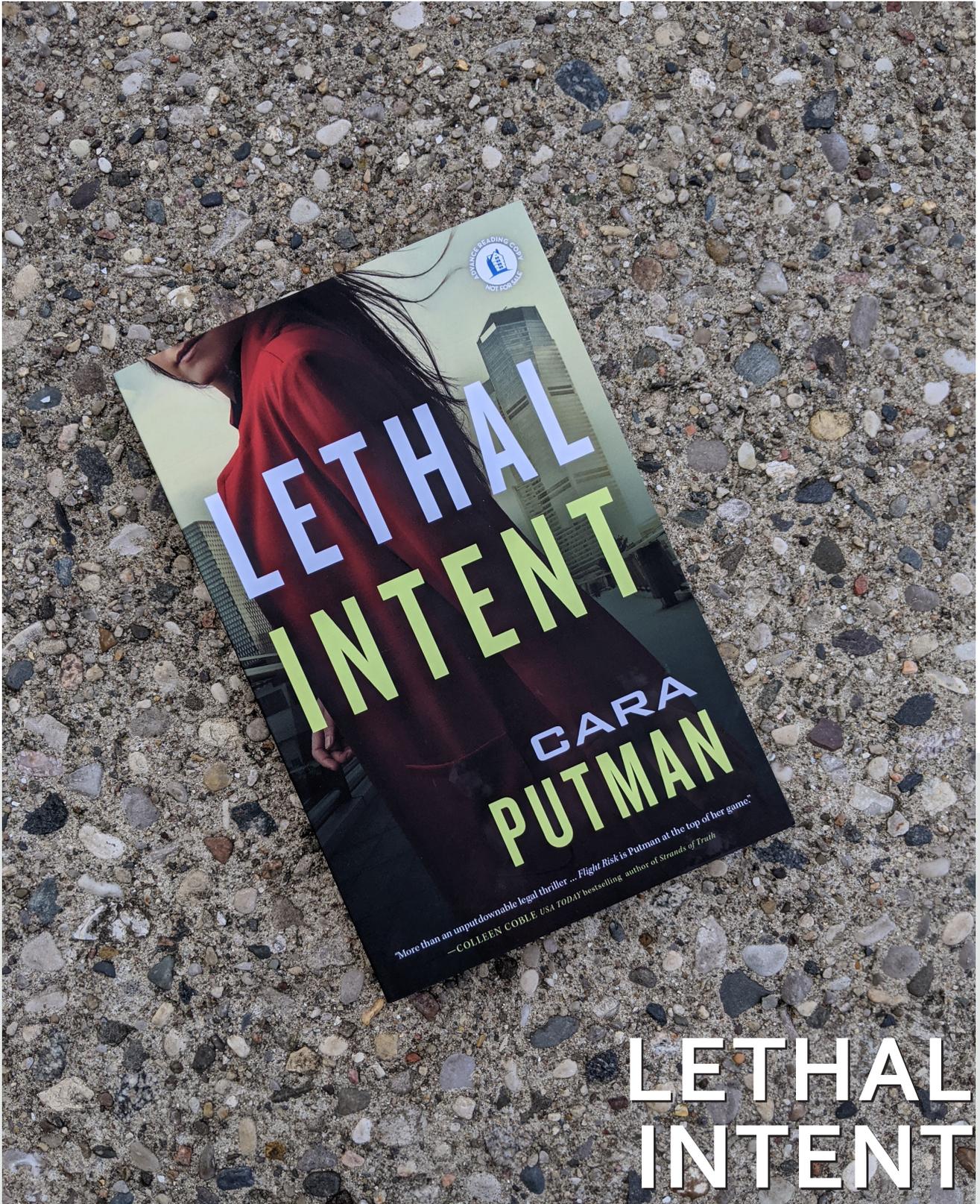


# BOOK CLUB KIT

THOMAS NELSON FICTION



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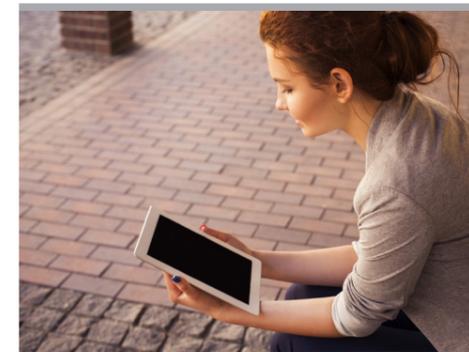
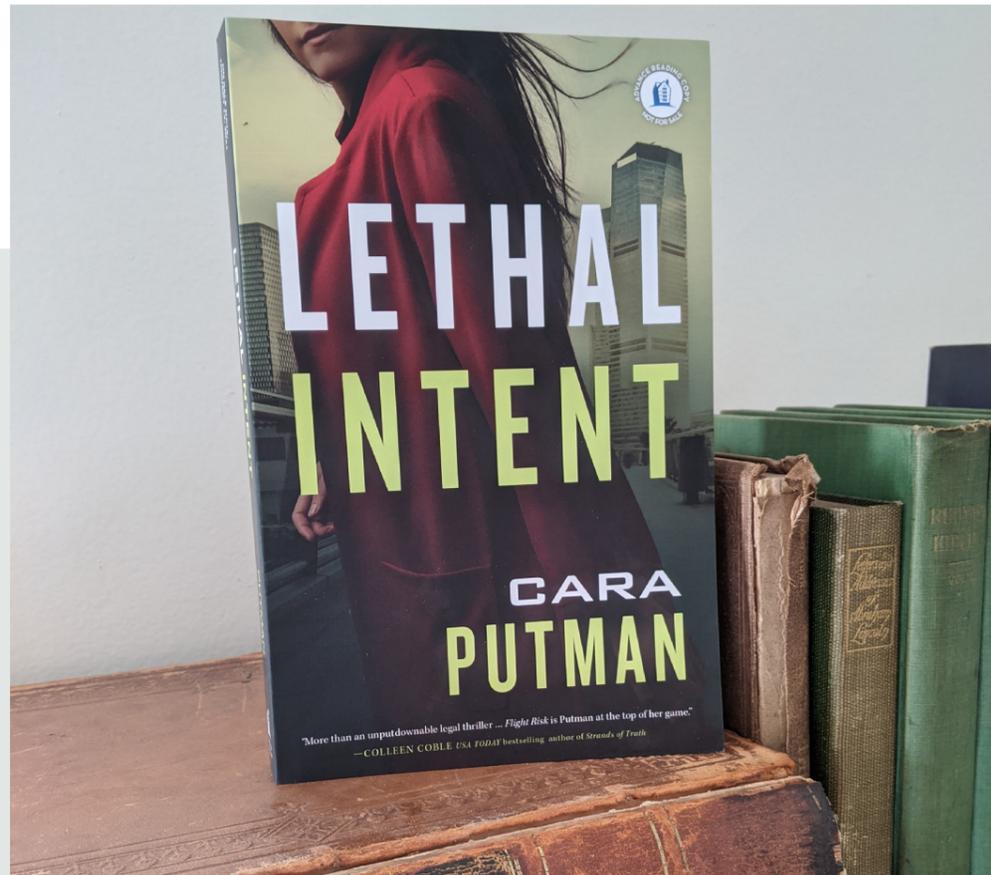
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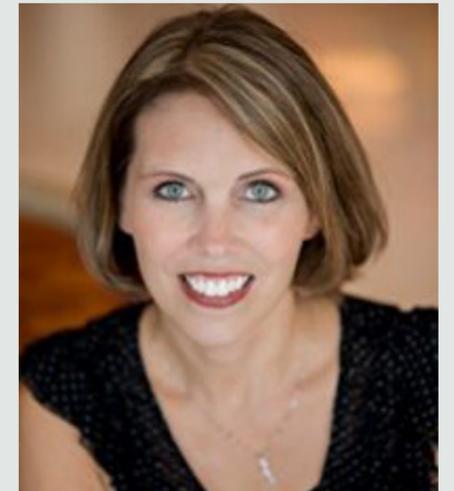
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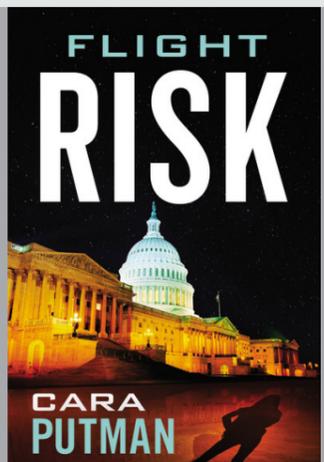


