



"Cara Putman's legal background has definitely been put to good use in this nail-biter of a romantic suspense/legal thriller... You won't be able to put this one down until the very end."

—Lynette Eason, award-winning,
bestselling author of the Elite Guardians series

BEYOND JUSTICE

CARA PUTMAN

BEYOND JUSTICE



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

CARA PUTMAN

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 hardening 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 1

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.

BEYOND JUSTICE

“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.”

JANUARY

His cell phone rang.

The noise blared in the silence of the flea-bitten, no-name motel room. He was safe here. He couldn't go back to Mexico without that flash drive.

The phone rang again and his hands shook.

He had to answer it, but then he would have to confirm Miguel's death.

He hadn't wanted Miguel to die.

Even now adrenaline shocked his body when he thought of it.

He had killed a young man.

A man who had been as close as a brother.

The phone rang again.

Hours had faded into days as Rafael tried to find a way to stay alive.

El jefe must know what he had done by now. Rafael had followed his orders, but without the prize, his days were still numbered. How could he hope to stay ahead of the family leader?

He must become as ruthless as the man two steps behind him.

Hesitate one moment, one second, one breath, and the man would be on him with the full power of the family.

The cell phone fell silent, the quiet almost as shocking as the former noise.

He would destroy this phone, get a new one. He should have done that the moment he escaped the detention center where he had found Miguel. It had taken all his skill to work his way out as the alarm rose behind him. *El jefe* didn't care . . . not without the precious information on that flash drive

Time was what he needed most. Time to formulate a plan. Time to find what Miguel had taken. Time to redeem himself so he could live.

The phone resumed its incessant ringing.

Rafael took a deep breath and picked it up.

CHAPTER 2

FRIDAY, MARCH 31

Early morning found Hayden in her office at Elliott & Johnson. It was little more than a closet, but it was better than the spaces new associates shared.

A light knock pulled her gaze from the spreadsheet on her desk to the doorway. Gerard Campbell, a partner and her boss, stood there without his usual suit coat and tie. Must be too early to present the perfect corporate image to the mainly empty halls. “Got a minute?”

As if she could tell him no. “Sure.”

“I’ve got a case I’m kicking your way this morning.” His eyes bored into her as if gauging her mettle.

Hadn’t she already proven it?

“Okay.” Her cases were routinely assigned unless she brought in the client herself.

“This one has potential. The kind that can make your reputation. Or destroy it.” His stare held her captive. “Do you have the time?”

And guts was the unspoken rest of the sentence.

She swallowed at the implied warning. “As much as you ever give me.” She softened the words with a small smile.

Hayden was bone-weary after the trial and had anticipated spending the rest of the week managing discovery for a couple cases. Leigh, her paralegal, had updated her schedule and brought in the spreadsheet of deadlines for her review just moments before. Three pending cases, none urgent.

CARA PUTMAN

"We'll meet immediately after the others agree it's yours."

So much for catching her breath.

Gerard took a step out before turning back. "Good job yesterday. The Commonwealth's office told me about your daring call. Pretty risky."

"It worked."

"This time." He studied her. "Your gut is good, but don't get cocky. Instincts have taken down many bright attorneys."

Hayden rocked back in her chair as he left. He'd followed her case? The partners barely tolerated her court-appointed cases, and some claimed they stole from her billable hours—even though everyone knew she worked them after hours.

But "tolerated" didn't mean they monitored her trials. As long as it didn't cost them anything, they'd let her run them as she liked.

So why had Gerard called the Commonwealth attorney's office?

An hour later she shifted against a chair in the large conference room and sipped her English breakfast tea as the meeting of partners and select associates droned on. She'd have gladly avoided it if Gerard hadn't told her to attend.

Donald Elliott chaired the regular meeting with his typical firm hand that matched the meticulous cut of his suit and perfectly coiffed white hair. The man was a legend, a founding partner of the firm, and though he regularly threatened to spend more time on the golf course, he hadn't slowed down yet. "Next up, *Rodriguez v. United States*. This one's yours, Campbell."

Gerard leaned forward until his elbows rested on the table. His tablet device rested next to him, but he ignored it. His gaze flicked toward Hayden, then back to the partners and senior associates sitting around the gleaming walnut table. "I filed the Rodriguez complaint last week. Now it's time to kick the investigation into focus. This is the perfect case

for an associate, and yesterday McCarthy confirmed she's the one to run it."

This was the first time Gerard had championed her and not Angela Thrasher, his usual pick.

Hayden straightened as she listened to the partners discuss his suggestion.

"Her criminal experience is different. How does this one match?" Reed Johnson leaned back and crossed his arms. He was known for his bulldog tenacity, but he focused on the rare appeals the firm filed when clients pushed for a second try, so his opinion carried weight.

"Her court appointed cases gave her experience in a place she was expected to fail. You should have seen her at this week's trial."

Elliott raised an eyebrow at Gerard. "I didn't realize you were at court."

