

IMPERFECT JUSTICE





As he reviewed the logs from Kaylene's car, he was impressed. She was venturing beyond the short leash he had given her. So long as she remembered he was in charge, all would be well. But he sensed a growing resistance.

He stroked his chin as he leaned into the computer screen. There was a pattern here. Once he uncovered it he would know how to rein her in and remind her that she lived for his pleasure. He could bring her back into compliance. One moment is all it would take.

But first he had to know where she strayed.

The combination of the tracker and her phone log gave him a perfect picture of her comings and goings. Grocery stores, library, that church she used as a crutch. All were locations he approved.

But this repeated stop at a strip mall that held a CPA's office, a dry cleaner, a coffee shop, and a women's resource center . . .

Kaylene's stops were too long to be dropping off or picking up clothing. He handled their finances; she wouldn't be visiting an accountant. And Kaylene didn't drink coffee.

So what was she doing at the center? He snorted. Women's resource center. What a joke. He'd looked it up. While cloaked in benign words, its purpose was more invasive. It existed to rip families apart.

It was time to up his surveillance. She always went on Thursdays when the girls had piano.

She'd underestimated him, something she wouldn't do twice. He'd make sure of it.

Maybe he'd create something else for her to do this Thursday. An errand perfectly timed to disrupt her plans. A grim smile grew across his face as he cracked his knuckles. That was perfect. If she protested, he'd know he'd been too lenient.

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It was time to remind her who was in control.



CHAPTER 1

Emilie Wesley glanced at her watch and frowned. In fifteen minutes her client would take a critical step toward freedom. It was a step that had taken months of preparation and more than a little bit of counseling and backbone stiffening. Now all that work, time, and effort would culminate in a protective order. Emilie would step to the background, her role in helping Kaylene Adams alter her abusive present finished.

When she'd finally received the text saying her client was ready to file, Emilie had jumped into action. She wanted to file it before Kaylene changed her mind. Emilie knew from hard experience that could happen in a moment.

But before the judge would grant a protective order, Kaylene had to appear in court.

Without her testimony, the motion was a complete no go.

Emilie stopped pacing and tapped the face of her watch, then pressed it to her ear. The steady *tick tick* affirmed it was working. What wasn't working was Kaylene's promise to meet her forty-five minutes before the hearing at the Haven, the non-profit that served women who wanted to escape difficult domestic situations.

She had waited in her office as long as she could before calling Kaylene's cell phone, a call that went directly to voicemail. She'd left a message and then told Taylor Adele, her paralegal, that she was headed to court. Maybe Kaylene had misunderstood where they were meeting. She could be a nervous wreck, waiting outside the courtroom for Emilie to arrive.

Emilie had almost convinced herself that was exactly what had happened until she reached the broad hallway outside the courtroom and couldn't find her client. She pulled her cell phone from her briefcase and called Taylor.

"Any sign of Kaylene?"

"None."

"You're sure? She's got to be somewhere." There was a churning in her gut that left Emilie unsettled, fearing what could have happened.

In the practice of law, clients were people you served during normal business hours and then forgot about when you left the office. Somewhere in her three years at the Haven that had stopped working. She sometimes woke up in the middle of the night panicking over a client's situation—and this was such a case. Kaylene's situation bordered on tenuous even after all the detailed planning and careful work. Her home life was one spark away from erupting, and there was so little Emilie could do to prevent it or protect Kaylene and her girls.

"Want me to keep calling?" Taylor's words penetrated her worried mind.

"Yes. I need to know she's okay."

"She probably got snagged in traffic somewhere. You know how 66 is."

"Stop-and-go all hours of the day." That was exactly why she'd bought a town house that was ridiculously expensive but also incredibly close to where she worked. Vehicles were made to move, not sit in lanes of traffic. "You're likely right. Let me know if you reach her."

Meanwhile, Emilie would check the courtroom just in case Kaylene had slipped around her. An unlikely scenario, but she felt ripples of desperation.

The courtroom was quiet, the dark wood lining the walls

somber and weighty. It was surprisingly empty for a Monday morning, a circumstance that would change in the coming minutes unless the judge had canceled the general motion hour. That happened if the court had a jury trial or series of hearings calendared. This morning the only people in the courtroom were a court reporter seated at a computer near the front of the room and the judge.

Judge Emma Franklin had served the people of Alexandria City for fifteen years. She glanced up from the file resting on the large desk in front of her and acknowledged Emilie. “You ready, Miss Wesley?”

“Not quite, Your Honor. My client is on her way.” She hoped. “Can we have a few more minutes?”

“The hearing is slated to begin in five, and I have ten minutes after that.”

“This won’t take long. I’m sure she’s looking for parking.”

The judge slid reading glasses down her nose and eyed Emilie, her gaze direct and not without warmth. “You understand your client has to be here to receive a temporary protective order.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Emilie fought to keep her tone respectful—the judge knew she understood that. “I’ll check the hallway for her again. The courthouse can be intimidating.”

“It’s easy to forget that when one works here. Good luck.” Judge Franklin turned back to her files, and Emilie hurried to the doors leading to the hall.

The moment she exited the courtroom, she stepped to the side and pulled out her cell. A text from Taylor flashed on her screen. Still no answer

Emilie frowned and pulled up Kaylene’s number. She hit call and waited for what felt like forever for anyone to pick up. Something was wrong. She hit redial and still no one picked up. The call finally went to voicemail, and she left a brief message:

“Kaylene, tell me you’re okay.”

When she’d started working with domestic violence victims, Emilie had naively believed she could fix their lives—or at least take her skill with words and use it to help these women navigate their turbulent lives.

She’d learned the hard way it wasn’t that simple.

If she wanted hope, she should have focused on adoptions.

Instead, she dealt with the real-world dysfunction that kept two people from sustaining a relationship. Where one or the other, sometimes both, fed off a destructive cycle of control and pain.