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cara Putman is the author of more than thirty legal thrillers, historical romances, and romantic suspense novels. She has won or been a finalist for honors including the ACFW Book of the Year, the HOLT Medallion, and the Christian Retailing's BEST Award. Cara graduated high school at sixteen and college at twenty, completed her law degree at twenty-seven, and earned her MBA in 2015. She is a practicing attorney, teaches undergraduate and graduate law courses at a Big Ten business school, and lives with her husband and children in Indiana.

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Facebook: [@Cara.Putman](https://www.facebook.com/Cara.Putman)



## ALSO BY CARA PUTMAN

Bestselling author Cara Putman returns with a romantic legal thriller that will challenge the assumptions of truth tellers everywhere.

“Cara Putman’s new novel, *Flight Risk*, is more than an unputdownable legal thriller. This rich, multi-layered story features real characters finding their way through a morass of problems that add to the depth of this compelling story. *Flight Risk* is Putman at the top of her game. Highly recommended!”  
—**Colleen Coble**, bestselling author of the Lavender Tides series and *Strands of Truth*

# AUTHOR Q&A

Cara Putman discusses her influences and inspirations for *Lethal Intent*.

**Readers love the twists and turns in your novels that keep them guessing until the very end. How do you create such intricate plots?**

The twists and turns evolve over the course of the writing. Usually, I start with a few in mind. Then as I’m writing I discover additional ways to give the main characters more challenges than they anticipated. With *Lethal Intent*, lawmakers contributed to the twists and turns for Brandon. Between when he first appeared in *Beyond Justice* to *Lethal Intent*, the law regarding group foster homes changed, but the regulations haven’t been finalized in Virginia. Trying to write in the realistic way I like became very challenging, but hopefully that makes it more real for readers.

**What do you think a romance element adds to a mystery/suspense storyline?**

Romance helps keep a human, emotional element front and center in mystery/suspense. Without that thread, it can be very easy to focus on the action. As a reader, the books that stick with me are the ones that have richly drawn characters

who make me feel for them. A good romance definitely helps. It also makes the story more real, because we may not stare down someone holding a gun, but we’ve all had those moments where we wonder if he/she likes us and where the friendship is going.

**What do you think makes a mystery so compelling that readers can’t put it down?**

As a reader I find it critical that a story have some type of ticking time element to keep me engaged. It can be subtle, but with a mystery I have to be invested. As a writer, I try to keep that front of mind. Readers want an experience that is outside their day-to-day. We want to feel

and see things that are different and unique. This is even more so when we’re reading a mystery or suspense. So keeping that sense of pacing and series of reader expectations at the forefront is critical to creating a mystery they can’t put down.