"I wasn't, but I heard the reviews. The Commonwealth thought they had her client on all counts. He walked. All because she took a daring risk."

"Our daring risk was letting you take this client." Johnson's frown deepened as he studied Campbell. "It's an unnecessary risk."

"Remember, Jason Randolph brought the client. I agreed to litigate the case."

Elliott shook his head. "Randolph was ambitious to take the case."

Gerard shrugged. "We disagree on the risk. We took the client, and she requires our best efforts. All of us at this table are too busy. This is one for Hayden—she's ready."

Johnson snorted and shook his head. "You don't want this quagmire."

Hayden silently watched the exchange, questions piling up in her mind, noting Randolph's silence. Sounded like Randolph had scored the client and handed Gerard the case, which he now wanted to shunt to Hayden. That wasn't his usual style.

Seth Jamison, another associate, elbowed her and leaned close, his stringy hair falling into his eyes. "Told you they were grooming you."

She gave a small nod.

Elliott shook his head. "You do like to toss them in the deep end." He glanced around the table. "Everyone okay with it?" He must have seen whatever he looked for. "Fine, she can have it, but you'll manage her, Gerard. Get her up to speed."

Seth gave Hayden a sideways fist bump below the table. "Here's your chance, McCarthy."

She let a smile escape even as her heart whispered a warning. The cases the firm worked often lacked the cry for justice that motivated Hayden, and she wondered if this one would be different. But in the end, it didn't really matter. She'd still give it her best efforts.

A few minutes later the meeting wrapped up with a flurry of noise and paper shuffling. Gerard barely looked at her as he nodded toward the door. "Come with me, McCarthy."

"Yes sir." She deposited her mug on the waiting tray and followed him into the hallway. Gerard's cell phone rang, and she paused a couple steps behind him, giving him the illusion of privacy.

"Good luck." Angela sidled closer, accordion folders stacked in her arms. The gilded associate always looked like she had somewhere important to be and urgent matters to resolve—most likely because she usually did. "I've heard this case is a loser, so if you turn it around you'll be a hero."

Hayden considered her comment. "The partners don't accept losers."

"Sometimes they have to."

Hayden could think of a case or two the firm had taken solely to keep important clients happy. Was this one? "Guess I'll find out."

Gerard stuck his phone back in his pocket and continued toward his office.

Angela stalled Hayden with a perfectly manicured hand and looked down the hall before lowering her voice. "Just be careful. There's something about this case."

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure. But I’ve heard rumblings.”

“Thanks for the heads-up.” Hayden took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Angela had been in law school with her and graduated summa cum laude. If something about the case bothered her, Hayden would take note. At the same time, this opportunity would let her demonstrate what she could accomplish.

“Coming, McCarthy?” Gerard’s voice pulled her attention.

“Right behind you.”

Gerard had a large office with a bank of windows overlooking King Street, currently offering a view of busy traffic and a tour guide trying to corral a collection of schoolchildren. The windows bathed his office in a rich light the burgundy drapes couldn’t restrain.

He hung his suit coat on a hook behind his door, then settled in his chair and tugged his shirt cuffs into place. Hayden lingered in the doorway, wondering if she should sit or stand.

“Come in, Hayden. This will take a minute.” He gestured toward the leather chairs in front of his desk and pushed a fat expandable folder toward her. “Here’s your new case.”

“Thank you.” She picked up the file and felt its heft. “Why are you handing it off?”

He studied her, gaze intense and focused. “The client is a woman, Hispanic, whose son was killed in Texas while detained by an alphabet soup of federal agencies. She passionately sold me on the evil done to her son. Now she’s stopped communicating. We can’t win without her cooperation.” He rubbed a hand across his chin and shifted in his chair. “At the same time, any delay has negative implications.”

The words settled around Hayden, lacing the air with the weight of caution. She flipped through the file, reading the section labels. “You filed last week?”

“Yes.”

Interesting. "What makes it urgent?"

He steepled his fingers. "This isn't a case the feds want in the press—and it's not one we want before a Texas jury."

"Why was he detained?" Hayden pulled a legal pad out of the file and jotted notes.

"Entering the country illegally. He was under eighteen when Border Patrol nabbed him, so the government placed him in a juvenile facility. The partners accepted the case, but they want it settled or killed, so get discovery started. Yesterday would be fast enough."

"Okay." She cleared her rapidly closing throat as she rifled through the stack of files.

Gerard swiveled toward the mahogany credenza behind his desk. Lifting a single folder, he turned around and opened it on top of his desk. "One other thing. The case is in the wrong court."

"You filed last week, and it's in the wrong court?"

"After the boy was killed in custody, the mom was in my office within a month. She got referred to us through Randolph. The partners see the potential for more cases like this if we win. I filed the Federal Tort Claims Act claim with the ICE, Border Patrol, basically every agency I could think of. All were quickly denied. In some cases, the paperwork couldn't have even left the desk of the person who opened the mail. What that did is give us access to court, and my client wanted it filed. That lined up with the collective brain here, but as I said, a Texas jury will kill us." He studied her a moment, giving space for his words to sink in. "I'm too close, and it's time to bring you in. I want an unbiased opinion Monday morning."

