

Deadly Exposure

by Cara Putman

(EXCERPT)

Chapter One

Dani Richards barely noticed where the usher pointed as she turned to take Aunt Jayne's arm but groped emptiness. Dani spun in a circle, searching for her. "Aunt Jayne?"

"She went that way, ma'am."

Dani nodded at the usher and hurried across the plush red carpet toward the boxes. She slipped into their box, but it remained empty. Then she heard a raised voice from the adjoining box. She darted to it, parted the curtain and pushed through. Aunt Jayne relaxed next to a young woman, whose stiff back and chin pointed high made it clear she was trying to avoid eye contact. "There you are. You scared me to death, Aunt Jayne."

"No need to worry. I looked for our seats and found this lovely young lady instead."

"You don't belong here." The woman looked from Dani to her aunt, emerald eyes flashing. Her regal bearing sagged with a hint of disappointment. She glanced beyond Dani into the emptying foyer.

Aunt Jayne patted her hand. "Don't worry. Your young man will join you. You're too lovely to miss."

Dani examined the woman more closely, wondering why she seemed so familiar. In her job as a reporter, she worked with too many people to count in an average week, but this woman tugged at her memory. "Have we met before?"

“Please leave now.” With a quick twist of her wrist the woman glanced at her watch.

“Sorry for the interruption. Come on, Aunt Jayne. CATS starts any minute.” Together they reentered the foyer and slipped up the stairs to the right box. Dani released a deep breath, determined to enjoy every moment of the evening. After the latest trial she’d covered as a crime reporter for Channel 17, she’d earned the reprieve. Her aunt deserved her full attention on a night when the cloud of Alzheimer’s had slipped away, even fleetingly.

Aunt Jayne sank into her seat and smiled. “Thank you for bringing me, dear. It’s so nice to have you in town again.”

Dani settled beside her in a maroon seat as the orchestra’s instruments crescendoed into the opening notes of the musical, prepared to relish every moment. She’d spent the five years since graduation working her way through the ranks of broadcast journalism, moving from Cheyenne to Des Moines to St. Louis. She’d given it all up to move to Lincoln for Aunt Jayne. Her mom believed she’d lost her mind, and her dad tried to convince her to take a job at his station in Chicago each time they talked.

Lincoln had been lonely, especially when Aunt Jayne’s bad days outnumbered the good. She’d wanted to dance when she reached Peaceful Estates and found Aunt Jayne alert and excited. A shadow remained of the woman Dani remembered from summers spent in Lincoln. If only she reappeared more often.

The curtain rose, and Dani leaned into the railing. She glanced at the neighboring box, but couldn’t see more than outlines in the darkness. The opening song began, and her attention focused completely on the stage covered by a large set that resembled a junkyard. The actors stretched and danced as they mimicked cats and sang. The scenes flew by, and too soon the curtain sank for intermission.

Dani shifted against the seat and straightened. Renee Thomas. That was the woman’s name. She’d interviewed the grad student for a story on promising research at the university. Though Renee had been formal and distant tonight, she’d been much friendlier and relaxed during the interview. Odd, since people tended to freeze in that setting. She’d practically glowed as she discussed the research, something about protecting food from terrorist attacks. Dani had worked with her to describe the research in layman’s terms.

Aunt Jayne tapped Dani’s arm lightly. Dani smiled. “Are you okay? Need a break from sitting?”

“Maybe we should hunt for the story. Surely, it’s hiding somewhere.” Aunt Jayne looked at her, amusement glowing in her eyes.

“There’s a loose plot, keep watch.” Dani stretched in her seat and her gaze slid into the box to her right. Renee sat motionless. She studied the woman, remembering the edge of worry that marred her expression. Renee had remained alone after all. “Let’s stretch our legs a bit.”

They stepped into the wide hallway. Dani looked around, hoping tonight wouldn’t be the time she ran into the only person she’d allowed to break her heart. Caleb Jamison. The thought of him made her emotions spiral into a tornado of anger and hurt. She looked over her shoulder, afraid he’d appear like some horror-movie ghoul. Wished she could wipe her memory of him.

“Aunt Jayne, let’s step up here. I interviewed your new friend last week. Maybe she’d like to join us.”

Dani approached the neighboring box. She knocked on the doorframe, parted the curtain, and entered the woman’s box. A spicy fragrance tinged the air.

“Renee?” Dani waited a moment. The woman never turned. The seconds ticked by. “Are you enjoying the show? Andrew Lloyd Webber is a genius.”

Renee remained silent. Dani stepped closer. One part of her mind began to insist she leave. Now.

Dani tapped Renee on the shoulder. Her skin felt cool. With quick steps she circled the seat and stood in front of Renee. Dani looked down, searching for a flash of recognition. Instead, Renee’s gaze remained fixed, a horrible grimace pasted to her face. The emerald scarf wound tight around her neck in contrast to the way it floated earlier.

She sucked in a breath and willed herself to remain calm. Between the tightness of the scarf and the bruise lying under the woman’s jaw, Dani’s instinct jumped to murder. Bile rose in her throat. She put a hand over her mouth and swallowed....