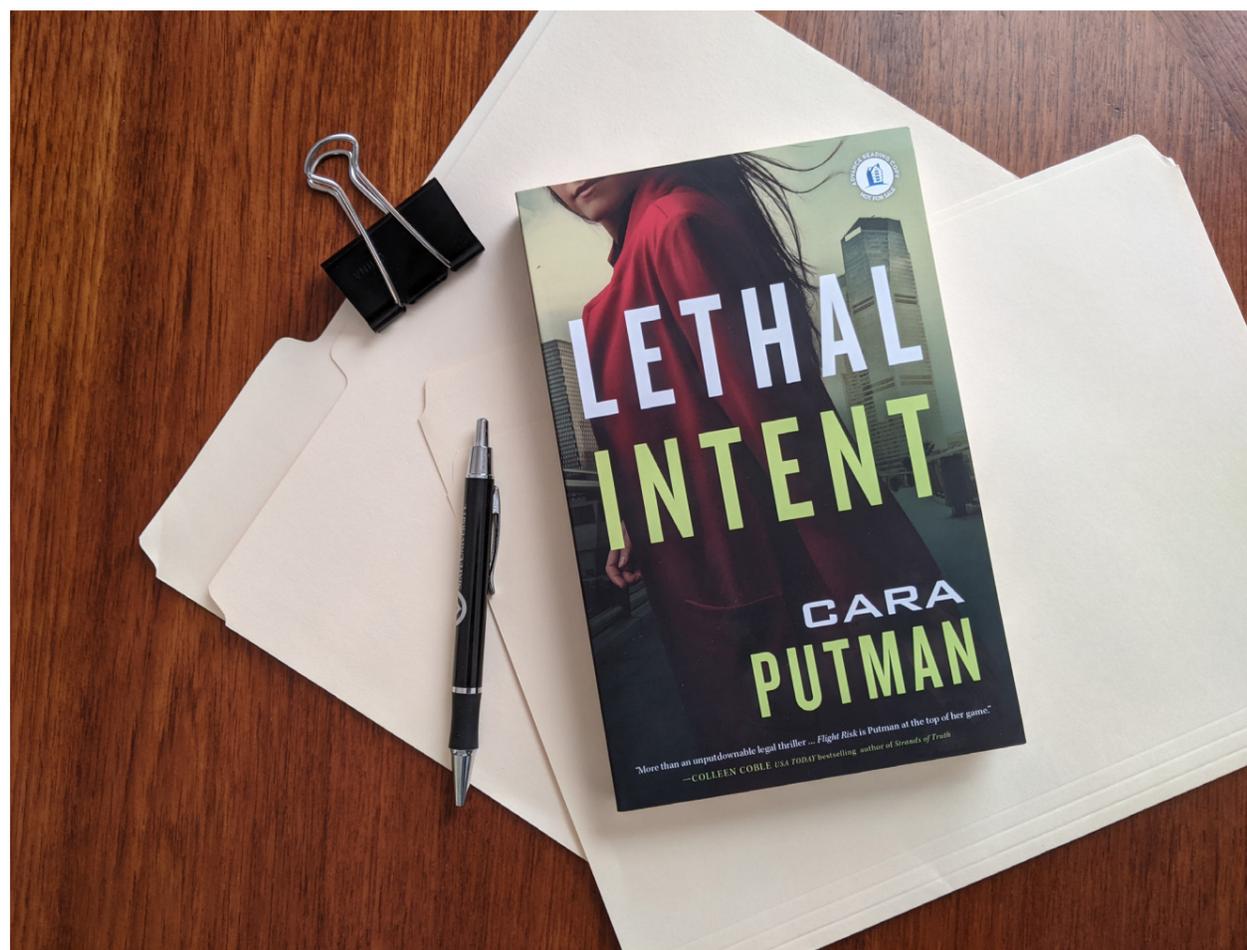
**How did you research the setting for this book, Alexandria, VA, and Washington, DC?**

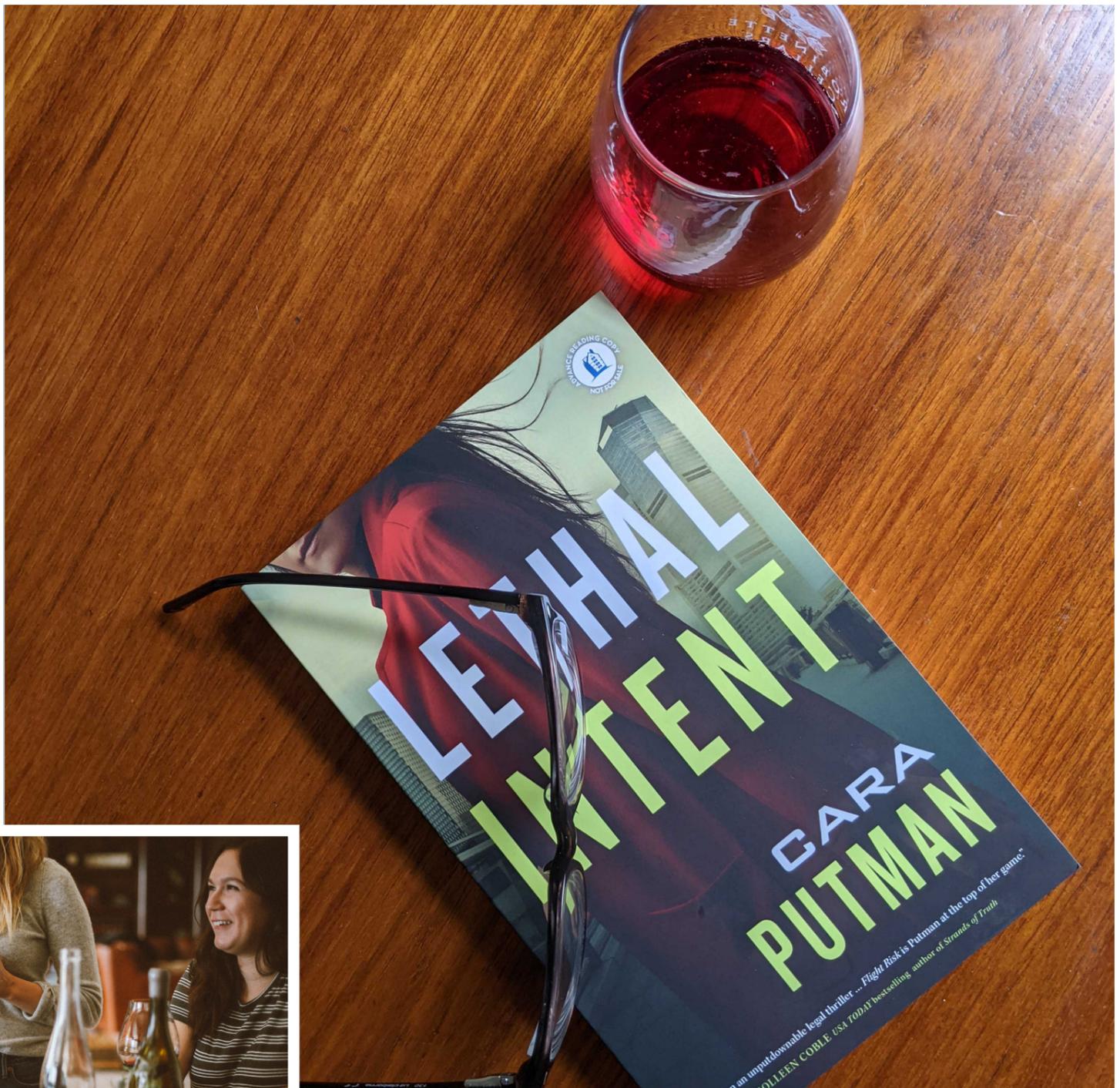
I lived in Alexandria, Virginia, for the first eight years of my career out of college. I attended law school in Arlington, and spent a year working for a federal judge across the park from the White House. Basically I lived and worked where this series is set. It’s been so fun to relive that

time while writing these books. It’s a fun place to live and work, and it’s one many have visited or would like to. I’ve also been known to ask friends if an ice cream shop is still in Old Town, or haunt the website of restaurants like Georgia Brown’s to make sure I know what it looks like today and what the current menu contains.

