She stepped back and tried to find neutral ground.

“Can you believe it?”

David fell into step next to her as she started up the block. “It’s surreal.” David rubbed his head roughly. “I don’t want whoever did this to get away with it.”

“I’m sure the police or whoever is investigating will find the

murderer.”

“They don’t know the judge. We do. We can catch things they might miss.”

Ciara stopped and stared. “We’re just former clerks. We’d get in the way. Muck things up.”

“Not when we can tell them what’s different. If anything’s odd.”

“Don’t you think Glenda will take care of that?”

David studied her, darkness shadowing his gaze. “This murder makes me angry. You know Glenda. She’s a great assistant, but she’ll come to pieces over the judge’s death. You and I can move past that.”

He stared at her, and she felt like she could see through him.

“The judge gave me a chance no one else would. Even after clerking for him, no one would take on the young attorney from the wrong side of the tracks.” He snorted. “Can you believe there’s still such a thing? But there is.”

“I still run into the good old boys’ club.”

“This is Virginia.” He shrugged. “Do you know why I started working with the deadbeat dads? Court appointments. Clear and simple. I had to pay the bills, and Judge Banter knew it. He helped me the only way he could...sending me those who qualified for free attorneys.”

“I wish I’d known that.”

Silence settled between them, and it felt good. Not awkward like when they’d landed in elevators together. Was David still the same underneath everything? Maybe working with him on his wild goose chase would give her a chance to find out.



THE SILENCE FELT HEAVY. Did Ciara think he wanted to take a fool’s mission? Probably. But he couldn’t sit back and wait to see what happened. Not when anyone who worked around the law or read a crime novel knew those first few days were critical. If the detectives missed something he could see....He couldn’t let that happen.

“All right. I think you’re nuts, but as long as we don’t get in the way,

I'm in."

At Ciara's quiet words, he rallied. They could do this. Together. Just like when they worked for the judge and plotted grand strategies to take over the legal community.

"Where do you want to start?"

"I don't know." He'd never claimed he had a plan.

"I can touch base with Glenda tomorrow. Try to learn if anything unusual has happened."

"Maybe I'll track down his son." David wondered if the college kid would take his call.

"It's worth a try. I got the sense after Mrs. Banter died they drifted apart."

"Alexander still might know something."

"The poor guy is all alone now." Ciara shuddered.

David couldn't imagine missing Sunday brunch at his parents. A command performance for all seven kids and, for those who had married, their families. And now Alexander wouldn't even have a father to call.

"Maybe you could offer to help him plan the service." Ciara's voice was so soft, he took a half step closer.

The service. He hadn't thought about a funeral yet. He stifled a groan as he considered what might be involved in planning it. This situation would be more terrible if the judge wasn't a believer. Ciara shivered next to him. "Should we head back?"

"I should have grabbed a jacket before heading out." She stopped and looked at him. "Do you want to come in for coffee?"

"Sounds good." The walk back to her townhouse was silent. He left his car where he'd parked. She twisted the doorknob and walked in without unlocking the door. "Don't you lock the door?"

"Don't need to. See all the curtains fluttering?" She pointed back in the courtyard. He bit back a laugh as several flapped. "Those would be my girls. They watch my back and I watch theirs."

"That's great."

“You have no idea.” She turned back to the large room. The walls were painted a vibrant salmon before melting into a bluish color that worked. It made him think of a vivid sunset and the rainbow of colors she usually tucked into her outfits even when wearing a stern suit in the courtroom.

A faint whistle sounded from around the corner. She bolted toward it before returning with a kettle. “Guess I forgot to turn this off.”

“Don’t do that often, do you?”

“Just days like today. Good thing it was full when I left.” She led him to the narrow galley kitchen. “I have tea or instant coffee.”

Instant? He might have to rethink drinking anything. He must have wrinkled his nose or something, because she laughed.

“How about French press instead?”

“That sounds better.”

She measured grounds into the press then added the water. They were quiet as the water darkened. She grabbed a couple mugs from a cupboard and filled them. “Sugar or milk?”

“Still take it black.”

“Guess I should have remembered.”

He tensed. “Sorry. Black is great. And you’ll have two teaspoons of sugar and some milk. And when you’re done it’s not really coffee anymore.”

Color flooded her cheeks. “I add syrup now. Peppermint.”

“Isn’t that a Christmas flavor?”

“Only if you don’t stock up.”

She slipped past him and headed to a small loveseat tucked under a window. The seat had a feminine print of some sort, and, based on the books and coaster piled on the table in front, it was her preferred place to relax. He glanced around but didn’t see a T.V. anywhere. Not even a cabinet that could hide one. Instead, a solid walnut bookshelf filled the nook, every square inch lined with titles.

“What you expected?” She smiled over the top of her mug at him. Guess he’d been busted.

“It’s you.”

“I like to think so. Where do you live?”

“A condo downtown.”

She stopped drinking and stared. “DC?”

“Nah. Old Town Alexandria. One of the rundown townhouses. Probably hasn’t been renovated since the war.”

“World War Two?”

“Civil. The only good Yankee is...”

“...A dead Yankee.” Tears filled her eyes. “Judge Banter said it with teasing, but I always think of him when I see art from *the war*.” She bracketed the words with her fingers. “Which side was the artist on?”

“He loved the Civil War. Did you know he was researching a nonfiction book he wanted to write?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t. Guess you were closer.”

“No. Just interested.” He had thought the judge was on the right track. More than revisionist history, his theories would transform the way the Battle of Manassas was interpreted. Could his death be related to his research? He took a swig of coffee and grimaced as it burned a track down his throat.

“That bad?” Ciara’s eyes twinkled as she looked at him. “I offered sugar and milk.”

“No, just had another thought.” But as he met her gaze, he decided he’d hold that thought. Instead, he wanted to make the most of this opportunity to show her they could recover what they had as young law school grads clerking for the world’s best judge.

The next morning Ciara sat at her desk, reliving the prior evening. After they walked a bit, a switch flipped and David shifted from discussing the murder into a charming companion. She'd laughed as he told stories about a client who brought his kids to the office. Each time the client did, David found colored crayon gifts all over his walls.

She couldn't pull her thoughts back to work. Between Judge Banter's murder and David's charm, she felt distracted and out of sorts. Coming to work had been a mistake after all.

Linda hurried in with a stack of files, but slowed when she saw Ciara. Her sky-blue eyes softened. "Are you okay?"

"I will be." She nodded to the pile. "What have you got for me?"

"A stack of new motions filed by opposing counsel in these matters. The most important is this file." Linda handed it across the desk. "The dad's moving for a reduction in child support. Claims his income has decreased 25 percent so his support obligation should too."

"Is he represented?"

"Your favorite."

Ciara groaned. "And I was just starting to like him again."

"Not sure I'd waste the energy. Why does Mr. Evans always end up with the deadbeats?"

"He told me last night Judge Banter routinely fed those clients to him. All in an effort to help him build a practice."

“Humph. Not sure that helped him much. I never could understand why a guy as smart as him didn’t land with a firm. Must not interview well.”

Ciara couldn’t stifle a laugh at the thought. David’s charisma should pull in whoever interviewed him and leave them begging for more. He had the engaging smile and direct gaze that made you want to like him. In fact, if he practiced on her side of the cases, they’d still be friends. She was sure of it.

“Well, here you go.” Linda patted the stack and moved to the door. “Let me know if you need anything. Oh, and your appointment is running behind.”

“Will do.” Ciara grabbed the top file and read through it. Another sob story from a father who claimed the world had collapsed on him. Sometimes it did. Even she could admit that. But sometimes, the dad resented his child support obligation and stopped working to avoid paying. She’d have to scan the file to determine this father’s category.

Funny how one conversation could tilt her perspective about a man she’d thought she understood. Guess she’d jumped to conclusions. But one good night didn’t erase years of courtroom drama.

Ciara pulled up Glenda’s number and waited for her to answer.

“Hello?” The hollow voice sounded nothing like the usually vibrant Glenda.

“Ms. Baxter?”

“Who’s this?”

“Ciara Turner. I’m so sorry about Judge Banter.”

A soft sob filled the line. “You found him?”

“With David, yes.”

“I don’t understand how something like this could happen. He never mentioned anything to me.”

Ciara doodled on the legal pad next to her phone. “Did you notice anything unusual? People he saw, blocks of time he asked you not to schedule?”

“You sound like that detective.” With Glenda’s tone, Ciara couldn’t

tell if it was a compliment or not. “Each day was busy and full. You know the drill. Judge Banter packed every moment. That’s why he came in so early. Especially since his wife died, he worked hard to get out of the court at a decent time. No more late nights since Alexander needed a parent.”

“What happens to Alexander now?”

“He started college last fall. I imagine he’ll stay in college, though I’m not sure I could hold it together. All alone at eighteen.” Glenda’s sigh mirrored Ciara’s. “Why all the questions?”

“David and I talked last night. I can’t shake the image of the judge on the floor. Guess I feel a need to wrap my mind around what happened.”

“If you figure it out, let me know. This is one event I’ll never understand. I’m adding it to that list I’m taking to the Pearly Gates.”

They chatted a couple more minutes before Linda tapped the edge of Ciara’s door and pointed at her watch. “Glenda, gotta run. Please let me know if you need anything.”

Ciara tried to switch gears to custody matters and brace for her client and whatever stories she brought. A glance out the window had her wishing for time to escape outside for a quick walk in the spring air. Maybe with a certain someone at her side.



THIS TALE WOULD NEVER END. David was convinced his client would never run out of terrible things to say about his ex. Days like this, David wished he’d stayed in Leesburg to run his family’s restaurant. Even days spent with clothes soaked with the aroma of grease would be better than listening to Ralph Manchiso spew this garbage.

He held up a hand, and his client sputtered to a stop. “I get the picture.”

The burly guy crossed his arms and clenched his jaw. “I ain’t done.”

“I can continue to sit here, but you will get a bill for each minute. Or we can move on to what you can do.”

Ralph shrugged. “I ain’t done.”



“It’s your money.” David sat back and tuned the rest of the words out. This guy didn’t need an attorney. He needed a therapist. Too bad David got to fill that role today. As he half-listened, his thoughts wandered. He needed to track down Alexander Banter. Probably shouldn’t call Glenda, since Ciara would contact her.

Last night had been good. Really good. Amazing how a short walk, a cup of java, and a little conversation could restart something he’d thought couldn’t be resurrected.

“You listening to me?” Ralph thumped a fist on the table. “If you’re gonna bill me, you oughta listen.”

David tugged his attention to the man. Better to concentrate and extricate the man from the building than get him riled. The man had the temper to back his restraining order. Finally, an hour later he escorted the man from the office. When he walked back in, his assistant—his “man Friday”—shook his head.

“That guy is the worst we have.” Clive Tillman sank into his chair at the reception desk.

“Nice of you to conveniently disappear from your desk.”

The kid looked unrepentant as he pushed up his shirtsleeves. “The guy gives me the creeps.”

David shook his head. “This is exactly why I don’t have a female receptionist.”

“You know that’s discrimination.”

“Nope. Protection. I wouldn’t want a lady to have to deal with him.” He eyed Clive’s lanky form folded behind the desk. “You shouldn’t have any concerns.”

Clive reached for a stack of phone slips. “Here are your messages.”

David flipped through them as he took the few steps to his office. The small waiting area, his office, an office supply doubling as a library, a small kitchenette, and a conference room rounded out his space. Not bad for the few years he’d been in practice. It had taken hard work and long hours, but he’d turned the corner and could see some fruit. He just had to remind himself on days like this, clients like that last one were

worth it only because they facilitated everything else he did.