"You said wrongful death?" Had to be, if he'd worried about tort claims.

"Yes." He watched her carefully.

"If it's wrongful death, your options are a federal district court or state court. Either one comes with a jury." The government would be crazy not to request one, with immigration as hot a topic as it was.

“Yes.”

“You need a court like the Court of Claims.” She tapped the top of the expandable folder as her thoughts raced through options. “No, that won’t work.” That court heard contract, tax, takings, and employment disputes against the federal government. Negligence didn’t fit the court’s limited jurisdiction.

“Don’t be too quick to dismiss the idea.” He looked past her shoulder as if formulating an idea. “Use some of that fancy legal know-how you earned in your clerkship. This kid deserves justice, but without us he won’t get it. We have to find a way to get our day in court *here*. Maybe get your judge’s opinion.”

“I can’t—” It pushed too close to the ethical line.

He waved her words away as if they were inconsequential gnats. “Of course. Forget I said that.”

He paused, and Hayden rushed in. “What if instead of wrongful death we style it as a breach of contract since he was in ICE custody? An implied contract of sorts. You detain these kids, you must provide a safe space.”

Gerard considered her words, his fingers steeped beneath his chin, and a slow smile grew. “It could work brilliantly, or it could implode—this is why I wanted you on the case. Your clerkship means the judges know you.” He rattled off a few more details, while Hayden took careful notes. “We’ve requested the kid’s belongings. I’m hoping we’ll find something worth the expense. Speaking of which, this case is burning through the retainer. Once that’s gone, the partners want the case gone.”

“The client won’t provide more?”

“Nope.” He closed the file in front of him and handed it to her. “This has the mom’s contact information. Find a way to connect with her.” He clasped his hands on top of the blotter. “If we win, this theory could open a floodgate of cases. So do your job well.” He studied her, and Hayden held his gaze. His phone rang and he grabbed it while waving her toward the door.

CARA PUTMAN

Hayden collected the accordion file with the contact file on top and left, shutting the door behind her. The files felt heavy, light, awkward, but right . . . all at the same time.

Angela was waiting, perched on Hayden's desk, when she got back to her office. "So?"

Hayden sank onto her chair, setting the files on the desk. "I don't know."

"A partner calls you into his office for a big case and you 'don't know'?"

"He wants discovery started yesterday and the case moved to a new court. And this is what I have." She waved at the file.

Angela snorted. "That sounds right. The case involves wrongful death?"

"Yes, but a jury will kill us in Texas, so I need to move it."

"Federal government as defendant?"

"Yes. So move it to DC, but a jury here won't be much more sympathetic." Maybe the Court of Federal Claims *was* the best option. She'd have to refresh her memory, but it would be a stretch to get a wrongful death case there. Still, she could develop the breach of contract angle. All she knew for certain was that it was critical to move it from Texas. "I assumed it would be a small case, something too little for Gerard to bother with. But he claims it could open a new area of litigation for the firm."

"I'll leave you to it." Angela pushed to her feet. "Let me know if I can help."

When the cleaning crew came through the office hours later, Hayden packed the accordion file into her bag. She'd managed to read through it, but had been interrupted to put out fires on other cases. Now her stomach insisted she grab dinner. She'd take the file and leave another message for the client, since her earlier call hadn't been returned.

BEYOND JUSTICE

Might as well try one more time.

As it had before, the phone rang repeatedly. About the time Hayden expected to leave a voice mail, she heard a soft voice. “*Hola?*”

“Mrs. Rodriguez?”

“*Hola?*”

Hayden frowned as she scrambled to resurrect her high school Spanish. “*Señora Rodriguez?*”

“*Sí?*”

“*Me llamo Hayden McCarthy. ¿Hablas inglés?*”

“*Sí.*”

Thank heavens. Hayden leaned against the chair. “I’m with Elliott & Johnson and Mr. McCarthy gave me your case. Could you come into the office tomorrow, so we can meet?”

“No, no, no.” The woman’s voice became increasingly frantic.

Hayden could hear a man’s angry voice shouting in Spanish in the background.

“Mrs. Rodriguez? I know tomorrow’s Saturday, but it’s important we meet.”

The male voice got louder, and then she heard a rustling like the phone was being yanked away, followed by a loud bang.

Hayden winced and pulled the phone from her ear. “Hello?”

A dial tone was the only reply.

CHAPTER 3

Traffic on I-395 barely moved as Andrew shifted lanes. One more mile and he could slip from the rush hour morass. He'd spent time today with Jorge, a new kid who'd arrived from Mexico a couple months earlier. The boy's steps were unsure and his grin unsteady, but Andrew had successfully coaxed him to talk. As Jorge shared about an older brother who had died, his pain showed. Yet as he kept talking, he showed a curiosity and intelligence that would serve him well. All he needed was a community to help him acclimate, and that's what New Beginnings provided.