Did any of Kaylene’s neighbors have any idea what happened behind her closed doors?

Probably not.

One or two might suspect, but it wouldn’t have risen to the level of intervention.

That was one tragedy of relationship violence. If you didn’t see the bruise, you could pretend it didn’t exist. If you never thought about the disproportionate number of broken bones, you could believe someone simply had a string of bad luck. Happens to the best of us. After all, a grown woman could always flee if her situation got dangerous, unlike a child trapped in the power of someone bigger and stronger.

It was a fiction, but a fiction people chose to embrace.

Emilie walked down the side staircase to the first floor and checked with security. Then she searched the bathrooms on each floor. Still no sign of Kaylene.

She glanced at her watch as she hurried back to the courtroom. They were out of time, and she’d have to beg Judge Franklin for leniency in the hope Kaylene would eventually appear.

Had Robert, her husband, somehow found out what she was doing?

That was a worst-case scenario, one that could lead only to even

worse scenarios. Emilie dislodged the thought as she reentered the courtroom.

“There you are, Ms. Wesley. Did you find your client?”

“No, Your Honor. I’m afraid we’ll have to ask for a continuance.”

Judge Franklin watched her for a moment, but Emilie refused to shift or fidget. “All right. You can handle that with my clerk.”

“Thank you.” She hurried from the room and scanned the hallway again as she walked around the corner to the judge’s office. It only took a moment to reschedule for the next morning, and then she called Taylor. “I’m going to search the courthouse one more time, then head back.”

“All right. I’ll call you the moment I hear from her.”

“Thanks.” Emilie slipped her phone into the side pocket of her Italian leather briefcase. For a moment her thoughts flitted to her graduation trip to Florence and the open-air market where her mom had insisted she buy the briefcase so she’d look the part of an attorney. She shook her head. The memory of her hope and optimism that day disappeared in a wave of fear.

There were a few more people about as Emilie looked into courtrooms and checked the bathrooms one more time. Kaylene wouldn’t be the first client who’d had the courage to start the process only to have it fail when she most needed it.

As Emilie walked down the first floor toward the exit, a detective strode toward her. She didn’t know Detective Gaines well, but the man had been around a long time and might be able to help. She hurried to him, her heels clicking against the stone floor.

“Detective Gaines, do you have a moment?”

“Not really.” His gaze was intent if slightly unfocused, as if he was preoccupied with whatever matter had brought him to the courthouse.

“My client was supposed to meet me here to get a protective order in front of Judge Franklin. She didn’t show.”

"I'm sorry, but how can I help? Your client has to want the protection."

"Yes, I know." She blew out a breath, stemming a wave of annoyance. "I'm worried her husband found out and did something."

"Has he been violent before?"

"Yes." Kaylene had caught her husband in an affair, which had been the proverbial straw that destroyed her ability to carry on as though nothing was wrong. When he beat her for confronting him, she knew she must escape and had shown up at the Haven.

"Give me her name, and I'll check after I take care of something else."

"Thank you." She gave him Kaylene's name and headed outside. In fifteen minutes she was back in her office at the Haven comparing notes with Taylor. "I don't understand."

"That makes two of us." Taylor's usually smiling face wore a mask of concern as she met Emilie's gaze. "Kaylene was as committed as any of our clients."

It was true, and that was what had Emilie tied up in knots. She moved to her desk and tried to focus on other case files, but her thoughts continued to stray to Kaylene. A news alert beeped onto her phone: *Multiple shooting at Ravens Park home*. She ignored it. Just another sensational headline.

Her desk phone intercom clicked to life.

"Yes?"

"There's a Detective Gaines for you."

"Thanks." She grabbed the phone. "Thanks for getting back to me, Detective."

"Your client's name is Kaylene Adams?"

"Yes."

"She won't be meeting you at court. She's headed to the morgue, and suspected of shooting her daughters."

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CHAPTER 2

The shadows lengthened outside the office as Emilie stared at the blank screen. After the Haven closed she sometimes took advantage of the quiet to get out her laptop and work at her other job: freelance investigative journalism for an online newspaper that wanted to be the next must-read. Almost no one beyond her tight circle of girlfriends understood she had dual roles, but each fed a separate part of who she was. Lately, though, the writing didn't flow. It felt stymied, and she hoped by staying late she could knock out her next article.

Instead, she kept imagining Kaylene's body covered by a sheet. Her body heaved onto a gurney. Her body thrust into the ambulance.

If only Kaylene had called her Friday rather than Saturday, so they could have gone to court immediately to file the protective order. Maybe then Kaylene would be alive. Emilie's head knew she'd had no choice but to wait, but her heart felt as though she'd betrayed her client.

The online headlines screamed that the police believed Kaylene had killed one daughter and critically wounded the other. It felt like a waking nightmare. A grainy video that appeared on a couple of the local news station websites seemed to support the theory. One viewing, and Emilie felt her stomach rebel against the lunch she'd eaten as she'd scrambled to find any explanation for the tragedy.

She'd tried to watch it a second time, but she couldn't face it.

Now she had to get this article written, but the words wouldn't come. Even terrible words would be better than none—she could always edit it later.

But the blank screen taunted her . . . the cursor blinking her failure at the top. This was not normal. Had the Muses abandoned her? She leaned across the surface of the desk. The coolness of the pressed wood felt good since the air conditioning automatically slowed after hours.

After a moment she groaned and pushed back upright. There was no point staying any longer. She should go home, where she could at least stare at the computer screen from her bed in comfy clothes and with bare feet. The ridiculous heels she wore pinched her toes. They were a torture device, but part of her uniform and the identity she presented to clients. She wanted to remind them that they could be both strong and feminine. They could know who they were and be confident. It was possible, if one portrayed the right image. It might be an illusion, but no one else had to know. *Tell yourself that, Emilie*, she thought, wondering where her ability to help people and her words had gone.