When he returned to his office, David sank onto his mesh desk chair and kicked back a moment. He needed to do a quick search for Alexander—he'd find something online. Every kid at a minimum had a Facebook or similar online profile. Then he could call later. If the kid was in college, he'd either be in class or asleep since it was before ten in the morning. He turned to his computer and started clicking away. Bingo. A blog. What did a kid have to share with the world? After scanning a couple entries, David realized Alexander had a unique way of looking at international affairs. He seemed to see everything through a different lens. David clicked to the bio and grinned. Of course, the kid was a student in Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. Now his blog made perfect sense.

David could track him down, especially if Alexander lived on campus. A call to the switchboard, and he'd be patched through to the appropriate dorm room. Not as good as a cell, but it would start the connecting process.

As expected, he left a quick message. He'd bet pizza money the kid wouldn't return the call, but now he had a number. It wouldn't take much to get a room location either. Then he could stop by and see how the freshman held up.

A couple more times over the course of the day, David tried to reach Alexander. The result never changed. The same garbled voicemail picked up. When the day ended, David hopped in his car and headed through traffic into the city and west to Georgetown. He'd love to leave the car, but without a closer Metro stop, he'd walk too far to reach the dorms. Instead, he spent time scouting an elusive parking spot.

The kid lived in Village C, one of the residence halls in the heart of campus. David wouldn't arrive unannounced at the hall, so he pulled out his cell and tried one last time as he hoofed it across campus.

"Hello?" It sounded like Alexander had a cold. His husky voice reminded David of the somber purpose of his call.

"Alexander, this is David Evans. I used to clerk for your dad."

“So?”

David bit his tongue. He'd give the kid slack for the rudeness. “I was one of the people who found him yesterday. Do you need any help right now? I'm on campus and could meet you.”

The husky tone of the kid's voice transitioned to hostility. “Look. I don't need strangers around or the media.”

“I don't mean to intrude. Ciara Turner—she also clerked for your father—and I wondered if you had anyone planning the service. We could...” For someone who had the silver tongue, none of this came out as he'd imagined. “I don't know how you're doing, but I'd like to help. If I can ease some of the stuff you are dealing with, I'd like to.” That was marginally better.

“You found him?”

“Along with Ciara. We had an early meeting with him.”

“I would like a cup of coffee.” Alexander gave him directions to one of the student-run coffee houses. Ten minutes later, David waited at an outdoor table, the sun beginning its descent behind the office buildings surrounding the campus.

His phone rang while he sat, and he quickly filled in Ciara. They made plans for another walk...a chance to share what they'd learned. He closed his phone and turned his attention to the students filling the sidewalk. How would he know the right college student in the flood that was trying to reach their next class on time? He searched the foot traffic anyway. A few minutes later a lanky, young man with five o'clock shadow ambled to a stop in front of him. The kid's gray eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed. David imagined he hadn't slept since his dad's death.

David stood. “Alexander?” The kid nodded. “What can I get you?”

“A black coffee.” Alexander slouched at the table while David went in to get their drinks.

It felt awkward as the two sat at the small bistro table, the umbrella's edges flapping in the breeze. The scent of flowering trees carried toward them and mixed with feelings of somberness that draped Alexander like

a coat he'd outgrown.

"So what did Dad look like?" Alexander studied his coffee as if expecting to find answers for the crazy events of the last couple days.

"He was down on the floor. There weren't puddles of blood or anything like that. Almost like someone hit him on the head."

"The police aren't telling me anything." Alexander glanced up for a moment. "I guess they're trying to protect me...but I want the truth."

Ciara sat on her front stoop as the day slid into dusk. The trees lining the sidewalks had erupted in blossoms and she let the image soak in, replacing the stress of the day. She'd learned early in her practice that she must release each day's troubles. In the summer it was the community pool a few feet from her back door. In the spring, moments like this recalibrated her.

If traffic hadn't held him up, David would arrive soon.

She wasn't sure what she thought of that.

The judge's murder had cast them together, put them on the same side for the first time since their clerkship. She had to be careful. Remind herself how he'd broken her heart. Everyone would call her a fool if she let him back in without any hesitation.

She sat on the border of doing just that.

Letting him slide back into her life as if nothing had ever changed. But it had.

She rubbed her temples and tried to think about anything else. Even one of her non-David cases would work. She had to face reality. Once the police caught whoever murdered Judge Banter, things would return to normal. David wouldn't call a couple times a day and make plans to stop by in the evening. They wouldn't share cups of coffee and strategy.

Instead, they'd return to being opponents, squarely defending the rights and needs of their clients. At odds with each other on multiple

levels.

“Enjoying the evening?”

Ciara startled and dropped her hands in her lap as Savannah David settled next to her. The woman looked as relaxed and neat as always, the picture of a woman at peace with her life. Bet she didn’t see the beginning of crow’s feet when she looked in the mirror.

“What are you doing here?”

“Out enjoying a long walk this evening.” Savannah smiled as she brushed some loose hair out of her face. “I love strolling through this neighborhood and the way it explodes into spring.”

“I’m doing the same.”

Savannah looked unconvinced, her eyes seeming to see through Ciara. “A case bothering you? That’s usually what makes you all pensive.”

“Not tonight.” There were some things she couldn’t share with her law school mentor. Not yet.

“Want to tell me about him?”

Ciara grinned. “I didn’t say I was thinking about a man.”

“What else would it be since it’s not a client? And I’m glad to see it. You need someone who sees how special you are.” The woman patted her hand then stood. “I’ve got to get ready for my book club. The girls’ll be over shortly, and I still have to get the snacks set out. I hope they like this new recipe I’m trying. One or two can be a tad picky.”

“I’m sure they’ll love your treats. Everything you make is delicious.”

“You’re sweet.” Savannah gave her a smile. “Don’t hesitate to call if you need to brainstorm. Good night.”

“Night.” The sound of a man’s shoes clomped in the growing darkness. Ciara peered that direction, then smiled when she spotted David. She stood and brushed off her jeans.

“Still up for a walk?” Fatigue etched lines around David’s eyes as he stood in front of her.

“How’s Alexander?”

“I’m not sure. He started out hostile, then turned really sad. Didn’t

want help though. Seems determined to strike out on his own from the beginning.”

“Can’t blame him. Yet what a hard thing to do.”

“He said the police haven’t released the body yet, so he’s not sure when the funeral will be.”

“Surely they’ll speed up the autopsy. He was a judge.”

“It’ll still take time.” David rubbed his head in a brisk motion, then pointed down the sidewalk. “Ready?”

“Sure.” Ciara locked her door and then joined him.

They walked side by side as they retraced their route from the previous night. They stopped when they reached the bridge over I-395. Below, the headlights of cars raced, heading into the city and down into the Virginia suburbs. David seemed lost in thought, not attempting to keep up banter. As the silence stretched, Ciara wondered why he’d bothered to join her. Being alone wasn’t so bad in light of his brooding.

She bumped his shoulder. “What’s eating you?”

He started and glanced down at her. “What?”

“You’re a million miles away. Why come if you didn’t want to? I didn’t make you.”

“I couldn’t stomach going home to nothing.”

The words branded through her. “Thanks.”



“WAIT, that’s not what I meant.” David stifled a groan. “Today everything’s coming out strange.”

“This from the guy who won every moot court competition he entered?” Ciara arched an eyebrow, and in the light of the streetlamps he could tell she wasn’t biting.

“My wit abandoned me.”

“That happens. But seriously, go home. I’m not someone to mark time with. Either be here or go.”

Her words hit him in the chest like a line drive. He could remember every moment of the last time she’d thrown them at him. Still regretted

walking away. Not fighting for her. Guess he had a choice this time. Would she let him make it? Her posture tensed as if she'd braced for him to stalk off like he had the last time. Instead, he forced his shoulders to relax.

"I'm not going anywhere, Ciara."

"This time?"

He nodded. "I never should have left that night."

"Then why did you?" He saw moisture reflected in her eyes. "I stayed right here."

It had seemed the right choice at the time, but Ciara had paid the price. Maybe she'd give him a chance to fix it. Make things right. Earn the right to be with her again.

Maybe.



DAVID'S EYES tried to send her a message, but in the shadows, Ciara couldn't read them. Just once, she wished he'd come out and say it. Whatever was on his mind, just spit it out. What made it so hard for him to own what he'd done?

He'd left.

She'd stayed.

Then they collided in court. Two planets destined to crash and explode whenever they intersected. She loved the attraction, hated the collisions.

She shoved her hands in her pockets and turned away from the traffic flying by below. It was time to head home. "I'm sorry, David."

As she walked away, she listened. Would he follow?

The whizzing of cars threatened to overlay any other noise, but she couldn't hear him. She bit back a tear at the realization he wouldn't follow her tonight. She shouldn't have expected anything else.





TWO DAYS LATER, Clive buzzed David. “Detective on the phone for you.”

Maybe the man had news for him. Good news. David desperately needed some as his thoughts continued to cycle back to the night he let Ciara walk away—again. “Thanks.”

He picked up the phone and punched the blinking light. “Evans here.”

“This is Detective Howard. I’m working Judge Banter’s murder.”

“Yes, sir. What can I do for you today?”

“Do you know if the judge had any health conditions?”

“No.” David scoured his memory. “He hadn’t mentioned anything the last few times we met.”

“All right.”

“Have you talked to Alexander? He could at least tell you who his dad’s doctor was.”

“He didn’t know. Typical kid. Out of touch with his parent’s health. And there are no prescriptions at the house. We’ll keep digging.”

“Any suspects?”

“A few, but can’t mention them in an ongoing investigation.” The detective’s voice indicated he thought an attorney should know that answer.

“Sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

The detective thanked him and hung up. David’s fingers hovered over the numbers, poised to dial Ciara. Had she received a similar call? Maybe if he hadn’t let her walk away, he could call. Instead, it felt like the chasm between them had exploded again rather than shrinking. He was a fool.



CIARA KEPT WAITING FOR SOMETHING—something she didn’t want to define. But if she looked at her cell phone one more time, just to make sure she hadn’t somehow missed a call, she would chuck it out the nearest window so the closest vehicle could run over it.

No man should have this much control over her thoughts, especially

David.

She groaned. She'd done it again, let her thoughts cycle around when they should be focused on her job.

Her clients added meaning to her days. If she could protect one woman and her children, she'd done something that mattered. But could she really do that anyway? She wasn't God. She could only do her best to provide some boundaries.

"Get up." Linda stood in the doorway, Vera Bradley bag hooked over her shoulder. "It's time to get you out of here."

When Linda had that look in her eye, Ciara hopped to attention. The woman's instincts had been aroused, so she might as well go along. Otherwise, she wouldn't hear the end of Linda's mothering. Ciara tugged her purse from her bottom desk drawer and stood. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere where we can clear your head." As soon as they exited the office, Linda made a beeline for King Street. She set a pace that made Ciara almost trot to keep up.

"Where's the emergency?"

"You need some ice cream therapy."

"I don't know about the therapy, but ice cream sounds good."

"Of course." Linda lowered her sunglasses enough to let Ciara know how ridiculous her statement was. "Every girl needs it from time to time. Now spill the beans."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't play dumb. I may be your paralegal, but I've worked with you long enough to know when something is eating through you. I don't think it's a client situation this time. We haven't had an emergency in several weeks. So what is it?"

Ciara's steps slowed. Linda was much more than her assistant. The woman's kind care and concern had won her over almost from Linda's first day on the job. If anyone at the office really knew Ciara, she was the one. But that didn't mean Ciara wanted to lay everything out for inspection.