**What made you write this story? How is this novel different from your previous books?**

I’ve “known” Caroline for several books, but when she stepped into the limelight I realized I had to dig deep to discover what makes her unique and interesting. I also wanted to look at the realities and wonders of what research scientists are doing. I never expected to dig deep into the science of Car-T cell research, but over coffee at Panera, I realized just how amazing what doctors and scientists are doing really is. I’d watched a friend walk a similar journey to Brandon’s with his foster child, and I wanted to capture that strength and uncertainty. My friend is truly my hero in the way she battled for her son and did what it took to give him a chance...even when it meant moving across the country to participate in clinical trials. I hope some of that emotional reality is captured in a way that honors those who have lived it while also highlighting the process and challenges of work in that cutting-edge space.





# HOSTING A GREAT BOOK CLUB

Some ideas for a fun and successful book club meeting for *Lethal Intent*

**B**ook clubs are about reading good books, of course, but they're also about so much more: delicious snacks, socializing with friends, considering new perspectives and ideas, and maybe even learning something new. For your book club's discussion of *Lethal Intent*, here are some ideas for all the components of a good book club that you won't find in a paperback.

## Read up on real-world events

If the plot of *Lethal Intent* felt familiar to you, that's because

there have been some real-life scandals with medical startups, the most recent of these being Theranos. Read up (or watch a documentary) on the controversy for context.

## Watch a legal drama

Everyone loves a good legal drama (how many seasons of *Law & Order* have there been?). So pick your favorite and settle in for a little pre- or post-discussion movie session. Popcorn optional!

## Play a legalese translation game

Legal terminology can be complicated for the lay person, and legal dramas are full of it. Make a game out of identifying legal terms, perhaps in the style of *Jeopardy!* or another trivia game show.



**A FASCINATING PAGE-TURNER THAT ISN'T AFRAID TO ASK HARD QUESTIONS—THE KIND THAT KEEP YOU THINKING**

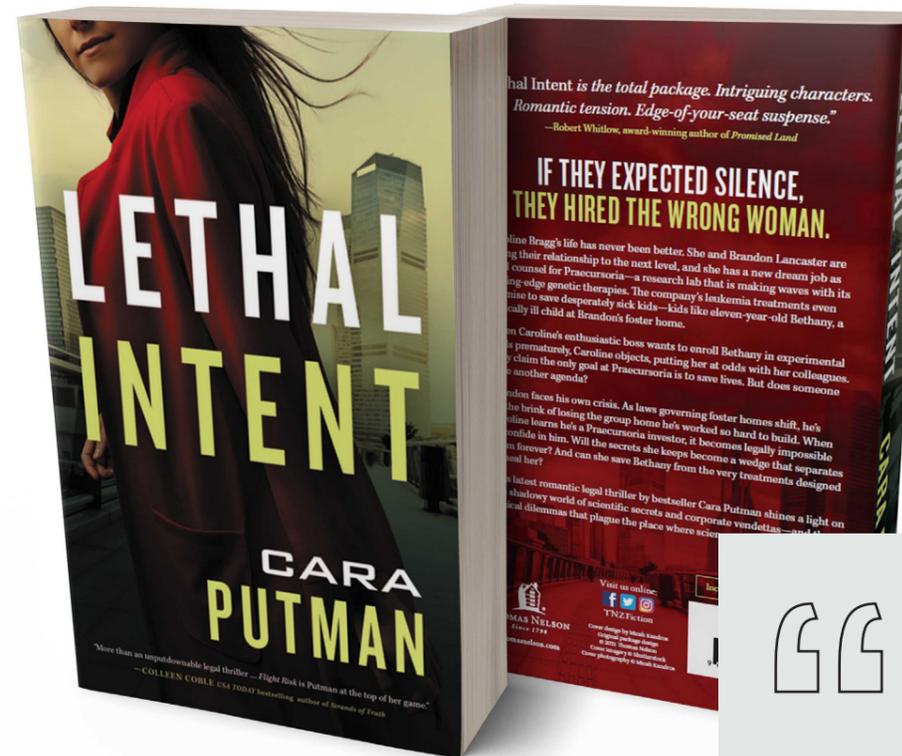
# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Some questions to prompt your book club's discussion of *Lethal Intent*. These questions can also be found on pages 326–327 of the book.



8. Caroline witnesses a terrible accident and is rocked by the realization she could have been in the car but for a small choice to drive separately. Are you aware of a time when a small decision changed your life's course?
9. Reid reminds Brandon that we aren't meant to do life alone. What does that mean to you, and how has that played out in your friendships?

1. How far would you be willing to go to find help for your desperately sick child? Do you think the Robbinses were right to try anything they could to save Patrick, or would you have drawn the line in a different place?
2. Quentin says, "Every law has a gray area. Find it or this"—he gestured between them—"may not be a good fit." Do you agree? If you had been in Caroline's shoes, what would you have told him?
3. Brandon has a hard time sharing his full story with Caroline even when he knows it's necessary for their relationship to deepen. Do you find it hard to share the painful part of your past? Why do you think that is?
4. Caroline has to stand toe-to-toe with her boss when they disagree about what the law is. Have you ever had to take a stand against someone in authority over you? How did you do it? What advice would you give Caroline and others in her situation?
5. Caroline is challenged by Hayden to articulate all her fears and expose them to the light. Have you ever suggested that to someone, and did it help?
6. Brandon says it takes "a special heart to lavish a parent's care and concern on children who weren't biologically yours and were entrusted to you only for a season." What do you think would be necessary to love foster children well?
7. Brandon considers selling something precious to him so that he can help his kids. Have you done something similar? Sell an item you love in order to have more flexibility to serve others?



“EVERY LAW HAS A GRAY AREA. FIND IT OR THIS”—HE GESTURED BETWEEN THEM—“MAY NOT BE A GOOD FIT!”

# WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

Readers love the ethical dilemmas, riveting storyline, and just the right amount of romance in *Lethal Intent*

"I loved Cara Putman's *Lethal Intent* and rooted for her heroine Caroline Bragg through every twist and turn. This legal thriller perfectly captures what it's like to grow from law clerk to lawyer, and when Caroline finds herself faced with a heartbreaking ethical dilemma that leads to the corporate battle of her life, she confronts the challenge with strength and resources she never knew she had. Putman seamlessly blends the story with a wonderfully inspiring romance, too. Do yourself a favor and pick up a copy of *Lethal Intent*!"

—Lisa Scottoline, #1 bestselling author of *Eternal*

"A fascinating page-turner that isn't afraid to ask hard questions—the kind that keep you thinking long after you've read the last page. You'll root for Caroline and Brandon as they wrestle with hard decisions that test them and their relationship to the breaking point."