She shoved a couple files in her bag, grabbed her car keys, and turned off the lights. The hall was quiet, the faint hum of the refrigerator whispering in the darkness as she passed the kitchen. One of the safety lights buzzed, as annoying as the mosquitoes that swarmed along the Potomac.

She felt a vibration against her side, and she stopped to rummage through her bag. How was it that the pockets always deepened when she scrambled to find a ringing cell phone? When her fingers finally clasped it, the call was gone. All that remained was the screen showing a number she didn't recognize. Oh well. If it was important they'd leave a message. She'd learned if they didn't, she shouldn't call back. No need to invite conversation with strangers who were usually telemarketers.

She jiggled the back door as she walked past. Good, it was already locked. Occasionally the cleaning crew forgot or, more likely, assumed the last staff member would lock it. So she always checked.

After that it was a quick lap through the rest of the warren of hallways to turn off lights. She loved the cheerful framed artwork, drawn by clients' children, that brightened what would otherwise be a boring beige hall. Inexpensive interior decorating with a message. It had been the receptionist's idea, when she first arrived, to soften the space and make it more inviting, but Johanna soon realized that a non-profit's funds didn't allow for splurges. Then she landed on the idea of dollar-store frames filled with artwork children created. The result was charming and colorful. Then a donor noticed and wrote a check for larger pieces to be framed and displayed in the entry and conference rooms.

The result was unique and perfect.

Emilie stopped to examine an acrylic Kaylene's daughter Kinley had painted. The girl had been delighted to wait for her mom in the children's room, once she'd spotted the art supplies. When Emilie and Kaylene returned an hour later Kinley hadn't heard them come in. Tongue protruding past her teeth, she was concentrating on adding a thin brush of white along a tree trunk.

Tears filled Emilie's eyes at the memory.

Kinley had glanced up. "That white edge is meant to add highlights." The words sounded so self-assured coming from a nine-year-old.

Kaylene had grinned and tugged her daughter's ponytail. "Guess all those art lessons are worth it. You've created something beautiful." As she looked down at Kinley the worry lines seemed to fade along her eyes, and the tightness at her mouth eased. "Kaydence is our math and science gal," she'd told Emilie. "Kinley is our creative."

“And you love me for it.” Kinley’s grin was big enough to split the sky.

There was nothing in the child’s face that day to indicate she feared her mom. Nothing at all.

Emilie walked out the front door, checking to make sure it locked behind her before proceeding down the sidewalk to the parking lot. She could have used the back door, but when she left after dusk she preferred to walk along the busy road before darting into the lot and unlocking her car at the last moment.

It might seem paranoid, but she didn’t want to give anyone an opportunity to sneak up on her or into her car because she carelessly unlocked it while she was fifty yards away. That wasn’t a good idea in her line of work.

She tried to peer into all corners of the parking lot before entering it. Even then it wasn’t until she was almost to her car that she saw a person in the shadows. She hurried to unlock the car and climb inside, and then quickly relocked the doors from the inside. The person stepped forward as she turned the car on and put it in reverse. Then they—she couldn’t tell through the lens of the rearview mirror if it was a man or woman—let the weakened light from the street brush across their face, a safe move thanks to the hoodie that cloaked their features.

Emilie wanted to scream in frustration. Who was this person? Before she could do something, anything to fight back—but what? call the police? could they arrive in time?—the person was gone. Vanished in the shadows. If she could see who it was just once, she could do something to fix this and make them stop.

She pulled out of the parking lot and turned onto the street.

She needed to get home. Somewhere safe.

Someplace where she could pretend no one stalked her and made sure she knew it.

FIVE MONTHS EARLIER

He buttoned the top button of his tuxedo shirt, then adjusted the bow tie. Tonight's fund-raiser for the Haven would be his first step into public view since the business trades released the amount he'd been paid for InterIntell. The dollars were large enough to have those who wanted to be his friends circulate where before they hadn't acknowledged him. Tonight he simply had to smile and endure. Shake a few hands. Feign interest and leave as soon as he could.

He'd never quite fit into the social scene, a fact he could trace to middle school when his interests diverged so completely from those of his mindless classmates.

Today would be different. He knew he could exceed expectations. A few extra zeros in his bank account helped with that.

He was no longer the skinny, nerdy kid who sat in the back row drafting code and forming ideas while the rest learned useless information like the dates of wars and theorems he'd mastered as an eight-year-old. He was the celebrated CEO of a company that revolutionized the way people lived. Where most people looked around the world and saw colors and shapes, he saw zeros and ones. He saw programs that could affect the world around him.

The fact that his dad was a high-tech exec had provided a shortcut to his own launch. He'd barely waited until high school graduation. College classes and his business kept him focused. He'd worked hundred-hour weeks, and two months ago it all paid off when he sold his business for a cool half a billion. Because of the way he'd structured the business, more than half of that landed in his own very fat bank account—a fact touted by the financial magazines and papers.

Society would see him through a very different lens now.

Money could do that. It could turn the awkward into

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something worthy of attention and time.

He left his bathroom and marched down the stairs and out the front door to where the Lincoln Town Car waited. He'd wear the aura of a wildly successful businessman, maybe even flaunt it a bit. All with good taste.

He slid into the backseat and ignored the driver's small talk. He needed to think about what he would do if she was there. The woman he'd glimpsed during a tour of the Haven. A key member of the staff, she'd be at the event and was the reason he'd agreed to attend.

Forty minutes into the reception, each second ticking by with excruciating slowness, he was ready to leave. Those who knew his new situation fawned cloyingly. It annoyed him and demeaned them. He scanned the crowd of strangers searching for her brilliant blonde hair but didn't see her.

His listened to a couple of men ten years older than he joking about their accomplishments, though it sounded like a string of conquests. So inappropriate in a setting like this.

"You still listening?" A man in a polka dot bow tie, whose name tag he hadn't bothered to read, elbowed him.