Linda slowed her pace as they neared Scoop's Grill and Homemade Ice Cream. The deep green storefront gave way to an inside with a refreshingly short line. Often, the line would extend outside, and Ciara didn't have that kind of time today.

"So are you going to say anything?"

"Other than the Rocky Road, what looks good?"

Linda rolled her eyes, then chuckled. "All right. You don't have to say anything. But if you don't shake whatever's bothering you, the big boss is going to notice. I'm surprised you haven't yanked your cell out half a dozen times to check it for calls."

"Am I that pathetic?"

"Lately...yes." Linda placed her order then paid. "I know the judge dying shocked you, but that doesn't explain all this."

Ciara accepted her paper dish of gooey pistachio ice cream. "I know. Let's just say it's reopened old wounds. The kind I'm a fool to entertain."

"So why do that?"

Ciara took a bite, letting the creamy flavor slide down her throat as she bought time. "I'm a glutton for torture?"

Linda shook her head. "Try again."

"I'm a fool who believes true love exists." The moment the words left, she cringed. She had not meant to say those words out loud. Not even to Linda.

Linda scooped a bite into her mouth and dug out another. She pointed the loaded spoon at Ciara. "True love exists. But it takes a lot of work. The kind that doesn't run when something gets tough."

"Did you somehow join us on our walk?"

"Us? Meaning David Evans?"

"Yeah." Ciara pushed back out on the sidewalk. "I told you I'm a fool. He's already hurt me once, and I let him walk right back in after one nice evening."

"But you walked away?" Linda's brow furrowed as she followed.

"I did." Ciara grimaced and pulled her shoulders up. "Can you believe it? We were talking, and I walked away like a fool. I wanted him to

follow me. What a waste of hope.”

A waste of hope. The words echoed through her mind as Ciara tried to focus on her job. When had romance and true love devolved to something too painful to risk?

When she and David first broke things off.

She'd been convinced forever waited for them. A bright future working together, righting the wrongs of their little corner of the world. That happily-ever-after never materialized, and she'd let the disappointment kill her hope of ever finding love. Working on so many broken marriages didn't improve her perspective. It was easy to become jaded. To believe anything else came from watching one too many Disney cartoons as a kid. She'd bought into the whole idea that there was one man out there who would complete her and make her whole.

She knew better. Really she did. Life had shown her Jesus was the only one who would never leave her.

Where did one buy hope and learn not to spend it frivolously on people who didn't respond?

She pulled on her trench coat and added a stack of case files to her briefcase. Nothing like a little late night reading to keep her occupied and make up for her wandering thoughts during the day. She walked to her car and then drove up King Street to her neighborhood. When she pulled into the cul-de-sac, she slammed on the brakes.

What was he doing here?

David leaned against his car, legs crossed and his hands jammed in his pockets. His sports jacket looked rumpled, and his hair mussed like he'd run his fingers through it again. She eased the BMW into the parking spot next to his older sedan.

"You could get your car towed if you leave it there." What an opening line.

A tired smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "That's why I didn't leave." He studied her a moment. "I hope I won't have to leave it here long."

"What?"

"Join me for supper tonight." He glanced down at the pavement. "I want to make it up to you."

"Make what up?" The man didn't make any sense.

"Letting you walk away." He looked up, his gaze colliding with hers with such intensity she almost jolted. "Give me another chance?"

She searched his eyes. Could she open her heart, risk him hurting her? She tugged her lower lip between her teeth. Everything in her screamed no, except for a small corner of hope that whispered it could be okay if she'd risk it all. "Okay. But don't do something like that again."



DAVID SHOVED his hands in his pocket to resist reaching out and touching the strand of hair that had escaped her ear. How like Ciara to agree, but tack on her own stipulations. He'd seen that maneuver a hundred times. "Do you need a few minutes to get ready?"

"No more than five."

"I'll wait here." He gestured to his car. "Make sure this piece of metal doesn't get towed."

She studied him another moment, her hazel eyes probing his, and he wondered if she found whatever she looked for. Part of him questioned why he'd come. They seemed destined to act like two magnets, attracted and repelled at the same time. It was a maddening dance, but one he had to try...again. Maybe this time they'd get the steps right and avoid each

other's toes.

He flipped around and placed his elbows on the roof so he could watch for her return. After another long day, he'd considered heading home, but the detective's call had made him reluctant to spend the evening alone.

All those meals by himself got repetitious. And while many women thought dating an attorney was great, many were reluctant to get too close to someone who specialized in the law of broken families. Didn't exactly feed their longings for happily ever after.

"Waiting for someone—or stalking her?"

David startled and whipped around. A woman in her forties studied him. "Waiting."

"All right. Treat her gently."

"Do I know you?" He studied her more closely. "Wait, I remember you. Savannah Davids."

The woman laughed. "You didn't hang out in my office like Ciara did, David. She's definitely one of my girls. Are you the one giving Ciara so much trouble?"

"I don't think so."

"Be careful around her." There was a serious glint in Savannah's eyes, the kind that if his mother had, he'd be jumping to attention. "She deserves someone who will treat her like a princess."

"I agree, ma'am." David wasn't sure what else to say to an assault like that. He straightened with some relief when Ciara hurried from her townhouse.

"Hello, Savannah." Ciara didn't seem surprised to see their former professor. Must mean she lived somewhere nearby. "Ready to go, David?"

"Absolutely."

Savannah's smile had the edge of knowing. She hadn't been fooled by him at all. "Have a nice evening."

Ciara slipped into his car then turned to him. "Did she give you a hard time?"

“No,” he bluffed. “Why would you think that?”

“Something about the shell-shocked look around your eyes. Where are we headed?”

“Shirlington? I know it’s close, but there are some great restaurants there.”

“Sounds perfect.”

David pointed his car down the hill, and, in a few moments, slid into a parking space in the parking garage. He opened the passenger door and waited for Ciara to slide from the vehicle. “Feel like the Carlyle?”

Ciara paused and looked at the cranberry red awning. The food was always excellent at Carlyle, but did she think it was too formal for the night? “How about the Capital City Brewing Company? A burger sounds good.”

Sound invariably ricocheted off the concrete floor while the high stools made it easy to mix and mingle in a group. It provided a casual atmosphere compared to Carlyle, but David wasn’t sure that’s what he wanted tonight. Although, after his stunt earlier in the week, he should let her take the lead. This time he’d follow, even if it was to a nice burger joint.

She maneuvered among the tables set outside and into the restaurant. In no time, a hostess led them to a black Formica table in a corner. David thanked her, hoping the location would give him a chance to actually hear Ciara. In short order, a waitress had glasses of tea in front of them and had collected their orders.

Ciara sat across the table, twisting the edges of the paper napkin wrapped around her silverware. Her jittery edge made him again regret letting her leave.

“I’m sorry, Ciara.” He reached across and stilled her fingers. A jolt of electricity shot up his arm, and he pulled back. “Forgive me?”

She considered him through glazed eyes. Had she felt the jolt, too? Then she seemed to snap out of whatever place she’d disappeared. “Yes.” She glanced down and uncurled the napkin, settling it across her lap. “But I’m not sure how many more times I’ll let you do that.”



“I understand.” What else could he say? It’s not like they could launch any kind of serious relationship.



CIARA STUDIED HIM. He still didn’t get it. Didn’t understand the hurt he’d inflicted when he hadn’t fought for her. That’s what the prince did. Battled for his girl, even if the fight was with her.

She needed to know she mattered. More than what, she couldn’t say. Simply that she mattered more.

A throb pounded a steady beat in her temple. She resisted the urge to step away, protect herself and abort the headache. “David, what is it you want?”

“Sorry?” He leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest. Even in khakis and a polo he had an air of authority that had the women at nearby tables glancing his way. He brushed a lock of wavy hair off his forehead, and Ciara could almost hear the collective swoon.

“Is friendship what we can attain?” She gestured at the space between them. “Or is there more?”

“I don’t know.” He looked like he regretted bringing her here.

How long until the appetizer arrived? They needed something to look at other than each other. How sad was that? Two adults who couldn’t carry on a simple conversation. Discussing their jobs didn’t work. Instant jump to conflict. What else did they have in common?

“So where are you going to church?”

David’s quiet question caught her off guard. “Me?” She asked.

He glanced around, a small smile on his lips. “See anyone else with us?”

“You don’t have to use sarcasm.” Yet she couldn’t help a grin. “There’s a community church right off King Street that’s not too far from my neighborhood. It’s a smallish congregation, but I like knowing most of those who call it home. Are you going somewhere?”

“Just switched to a non-denom in downtown DC. It meets in a theater, kind of different, but the pastor gets me every week. Being

uncomfortable is a good thing.”

Ciara had to nod. She loved that her pastor seemed to nail her each week with ways her life needed to change to better reflect Christ. “I don’t remember you talking about church much when we clerked.”

David shrugged. “It wasn’t that important. But I couldn’t be around a man like Judge Banter without wanting to learn more about how life could be infused with Christ in such a natural way. More than Sundays, but not preachy, if that makes sense.”

“It does.” Ciara prayed her life contained that same natural fragrance of Christ. “How do you reconcile that—” She stopped short. She did not want to bring up work. Not tonight.

“With my job?” He leaned forward, closing the distance between them. “Can you believe that just like some attorneys are committed to every accused person having a criminal defense, I’m committed to men having an attorney even if they aren’t great dads or husbands? Some have tried. Others don’t care. But they all get their defense. Maybe you’ll never accept that, but it’s who I am.”

“What if you could find a firm to work for?”

“Look at me. I don’t want those strings. Sure, it’s not easy being my own boss, but I control my schedule and which clients I accept. There’s no pressure—” She quirked an eyebrow at him, and he continued. “Okay, no pressure other than making payroll and rent, to take on every potential client.”

“I don’t know that we can reconcile that difference.”

“Then we’ll have to be acquaintances.”

The thought left her empty and cold. She’d enjoyed spending time with David over the last week. She’d missed his camaraderie, but this difference went to the core of who she was. To her sense of justice and right and wrong. She couldn’t just walk away from what she believed. She swallowed as she searched her mind for another conversation topic.

The waitress saved her by finally placing the appetizer between them. Soon they dipped various fried delights in different sauces as they discussed the chaos on Capital Hill.

After dinner they strolled the length of Shirlington, stopping to read the list of movies showing at the theater. The eclectic mix of first run and foreign films caught her attention. Too bad she didn't have more time to see movies or someone to take her. She glanced at David, but he studiously kept his attention on the board. Guess there was no chance this night would evolve into dinner and a movie. What did she expect when she'd so thoroughly shot down what he did?

This was why she remained single.

In a city filled with career driven people, she shoved away the only man who'd held her interest. She should have focused on the way he brought up church and his faith rather than what he did Monday through Friday, but she couldn't divorce the two.

Her faith compelled her to work with the clients she did.

Could it be the same for him? Even if he worked for those wearing black hats?

"Let it go, Ciara." David's voice startled her.

"What?"

"Quit analyzing everything. It might work well in the courtroom, but doesn't work here. Sometimes you have to let go and have faith."

"Let go? With you?" She clamped her lips together before she started ranting. This coming from the man who couldn't decide what he wanted. "Thanks for the advice."

He stared at her, sadness clouding his eyes, until she felt heat rush up her.

"I'm sorry. Maybe you should take me home."

"Maybe I should. I'd like things to be different, but maybe it's just not possible."

As he left her at her front door, she longed to reach out to him. To call him back. To tell him that it didn't matter, they'd find a way to make things work out.

But she didn't.

Because it did matter.