—Rick Acker, bestselling suspense author

"*Lethal Intent* kept me on the edge of my seat. With a riveting plot involving the legal and ethical struggle to bring innovative stem cell research through FDA trials and, ultimately, to save lives, the stakes couldn't be higher! I immediately connected with

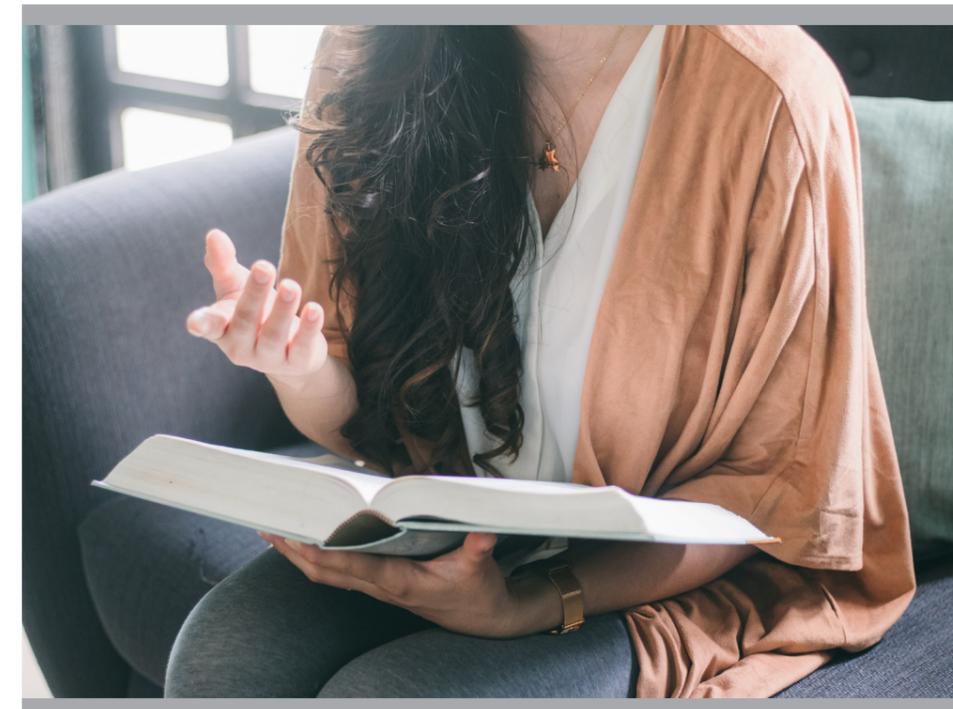
““ **LETHAL INTENT IS THE TOTAL PACKAGE.**

Caroline, her search for truth, and her unwavering stance to remain within the guidelines of the law. Brandon's quest to provide a safe home for foster children and keep siblings together pulled at my heartstrings. Putman shines in her gift for weaving tangled threads together for a thrilling emotional read!"

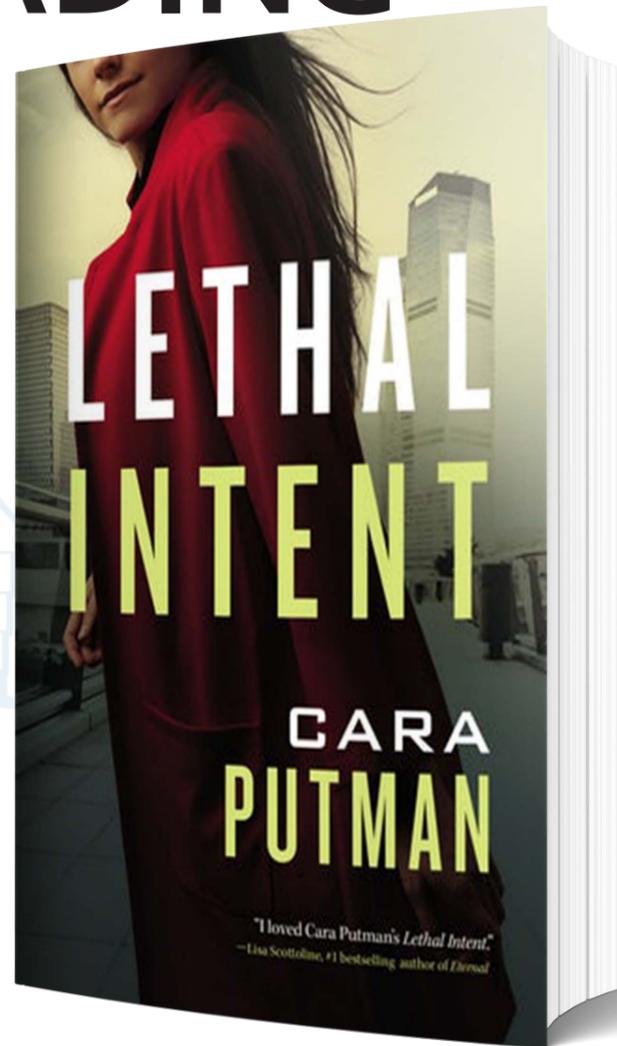
—Elizabeth Goddard, award-winning author of the *Uncommon Justice* series

"Cara Putman knows how to craft a great novel. *Lethal Intent* is the total package. Intriguing characters. Romantic tension. Edge-of-your-seat suspense. And a fast-paced ending that will leave you exhausted (in a good way!)."

—Robert Whitlow, award-winning author of *Promised Land*



# START READING



## PROLOGUE

NORTHERN VIRGINIA  
SATURDAY, JANUARY 23

The phone felt warm against her cheek. Caroline Bragg ran a hand along the edge of the clothes hanging in her closet and inhaled, then slowly released her breath.

“What should I wear?”

“Other than a little black dress?” On the other end of the line, Jaime Nichols shushed her mewing cat. “Rhett misses you and says send tuna.”

Caroline’s nose wrinkled as if she could smell the foul fish. She’d fed the cat during her weeks of crashing on Jaime’s couch. “I miss him too. Seriously though, what do I do?”

“Brandon’s been your friend for years. Pick something comfortable yet feminine.” Jaime’s tone was no-nonsense. “You’re the southern belle. Anything you pick will be perfect.”

It should have been that easy, but it wasn’t. Not this time. “Easier said than done. My closet is filled with work clothes.” And a few frothy dresses that were better for garden parties than for January. She sighed. “This is important, Jaime. I don’t want to blow this chance.”

Caroline had thought close friendship was all she and Brandon Lancaster would share, but now he was asking her to be something more. Tonight they’d define that “something” over dinner.