"Can't help myself."

The man seemed to think his reply was humorous. Further proof he wasn't worth the time.

"Hey, look who's here." The man on the other side of Mr. Bow Tie, clearly his equal in laziness and low expectations, pointed to the door. "Now there's a sight for sore eyes."

Mr. Bow Tie whistled through his teeth, a shrill and grating sound. "Mighty fine indeed. I wonder if she came alone."

Obviously she had. There was no one beside her to remove her coat or take her arm and lead her through the space. If she

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had come with him, he would proudly lean into her every word, let her know how much he adored her. Women liked that kind of thing . . . he'd been told. Time hadn't allowed him to find out for himself.

But as the blonde stopped to speak to a couple of women who dripped with diamonds but hadn't aged as well as they thought, he knew he wanted to find out more than her name.

Bow Tie elbowed him again. The man really must stop that. "Wouldn't you follow her around like a puppy dog just to get her to acknowledge you?"

Bow Tie's friend Alexander—name tags were useful for memorizing the names of people who were annoying—chortled. "Woof woof." He frowned. "But she looks like an ice queen."

"I always hated that moniker."

"Moniker?" Bow Tie leered at him. "An odd word."

"Guess money can't change everything." Then Alexander's grin faded. "Although maybe that's exactly what Miss Ice Queen wants. A man with resources."

Anger rose in him, but he decided he'd had enough of these two buffoons. He walked away, cutting through a cluster of people without noticing or caring who they were. She was there, the woman who'd entranced him with a glance. He would woo her . . . step by step.

She was talking to another woman. Her blonde hair curled around her shoulders in loose waves, so light. He wanted to touch them. Her off-the-shoulder dress revealed perfect skin, and her smile was friendly and curious. Did she know how beautiful she was compared to the hot-house flowers next to her?

Her friend noticed him first.

Then she turned, curiosity in her expression. "Hi, I'm Emilie Wesley. You are . . . ?"

CHAPTER 3

What did one wear to a funeral home to shop for a coffin? When he woke up Monday morning, Reid Billings assumed the week would be like any other. Seventy hours of meetings, money, and routine. Then Monday's events happened. His boss came to him first. Social media and news websites were not the way to learn one's sister was dead and accused of taking her child's life.

Nothing could have prepared him for this.

He stood in front of his closet, numb, dreading the task before him. It shouldn't be his place to make the funeral arrangements, but Robert had refused.

Could he blame his brother-in-law? He didn't know what to think . . . His head was conflicted and his heart bruised. He rubbed his hands over his stubbled chin. He should probably shave, but he couldn't quite care.

Reid sank to the floor. In moments his world had changed, careened off its axis, and he staggered to find equilibrium. Kaylene had always been a nurturer. She'd mothered him to death, to the point his friends had called her his other mother. Though they'd drifted apart after she married, he knew she had lived for her girls. He couldn't imagine she would do a thing to hurt them, let alone try to end their lives. He'd watched the online video before his assistant Simone's warning e-mail arrived that he shouldn't. Now he couldn't get the image of his sister holding a gun and dying out of his mind. What kind of news service allowed something like

that to air where children . . . or the grieving family . . . could see it?

He rubbed his eyes, swallowing the lump that threatened to block his throat. He didn't allow emotions to touch him—that's what made him so great with finance and managing other people's money. He could distance himself from the push of the pack. While others might rush over a cliff together, he kept a distant view. It had protected his clients through the vagrancies of the markets.

But this was different from anything he'd ever dealt with. He felt paralyzed, trapped in his own body, a spectator as a great wave of emotion he didn't know how to manage washed over him.

Why, Lord? This isn't right on any level.

He knew the world was evil. Just watch the evening news or open an Internet browser, and the brokenness leapt at you. His work on the board of a children's home illustrated the fruit of broken families. But somehow he'd believed his family was immune.

His cell pulsed inside his pocket. While he wanted to ignore it, his boss didn't care if he was mourning and guilt-ridden. And if it wasn't Marvin Fletcher, it could be a response to one of the dozens of calls he'd made for the kids at Almost Home. The non-profit needed an influx of funds quickly or two of the homes would close. He wouldn't accept defeat, not when he had clients with pockets almost as deep as Warren Buffet's.

He reached for the phone, still hesitant. It could be another person trying to ferret out information about Kaylene. The media calls had started slowly, but through the last twenty-four hours had escalated. He glanced at the screen as the phone rang again. Some of the tension leached from his neck. This was a call he'd take.

"Billings."

"You okay?" The deep voice shored him up. Brandon Lancaster had been his best friend since backing into Reid's car freshman year at Virginia. The burly defensive lineman had looked sheepish

as he crawled from his truck and stuck out a hand. Before long the two were meeting for lunch most days and then rooming together junior year. After two years in the pros, Brandon now ran Almost Home, a foster child ministry for hard-to-place kids, while Reid spent his time making more money for those who already had wealth.

“No.” There was no other answer to that question.

“God’s still here.”

“Yeah, I know.” He did. His head knew. He was just having a hard time convincing his heart.

“Chinese?”

“Huh?”

“Man’s gotta eat.”

Not really. “Okay.”

“I’ll bring it at six.”

That would give him time to get home from his appointment at the funeral home. “See you then.”

Reid hung up and leaned his head against the closet. Man might *have* to eat, but that didn’t mean he wanted to. There was no sense telling Brandon that. The guy still ate as though he was a lineman for the college football team.

All right, God. I know You’re here even when I don’t sense You, but I need You to show up.

’Cause otherwise, this life had gotten too hard to live.

Two hours later the private memorial ceremony was planned, the casket selected for when Kaylene’s body was eventually released, instructions about buying a cemetery plot given. Reid walked to his car, loosening the tie that screamed Wall Street. The somber eggplant color had seemed right when he selected it; now it hugged his neck like a noose.