Andrew signaled to take the exit ramp, then wound his way up a steep hill into Fairlington Village's back entrance. His condo, formerly Pentagon officers' housing, kept him close to work and available for the command performances his congressman father demanded.

Andrew parked in front of the brick condo and grabbed his messenger bag. He waved at Elaine Bedford, the retired schoolteacher who kept a close watch on the comings and goings in their cul-de-sac. If anything were ever amiss, she'd tell him.

What the spry seventy-year-old didn't know was that he counted on her to tell him if his dad's staff appeared. So far no one knew he'd turned his condo's attic into an art studio. He had done most of the work himself, with a little help from a handyman friend, to avoid a paper trail or other evidence of work being done.

An excited scratch at his front door built in intensity as he turned his key in the lock. The moment the door opened, Zeus, his large black Lab, launched himself at Andrew, who dropped his bag on the black

BEYOND JUSTICE

leather couch and bent down to return the welcome. The couch was the selection of his mom's decorator. He'd wanted a basic sofa, but it was easier to acquiesce than fight his mother, the Virginia tornado.

Andrew snapped a leash on Zeus and took the excited dog outside for a quick stroll before returning inside to reheat a slice of pizza. Then he grabbed an Honest Tea and climbed the stairs to his attic.

He flipped the light switch, and his drawing desk was illuminated in such a way it tricked him into believing it was natural light. While he munched the last bite of pizza, Andrew studied the quick sketches he'd outlined the night before.

This week the politicians weren't cooperating to provide inspiration for his cartoons. He needed a good old fight in the capital. Something he could satirize with a few swipes of his pen.

Instead he had scrawls a five-year-old could improve.

He wiped his hands on a Lysol wipe yanked from the container on the desk, then spun around on his metal stool.

His thoughts ticked through the headlines he'd scanned on his phone throughout the day. Terrorist threats. Military challenges. Budget woes. Pork barrel squabbles. All old news. He needed something different. The twist that poked an issue in a sarcastic way while shedding light on something people understood but couldn't articulate. That was what the best political cartoonists did, and he wanted to join them.

Andrew straightened the pencils in their orderly rows, then swiveled toward the laptop sitting on the table next to his drawing desk. With a couple clicks he opened his browser and popped across various editorial pages, looking for inspiration.

As he picked up a pencil, his thoughts turned to Jorge and his journey to New Beginnings. Andrew's pencil started flowing across the page as he sketched the thirteen-year-old's thin face. Then his angular body. Jorge's mother insisted she provided four squares a day for him. Andrew could help the family access resources at local churches and nonprofits if she would let him, but she'd resisted, assuring him she had plenty.

CARA PUTMAN

In another box he sketched the ragged image of a Turkish policeman standing at the edge of the ocean cradling the shell of a toddler who hadn't completed the journey from his homeland to a new land. The photographic image had shocked the world a couple years earlier. It still sucker-punched Andrew. What horrors had chased the toddler's family and caused them to risk the lives of their small children on such a harrowing journey?

Was this the cartoon for this week? Contrasting the experience of two boys, both of whom had parents who wanted to live free from fear and tyranny. One made it. The other didn't.

His cell phone rang, and Andrew pulled the phone from his pocket. A glance at the screen showed his father's number. He sighed. Scott Wesley wasn't a man who called just to chat.

Andrew stared at the screen a moment longer, then took the call. "Dad."

"Andrew." The congressman took a breath. "Did you see the news?"

"I've scanned it."

"Senator Potter just resigned, effective immediately. No explanation, but plenty of speculation."

The capital ran on speculation. Interesting that the senator would quit with two years left in his term. Had the rancor gotten to him, as it had Representative Boehner, or was he forced to leave? Andrew grabbed a clean sheet of paper and jotted some notes.

"You with me, son?"

"Yeah, just thinking."

"I'm running for his seat and talking the governor into appointing me to the vacant slot meanwhile. It's a fine dance, but I'm on his short list."

"Really?" His father had ambitions, but this appointment could be intense, with candidates appearing from nowhere, eager for a shot.

"The time's right. Keep your calendar clear."

BEYOND JUSTICE

Andrew sighed. Guess he'd never outgrow photo ops. "Just give me a heads-up."

"I'll have Washburn do what he can. This will ramp up slowly unless I get the nod."

"Okay." That was as good as he was going to get. Dan Washburn, his dad's chief of staff, would assign a minion to keep Andrew in the loop. "Let me know what I can do."

"There will be fund-raisers and campaign appearances. You know the routine. It'll be like the congressional races, only—"

"Bigger."

"Yes." His dad's voice deepened to the well-modulated tones he'd perfected as a successful Commonwealth's attorney. "This is it, Andrew. The perfect time to move to the bigger stage of the Senate. There's so much good I can do there."

"Sure." With only a hundred members, each senator wielded more individual influence than any individual representative to the House. And influence was what his dad craved.