The days passed with no leads. Dignitaries and others packed Judge Banter's funeral when it was finally held two weeks later, but Ciara sat in the church alone. She tried not to search the crowd for David, but couldn't keep her gaze from traveling to the other side of the sanctuary where he sat. Then he stood and made his way to the front to give one of the eulogies. Tears collected in her throat as she listened to him recount the virtues of a man who gave them both a singular experience at a pivotal time in their careers. As he spoke, his eyes sought hers, and she felt mesmerized by the intensity in his. It felt as if a silent plea to understand who he was traveled across the chasm that separated them. The moment the service ended, she stood and skedaddled to her car, still shaken by what had passed between them.

She sank into her car, then locked the door. The keys remained tightly in her grasp as she tried to understand what had happened.

What was left to know? They were too different.

No matter how much she felt the jolt of physical attraction each time they shared space in a building, she couldn't open her heart to the possibility that something could happen between them.

That night she pulled on a pair of yoga pants, a fitted t-shirt, and scooped her hair back with a stretchy headband. She brewed a cup of tea and settled onto the loveseat.

Any other night she'd find herself absorbed in the novel she'd started

by her favorite suspense writer, but she couldn't get lost in the plot and pages.

She set the book aside. Was she wrong? She didn't like the thought. She prided herself on reading people well. That's what had stung with David. She'd been so mistaken about him. Right or wrong, she had to reach a resolution she could live with. Soon she'd find herself back at a table next to his in one of the area's courtrooms. They'd sit on opposite sides of a family crisis, and she had to find a way to live with that. She'd rather not be bothered by his presence at all, but for the moment she'd settle with not falling to distraction when she saw him.

Was that too much to ask?

The curtain fluttered against the back of her neck, bringing a kiss of goose bumps.

She picked up her cell phone and slid to the calendar. Colored blocks filled the next week, a dizzying mix of client meetings and hearings. Three involved David.

She set the phone down and wondered if she could express a desperate need for vacation time, one that would buy her time away from the firm and her clients. Even a week might help. She could claim the chaos of the prior weeks as evidence that her life hadn't filled normal parameters, and any woman would need a few days, maybe a few weeks, to reorient herself to the idea that she'd found the body of her mentor. The partners might argue she should have asked earlier, but she could always blame a delayed reaction. Surely things like that happened all the time.

A girl could wish.



DAVID WAITED for Alexander Banter to pick up the phone. He couldn't shake the kid from his thoughts, especially after the funeral. Someone needed to make sure Judge Banter's son held up okay, but David couldn't trust others would do it. However, the kid never answered his phone the first or fifth time he called. Must have driven Judge Banter

nuts.

If the kid didn't answer, David would have to wait and try again after the next client meeting. He hoped Alexander would answer because he could use any reason to delay the inevitable meeting with Ciara and her client.

He couldn't shake the quiet desperation mixed with distance that had filled her expression when his gaze collided with hers at the funeral. Neither could he alter the reality that she had dashed out of the funeral before he could get out of his row. If that wasn't the definition of avoiding him, he didn't know how the dictionary would describe it. To her it might look like he'd let her leave...again.

Alexander's voicemail kicked in. "Leave a message for the man who is now free."

Huh?

David hit redial and waited for the message to come up once more. Maybe the kid was in a weird philosophy class, but that message didn't make much sense. David cleared his throat. "Alexander, it's David Evans. Wanted to check in. Call if you need anything."

He ended the call reluctantly, then stared at a painting hanging across the office. Its rich frame hugged an image of an executive slumped in his office chair after a long day. Jesus knelt in front of him, washing his feet. Most days the image comforted him. The idea that Jesus saw how he worked for others, and that even when others didn't notice, Jesus did.

Today though, he felt convicted. As if it reminded him he hadn't done enough.

*Enough of what and for whom, Lord?*

He kept reaching out to Alexander. He took on the clients others didn't want, often without regard for whether they'd pay his bill. What had he overlooked?

The silence didn't break as he waited.

The phone sputtered to life. "She's here. With a client." Clive's tone bordered on unkind and left no question who he meant.

“Show them to the conference room.” David should get up. He should grab his file and move across the hall. But he couldn’t. Not with all the soul-searching still left to do when it came to Ciara. Had he treated her in an unChristlike manner?

He didn’t want to think too hard about the answer when she waited in the other room. Clive likely had grabbed a Diet Mountain Dew for her, one of the few David kept stocked for the times she ventured to his office. It didn’t matter that she came for clients, he took care of her. Did she notice the details? Probably not, and why would she? In this forum they were enemies, but he wanted to change that.



CLIVE’S DEMEANOR was cold as he led Ciara and her client Julie Stephens to the conference room and handed her a Diet Mountain Dew out of the small refrigerator.

“Thank you.”

He nodded, then turned to Julie. “Anything for you, ma’am?”

Julie frowned. “A diet cola if you won’t call me ma’am. Makes me feel ancient. My husband’s already done a good job of that by trading me in.”

Clive had the good grace to color as he retrieved the can. “Here you are, miss.”

“Much better. Thanks.” Julie sank onto one of the leather chairs pushed against the table. “So you think anything good will happen today?”

“Maybe we’ll hammer out the settlement.”

“I was still hoping for a miracle.”

Ciara considered her a moment. While she wanted to believe in miracles, she hadn’t seen many for her clients. “It’s possible, I suppose.”

“Not exactly a ringing expectation.”

“You know me, left-brain dominant, hard rule of my emotions.” What a joke when it came to her personal life, but Julie didn’t know that. Ciara popped the top to her soda and took a sip. Julie never would understand, so long as Ciara got firmly behind her wall before David walked in. For

once, she didn't mind waiting for him to wrap up whatever he worked on in the other room. She simply wasn't prepared to pretend his actions didn't wound her.

"Still carry a flame for this guy?"

Ciara spewed diet soda all over the table. She coughed and searched for a tissue in her pockets. "What?"

"Come on. Just because my happily-ever-after didn't work out doesn't mean I'm immune to sparks the size of the Fourth of July fireworks on the Mall. Watching the two of you skirt the obvious is the only thing making this hideous process bearable."

"Then I'm truly sorry." Ciara stood and grabbed some paper towels from a roll hanging over a small sink. She mopped up the mess, then wet a towel and wiped the table down again.

The door opened, and David stepped into the room. In an instant the walls seemed to crowd around her, and she straightened, the limp paper towel dripping on the table.

"Place not clean enough for you?" David's quirked eyebrow couldn't hide the twinkle.

Julie caught her gaze, a knowing light in her eyes.

And all Ciara wanted to do was crawl under the table, or better yet, out the door.



DAVID SHOULD HAVE FELT BAD, but he didn't. Instead, he pictured a hundred and one different scenarios that left Ciara leaning over his table with a tattered paper towel, cleaning up some unknown substance. It was too fun not to poke at her.

"Where's my husband?" Julie Stephens skewered him with her eyes.

"I regret to inform you that he called to say he won't make the meeting."

Julie growled, then turned on Ciara. "I told you this was a waste of time. That man refuses to see how his childish actions impact anyone but himself."



Ciara turned on David. “And you couldn’t call us? Tell us not to bother coming here?”

David held up his hands. “If I’d known, I would have. Clive just now handed me the message when I asked where Lawrence was.” And he’d have to get on Clive for not delivering the message immediately. He couldn’t blame Ciara and Julie for being irate. He’d feel the same in their position.

“Then I guess we’ll take this to the judge.” Ciara tossed the towel on the table. “We’d like to resolve this without a nasty, long hearing, but if your client won’t even come to a meeting, he’s leaving us no choice.”

“Now wait a minute. I’m sure he has a good reason.”

“Like taking his mistress shopping,” Julie muttered.

Ciara shot her a glance that told her to keep out of the fray. David doubted it would do any good with Julie. The woman wasn’t much easier to control than her husband, but at least she was here. “Look, I’m really sorry. I didn’t know, and I will give my client the what-for about it. Is there anything we can accomplish without him?”

Ciara looked at him like he’d suddenly grown a unicorn’s horn in the middle of his forehead. “I can’t imagine what.”

“All right. Meet you at motion hour later this week to schedule the hearing?”

“Thank you.” Ciara grabbed her briefcase, but paused as Julie brushed past her.

David placed a restraining hand on Ciara’s arm. “Do you have a minute?”

Ciara glanced from his hand to his face. “A very quick one.”

Now that she’d agreed to hear him out, he didn’t know what to say. Other than the vague impression he’d had in his office, nothing had changed. It was time to do something about that. He didn’t like the status quo, so he needed to act. He took a deep breath.

“Would you go to dinner with me tonight?”

Now, he had no doubt she believed he’d grown a horn. “Dinner? Tonight? Are you crazy?”

“Yes, I’m going crazy not seeing you. Ciara, my best days involve you.”

“Then it’s been a while since you’ve had a good one.”

“Exactly. It’s not the same.” He took a steadying breath. “I can’t just walk away like we’ve done in the past. I know I’ve hurt you.” He held up a hand as she started to sputter. “Give me a chance. You know guys stink at emotion.” She closed her mouth and crossed her arms. “I don’t want to let you slip away. I want to see if we have a fighting chance.”

“We do the fighting part well.” Her words sparked with passion.

“Actually we don’t. One of us walks away as soon as the other indicates there’s something deeper to talk about. We have to stop that.” He rubbed his hands over his hair. “Ciara, anything of value is worth a fight.”

How did one prepare for a dinner that might be date, but shouldn't register as one?

She'd call her law school friends Hayden McCarthy or Caroline Bragg for advice if she had time, but she barely had time to freshen up as it was.

A date? Ciara sighed as she weighed what that would mean. Could she take that step?

After years of not trusting David, she wanted to try. He'd shown his current character mirrored that of the law clerk she'd fallen for. Maybe she'd been unfair to lump him into the same category as so many of his clients. His point that they deserved someone to protect their rights was valid...she just wished he wasn't the one doing it.

She turned to her closet and stared at the clothes hanging neatly in her closet, uncertain how to dress. Would a silk dress be too nice? Make it look like she cared what David thought? But a pantsuit seemed too rigid; and a sweater set, while feminine, felt too casual. Dinner should not turn into a complicated wardrobe issue.

With a glance at her watch, Ciara grabbed a floral dress that swirled around her calves in frothy layers. She'd pair it with a rich aubergine cardigan—a compromise between too casual and too formal.

She hurried through a shower and blow-dried her hair. The soft waves framed her face as she added make-up. After a last glance in the

mirror, she pulled on a pair of dark purple pumps and clomped down the stairs to the living room and her loveseat. She adored her townhouse's wood floors, but at times like this, the noise made her feel as graceful as an overweight elephant. She plopped onto the cushion, then grabbed a magazine. Five minutes later, she couldn't remember a single word she'd scanned.

A brisk knock pulled her back to her feet. She stood, opened the door, and stilled at the expression that swept across David's face.

He whistled, low and a note that wrapped around her heart. "You look amazing."

Ciara swept a hand down the length of her skirt. "Thanks." She turned and grabbed her purse and beige trench coat. "Where to?"

"It's a surprise." He devoured her with his gaze for another minute, then offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

She nodded, feeling the weight of his admiration, and he led her to his car. Soon his sedan pointed down King Street, soft classical music filling the silence. She stared out the window, mesmerized as the George Washington Masonic National Memorial came into view, silhouetted in stark relief against the dark sky. It always struck her as the gate standing between Old Town and its neighbors. They passed the Metro station, and soon David's head swiveled as he looked for a parking space.

"Here we go." He found a spot on Lee Street. Before she could open the door, he'd slid out and walked around. "My lady."

Ciara accepted his hand and tried to climb gracefully from the car. His hand slipped naturally to the small of her back as he guided her back toward King Street. She wanted to sink into the emotion and protection the simple gesture offered, but couldn't escape how not normal all of this was. She needed to add another layer to her protective wall, but felt cracks develop in it instead.