He still couldn't believe Kaylene had shot her girls and then killed herself. The problem was all indications suggested she had. The police were adamant they were right and he was wrong. And if he'd been this wrong about his sister, what else had he been wrong about?

He ground his teeth as he slowed for a light. No. He knew what he knew.

She would not have done the acts the headlines blazoned to the world.

It didn't matter how things appeared.

He knew the Kaylene of his childhood. Knew her heart. If he was honest with himself, he'd noticed rumblings of trouble in her marriage. Seen and heard enough at the occasional birthday party or rare family event to suspect there was more going on than she revealed.

He pulled into the parking garage beneath his building and then made his way to the elevator and to his floor. The condo felt small, empty. Maybe it was time to get a pet. Something that would be glad to see him when he came home. A distraction when he needed one.

Strange that the silence had never bothered him before.

He opened his Pandora app and selected a movie soundtrack station. Maybe some pulsing, dramatic music would help him reframe the terribleness of today . . . or sink into it.

He had to escape this funk before Brandon arrived. His friend would see through him in a minute.

Reid's phone buzzed again, and for two seconds he considered tossing it into his bedroom and closing the door. But what if it was related to the kids at Almost Home? He pulled it out. "Hello?"

There was silence, then a sound as if someone swallowed. He glanced at his screen, but didn't recognize the number, so he put the phone back to his ear.

“My name is Emilie Wesley. I knew your sister . . .”

Right. Everyone knew his sister now that she was infamous.

“ . . . And I wanted to know how Kinley is.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to tell me who you are.”

“I was her attorney.”

Her words ricocheted through him. “Right. Why would Kaylene have an attorney?”

“Why would I lie?” The woman’s voice was insistent, if a bit broken at the edge.

“Because you aren’t the first person who’s pretended to know my sister.”

And who took the time to look up the relatives of someone on the front page. He was turning his phone off after this call. Frankly, he should hang up on this person, whoever she was. And he needed to check on Kinley. She was his niece, and he needed to know she would survive. The last thing he needed was more people trying to take advantage of Kaylene’s death, Kinley’s injuries, and his pain. It just showed how many sick and bored people there were.

What sounded like a shudder, maybe a sob, reached him. “I’m sorry to bother you, but Kaylene would want me to make sure Kinley’s okay.”

“What’s Kinley’s middle name?” he demanded. No stranger would know that.

“Rose. Robert picked her first name, but Kaylene insisted on Rose for her middle name. Kaylene said the moment she looked at Kinley she saw the sweet touch of a rose on her face.”

Reid paused, shocked at her ready response.

“Kaylene’s middle name is Grace,” the voice continued. “And Kaydence Marie was a sweet young woman. A thought that terrified her mom.”

“How did you learn those details?”

“I told you, Mr. Billings, I was her attorney. Kaylene hired me. I need . . . needed to know those details and many more.”

Wouldn't he have known if his sister had needed an attorney? Had he allowed so much distance to grow between them? He held the phone and prayed this deepening nightmare would end.

Emilie bit down on her lower lip. She shouldn't have called. It was stupid and impulsive, and that wasn't who she was. She spoke after thinking, moved after deliberation. She didn't call grieving brothers.

She hated grief. Hated the loss and emptiness it represented. The way it hollowed a soul and left a scar that time could ease, but never remove. It was a photo missing a family member. The empty chair at every holiday dinner.

Emilie might not understand what had happened Monday, but she knew from all Kaylene had said—and not said—that leaving Kinley defenseless was not okay. The hospital refused to give Emilie a word of information, careful to protect the patient's medical privacy. Emilie knew that was right . . . but she also knew she had to do something for Kinley.

The silence extended so long she was sure he'd hung up. “Mr. Billings?”

“How did you get my name and number?”

“Kaylene gave it to me. She said if anything ever happened, you were the person to contact.”

“I need to think about it. Do some research.” His voice was firm, yet she heard an underlying fragility in it.

“Is this your cell number? I can text you the website that will confirm who I am and what I'm saying.”

There was another pause, and then it was as though he had

reached a conclusion. “All right. You can do that.”

“Thank you. Please call me back.”

The call ended, and Emilie immediately texted him her electronic business card. She held on to the phone. It wouldn’t take long to confirm her identity—a simple Google search could accomplish that. Yet as the minutes passed, she concluded he had agreed to the text as a simple way to get off the phone.

She huffed out a breath and tugged her laptop close. If he wouldn’t cooperate, she’d turn her attention to learning about Robert Adams.

The front door opened, and Emilie looked up to see Hayden McCarthy walk in. Her roommate’s low heels clicked against the hardwood floors, and Emilie had to smile at the hot pink blouse peeking out from beneath Hayden’s suit jacket. Slowly but surely, her friend was breaking out of her navy and black wardrobe. “Get caught at the office, or did Andrew steal you for dinner?”

Hayden set down her briefcase beside the small glass table and smiled. “While I would love to spend time with your charming cousin, he’s a little too wrapped up in his latest batch of new kids. And I have to make a living.”

Ever since going into practice with their mentor, Savannah Daniels, Hayden had a new purpose . . . and added burdens. In some ways life as an overworked associate had been easier than it was now as an overworked attorney launching out on her own. She stepped to the bar that separated the living area from the kitchen, then studied Emilie, who was leaning against the other side of the counter. “You okay?”

Emilie considered lying. It would be so much easier than unleashing the maelstrom of her emotions. But if Hayden caught the slightest hint that she was being less than truthful, she would dig until Emilie came clean.

“I can’t get Kaylene out of my mind. I keep imagining her

body on her front lawn.” The newspaper articles hadn’t hesitated to paint an image she could clearly see in her mind.

Hayden’s eyes softened, and she reached toward Emilie, her touch gentle. “I’m so sorry.”

Emilie shuddered. “I can’t let it affect me like this.”