“Grab that dress you wore to Emilie’s bridal shower. The cream one with wine-colored swirls.”

Caroline nodded even though Jaime couldn’t see. “That’s perfect. Thanks.” She ended the call, and her hand trembled as she pulled out the flowing dress that had a cream background splashed with large

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cranberry paisley and flowers. Paired with boots and a leather jacket it would hit the right note of fun and flirty. Had she really just thought those words related to a dinner with Brandon? And when had Jaime become her fashion guru? Two unexpected but welcome evolutions in her life.

Brandon was a big teddy bear of a man, unless you'd faced him on the football field in his days as a defensive linebacker for the Colts. When Caroline first met him, he was a rookie who'd just bought acres outside of DC for his off-season retreat. She'd watched as women threw themselves at him, but as the evening wore on he ended up next to her sharing sweet tea and jokes. As the kid from the wrong side of town fighting her way through the first year of law school, she hadn't expected to see him again. Then their paths intersected a few months later. The intersections became more frequent in the off-seasons, when he asked her advice on his postfootball dreams, which involved creating a foster home for hard-to-place sibling groups.

His teddy bear side emerged when he interacted with the kids who lived at Almost Home, the group foster home he'd founded to keep sibling groups together until they found permanent placements. But tonight was for Brandon and Caroline, just the two of them. No friends serving as buffers. No kids seeking his attention or a hug from her, though she cherished those moments when little arms wrapped around her waist or sticky cheeks pressed against hers.

Tonight she wanted to help Brandon forget all the challenges that came with serving an at-risk population and help him imagine what could be.

And maybe she'd let herself believe this was real. That her quiet, long-held dream really could come true: a man like Brandon could love her.

A soft smile tipped her lips as she slipped on the dress and touched up her makeup. She glanced at her watch then pressed a hand against her stomach to settle the butterflies. Where was he?

As if in answer the doorbell rang. She hurried across her small living area to the door and after she opened it took a minute to appreciate the sight of his navy suit softened by a forest-green hoodie poking out the top of the jacket.

He tugged the jacket down and quirked his head to the side. "What?"

"You look good, Lancaster."

His eyes began to smolder. "So do you, Caroline." He offered her his arm. His smile edged on tentative before becoming one that could melt knees across America. "Let's grab some food."

An hour later, after a pleasant drive to Ashburn, a small community outside the DC metro area, they sat across from each other in a red-velvet booth at Clyde's of Willow Creek Farm. Caroline's eyes darted around the space as she tried to take in every detail. It was DC-staple Old Ebbitt's meets rural horse ranch. Some of the dining rooms were designed with heavy beams that made her think of a barn, while others had heavy leather chairs pulled against four-top tables, and large paintings of birds lined the walls. Dimmed lights made the varied spaces intimate, and Persian rugs dotting the hardwood floors muted the sounds of the chairs.

"Do you like it?"

"It's nice." She smiled at him. "Quite the place for dinner." Her gaze traveled to the old horseless carriages suspended from the ceiling. "Do you think they'll crash onto us?"

"If they do, I'll protect you." He waggled his eyebrows as he made a small flexing gesture—not quite small enough, as one of the wait-staff sidestepped to avoid getting knocked by the movement.

The woman smiled at him as she slipped past, somehow managing to keep the steaming plates from sliding off her tray.

Caroline reached across the table and took his hand. "Relax, big guy. It's just me." She fought a grin as he stared at her.

"Did you just call me the Hulk?"

Leave it to Brandon to notice the oblique Marvel reference. While not a typical romance, the interactions between Black Widow and Bruce Banner had always tugged at her. The Hulk might be scary and angry, but Bruce was soft and sweet. Much like the man sitting across the table from her. She shrugged lightly. “Maybe.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Caroline, there’s nothing normal about this, and I’m glad.” His grip tightened on her hand. “You’ve meant a lot to me for years, but I want to take this deeper. I’m not one to play around.” He paused, and she nodded. “I waited until I was sure this”—he gestured between them—“is what I want for the rest of my life.”

Her heart skipped a beat as she let his words sink into her heart. She’d had a front-row seat to his life for years. He was a reliable man who didn’t play the field. Instead, he opted to go solo rather than give any woman false hope he was interested in her. It was one reason Caroline’s stomach had been tied in knots of anticipation and trepidation all day. She didn’t want to get this wrong. Not when so much rested on what happened next.

No, she wanted to build forever with this man she’d loved from a distance for years.

Now was their time.

## CHAPTER 1

TUESDAY, APRIL 20

Caroline shifted in the high-backed chair. The massive conference room table made her feel more petite than usual. Quentin Jackson, the man propelling Praecursoria through its rapid growth, vibrated with energy as he studied her.

“We are on the cusp of amazing developments and a transition from the lab to trials. We have a few CAR T-cell therapies in early stages now with more in our pipeline.”

She racked her mind for the importance of T cells, and he gave a hearty laugh.

“Don’t worry if the science overwhelms you. We’ll have you up to speed in no time. All you need to know right now is that T cells are one of the two cells that make up white blood cells. The treatments we’re working on could be the difference between life and death for young cancer patients. We need your legal expertise and quick mind to synthesize the science with the map to market.”

“I’ve overseen several court trials related to patents, which should help with that process.” It had been an unforeseen aspect of her days clerking for Judge Loren. She swallowed against the lump in her throat that still welled up when she thought about his untimely death from pneumonia. A month ago she couldn’t imagine interviewing for a job somewhere else, even if a part of her knew that she should stretch her wings.

“When can you start? Today?”

She felt rooted to the chair. Everything was moving so fast. Could she really transition her experience managing clerks for a judge into

managing patents and contracts for a start-up? While Praecursoria had been around for a decade as a cancer research lab, about eighteen months ago Quentin sold off its lucrative genetic testing branch to focus exclusively on the development of cutting-edge CAR T-cell therapies. Starting over that way was a bold if risky move.

She lifted her chin and forced a smile that didn't waver. "If that's what you need. First we have a few details to work out."

He laughed. "I like the way you tackle issues head-on. That will be key in this role. I know how to steer the ship, and my chief scientist can navigate the research, but you'll keep us on the legal straight and narrow." He tapped his pen against the legal pad in front of him. Then he picked up her résumé and named a salary that pressed her against the chair. "There will be performance bonuses tied to the successful conclusion of trials. We want to look into stock options as well. That will be one of your assignments in conjunction with HR." He slapped his hands on the table and she jumped. "My enthusiasm gets away from me sometimes." He shrugged but never wavered as he examined her. "Let's start with a field trip. The best way for you to understand why we're doing this work and research is to show you."