Soon they were in the lobby of her favorite Italian restaurant. Its brick walls and wooden floor served as the perfect backdrop to the small tables covered in red-checked oilcloth. The waiter handed them menus, but she didn't bother opening hers.

David arched an eyebrow. "Know what you want already?"

"Yes. The veal scaloppine alla picatta is one of my favorites."

"Still stick with your favorites?"

"Yes, sir. Once I like something, why risk disappointment?"

"Not very adventuresome."

"I went to law school. That was enough adventure for me."

David chuckled. His head swiveled slightly as he scanned the room. A cloud collected on his features as his gaze locked on something. He seemed to stare more intently, and Ciara could feel him slipping away from their pleasant evening. She started to turn to see what had captured him, but he squeezed her hand.

"What is it?"

"Who."

"Who?"

"The son of a recently deceased judge is over there having the time of his life."

Ciara didn't care what David said, she pivoted and then felt her jaw drop. Alexander Banter sat at a table surrounded by a couple of college co-eds. He looked like anything but a grieving son. Instead, he hefted a mug of beer high as if in a toast. Whatever he said, it made the girls laugh. A flush of heat raced through Ciara at the image. "What is he doing?"

"That's the question of the hour." David pulled out his phone and hit some buttons. He flipped the phone around to her. "I'll take these to the detective tomorrow. Maybe they need to look into Alexander a bit."

Ciara swallowed back a wave of bile. "I can't believe Alexander would murder his father."

"Well, I know if I was the grieving son, I wouldn't be out partying days after the funeral."

"What's he supposed to do?" Her mind raced for a logical conclusion, one that would stand up in court and didn't involve Alexander being the main suspect. "And why on earth would he kill his dad? It doesn't make sense."

“Maybe, but I’m going to dig.”

“David.” She let the word elongate. “Don’t go looking for a killer everywhere. Next thing you’ll think I did it.”

“Did you?” After a brief moment, he smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

She straightened and pulled back from him. “You know the answer to that, mister. Besides, I had nothing to gain. What does Alexander have to gain?”

“Freedom from a father with expectations?”

“Hardly seems worth murder. He’d already moved out of the house and into the dorms.”

“Money. Maybe he wanted to do things Judge Banter wouldn’t allow.”

“Possible, but still, to kill over it? Eventually Judge Banter would have come around. He wasn’t that hard.”

The laughter behind her built. “To my father. May he rest in peace now that I finally have mine.”

The laughter drizzled to a stop. Ciara gripped the edges of the table to keep from turning and staring. Half the room must have heard him.

“I can’t say I’ll miss him.” The words slurred, as a mug slammed against a table.

“See, he’s drunk.” Ciara shook her head. “Tomorrow he’ll be embarrassed if anyone tells him what he did tonight.”

“Maybe.” But the look in his eye let Ciara know David wouldn’t let it go.



DAVID TRIED to pull his attention from the young fool across the room and back to the beautiful woman in front of him. He sat here for her. He didn’t want more years to go by with this friction and distance between them. But if he kept pulling away to analyze Alexander, then his hopes for tonight would be aborted by none other than himself.

Time to multitask. He made a mental note to follow up on Alexander in the morning. But right now, he’d enjoy time with Ciara. See only her

and let her know that.

The waiter set plates piled high with Italian food in front of them. “Anything else right now?”

They shook their heads, and the next moments were quiet as the pasta disappeared.

Ciara dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “Will you let it go if the police can’t solve Judge Banter’s murder?”

He grimaced. “I don’t want it to stay unsolved.”

“But what if?”

“Then life will continue. What else is there?” He spun fettuccini around his fork and shoved it in his mouth. He studied Ciara while he chewed. What a complex woman, one he wanted to know. To understand. Deeply.

She shifted in the seat as if uncomfortable under his scrutiny. He swallowed and quirked a smile.

“What?” Her word had a timid edge to it, like she wasn’t sure she really wanted to know.

“Wondering what motivates you. What gets you up and going in the morning?”

“That’s not a small question.”

“The best ones rarely are.”

“True.” It was her turn to look beyond him. He gave her the time to consider her answer. “I like to bring hope to women in crisis. Even when they think they want the divorce, it’s a crazy process. And if I can help them reconcile, then I want to. Sometimes that bit of time and space is enough to bring the family back to wholeness.”

“It’s not about the fee?”

“Never. Well, to the partners it is, but I’ve chosen not to take that track—at least for as long as they’ll let me. I always want it to be about people first. About helping them through traumatic experiences. Especially the kids. I don’t know how people can do it to children—” She held up a hand. “I know sometimes there isn’t a choice, but I wish there was.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a mission.”

“I guess I do.” She cut a piece of her veal. “Every choice we make is like this. We think it only impacts ourselves, but it spirals out. Touches all those around us. Some in visible ways, and others in unseen. I’ll never forget how blindsided I felt when my parents split a year ago, and I’m around divorce for a living. I never thought it would impact me, an adult child, so hard.” Her voice dropped. “But it does. I felt just as lost as that six-year-old who can’t quite understand why Daddy left or Mommy’s moving away.”

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry.” The words felt awkward and inadequate.

“I don’t tell many people. After all, I’m twenty-seven. It shouldn’t matter as much. But it’s made me question a lot of things that I always thought were constant about my life. I’ve learned that only one thing is unchangeable and unshakeable.”

“God?”

“Absolutely. I can always count on Him—even when I don’t understand. I can’t say that about most people.”

Did he fall in that category? He didn’t dare ask, because he knew the answer. One he didn’t like. “I’d like to become someone in your life you can count on.”

She smiled, but it held shadows. “You used to be.”

The words pounded through him. *Used to be*. That didn’t sound too promising for *and will be again*. Yet that’s what he wanted. More than anything. To earn the right to be someone she could count on as a constant in her life. To stand there when the bottom fell out and her world shifted.

The waiter stepped up to the table in the silence. “Can I get y’all dessert?”

Ciara shook her head as she pressed a hand into her stomach. “Not me.”

“I think we’re ready for the check.” David wondered if she’d consider ice cream. Most women would jump at it, but Ciara wasn’t like most. No, when he was around her, he wanted to be more than he ever did with



others. He wanted to rise to the occasion. Be the man she needed. Would she let him?

As he held her coat for her, he wasn't sure, but he knew he'd do whatever he could to become that in her life.



THE NEXT NIGHT, the girls in her law school gang knocked on Ciara's door for their quarterly movie night. This group had been a year behind her, and she'd been their mentor during first-year orientation. Then she'd seen them in the halls at George Mason Law School, even had a class with Jaime. The friendships had lasted beyond graduations with a little work on everyone's part. It was wonderful to have a group that understood the travails of young lawyers. The long-running marathon of Cary Grant movies tied them together. This time though, as soon as the girls arrived, they had an agenda.

Caroline walked in and handed Ciara a tub of dip and plate of chips.

"What are these?" Ciara held them up, knowing it couldn't be routine chips and dip.

"Mango salsa and homemade cinnamon chips. There's nothing to them, y'all." She grabbed the pitcher of tea and stack of cups before heading down the stairs. "But tonight's not about me, right, Hayden?"

"Tonight we want the scoop about you and that David Evans." Hayden leaned against the wall as Ciara set down a plate of brownies she'd bought at the grocery store.

"There's nothing to say. Have either of you heard from Jaime?"

Emilie Wesley munched one of the chips, then nodded. "Jaime might be running a bit late. Something about a jury being out. She said not to wait on her. She'll arrive as soon as she can."

Hayden used a chip to point at Ciara. "You still haven't told us about David, missy."

Ciara tried to distract the two by starting *Arsenic and Old Lace* right away, but they simply peppered her with questions over the top of the movie. If the antics of the two older sisters and Cary Grant couldn't deter

them, Ciara knew she might as well spill the tale.

“There’s nothing to say really.”

Caroline began to sputter a protest in her soft southern drawl.

Ciara raised a hand. “Wait a minute. I have to decide whether I care more for David or our differences. Lately, I’ve begun to think I’ve created the differences to keep us apart.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Hayden ran a chip through the dip, then popped it in her mouth. “Caroline, this is delicious.”

“Thanks.” Caroline turned to Ciara. “So? What are you going to do?”

As Cary Grant discovered the body, Ciara realized that was the question she had to answer.

What was she going to do?

The phone rang and rang as David tried to connect with Detective Howard two days after his dinner with Ciara. It had been impossible to reach the detective or his voicemail, but finally, he found someone who dumped him into voicemail so he could leave a message. Would the man even call him back? In the light of another day, it seemed crazy to consider Alexander a suspect in his father's murder. But he wouldn't walk away from the strong conviction he'd had at the restaurant.

The day soon erupted out of control with client after potential client calling. It felt like the phone had attached to his shoulder.

"You've got to get out of here." His assistant stood in the doorway, a file in hand. "The hearing is in fifteen minutes."

David groaned. "Are you sure the detective hasn't called back?"

"Not yet. What's the rush?"

"Not positive. Gut feeling, I guess."

Clive waved the file. "For now, you have to run."

David pulled his court I.D. from the desk and stood. "All right."

He hurried to the court and tried not to be annoyed by opposing counsel. Right now, having Ciara stare at him from the other table would be preferable to the full can of air pontificating with wild gestures. One of the old school, this attorney thought everybody loved to listen to his 'wisdom.' It took all David's self-control not to roll his eyes every other moment at something the man said.

In the end, the judge finally cut him off. “I understand your position. Thank you. I’ll have my ruling in a week.”

As David collected his materials, his phone buzzed on his hip. He hustled from the courtroom and pulled it out. “Evans here.”

“You called?” Detective Howard sounded bored.

“Thanks for calling back.” David stood in a quiet corner and filled the detective in on what he’d seen and heard at the restaurant. “I don’t know if it matters, but I thought you should know.”

“I’ll check into it.”

“Any reason to think Alexander might be involved?” David pressed the phone closer to his ear.

“I’ll check into it.”

“Okay.” David closed his phone. He’d done everything he could. Maybe he’d call Ciara and fill her in on his walk back to the office. Two nights ago she’d been too nice to tell him he was insane. Did she still feel the same way?



“DAVID EVANS on line one for you.”

Ciara glanced at the phone, then back to the legal memo she needed to proof before close of business. “Guess I’ll take it.”

She took a quick breath, then picked up the phone. “Ciara Turner.”

“Hi, this is David.”

She smiled at the question in his voice. “Hello.”

“I wanted to let you know, I talked to the detective on Judge Banter’s case. He said he’d look into the other night.” He paused, and Ciara wondered what had him considering his words. “I thought you’d like to know.”

“Thanks. Here’s hoping he can solve the case soon.”

“Yeah.”

As the silence lengthened, she glanced back to the memo. “Anything else?”

“No. Well, yes.” There was another pause. “Have dinner with me

Friday.”

Ciara stared at her desk, her eyes not seeing the papers and files covering it. Did she dare? She wanted to, since she’d seen far enough into David in the last weeks to keep exploring.

“I’d like that.”

“I’ll pick you up a few minutes before seven if that works.”

“Perfect.” After their conversation ended, she hung up and looked down. While they’d talked, she’d doodled across one of the legal pads. Heat climbed her neck and cheeks as she glanced at the words. Ciara woven into the letters Evans. Such a junior high gesture. She ripped the sheet from the pad, then the next as she saw the imprint. She groaned and slammed them into the trashcan under her desk.

Maybe she should have said no.