“Give yourself space to grieve.” Hayden set down her keys and then walked around the counter and pulled Emilie into a hug.

Emilie fought the urge to resist.

“Everything’s felt off since . . .” She couldn’t push the words out. Hayden understood why her home had ceased being a sanctuary. “Maybe I need to sell and start fresh somewhere.”

Hayden’s eyes glazed with concern. “We’re okay here. You love this location.”

She did. It sat within a few blocks’ walk to her favorite restaurants and the Potomac as it curved south into Virginia. But at night she still had nightmares of her car careening out of control down Rock Creek Parkway the night she’d come home last spring to find that someone had broken into their condo and violated their home. She’d worked through it . . . she thought.

But Monday the fear and uncertainty had returned. She rubbed the goose bumps on her arms.

“Maybe you should take a vacation, Em. You’ve worked so hard . . . really ever since law school.”

“It’s what I’m good at.”

“Sure.” Hayden nodded. “But everyone needs time to refresh.”

“I don’t see you doing a lot of that either.”

Hayden grinned even as her cheeks pinked. “Andrew’s really good at making sure I take time off each week.” She crossed her arms and leaned back against the counter. “You go from working for your clients to writing an article and back. You’re an adrenaline junkie.”

Emilie snorted. It wasn’t as though she raced from tension-laced

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trials to pressure-packed deadlines for the thrill of it. Any time she complained to her parents about her busyness, they just reminded her she didn't need to work. But the reality was she did. She longed for her life to matter, to do something that impacted others. She started to speak, but Hayden held up a hand.

“You know I love you, Emilie. You've had a terrible week. Give yourself grace, okay?”

Emilie nodded as she heard the wisdom in her friend's words. The question was how to actually live it.



CHAPTER 4

Emilie sat at her desk, replaying her conversation with Kaylene's brother. He hadn't known his sister had an attorney, hadn't known she'd needed one. That reinforced Emilie's impression her client had felt trapped. If Kaylene had let her brother into the depths of her problems at home, would she be alive?

The question had chased her through her restless sleep and now haunted her waking hours.

She opened the browser on her computer and clicked to a local network affiliate. Kaylene's death no longer ran as a banner at the top of the page, yet it only took a quick scroll to find the video on the side bar of the web page. She moved the mouse so the arrow hovered over the image. Was she ready to watch it again?

She clicked before she could change her mind.

The video was only thirty seconds of jerky images. Whoever shot it must have stood in a yard a couple doors down from the Adams' home. In the distance sirens wailed, but otherwise the video was eerily quiet. It was as if everything had focused on the woman stumbling down the front steps. In her hand was a small black item. A gun? Red seeped through the side of her white blouse. Behind her a young woman fell across the steps leading to the sidewalk. Someone yelled for help. Then the video got shaky as a police car raced to a stop at the edge of the frame.

A knock on her office door yanked Emilie from the video.

Taylor stood in the doorway, dressed in a pencil skirt and cashmere sweater, the perfect look for a young professional who

wanted to advance. She held up a cup of coffee with a hesitant smile. "It's your favorite."

Emilie accepted the cup and inhaled the rich brew. "Thank you. Do I look that bad?"

"Like you got as little sleep as I did." Taylor sank onto the chair in front of Emilie's slightly battered desk. "What did we do wrong?"

That was the heart of the question. If Emilie had done her job right, somehow she would have convinced Kaylene to quit delaying, and she wouldn't have been at the house when violence erupted.

"Maybe we didn't do anything wrong." The words sounded as weak as the conviction behind them. Sure, in the whispers of her heart, she knew she wasn't the only solution for her clients, but she was a large piece of the work at the Haven. The counselors helped women regain some semblance of self-worth and then Emilie helped them navigate the legal roads.

"And maybe we did." Taylor leaned forward, propping her elbows on her knees, intensity filling her gaze. "Do you still think we can make a difference? I've heard you tell people that you love this job because it allows you to save people. This week we didn't."

It was the truth. She had failed a desperate woman who had come to her. Emilie tried to force perspective . . . A woman had to truly want to flee. Kaylene had waffled back and forth. But she had walked through the door of the Haven needing help.

Emilie had failed Kaylene.

That reality had her boxed into a corner so tight she could hardly breathe, let alone do anything on the stack of files that represented other clients in various stages of longing to break free. Would she make the same missteps with the next woman?

She needed to believe it was possible to carry on. If not, her life's mission was a fraud.

She glanced down at her desk, picked up the top file. Glanced at the intake form Taylor had stapled to the inside cover. *Veronica needs us to fight for her*. Then she pulled the rest of the stack to the center of her desk and looked at her colleague.

“Each woman represented in these files needs us to work our hardest. Ultimately, each one has the choice on whether she’ll find a safe place, but without us many wouldn’t have the ability, means, or way to escape.” Emilie could feel her passion for the work return as she spoke. “What we do is important, but we won’t always succeed. This week has been a brutal reminder.”

Taylor nodded, a flicker of determination lighting her gray eyes. “I want to win them all.”

“Me too.” The phone on her desk rang, and she glanced at the caller ID. It was the shelter’s executive director, Rhoda Sterling. “I have to take this, but we can talk anytime you need.”

Taylor left, and Emilie let the phone ring again as she tried to brush the darkness from her mind. The shadows lingered right at the surface of her thoughts, never more than a flicker away, ready to rear up and overtake her. But if she showed even a moment of weakness Rhoda would fluff her short gray hair and pack Emilie off to the grief counselor she kept on speed dial.

Emilie blew out a slow breath, then picked up the phone before it rolled to voicemail. “This is Emilie.”

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d done the smart thing and gone home.” Rhoda’s voice sounded crisp and businesslike, but Emilie knew it was the tone her boss used to maintain control.

“Too many clients need my help to leave.” The words sounded brittle to her own ears, but she had to exude strength to withstand the force of her boss’s personality.