Andrew's phone beeped, and a number he didn't recognize came up. "Dad, keep me posted. And congrats."

"Thank you." His father ended the call before Andrew could.

The Rodriguez file rested in front of Hayden on the dining room table, but her eyes were on her roommate. Quiet elegance, she decided. That was the right term for Emilie's loose chignon, khakis, and cardigan set. She looked ready to go out on five minutes' notice.

Emilie pulled something from the fridge and popped it into the microwave. "Are you working all night, Hayden?"

"I have a new client the partners want taken care of yesterday." Hayden glanced at the legal pad she'd slowly filled with notes. Legal

theories were flooding her mind, but the core question troubled her: Why had the partners accepted the case and pushed to file already? The stack of papers she'd been handed might be thick, but it was short on key information. Like who killed the client's son, Miguel.

Prison officials owed a duty of reasonable care to inmates, but wrongful death was the wrong theory to get the case out of district court. Litigation 101 said to go for the deepest pockets, and a Bivens action alone, which assumed she knew which individual employees to blame for Miguel's death and could argue negligence, wouldn't bring justice to his family.

A jury would kill that case.

That's why filing the complaint as Gerard had done felt forced, unlike his typical meticulous planning. What unseen pressure was at play?

"While you're doing your workaholic thing, can I use your phone?"

Hayden glanced up and saw Emilie's phone resting next to hers on the counter. "What's wrong with yours?"

"Andrew will recognize the number, so he won't take my call."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"Because Andrew is busy Friday nights, and he knows I know that. So he'll ignore me."

Hayden rolled her eyes. "Go ahead." Her mind flashed across the photos she'd seen of Andrew when she'd googled him that morning—an act she'd deny if anyone asked. Each photo showed a different model look-alike hanging on his arm—DC's best-of-the-best. No matter how long she lived in the pulsating city, she'd never belong in those circles. She could only imagine where and with whom Emilie's cousin was hobnobbing on this Friday night.

Emilie's phone vibrated, and she quickly shoved Hayden's phone back at her friend. "Here, I have to take this call. It's a domestic violence client. If Andrew answers, stall." She ducked down the stairs to her basement suite while Hayden looked at the phone in her hand.

BEYOND JUSTICE

"Hello?" a deep voice answered.

"Andrew?" She scrambled to hold it to her ear. "This is Hayden. Emilie grabbed my phone, dialed you, then handed it to me and disappeared."

He chuckled. "Sounds like Emilie. Any idea what she wanted?"

"It's Emilie . . . hard to know." Hayden walked to the stairway and called down.

"I'll call him back in a minute!" Emilie yelled.

Andrew chuckled again. "I heard that. Tell her I'm at my folks' place tonight."

"I will."

"Thanks." There was an awkward pause. *Just say good-bye and hang up.*

"So, has Emilie talked you into helping with the fair?" His voice was warm, friendly.

What had he asked? Oh, the fair. "Not yet."

"Give her a little time. Emilie thinks her enthusiasm for everything is contagious. Feel free to tell her you're too busy." Andrew knew his cousin well.

"I'll do that. Good night."

"Night, Hayden."

After she ended the call, Hayden held on to her phone. There was something steady and calm about Andrew. She bet little rattled him, a helpful characteristic for someone who worked with young people at risk.

She turned back to her notepad, wishing *her* Friday night consisted of more than working.

CHAPTER 4

SATURDAY, APRIL 1

Saturday's headlines proclaimed the resignation of Virginia's sitting senator. The election would occur at the expiration of the original term, Hayden read, and the governor had several individuals he was considering to fill the interim position for the intervening eighteen months. Hayden paused when she saw Congressman Wesley's name on the very short list. That would make Andrew's life interesting. The election commission didn't state a specific date by which the position would be filled, but it would be soon.

Hayden thought, not for the first time, how glad she was that her life did not revolve around politics. It might seem strange to those outside the Beltway, but when you lived inside it, you realized there was more to the city than Capitol Hill.

Instead of being subject to the whims of powermongers, her life was subject to the courts.

After a quick walk to one of Old Town's coffee shops, she headed to the office. While she didn't spend every Saturday there, this was far from the first case requiring her to book time on the weekend.

Several offices had light leaking under the doors, but overall, quiet and calm filtered through the hallways and conference space. Hayden opened the door to her office and put her bag on the desk, then set down her tea and pastry bag. As she waited for her computer to boot up, she sank onto her desk chair and pulled out a cranberry-orange scone. She took a bite, savoring the mixture of tart and sweet.

Today she must connect with her client.

Someone tapped on her doorframe, and Hayden glanced up. Seth stood there, looking more like a skateboarder than an attorney with his curly hair flopping in his eyes, wearing a T-shirt and hole-y jeans.

"What are you doing here?" She'd rarely seen Seth in the office on a Saturday, and definitely never this early.

He sagged against the door and crossed his arms. "Working on a project for Johnson. He's on a rampage about a pile of research he needs Monday."