She stood and hurried to the break room for a cup of tea. She needed to clear her thoughts and make room for her clients. Focus on their needs and how she could help them. Somehow she worked for hours, churned out pleading after pleading. Then she threw a few files in her briefcase and headed to her car. The drive down King Street flowed smoothly, the bulk of rush hour ahead of her.

As Ciara turned into the cul-de-sac, it looked like a block party had broken out spontaneously. Her neighbors sat on their porch stoops. A few had pulled grills around from their backyards and smaller ones from patios. The sidewalks had been transformed with chairs and coolers.

“You got here just in time.” Savannah grabbed Ciara’s hand and led her to a neighbor’s doorstep. “Tara here just brought out some fruit slushes. One’s even got your favorite—watermelon.”

Ciara grinned as she tugged lightly free from Savannah’s grasp. “I don’t know how you got invited, but I’ll be back in a moment. Let me plop this down first.” She wiggled her keys in front of her. “Drop off my briefcase.”

“Well, hurry back. I’ll try to protect one of Tara’s special slushes for you.”

“Okay.” Ciara wove through her neighbors, a tilt to her lips as she

watched the fun. She wanted to jump in, but something held her back. Still, there was no better way to welcome spring than to celebrate a warm day with her neighbors. Ciara unlocked her front door, and then threw the briefcase on the loveseat. She clattered up the wood stairs and into her bedroom. After yanking on a pair of jeans and a purple cardigan set, she slipped on a pair of flats and hurried back down the stairs.

Her phone rang as she hit the door. She sighed and turned to the kitchen. Ciara grabbed the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey.” David’s lazy voice made her smile.

“Yes?”

“Just wondering when you’re coming out.”

“Coming out?”

“Is there an echo around here?”

Background sounds, music from a radio, the scrape of a can being pulled from ice, the small laugh of a child. Ciara took a step toward the door.

“Where exactly are you?”

“Open the door.”

Ciara’s steps quickened, and she flung open the door. David stood grinning there, a clear plastic glass filled with a pink frothy concoction with a curvy straw stuck in it.

“That must be Tara’s touch.” She pointed at the pink straw.

David handed it to her. “Ready to join the party?”

There seemed to be more than the surface question in the words. Ciara considered him a moment, then thrust her thought to the side.

“Yes.”

And now that David was there, she was.



THERE WAS a special magic in Ciara’s neighborhood. A group of people who enjoyed each other in their non-work hours that David hadn’t seen replicated. In a way, it matched Ciara, one who cautiously considered others. But once she accepted you, that was it. She would do anything

for you.

David wanted to land back in that place. One where she expected the best rather than anticipated the worst. They'd eased their way that direction, but he was ready to mark the new column firmly and never deviate from it.

Ciara Turner was entirely too special to let slip through his grasp. Again.

She stepped in front of him to interact with one of the neighbors' children, an adorable little boy with blond curls and large green eyes. He looked up at her with absolute adoration, the kind that said she'd proven herself to him over and over. And probably through kicking balls around the tennis court.

The little boy scuffed his tennis shoe in the dirt and dropped cherry blossoms along the sidewalk. The kid was enough to make him think about someday. That someday where there'd be a little David and a little Ciara.

Whoa!

He shook his head. Time to dislodge that thought before he got waaaayyyy ahead of himself. She'd barely accept dinner invitations without studying him as if certain he hid a hidden motive in his ask.

He had to stick it out longer than she planned to. Good thing stubborn was his middle name.

The vibration of his phone against his hip pulled his gaze from her. He glanced at the caller I.D. Alexandria Sheriff? He touched Ciara's elbow, waited for her gaze to meet his. He flashed her the screen. "I've got to take this."

"Sure." She nodded, and he felt her gaze follow him as he stepped around the corner, searching for a quieter spot. "Evans."

"Mr. Evans, this is Detective Morgan."

"Yes, sir." David turned his back on the festivities and focused on the abandoned pool.

"We've got Alexander Banter in custody. He's requested an attorney."

David held his breath as he waited for the detective to go on. "Yes?"

“He’s requested you.”

The words slammed into David. Could he defend the kid? “Why do you have him?”

“Followed up your call with a few of our own. Mr. Banter is now a person of interest, intense interest, in the death of his father.”

David felt the tension cord his shoulders. “I can’t represent him since I may be a witness against him. He’ll have to try someone else. I wouldn’t represent him even if I weren’t a possible witness.”

“Thought you’d say that. Surprised the kid didn’t figure it out. Must really think he’s fooled everyone.” The detective sighed, and David could imagine him sitting at a battered desk, rubbing exhausted eyes. “Back at it then.”

“You’ll keep me posted?”

“As much as I can. Seems you care more about wrapping up this case than the son. Weird business some times.”

After the man hung up, David stared at his phone. Alexander had asked for him? The kid was a fool. Even if David weren’t a potential witness, he couldn’t stomach the thought of defending the man in a potential criminal action for the murder of his father.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he tried to quiet the inner war.

“Everything all right?” Ciara stepped next to him. “You look upset.”

That word couldn’t begin to describe the fire pouring through him, demanding an outlet.

“What did the detective know?”

David tried to couch his words to be light. “Just that Alexander wants me to represent him during his questioning.”

“You can’t do that.” The shock ricocheted in her voice.

“I know. Can you imagine he asked?” He ran his fingers through his hair, wishing instead for something to throw against the tennis court’s fence. The resounding clatter would sound so good.

“So what now?” She leaned against his arm as if to lend her support as he struggled to find footing.

“I guess we let the detectives do their thing. Trust they’ll figure out if



Alexander was involved. If not...I guess we leave it to them anyway.” He looked at the woman beside him. He tipped her chin. “There are other things I’d like to figure out.”

A sly grin tipped her lips. “Like what?”

He studied her eyes, soaking in the way she had stripped the barriers that used to exist. The ones that separated them from each other like the deepest cavern. If she could do that, then he could bare his soul. Let her know what he wanted. What he was ready to fight for. He leaned down until their foreheads touched.

“What I want is to learn how to encourage a woman like you fall in love with a man like me.”

The next days confirmed what Ciara had dreaded. Alexander Banter had killed his father. All to receive his small inheritance from his mother's death. He was tired of waiting for his dad to let him make the decisions on the money. That dreadful morning weeks earlier, he'd arrived at his father's chambers ready to argue with Judge Banter. He left a murderer.

The days sped up after that, each one feeling a bit more like spring. Even on the days she met David in court, they didn't feel like adversaries anymore. They couldn't be colleagues. But she now understood he wasn't the enemy she'd created in her mind.

Still, she couldn't decide how far she wanted their growing relationship to evolve. Friendship felt...safe...if a tad dull. But anything else required risk. She thought she could offer that to him, but each time he pulled back, she exhaled.

Maybe she wasn't as ready as she thought for more than friendship.

Either way, she had to settle the matter in her mind and clue her heart in on the decision. Because right now, anytime her gaze collided with David's she lost her place. Her thoughts evaporated like so many bubbles in the spring air. Then her emotions would begin soaring like a kite. Next thing she knew, she'd take up writing poetry. And that would be too much. Way too much.

David's calls dried up. She tried to tell herself it wasn't because the

police had resolved the mystery. He simply had a case that consumed him. Probably a stack of clients that all demanded his attention at the same time. If anyone knew how client crises erupted at inconvenient times, she did. That was the life of a family law attorney.

Yet another reason she'd lectured herself not to fall for David.

Her heart had ignored her advice. Quite good advice. The kind that could protect her.

Ciara swiveled her chair to the credenza, placing the phone behind her. Sheer determination kept her from listening for the phone to ring. She had too much to do, too many people depending on her, to let one man distract her focus and energy.

By the end of the day, she felt good about what she'd accomplished, but her phone still hadn't rung with the right voice on the other end of the call.

As soon as she got home, she hurried upstairs and into exercise clothes. She tied on her tennis shoes and bolted out the door. Her thoughts roamed over the past weeks. All that had happened to turn her world on odd angles. She prayed she'd never have to find another person she respected and admired face down and hours away from death. She prayed that somehow she could forgive Alexander for killing his father. And she prayed that she could come to grips with what she felt for David—whatever it was.

She took the bridge across 395 and continued power-walking into the neighboring community. Her thoughts churned to the tempo of her pumping arms.

Somewhere she could find peace.

She had to. The alternative of letting a man control how she felt about the rest of her day couldn't be more wrong. *God, help me figure this out. I just want to honor You, especially in my relationships.*

Could there be a more crucial area to put God first? She couldn't imagine one.

Her relationships with other people touched every area of her life. From clients to colleagues to people in her neighborhood and at church,

her life was a tightly woven web of connections.

Ciara shivered and picked up her pace again. The vibrant beauty of yellow and red tulips, pastel crocus, frothy cherry blossoms, and other flowering trees couldn't pull her mind from the sense she was holding on to something. Something she needed to relinquish if she wanted to see what was possible in this area of her life.

What did she want?

Her dreams had always envisioned a husband and one or two kids that looked a lot like them completing a family picture that morphed into older images each Christmas. She'd imagined loose teeth and braces. Dolls and Legos. Trucks and crafts.

Instead, her life existed in her job and townhouse, without even room for a dog or cat. As she examined it, it felt pathetic. Empty. Not at all matching the dream.

Her steps slowed as she reached the playground on the backside of the neighborhood. Wasn't it time to chase her dreams? Dreams that involved more than serving her clients? Dreams that would fill her life and her home?

She longed to, but even as she examined the idea, she knew it wasn't entirely true. If it were, she would call David. She wouldn't cling to some old-fashioned notion he had to call her first.

Ciara sank on to a swing, and pushed her feet against the mulch. Slowly the swing rose higher and higher as she pumped her legs. Her hair blew off the back of her neck and she stretched out, letting the swing lift her higher and higher. She closed her eyes and listened to the breeze as she swooshed back and forth.

*God, I want to live like this. Abandoned to You and trusting You with my future.* She paused. *With David.*

The words released a weight in her chest. Could she trust God? To know her best interests? To protect her heart? Even as she thought the questions, she laughed. If she couldn't trust Him, who could she trust?



FRIDAY EVENING, David hurried from the office. He'd been delighted that Ciara took his call, and even more so when she'd agreed to meeting him after work. He'd hesitated to call it a date for fear it would scare her off. The days stayed light longer, but if he didn't hurry, he wouldn't have enough time to implement his plan. And if there was anything he was good at, it was building a plan and executing it.

It's what attorneys did every day.

Now he had to get this one to work out. With a certain girl. Who just might outthink him if he wasn't careful.

He flew through his townhouse, grabbing the fresh clothes he'd set out the night before. In less than fifteen minutes, he was back out the door and in his car. He turned to a classical station to set a soothing mood as he zipped up King Street toward Cherry Blossom Estates. Toward Ciara.

One chance. He had one chance to get this right.

He shook his head and turned up the music. If he kept telling himself things like that, he'd lose his focus before he even arrived at Ciara's doorstep.

"It's just one night, man." The pep talk didn't help. At all.

At the stoplight, he looked in the rearview mirror, then tried to rub the stress from his face. It wasn't Ciara's fault his day had deepened the circles under his eyes. He really needed to reevaluate how he selected clients. Some of them simply weren't worth the added headaches, like today's no-shows. Not showing for a child support hearing stood as the all-time no-no, and these guys didn't get it. Even if you felt persecuted, you had to show up, tell the judge why. Today's yahoos had ignored his advice and now one had an arrest warrant outstanding and the other was one small step from the same thing.

Tonight would be a great night to avoid work conversations.

Like that could happen when two attorneys went to dinner. He'd just have to try hard to come up with ways to steer the conversation in any of a million other directions. All of them far from that courthouse sitting in downtown Old Town.