“Emilie . . .”

“I’m fine, Rhoda.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t be concerned about you. Taylor too.”

Rhoda sighed, and Emilie could almost hear her reaching a decision. “While I’d like to give you the rest of the week off, I need you to meet with a new client. She’ll need your best.”

Whereas those words usually energized her, today Emilie felt a prick of something far different. “When is she coming?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“I’m on it.” As she hung up, Emilie looked at the Monet prints decorating her office. Water lilies or no, she felt the walls pressing against her. She could barely catch her breath, and her skin felt on fire. *Get a grip, Emilie.* She had to do this. The whole point of her life was using her skills to help women in crisis. She couldn’t let the thought of meeting a new client cause her to look for a paper bag.

She leaned forward in her chair, forced her lungs to expand.

Something wasn’t right; this wasn’t who she was. She shook her head, trying to clear the haze that clouded her vision. Fine, she’d meet the client, follow the steps she always took. And in the routine, she’d become centered—she hoped.

Twenty minutes later Emilie’s phone buzzed again. She surged toward it and pushed the button before she could lose the calm she’d just barely located.

“We’re in conference room two.” Rhoda’s voice had the focused, compassionate edge she used with fragile clients.

“On my way.” Emilie stood, grabbed a legal pad, and tucked a business card into it. As she hurried from her office, she bounced against the door, and then forced her lungs to slowly release air.

She walked down one beige hall and then turned down another, this one ready for clients to see, with the kids’ art hanging against the soothing beige paint. Her office’s location kept her isolated from the flow of traffic, a necessity when she needed to focus on legal arguments, but as she passed a handful of offices that housed the social work staff, she noticed that an unusual number were empty. As she neared the small conference room, her steps

slowed.

Normally she couldn't wait to meet the next client. Normally she loved the challenge of figuring out how to help solve their problems and right their worlds.

Today wasn't normal.

She stopped short of the doorway and forced her shoulders back while she took two deep breaths. Then she lifted her chin and entered the room. No one in there needed to discover how her inner turmoil was bleeding into her actions—especially her boss.

Rhoda sat at the small conference table, holding a mug of steaming tea, probably Constant Comment with a squeeze of honey. She smiled, only the smallest hint of wrinkles at the corners of her gray eyes warning Emilie to tread carefully. “Emilie, I'd like you to meet Nadine Hunter. She needs our help.”

A young woman with sunglasses hiding her face and a purple bruise swelling her cheek turned slowly toward Emilie. She raised her sunglasses, and her eyes held a bottomed-out look of emptiness.

Rhoda touched Nadine lightly on the arm, and the woman jumped as if she'd been shocked. “Nadine, Emilie Wesley is our staff attorney. She's very good and will be your advocate.”

Emilie took another step forward, slid a chair from the table, and then forced herself to ease to the edge of it. She simply had to pretend that she was the confident litigator she had been a week ago. As she smiled, she extended her hand, but Nadine didn't take it.

Emilie kept her smile in place. “It's nice to meet you, Nadine.” She kept her voice calm and soft. “Can you tell me your story?”

The young woman—she couldn't be more than nineteen or twenty—looked everywhere but at Emilie's eyes. “My boyfriend uses me as his punching bag.”

“Then let's get you out of there.” Emilie pulled the legal pad in front of her and clicked on her erasable pen. “Before I begin

collecting information, I want you to know something. I understand. While I was in law school, I had a boyfriend who thought he owned me, and it took a lot of work to break free. A protective order allowed us to get him into jail. It can be the first step for you too.” Emilie paused until the woman met her gaze. “First I need some quick information to get started on a protective order that will provide space from him while you figure out what you want to do permanently.”

The woman shook her head. “I can’t do that. He has Jon, and he won’t let me see him if I leave.”

“Jon is . . . ?”

“My ten-month-old.” A tear tracked down her cheek. “He’s the reason I stay. I don’t make enough to take care of us, and Reggie knows that. He’s the smart one.” She touched her cheek, and Emilie could feel all the self-loathing that simple gesture contained.

“We can help you, Nadine.” Emilie met Rhoda’s gaze, and she felt the strength of resolve rising within. Nadine needed someone who could speak for her, who could help protect her. Emilie would give her best for this woman. Today that would have to be enough.

CHAPTER 5

All night and into Friday morning, Emilie's mind was a cauldron of spinning thoughts. Nadine needed her help now, as did the other women represented by the files, but could she help anyone until she understood what had gone wrong with Kaylene? About four in the morning she sent an e-mail requesting an all-staff early meeting, but she couldn't loosen the panic her fears wrapped around her heart.

She scanned headlines, but they were empty of any new information.

She still couldn't believe Kaylene had shot her girls. But if she hadn't, who did? As far as she knew, only family had been in the home, but just because the media hadn't mentioned another presence didn't mean there wasn't one.

When she arrived at the office, she sent an e-mail to Taylor asking her to order the police report. After a time of staring at a file, but not seeing the contents, she glanced at her watch and then gathered her notepad, pen, and phone. It was time to head to the conference room. Her fellow employees straggled in, curiosity or boredom on their faces as they took seats at the oval laminate table. Black-and-white photos of DC landmarks softened the beige walls and carpet. It would be nice to have more color to warm the room, but the reality was the work they did at the Haven wasn't warm and fuzzy. It often had an edge of life and death and utter chaos.

Rhoda was the last to file in, a slightly impatient look on her

face as she settled into her usual chair at the head of the table. “Looks like we’re here. Mind telling us why you asked for this meeting?”

Taylor shifted in her seat, her coral top and bright turquoise beads a nice contrast to Rhoda’s sterile suit. “I’m curious too.”

Emilie launched into her theory quickly, before her boss could grow more impatient. She glanced at the people filling the chairs at the table. Several worked as caseworkers, meaning they were responsible for helping a portfolio of clients receive the support they needed. A couple filled counseling or other specialized roles like her own.