"Sounds fun."

"Sure." He gestured toward a chair, and she nodded. "How's the case?" He pointed to the file. "Ready to be the hero?"

"Not quite. I've got a few ideas though."

"Be careful. Campbell would have kept it if it had any chance of success."

Hayden bit back a retort. Where was the friend who'd been all encouragement yesterday? "It sounds interesting."

"So does my mom's grocery list." Seth scrubbed his face with his hands. "Sorry. Guess I was out too late last night. Should probably head home. If only I didn't need this job to pay my loans."

"Some days are like that." Any job was "just work" if you lost sight of why you did it. "Need help?"

"Nope. Just wanted sympathy." He pushed to his feet and unfolded like a gangly scarecrow. He picked up the file and flipped through it before returning it to her desk. "I'll let you get back at it, but let me know if you need help. Later."

Hayden watched him leave. What had that been about? There was an unwritten code that weekend warriors were left alone unless you needed help. And few attorneys would admit *that*, even when brainstorming might save hours of work. The law could be crazy competitive, even among members of the same team.

She turned back to the file. She needed to talk to her client. Until

she heard Maricel Rodriguez's story, she wouldn't know how best to proceed. There was little beyond conjecture inside the file, and the complaint held the barest facts—not uncommon with the notice pleading allowed in federal court—a format that allowed bare allegations to be made in the initial court filing. Hayden liked to know more before she alerted the defendant—in this case the US government—to her case. If she moved courts, that sent negative signals to the defendant, not the least of which was that the plaintiff's attorney had made a fundamental error.

She'd need to focus on non-parties for information or run afoul of the discovery rules. If she could get some information without the laborious interference of opposing counsel, she would. The detention center management had to understand there was a problem, but if by some miracle they didn't, keeping them lulled to sleep was a priority.

She blew across the top of her Earl Grey and tipped back in her chair. What she knew was basic.

Seventeen-year-old Miguel Rodriguez had almost made it successfully into the United States from Mexico. Another mile or two and he could have disappeared into the masses of a Texas city and remained undetected.

Instead, two miles into the United States, Border Patrol intercepted him and about twenty other kids. Thanks to the overwhelming flood of unaccompanied children, it had taken a couple days to place him in a detention center. After that the details got fuzzy. A key question: If Miguel's mother legally entered the country, why hadn't he accompanied her? If she could immigrate through legal channels, couldn't he?

Maybe.

All Hayden knew was he hadn't.

Instead, he'd journeyed with a bad coyote and landed in a detention center. Three weeks later, while his case lingered in the backlog of juvenile matters in an overwhelmed system, he died.

According to the notes, Maricel Rodriguez insisted her son was murdered, but the government denied it.

Never admit anything you didn't have to, and the center didn't have to.

Hayden closed her eyes and tried to imagine what had chased Miguel to the United States. What did he hope to achieve here? She needed to understand the human side of the story so the judge could grasp it.

Most people understood the basics: immigration was horribly broken. People on both sides had strong emotions about it. Those would be especially tense and dividing in a state as affected as Texas. A Texas jury would be loaded with members who hated the issue so much they wouldn't see the bereaved mother and dead son. Hayden had to humanize the story . . . and to do that she needed to understand Miguel and why he died. Had he really been murdered, or was his death an accident?

She broke off another corner of the scone and popped it into her mouth.

With a jury pool potentially set against her client, how could she move venue in a way that wouldn't immediately get Rule 12(b) motioned out of court? The motion was a quick, effective way for defendants to kill a case at the beginning. To pursue a wrongful death theory, Texas was the best option. The government would request a jury if the case made it to trial—a long shot in a state with a clear interest in the issue.

The Court of Federal Claims?

That Court was so obscure many attorneys didn't know it existed. Created as a court where the United States government is always the defendant, it had limited jurisdiction to hear cases. But if she could force this case to fit . . . the idea had real possibilities.

She might not know all the facts yet, but she could compile a list of those she needed to have a fighting chance in Court of Claims jurisdiction.

If that happened . . . then maybe she could get answers and closure for her client.

But first she needed more facts. After locating the phone number in the file, she dialed and waited.

CARA PUTMAN

“*Hola?*” A boy’s voice came across the phone.

“Is Señora Rodriguez home?”

“No. She at work.”

“Can I leave a message?”

There was silence, but she waited.

“Can you call? Leave message?”

She smiled at his charming tone. “Yes, I can. *Gracias.*”

A minute later she called again, and this time left her work and cell phone numbers along with a short message. Now if the woman agreed to meet, she’d have progress to report to Gerard Monday.

She pulled up a legal search engine and confirmed that the basic jurisdictional restrictions of the Tucker Act hadn’t changed. Despite a search for fresher cases that might have changed the status of the law, the Tucker Act excluded wrongful death cases from the Court of Federal Claims. The venue statutes indicated that when the federal government was the defendant she could file where the plaintiff resided.