He pulled his sedan into a vacant slot in front of Ciara's end unit, then hurried to her door. Almost before he knocked, the door opened and Ciara stood there. His breath disappeared as he soaked in her vision. At her throat, she wore a frothy pink scarf the same color as the cherry blossoms, setting off her cream dress and adding warm color to her cheeks. Heels elevated her closer to his level, and she wore her hair down in soft waves just below her shoulders. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled.

"Let me grab a coat, and I'll be ready." She turned toward the corner where her coat tree hid and slid into a beige trench coat before he could reach her side. Ciara tugged her hair free of the collar, then quirked her head to the side. "What?"

David gathered his thoughts. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

The color in her cheeks heightened, and she glanced to the side. "You say that to all the girls."

He cleared his throat. "Not at all." He offered her his arm. "Ready for an evening out?"

"Absolutely. I'm glad to put this week to bed and relax." She took a step on her heels and teetered just a moment when one seemed to slip into a crack on the brick.

Should he reconsider his plans? He studied her a moment, then decided he couldn't. It was time to let her know.



CIARA BRUSHED BACK a creeping wave of uncertainty. Had she overdressed? David kept looking at her with something in his gaze, something she couldn't read. He opened her car door, and she slid onto the leather seat. After placing her hands in her lap, she took a steadying breath as he hurried around the car.

David started the car and eased out of the neighborhood. "Are you hungry?"

"Not yet."

“Good. I thought we could make a quick stop before heading to the restaurant.”

The strains of violins wrapped around her. Usually she found classical music soothing, but today an edge of discord seemed to creep in with the tones. She shook off the thought, one that surely came from her overactive imagination. She eased against the cushion and forced herself to relax. Work had ended and she had time to relax.

In moments, David motored his car through light traffic into the city on 395. They veered off onto the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, and soon he twisted through the maze back toward the Jefferson Memorial. Its neoclassical marble dome poked over the Japanese flowering cherry trees that ringed it.

Ciara stayed quiet as he pulled into a parking slot. He turned off the car and looked at her.

“Up for a stroll?” There was a playful glint hiding something deeper—maybe a challenge—in his gaze.

“Always.” Though if she’d known, she would have worn different shoes. A pair that wouldn’t leave mismatched blisters all over her feet.

David led her to the sidewalk that circled the Tidal Basin and kept a slow pace. For a Friday night, tourists and pedestrians hadn’t overrun the area, though several runners zipped around them. The cherry trees stretched branches overhead, each still decorated with the dainty pink and white blossoms that exploded with the advent of spring. Without crazy storms, the blossoms had lasted longer than Ciara could remember seeing them.

David kept up a steady stream of small talk. Anytime a topic showed a hint of petering to an end, he’d turn to something new, almost as if he wanted to make sure one topic didn’t show up. Ciara let him lead wherever he wanted. She’d enjoy the moment regardless of the topic, as long as it wasn’t a case they shared.

As they reached the end of the circle, he stopped and looked into her face. “Want to sit on the steps for a minute?”

Ciara nodded, even though she didn’t want to imagine what might

happen to her cream dress. The dry cleaners could try to clean any dirt later. Right now she wanted to enjoy the easy camaraderie between them. Even if it meant cold legs and possible stains.

After he helped her ease to the stone, she couldn't hide a quick shiver.

"Guess I should have grabbed a blanket."

"I'll be fine for a bit."

He slipped his sports jacket off, then slid it over her trench coat. He shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the skyline.

This was what Ciara loved about living in Washington, DC. Moments like this when the reality that she lived in the nation's capital confronted her from all sides. Planes roared into and out of flight patterns for Reagan National, while cars streamed in and out of the city on 395. The monuments and Capital building stood in contrast to the sky, while government buildings lined the spaces in between. Throw in the mix of tourists, and she couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

David bumped her shoulder, and she turned toward him.

"I'm glad we've started spending time together again, Ciara." The words seemed almost forced, not the natural delivery she'd expect.

"I am, too." She shifted, feeling the cold penetrate her dress.

David studied his hands, then looked up at her, his eyes piercing her. "I don't have many regrets in my life, but one is letting us drift apart after our clerkship. You are an amazing woman, and when I'm with you, I want to be so much more than the man I am now."

She started to speak, needing to stop wherever he was headed, but he placed a finger on her lips. The contact sizzled into the space between them, and her breath hitched.

"Hear me out."

He must not understand that at the moment she could hardly form a thought, let alone a sentence. Instead, she almost moaned when he pulled back slightly.

"I know we'll probably never see our cases the same way...and frankly life would get boring if we did." A rakish air hit his eyes, and she



caught a hint of Humphrey Bogart. “But I don’t want to let us drift apart again. I want you in my life, deeply in my life. I can’t imagine it without you now.”

He stroked her cheek, and Ciara leaned into the touch.

“I want you, no, need you in my life, Ciara. These last weeks have shown me what a shell I’ve lived without you.”

She nodded. “My life’s the same. Full, but not rich. It’s missing something crucial without you.”

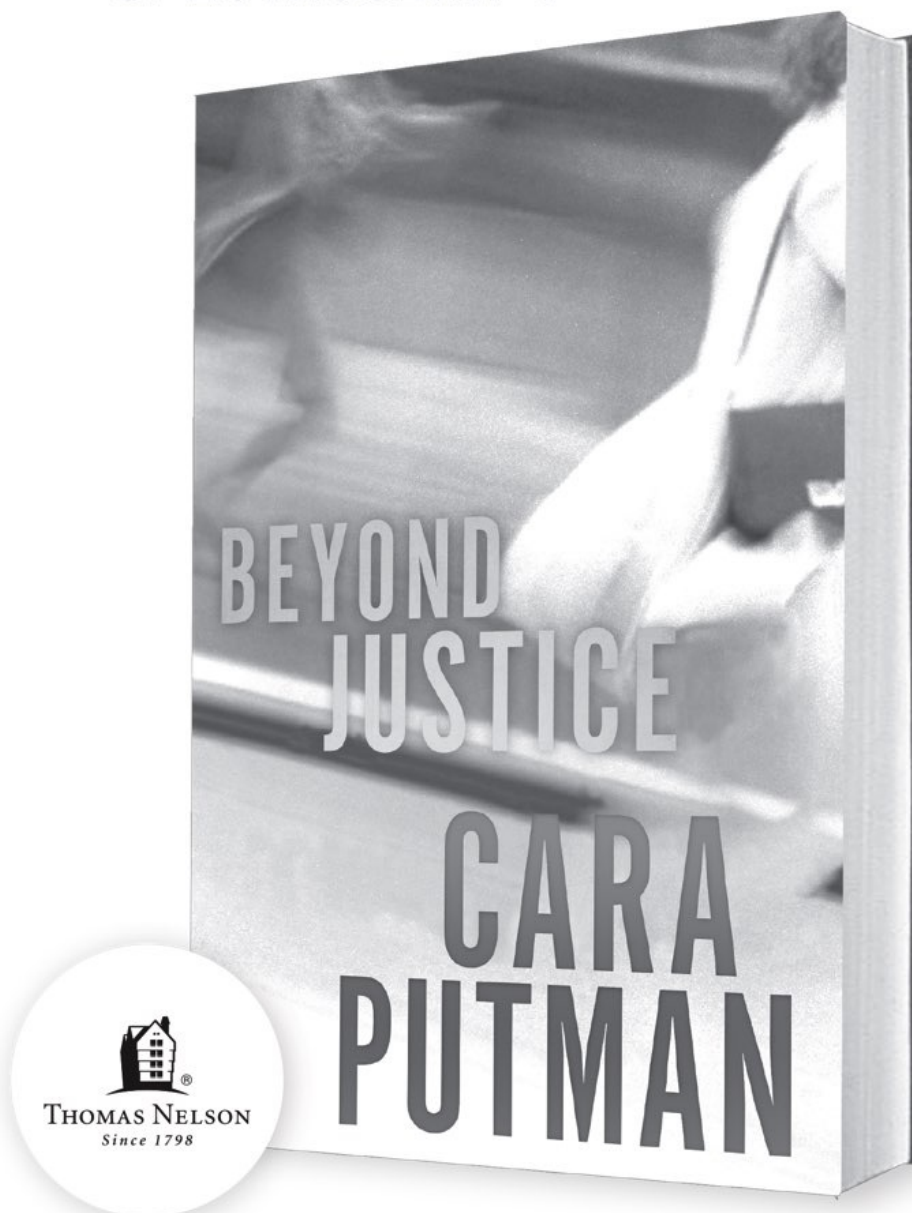
“It’s more than that.” David took a moment as if weighing what he intended to say next. Counting the cost before saying the words. “I can’t imagine my life without you beside me...forever.”

Ciara kept nodding, even as she searched his gaze for any hint that he didn’t mean what he’d said. “I can’t go back either.”

“I love you, Ciara.” He tipped her chin up, then slowly, hesitatingly eased toward her. He stopped, hovering above her lips, giving her the opportunity to back away...create space between them. Instead, she leaned into him, met his kiss. The moments evaporated as he held her, a touch as light as if she were a cherry blossom he could crush. Instead, she felt treasured and honored.

After a minute, he eased back, and she hid her face in his chest. David wrapped his arms around her, and she knew she’d found what her heart had searched so long for...a place to be loved.

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**JANUARY**

If he didn't find that flash drive now, he would have to disappear. Immediately. Some place *el jefe* couldn't find him. It was that or die.

"Where is it, Miguel? What have you done with the information you stole?"

The young man shuddered as he choked on a breath. Blood poured from his nose, broken in the first punch, the horror of it fresh. Blood dribbled out his mouth. Blood dripped off his chin. Still he refused to speak.

Rafael drew back his fist, ready to strike again, then held his arm back as if against a powerful force. This was not who he was. It was not who Miguel was. All of this was so broken. Somehow he had landed on the wrong side of the great family his own had served for three generations. How was he now opposing the young man he loved like a brother? He scanned the bare room. Four bunk beds lined a wall. A urinal in the corner. A barren sink with a square mirror. A single light bulb hanging well above his head. Where could Miguel have hidden anything in this desolate place?

The stench of urine and sweat, of bodies crammed into a space designed for half as many, mixed with the coppery aroma of fresh blood. Limp sunlight pushed back the shadows from a barred window high on the wall. Sunlight that reminded him of the times Miguel had tagged along when Rafael did odd chores at the estate. Sunlight that reminded him how wrong it was for Miguel to be here. He was the son of a lord, not someone who should be locked up.

"Where is it, Miguel? I can't ask again." He flipped open the blade of the knife he held and slid it under Miguel's chin. "Give it to me, or I have no choice but to kill you."

Miguel flinched. "We always have a choice." The youth lifted his chin and met Rafael's gaze with pain-filled eyes. "We are brothers, Rafael."

"We were. If you don't give me that flash drive, we are both dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Liar! *El jefe* knows you were in his computer. He told me himself. He sent me."

“You kill me, and my father will hunt you like a rabid mongrel.” False bravado flashed in Miguel’s eyes.

“Your father told me to kill you, amigo.”

The spoken words resounded in the narrow space between them.

He looked at señor’s precious son. His heir. Could he somehow take Miguel with him and disappear? No. Would Miguel give him the list? The boy raised dark eyes to meet his gaze, defiance harden-

ing them. Somehow Rafael had imagined he could avoid killing while serving the family even as he’d crept up its structure. But now he had no choice.

Retrieve the information for *el jefe* before it falls into the wrong hands or be killed.

Heat flooded him and red clouded his vision.

“I’m sorry, Miguel . . .” He stepped forward, knife clasped in his fist.