Her gaze stopped when it landed on Shannon Riaz. “I can’t stop thinking about Kaylene Adams. I realized I didn’t know her as well as some of you may have. Shannon and any others who worked with her, I’d like your impressions of her and her story. Did she have friends she confi—”

Rhoda interrupted her. “Why are we spending time on a woman we can’t help when there are dozens in need of our assistance?”

“What if the story as we know it isn’t correct?” Emilie leaned forward. “The Kaylene I knew could not have done what the police say.”

Taylor nodded. “I agree. I can’t imagine her with a gun.”

“She could have had one.” This came from Shannon, the recent graduate who filled a social worker role and had been Kaylene’s caseworker. “She asked me how to get a permit and where to purchase one.”

Emilie’s heart sank. “Why would she ask you that?”

“She noticed the photo I have behind my desk.” Shannon shifted against the chair. “I was on my college rifle team, and she was interested.” She raised her hands defensively as Rhoda groaned. “What?”

“This is exactly the kind of information that cannot get out. We do not need anyone suggesting that we helped arm a murderer.” Rhoda looked at each person around the table with unflinching intensity. “I am absolutely serious about this. I see this information in the news, I find out who leaked it, and you will lose your job.”

Her gaze settled heavily on Emilie, as if she expected her to sprint to the *Nation's Post* with an exclusive.

“Don't worry, I'm not writing anything for anyone.” Emilie jotted a note. “Okay, so she asked about a gun. Did she actually buy one?”

“We need to end this discussion right here.” Rhoda leaned forward, palms pressed flat against the table. “Nothing good can come of this conversation.”

“I disagree. If we can figure out whether Kaylene owned a gun, we can determine whether it was used in the shooting.” Emilie kept pushing. “What if it wasn't her gun? What if she was trapped?”

“Then she should have let us help her. The video certainly makes it look like she was the one using it. It absolutely cannot get out that we had anything to do with talking to Kaylene about a gun. Am I clear?” Rhoda made eye contact with each person at the table. “This is not a topic we should discuss with our women.”

Emilie watched the others nod, even if with reluctance.

“Emilie?” Rhoda focused completely on her, steel in her eyes. “Do I have your cooperation?”

Emilie swallowed hard, feeling all moisture drain from her mouth. “I need to think about this.”

“There's nothing to think about. Either you're working for the good of this agency or you're not.”

Suddenly Taylor jerked as if she'd been jolted with electricity. She mouthed *sorry*, then pulled out her phone. “Emilie, we have a client emergency.”

Emilie jumped up and made her way out of the conference

room with a quick thanks, Taylor close on her heels.

“Who is it?”

“No one. I knew you needed an out.”

Emilie stifled a smile as she hurried into her office. “You’d better create a real client emergency in case Rhoda fact-checks.” She sank into her leather office chair and jiggled her mouse to wake up her computer. “Have you ever seen her like that?”

“No, but her assistant said she’s been under intense pressure. It sounds like she’s had some fancy stepping to keep key donors from bailing.”

“I wonder why. No one has said Kaylene came here.”

Taylor shrugged. “Who knows?”

Maybe they would never understand. Much as she wanted to plead that everyone was wrong about Kaylene, Emilie couldn’t ignore the voice in her head saying that somehow she should have prevented both deaths.

Reid did an Internet search for all articles related to his sister’s death. Maybe a reporter had found someone to interview he hadn’t thought of yet.

Which wouldn’t be hard. He hadn’t stayed in touch with Kaylene, allowing space to grow between them. He’d been focused on college and then launching his career. Finance wasn’t one of those nine to five, walk-away-from-it jobs. At least not if you wanted to work for a top-notch firm, and he’d refused to settle for less.

What had that choice cost him?

He might never know, but he could do something now for Kinley. He could make sure she was safe, and maybe in doing that he could absolve his earlier selfishness.

The browser did its job too well, pulling up a long list of articles. So this was what it was like to be infamous. As he scanned the articles, he sensed a pattern to the reporting. There was the sensational element of the first days. Mother shoots her kids. Family in chaos. Scandal and abuse abound. Not the first time one of the couple had called police or sought help.

Wait, they'd sought help? He reread the article slowly.

The reporter for this article had relied on innuendo, but had tracked down an unidentified source who suggested Kaylene had sought counseling and Robert had refused to participate. The source indicated it was a familiar story. Wife wants to save her marriage, work on serious issues, but receives no cooperation from husband.

Reid frowned. So how would that cause Kaylene to kill her daughters? If Robert had been her problem, why wouldn't she have shot him? Assuming, of course, that killing someone had ever been her intent—a leap of logic Reid still couldn't make.

He felt his eyes cross as he read one more article. He stood and stretched, then went into his living room and sat at the baby grand. He closed his eyes and let his fingers move across the keys. The music poured from him. Fast, furious, forte.

It felt like a prayer. A demand asking God to intervene.

As tumultuous as his emotions were, he felt an odd settling peace as time slid by on a sea of notes that flowed without conscious thought. When he could keep his mind empty and open, he often heard God whisper.

Wasn't that how the best prayers developed?

By opening one's heart and mind to God, letting Him into the pain and the joy.

That was what he did in those moments at the piano.

The notes slowed as the air conditioner kicked on, sounding an accompanying hum. Reid swayed as the notes spilled from him.

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Twenty minutes later the music eased to a fading note.

He opened his eyes. He hadn't received any insights, but he felt solid, no longer subject to the day's sucker punches and blows. As he went back to his tasks, he felt renewed hope that if he kept on the same path he would find truth. And if that truth were that Kaylene had shot and killed her daughters, then he would deal with it. Tragedies happened in a world broken with sin. But he also knew he didn't feel released from his burden to investigate. He would pursue this further . . . after he got through the afternoon's memorial service.