Thirty minutes later, after a drive from Tysons Corner to Falls Church, she was chasing Quentin down the halls of Inova Children's Hospital. If they could figure out how to bottle his energy, the company would be a huge success.

"Follow me." Quentin swiped a card in the reader next to the door to the pediatric oncology wing. He held it open for her and she brushed past him, then waited for him to lead the way. He glanced over his shoulder as he strode down the vibrant purple and teal hall. "I want you to meet someone who brings the importance of our work into focus."

"How do you have a keycard?" It seemed like a huge liability for

the hospital, but maybe she needed to remove her risk-management hat. She didn't work for the hospital but for Praecursoria.

He didn't slow as he approached the nurses' station. "It gives me limited access when I'm meeting with the trial team. I called ahead while you took a break."

Disinfectant couldn't hide the scents of fear and desperation that hung in the air like a heavy perfume. She felt like a voyeur as they walked past rooms where people and machines gathered around small beds. "What did you want to show me?"

"The doctor I want you to meet is a pioneer. She had a research fellowship at the old Praecursoria during her summer between undergrad and medical school." Quentin's steps quickened as if he couldn't wait to see what would happen in the next minutes. "Word is she's having success with our trial therapies, but I like to check for myself." He slowed as he glanced at the room numbers. "I like to be hands-on. If she's having the success I've heard, she can help us expand testing to additional research facilities. And that gets us closer to the next stage of FDA approval."

"What are you hoping I'll learn?"

The man turned his charismatic grin on her. There was a reason he was on the city's top-ten list of eligible bachelors, but she wasn't interested. "To be an effective part of my leadership team, you need to understand the impact of the work we're doing. That'll light the passion you need for the long hours and fiscal uncertainty. Also, at times you'll need to answer questions related to the process."

An average-sized woman with stylish spiky blonde hair exited a room, and he threw his arms wide. "There she is. Anna."

The woman turned, a hand on her pregnant stomach and a flit of a smile on her face, but a weary slump bowed her shoulders. "Quentin." She accepted his hug, then moved her hands into her lab coat's pockets. "Did I know you were coming today?"

"I set it up with your assistant."

The woman nodded. “That would explain it. Haven’t connected with her yet because of an emergent patient.”

Caroline sensed a tension in the woman and turned on the southern charm she was known for. “We can come back.” Quentin started to speak, but Caroline placed a hand on his arm. “We’ve all had times where plans change. Nothing is life-or-death about why we are here.”

The woman studied her with a hazel gaze, then her posture relaxed. “I like you. I’m Dr. Anna Johnson.” She pulled her hand from her pocket and extended it to Caroline.

She shook the woman’s hand. “Caroline Bragg, the new counsel for Praecursoria as of two hours ago, give or take.”

Now the woman grinned. “If the trials continue the way they are now, you’ll be very busy. We should do lunch so I can answer any questions you have about the protocol.” She focused on Quentin. “What do you need today?”

“I want to give Caroline a quick introduction to the real work.” He glanced up and down the hallway.

Dr. Johnson started down the hall. “You can come along.”

The wing was typically wide, allowing for gurneys and wheelchairs to pass, but the walls were painted brilliant colors rather than the standard sterile white. Rooms hopscotched down each side past the central station that housed several nurses and a bank of monitors.

As she walked, Dr. Johnson turned to Caroline. “You know Praecursoria is developing CAR T-cell therapies.”

“Yes, but I don’t understand what that means yet.”

“The short answer is we’re engineering a patient’s own cells to be ninja fighters that take out specific cancer-carrying cells like leukemia. They become little superhero cells. I’d like to introduce you to a young lady who may be a candidate for the trial. But first I need something to drink.” Dr. Johnson led them down another corridor to a break room. The woman stepped in front of a vending machine loaded with various waters and sodas. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m fine.” Caroline held up the bottle of water she carried.

Quentin pulled out a credit card. “I’ll get yours.”

“No, you won’t. You know the rules.” She batted his hand to the side, then swiped her badge in front of the reader. A moment later a bottle of water clunked to the bottom of the machine, and she crouched to pull it out.

“How are the trial participants doing?” Quentin asked.

“As well as can be expected.” She uncapped the lid and took a long drink. “You won’t have results overnight. This is going to be a process—and a long one—but everything I’m seeing from the first patient is positive. We should start looking for additional participants.”

“Give me something concrete. A story I can take to funders.”

Quentin’s smile barely wavered, but Caroline sensed an edge of desperation in his tone. “It’s not inexpensive.”

“It never is.” Anna headed to the door. “Let me show you something.”

Brandon hovered over the bed, longing to do something. Bethany Anderson was eleven and leukemia was ravaging her body. She’d already had two failed bone marrow transplants, and he hoped she would qualify for a new treatment option that was in its earliest stages of development. It was Bethany’s last resort.

Her eyelids fluttered, and suddenly he was pinned in place by large blue eyes.

“Hey, Bethany.”

She licked her lips and tried to sit up a little. “You came back.”

“Yep. I promise I’ll keep coming back too.” Not because it was his job, though the state of Virginia had entrusted the care of her and her little brother, Gabriel, to Almost Home while the caseworker looked for a permanent placement. No, he’d do it because he was

the kids' protector. Normally he felt up to the task, but here on the pediatric oncology floor, he doubted his ability to make a difference for this little girl.

The idea of subjecting her to a treatment that hadn't been proven yet felt wrong to Brandon, but the doctors said there was nothing more they could do without a Hail Mary pass. They just needed the state to agree. He might be Bethany's guardian, but the state would control her medical treatment until she was placed with a family.

"Why are you frowning?" Her words snapped him from his thoughts.

He forced a grin as he sank into the chair next to her hospital bed. "Sorry about that."

"You don't need to worry about me." She straightened the sheet under her arms. "I'll be fine. I always am." She jutted her chin as if that made the words truer. "How's Gabriel?"

"He misses you. I told him I'll bring him to see you as soon as he's cleared."

"He won't be." She spoke with the life experience of someone who knew. "It's too dangerous." She didn't clarify whom it was more dangerous for.

Today she was a shadow of the girl she'd been six weeks earlier when the siblings arrived at Almost Home. They'd settled into a cabin with his best house parents, but soon after the leukemia reappeared, and her body lacked the reserves to fight. She was running out of time.

"That might be true, but I get to be here when I want to." As long as he submitted to frequent blood tests to ensure he didn't expose her compromised system to anything. The vinyl squeaked as he leaned back in the chair. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be right now."

"I can." She said the words so deadpan, he laughed.