## CHAPTER ONE

### THURSDAY, MARCH 30

The euphoria of winning a hard case vied in her thoughts with wondering what came next as Hayden McCarthy left the Alexandria courthouse. A colorful dance of tulips lined a flower box of the town house across the street, and the faint aroma of some hidden blossom scented the air. It was over.

Her client had needed her absolute best. Hayden had delivered it and obtained justice. She shifted her purse and readjusted her briefcase as she started down the street. Continue straight on King Street, and in a block she’d be at the office. Turn, and in four blocks she’d be home. Her town house’s proximity both to work and the heart of Old Town Alexandria was why she loved the space she shared with a friend from law school.

So . . . which way to go? The thought of going back to her office and confronting the waiting pile of work held no appeal. She would spend one night savoring success . . . and recovering from the adrenaline pace of a roller-coaster trial and jury.

She'd make a salad and cup of tea, maybe pick up a novel. If that didn't hold her attention, she'd dig into her trial notes. Analyze what had worked and how the risk of requesting a new foreman after deliberations had begun had paid off.

Each step closer to home, her conservative navy pumps tapped the refrain. She. Had. Won. She let a smile spread across her face.

She left King Street and headed north on St. Asaph. Some of the buildings she passed housed businesses, but with each block the area became more residential. In one condo a senator lived. In another a congressman, next to him a chief of staff and other people with powerful political positions. When Hayden first moved to the city from small-town Nebraska, her head had turned at how easy it was to rub elbows with those who controlled destinies. Now it was only scandals or surprise retirements that caught her attention.

The evening was so pleasant she detoured and walked the couple blocks to Christ Church. The wrought iron fence around the church grounds beckoned her to settle in the shade of the stately trees. She opened the gate, then walked until she reached a bench. Settling on it, she breathed deeply and closed her eyes.

*Father, thank You. It went well today.* She pushed against her eyes, daring relieved tears to fall. There was no one else around, and Hayden sat quietly, waiting . . . for something. Here within the shelter of a church more than two hundred years old, shouldn't she feel God's presence?

Yet there was . . . nothing.

Not even a rustle of a breeze through the leaves that she could pretend was the Spirit moving.

*I need You.*

Still nothing. Then slowly she sensed His smile as warmth spread through her.

A couple came around the corner then, strolling along the garden path arm in arm, smiling at one another. They looked at ease and in tune as their strides matched.

What would it feel like to be that comfortable and safe with someone? To know you could trust another person with your most hidden parts? Hayden shook her head. Her life was full to the brim—no room for a relationship. She stood and walked the rest of the way home at a brisk pace.

When she reached her town house, she crossed the courtyard and dug her keys loose from the pit of her purse. The Wonder Woman key ring, a gift from a grateful client after she won what he called the unwinnable case, jiggled as she unlocked the door.

The moment she walked inside, Hayden kicked off her heels and set her bag on the chair next to the glass table by the door. Soft classical music flowed from the kitchen, and the aroma of something spicy filled the small space.

“Emilie?” Hayden leaned down to rub one of her arches, then straightened and moved toward the kitchen.

“Down here.” Emilie Wesley’s bubbly voice came from the stairway leading to the basement. “Can you check the oven for me?”

“Sure. What are you making?” Hayden moved around the granite countertop and turned on the oven light. Emilie was a wonderful cook, but she often got distracted. “Mmm, lasagna. Looks great. It’s bubbling around the edges, and the cheese looks perfect. You expecting company?”

Hayden opened the fridge and pulled out salad ingredients. A salad plus a glass of sweet tea and she could disappear into her room . . . though the pasta looked wonderful. If she was lucky, Emilie would save her some for lunch tomorrow.

Hayden was dicing a red pepper when two sets of footsteps echoed up the stairs.

“Look who stopped by, Hayden.”

“Hmm?” Hayden looked up and into clear blue eyes that matched the

Potomac as it moved into the bay. His pressed khakis and Oxford with pullover sweater portrayed an understated GQ elegance that screamed old money and matched the clean haircut and polite smile that revealed teeth so perfect they might be caps. Andrew Wesley, her roommate's cousin. She hadn't seen him in years.

The knife slipped, and she felt a sharp pain in her finger. She turned on the tap and stuck her finger beneath the flow of cold water.

"Andrew, do you remember my roommate, Hayden McCarthy? Hayden, this is my cousin Andrew. It's been a while, but I'm pretty sure y'all have met before." Emilie's eyes danced as she tugged the man into the room. His mouth curved into a relaxed grin, the look as familiar and practiced as Hayden's in court.

The years had been good to Andrew Wesley. He'd been handsome when they'd first met, but now he was something more. He had the build of someone who worked out and took care of himself. Compact, muscular, and distractingly good-looking. Hayden pasted a smile into place.

"Hayden?" The deep voice was thick as the richest chocolate. "It's nice to officially meet you—again." He gave her a devastating smile. "Emilie is always talking about you."

"Good things, I hope." She grabbed a paper towel and turned off the water.

"What else would I say?" Emilie's eyes widened as she saw blood seeping through the paper towel. "Ooh, do you need a Band-Aid?"

"I'll be all right." Hayden took a deep breath and met Andrew's gaze. "Any friend—or cousin—of Emilie's is welcome here." With her good hand she scooped up the diced pepper and sprinkled it on top of the salad. "I'll leave you two to enjoy your dinner. It looks good, Em."

"You don't need to leave, Hayden." Emilie leaned closer, not hard to do in the galley space that felt even smaller with Andrew's presence, and handed Hayden a fresh paper towel. "We're working on plans for a spring festival. Think inflatables, fair food, and fun. It's a community event for his non-profit." She grabbed a purple grape from a bowl next

to the sink and popped it into her mouth. “You can help us.”



His cousin’s roommate wrapped the paper towel tighter around her finger, then turned to the refrigerator, shielding her face from his view. Had they really met before? He had a vague recollection of an awkward girl visiting his cousin during a law school break, but his memory didn’t match this attractive woman with the black hair and . . . stocking feet.

As Hayden put away the vegetables she’d used for her salad, Andrew looked for something to break the uncomfortable silence.

“I like the idea of a festival, Em, but I’m not sure we can pull it off.”

“Oh? You already have the location.” Emilie claimed the pot holders and opened the oven. “We can do this because we’re the dynamic duo. Besides, you’ve got a staff and board of directors to help. We’ll create the framework, and they can do the rest.”

Andrew shook his head. “You haven’t worked much with a board. And don’t forget, I’m not the senior guy in the office.”

Emilie slid the pan from the oven and set it on top of the stove. “You’re a Wesley. Everyone takes one look at you and snaps to attention. Your dad is too powerful to tick off.” She softened the words with a smile. “You might as well embrace it.”

That was something that hadn’t happened yet in his thirty years. Being Scott Wesley’s son was like wearing a coat made for someone else. He leaned against the counter and redirected the conversation—a skill he’d picked up from his father. “I’ve heard about Emilie’s day, Hayden. Tell me about yours.”

Hayden paused, salad dressing in hand. “I won a case today.”

“Oh?” He studied her face, but she didn’t give anything away. Not much of a talker?

She shrugged. “I kept an innocent man out of jail. So it was a great day for my client and his wife.”

“For you too.” Emilie stepped next to Hayden and squeezed her shoulder. “This woman worked a lot of late nights on that case and is on



the fast track to becoming a partner.” Hayden started to protest, but Emilie kept on. “She’ll never brag about herself, but she’s good. Nobody will be surprised when she becomes the youngest partner in Elliott & Johnson history.”

Soft color tinted the woman’s cheeks, and she glanced at Andrew. “I’m not any better than a hundred other attorneys in town.”

*Only a hundred, huh?* In a city overwhelmed with attorneys, she’d ranked herself fairly high. Well, the last thing he wanted to do was spend free time with an attorney. He’d spent too much time in their presence growing up to be wowed by their brilliance or awed by their stories.

She held up her salad bowl and fork. “I know y’all have plans to make, so I’ll slip upstairs and not interrupt. It was nice to see you again, Andrew.”

Andrew put a hand on her arm before she could disappear. “You really want to walk away from Emilie’s lasagna for that?” He crinkled his nose and pointed at the bowl of greens.

Emilie grabbed an extra plate. “There’s plenty, Hayden.”

Andrew grinned. “Always is. She forgets there’s only two of us.”

He said it as though these evenings were frequent, but they weren’t.

Emilie was as busy as anyone in town, so he’d pounced on her invitation. When they all sat down at the island a few minutes later, he watched Hayden. She looked tired. A good trial would do that, his dad always said. He and Emilie kept a quiet conversation going, with Hayden interjecting now and then.

She’d made it through law school, and he admired anyone who did that. He’d quit after a semester—but that had more to do with wanting to become his own man rather than an ever-lengthening part of his father’s shadow.

A phone beeped, and Hayden glanced at hers and frowned.

“Sorry, but I need to prepare for a meeting in the morning. Nice to see you, Andrew.” She stood and brushed past him with a small smile.

He watched her cross the living space and head toward the stairs. As she climbed from view he reminded himself that he didn’t have time to

feel attracted to anyone right now. Not when Congressman Wesley was gunning for a title change. Anyone he was seen with would end up plastered across the social pages of the *Post* the next day. Who would willingly sign up for that?

He turned back to the kitchen and found Emilie smirking at him.

“I’m not sure you’re her type, Andrew.” Her smile widened until her dimples showed.

He made a face at her. “Don’t think I don’t see right through you. I know why you had me meet you here.” He was just surprised it had taken this long. “It doesn’t matter. I’m too busy to get involved right now.”

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## DEAR READER

**DYING FOR LOVE** first appeared as a novella in the **CHERRY BLOSSOM CAPERS** collection I wrote with three friends. We had such fun creating a series of romantic mysteries set in a place I love: Northern Virginia and Washington, DC. Then as I started writing my new series of legal romantic suspense set in Old Town Alexandria and surrounding areas, I realized that Ciara and David were characters who needed to be part of that series. With a few tweaks, this story now serves as the prequel to my new Hidden Justice series.

I hope you enjoy this sneak peek into Ciara's romance and the cameos by Hayden McCarthy, Emilie Wesley, and other characters who are part of my new series. And if you enjoy this story, be sure to check out Hayden's story **BEYOND JUSTICE**, which releases in April 2017, and Emilie's book **IMPERFECT JUSTICE**, which releases in January 2018. Savannah, Caroline, and Jaime will have books of their own too.

Many thanks to Amanda Bostic for reading this novella and giving feedback when she didn't need to and to Lacy Williams for creating the cover that blends so well with the new series.

Thank you for spending your time with my stories. It's a gift I value highly!

**Cara Putman**

p.s. New reader friends, let's stay in touch! I'd love to connect with you on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#), [Goodreads](#), or [Instagram](#). And I send out a fun, never-spammy e-newsletter every now and then. Sign up to receive it [here](#).

p.p.s. Also, please know how much it means to me anytime you leave a review of one of my books! Reviews are incredibly helpful . . . and I'm incredibly grateful.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cara C. Putman, JD MBA, the award-winning author of 25 books, graduated high school at 16, college at 20, and completed her law degree at 27. *FIRST for Women* magazine called *Shadowed by Grace* “captivating” and a “novel with ‘the works.’” *Beyond Justice* is being called a page-turner that can’t be put down.

Cara is active at her church and a full-time lecturer on business and employment law to graduate students at Purdue University’s Krannert School of Management. Putman also practices law and is a second-generation homeschooling mom. She serves on the executive board of American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW), an organization she has served in various roles since 2007. She lives with her husband and four children in Indiana.

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