That meant she needed a novel theory. One she believed in when telling a judge he should let the case proceed.

Her cell phone rang, and she glanced at it. A number her phone didn’t recognize showed on the screen. “Hello?”

“Miss McCarthy? This is Señora Rodriguez.”

“Thank you for calling. We talked briefly yesterday. I’m the attorney working your son’s case and need to meet with you. Would today work? I can come to you.”

“My son meets a friend for ice cream in Alexandria. He will be occupied and safe.”

“Perfect.”

Occupied and safe? What an odd way to phrase it. They arranged details, and a minute later Hayden hung up with an hour before she’d meet Mrs. Rodriguez. On the other side of the meeting, she’d have a better idea what was next.

CHAPTER 5

SATURDAY, APRIL 1

Andrew dug his hands into his sweatshirt pouch to protect them from the bite of wind sweeping off the Potomac. When Maricel Rodriguez asked him to spend time with Jorge, he willingly agreed. His Saturday was miraculously free of appointments, a fact that doubtless would change as his father's campaign swung into action.

Jorge had requested ice cream.

Andrew smiled. He used to be that teenage boy, wanting all the junk food he could nab. He stopped in front of the red brick and green creamery.

Jorge probably needed the comfort food as he and his mom adjusted to the United States. Then maybe he would stop looking over his shoulder all the time. What would a kid so new to the area—to the country—have to be afraid of . . . other than settling in to his new home?

Tourists strolled along the streets of Old Town, enjoying the deceptive sunshine. Less than a block away, the park that edged the Potomac waited, and the blocks up King Street led to all kinds of shopping and eating options.

Andrew people watched as he waited. About the time he decided to grab a cup of coffee for a hand warmer, Jorge strolled up, with his mom a few paces behind.

Jorge lifted his hand in a small wave. "My mama comes. Must meet her attorney."

Andrew frowned. "Why? What's up?"

"Something she won't talk about." Jorge glanced at the display window at the front of the shop. "Is this where we eat?"

"Yep." Andrew clapped the boy on the back. "Be sure to get a waffle cone."

"Sí, señor." Jorge grinned at him. "I need *tres* scoops."

"Three scoops it is." Good thing he'd stopped at an ATM.

Jorge's mother quickstepped toward them. A short woman with brown curls and warm brown eyes, she seemed to hold herself tightly together, as if a strong wind would toss her into the river. She was dressed impeccably, though. Andrew knew she could walk into any of the shops his mother favored and find herself at home. The image didn't quite fit that of recent immigrants, and yet the Rodriguezes faced many of the same challenges and heartaches as those who arrived with fewer resources.

"I see you found your *amigo*." A smile touched her lips but not her eyes. She reached into her jacket pocket. "Here is money to buy your treat, Jorge. I wait here for my appointment."

Andrew lightly pushed her hand away. "This one is on me."

"On you?" Her brows drew together, and she tilted her head.

"Today I'll pay. Next time Jorge can, but today is my treat."

Her shoulders relaxed a fraction of an inch. "*Gracias*. I will return as quickly as I can."

"Come on, Jorge, let's get you that ice cream." After he had his blueberry yogurt in a waffle cone and Jorge his scoops of chocolate, chocolate chip cookie dough, and cappuccino, they headed toward seats by the front window.

"That must be the *abogada*." Jorge took a bite, leaving a trail of brown ice cream on his nose and cheek.

Maricel was still waiting on the sidewalk in front of the shop, and walking toward her—Hayden McCarthy.

Andrew watched the interaction between the two women. Hayden

smiled, yet held herself rigidly, and Maricel responded with newly stiffened posture. "Have they met before?"

Jorge shrugged. "Mama doesn't tell me about the *abrogados*. Says I focus other places."

She had a point. But Andrew wanted to know what was going on. He hadn't known the Rodriguezes long, but he wasn't about to let an attorney take advantage of them—not even his cousin's best friend. In his experience, attorneys wanted one thing: power.

And that had nothing to do with the best interests of their clients.

The trill of mingling birdsong wrapped around Hayden as she stood in front of Mrs. Rodriguez. When she was a child, she'd loved the way her dad identified each call, but all she knew was she liked the sound.

She observed the elegantly dressed woman. This was a struggling, out-of-place immigrant? If she had the resources her clothing indicated, why couldn't Miguel immigrate legally? This small woman in front of her might make Hayden look like a giant, but she radiated a confident core. Mrs. Rodriguez would make a success of her life in America . . . without her oldest son.

It didn't add up.

But it wasn't a conversation to have in the middle of a busy street.

"Mrs. Rodriguez, we're a couple blocks from my office. We can talk there in privacy."

The woman folded her arms across her chest and tipped her chin. "No."

"We must talk so I can understand your case. If we do it here, we lose important protections."

"Maybe I change my mind. Maybe I let my son rest in peace." Her posture was tense, and her gaze darted around the pedestrians walking past.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Rodriguez?"

The woman shook her head and frowned, then returned her focus to Hayden. "I see a ghost, but he is gone."

Hayden whipped around, but saw nothing unusual on the crowded streets. It was impossible to know if someone watched them.

"It will be quieter and private at my office." Hayden reached out to touch Mrs. Rodriguez's elbow, and the woman flinched. "Please, I want to help you."

The woman's chin trembled. "Miguel, he didn't deserve this."

"I know."

She squared her body toward Hayden like a boxer awaiting the next punch. Then she nodded as if she had come to a decision. "I will go with you, but I must tell Mr. Andrew first."

"Mr. Andrew?"

"My son's friend. They have ice cream inside."

Hayden nodded. "Of course. I promise not to keep you a moment longer than necessary."

"Jorge is all I have left. I must keep him safe." Mrs. Rodriguez opened the door and marched into the narrow storefront, Hayden following. "Mr. Andrew, I go with Miss McCarthy. You stay with Jorge?"

Hayden looked up, and her gaze collided with Andrew Wesley's. He was "Mr. Andrew," the Rodriguez boy's friend?

"Andrew. Nice to see you." She extended a hand.

"Hayden."

Jorge and his mother looked back and forth between them as they spoke, clearly surprised that they knew each other.

"Do you want me to come with you, Mrs. Rodriguez?" Concern flashed in Andrew's eyes, but hardened to something else when he turned to look at Hayden. "You don't need to do this alone."

"I must." Mrs. Rodriguez gestured toward the overflowing waffle cone in his hand. "You will be occupied with those."

BEYOND JUSTICE

Andrew nodded. "Where will you be? I can bring Jorge when we're done."

Mrs. Rodriguez looked at Hayden. "I do not know."

"Elliott & Johnson," Hayden said. "A couple blocks up King on this side of the street."

Andrew nodded. "I know where that is." He looked at her as though he thought she might hurt the older woman.

"Your ice cream is about to drip," Hayden pointed. Something in her couldn't resist pushing his buttons. "She'll be fine."

"Sure." He ground out the word between clenched teeth and pulled a card from his back pocket. "Here. Call my cell if you need anything, Maricel."

Hayden touched his arm, and he straightened as if she'd shocked him. What had happened to the warm, approachable guy she'd met the other night? "We should only be an hour." She waited until his gaze collided with hers. "We're on the same side, Andrew."

"We'll see." His look said he doubted it.

"Maybe the ice cream will sweeten your disposition," Hayden winked at him and then waved her hand toward the door. "After you, Señora Rodriguez."

Did I just wink? As she and Mrs. Rodriguez walked away, Hayden wondered where on earth that had come from. Fortunately, Andrew didn't know her well enough to understand how out of character it was. She forced her thoughts from him. Men didn't affect her. Period. She didn't have time for them if she wanted to make partner at the firm that demanded her all and never thought she gave enough.

Andrew rubbed a hand across his head.

Well, that was one way to be a jerk.

He hadn't meant to take her head off, but something in him had risen at the thought that she'd take advantage of the Rodriguezes. Neither Jorge nor his mother had shared the reason they'd immigrated, and he hadn't pressed. He'd learned early at New Beginnings that sometimes the only thing his families retained was their story. It was something to be treasured and shared willingly, not coerced. Would Hayden twist and poke until Maricel told her things the older woman preferred to hold close?

That ignored the fundamental question: Why did Maricel need an attorney anyway?

Maricel Rodriguez was strong, but a fragile something hinted at hard times in the past. Hard times she had risen above.

Jorge was studying him with serious eyes.

"Let's finish our ice cream like we'd planned." Andrew smiled, but Jorge didn't return it.

Instead, the young man sank deeper into the small bistro chair and dutifully licked, eyes constantly on Andrew as if assessing the likelihood of another eruption. It was a look Andrew had seen in kids who had a reason to expect violence. It pained him to have caused it.

Andrew sighed and settled onto his chair. "Look, Jorge, I'm sorry. I don't often lose my temper unless I think someone is threatened. Lucky for you, I care about you. Not so lucky, I chose the wrong way to show it."

"Is all right."

"No, I know better, and I'm sorry." He took a bite of the blueberry ice cream, and then licked a few dribbles. It was too good to let any escape. "So how was school this week?"

As he listened to Jorge share about his week, Andrew prayed for a chance to apologize to Hayden as well.

A loud mariachi band ringtone resounded, and Jorge jumped. His gaze darted around and his complexion seemed to pale.

Andrew placed a hand on his shoulder. "Everything okay?"

Jorge set the remains of his cone on a napkin and then wiped his

BEYOND JUSTICE

hands on another. He made an effort to look calm, but his trembling hands betrayed him. He tugged a small flip phone from his pocket and glanced at it before sliding it back.

“Jorge?”

“It is nothing. Just my *padre*.” The boy tried to smile, but it was a pathetic effort.

Clearly he wanted to drop the subject, so Andrew let him, but not before he filed the incident away in his mind.