"I bet you can." He might feel helpless and inept as he tried to

watch the various monitors and interpret the displays, but he could help her dream. "What's the first thing you want to do when you get out of this place?"

"Go to the beach and feel the sun on my face."

"That sounds good." He made a mental note to take her. "You keep doing what the doctors ask, and I'll see about getting you some sunshine."

She studied him as if not sure whether to believe him. "Really?"

"Scout's honor." The smile she gave him signaled he'd have to make this happen somehow. He didn't want to set her up for fresh disappointments, because he was out of his element. Almost Home didn't host medically complicated kids. He would need skilled staff to deal with the unique needs of that population, something he couldn't contemplate right now. Worrying about how Virginia might interpret the new federal Family First law consumed all of his attention. Depending on what the state decided, Almost Home might have to close.

A machine started beeping. Loudly. He glanced around but didn't know what to do, so he stood and hurried to the hallway, where he collided with a soft mass.

## CHAPTER 2

*Oomph.*

The air burst from Caroline's lungs as she crashed into someone. Quentin steadied her. "Watch where you're going, mountain man." Caroline glanced up. "Brandon?"

His gaze barely took her in before he latched onto the doctor. "Anna, the alarms are screaming in Bethany's room."

Weariness fled the woman's posture as she stepped into the room Brandon had exited. "Let me see what's going on."

Brandon followed her with Caroline a step behind.

Quentin tightened his hold on her arm. "You can't go in."

"Yes, I can. Brandon's my friend." And he'd been worried about Bethany for weeks. She tugged free and stepped through the doorway, then stood aside as a woman in scrubs rushed in.

The doctor glanced at her. "Please stay against the wall and away from the patient." She masked up then held a quiet consultation with the nurse as she watched the various screens and monitors. Then she murmured soft words to the little girl who lay pale against the pillows.

Brandon slumped against the wall next to Caroline, his gaze fixed on the bed.

"You okay, big guy?"

"I can't make this go away." He whispered the words into her ear.

Caroline took in the small form on the bed. "I'm glad to see her." She squeezed his hand. "I'm so sorry."

"She's a fighter, but she's not getting better." He sighed and then rubbed his face with his hands. He barely glanced at Caroline before returning his attention to the bed. "I don't know how to help her."

"You're here." Caroline leaned into his arm. This man was such

a rock for everyone, including her. He was the kind of support she'd never had as a kid struggling to survive an alcoholic single mom. She would have given anything to have someone like Brandon in her life as a preteen. The least Caroline could do was let him know he wasn't alone. "How can I help?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"You're doing the right thing, being here. She isn't alone."

"It's not the same as family."

"Is there any way you can bring her brother?" Gabriel was one of those kids who vibrated with energy and would bring a smile to the girl.

"It's not safe for either of them. It seems like such a small thing I should make happen, but can't."

"You can't, but you're here. That's something."

His chin lifted a bit, and his shoulders shifted back to their usual squared-off position. Her rock was back.

"Thanks."

"That's what girlfriends are for. You're always there for everyone else. It's nice to do that for you."

He roused to look at her, curiosity filling his eyes. "Why are you here? I thought you were interviewing."

She tilted her head toward the hall. "Come meet my new boss."

He grinned. "Of course they hired you on the spot."

"Dr. Johnson is working with one of our trials. Quentin wanted me to see what the company's work is."

The men greeted each other in the doorway, and Brandon stiffened before relaxing. "This is your new boss?" he whispered out the side of his mouth.

"Yes. You know him?"

"Not really."

"If it isn't Brandon Lancaster. I didn't recognize you at first. How's my newest investor?"

Brandon hesitated before extending his hand. He kept his voice down. “Good to see you.”

*Investor?* Caroline let the word bounce around her mind. She’d need to remember that.

Quentin cocked his head. “What brings you here?” He glanced into the room at Bethany. “Is she yours?”

“Yes and no. I run a group foster home. In that sense, she’s mine.”

“I hope she’ll be all right.” Quentin studied her as if checking for symptoms.

“Me too.”

Caroline looked between the two. “You didn’t mention investing in this company.”

“Didn’t think it mattered. Didn’t know it’s where you were interviewing.” Brandon shrugged, then returned his focus to Bethany while Dr. Johnson made notes in the computer.

Dr. Johnson leaned down to speak a few more words to the girl, sentences that coaxed a smile from her, then the doctor stepped away from the monitors and approached Brandon. “She’s fine. It looks like a malfunction on one of the machines, but we will keep a close eye on it and change it out if needed.” She studied Brandon carefully. “You should go home and get some rest. We’ll call you or the caseworker if anything changes.”

“She shouldn’t be alone.”

“She’s lucky to have you in her corner, but if you get sick worrying about her, you won’t get to advocate for her here. Her immune system is compromised, and I won’t allow anyone near her who is sick. Anyone.” The emphasis on the last word seemed to register as Brandon stepped back.

His transformation was instantaneous. He held up his hands and quirked the small grin that tipped the corner of his mouth and made Caroline’s heart skip every time. “All right, Doc. You’re the expert and I trust you.”

“Just keep doing that, and we’ll be good. I’m serious, cuz. Get some rest.”

“Cuz?” Caroline’s gaze bounced between the two.

Brandon glanced down at Caroline. “This intelligent woman is related to me. Can you believe it?”

“Is this the child you want to add to the study?” Quentin’s words jarred the space.

Dr. Johnson nodded. She motioned everyone to step farther down the hall and lowered her voice so Bethany couldn’t hear. “I’m waiting on test results to confirm she qualifies.” A sad knowing filled her expression. “I’m going to do all I can to push her into this trial.”

Quentin’s expression sobered. “Can we start harvesting and preparing her cells while you wait on the results?”

“Possibly. I’ll call Samson about it right away.”

Brandon lifted a hand. “Wait. Harvesting her cells? Help me understand.”

Dr. Johnson’s compassionate gaze shifted to Caroline and Brandon. “I know it’s a lot to take in. The treatment I want to try from Praecursoria is autologous, which means the patient both provides and then receives her own stem cells. We would harvest Bethany’s cells, then send them to Praecursoria to be adapted to fight the cancer before returning them to her.”

“Isn’t leukemia usually treated with a bone marrow transplant?” Caroline felt her neck flush. “Sorry to interrupt, but I want to understand.”

“No need to apologize. Bone marrow transplants are usually the first type of immunotherapy we try. They’ve been used since 1956, but they’re not perfect. Unfortunately, this has failed twice for Bethany. Here’s what happens.”

Anna pulled a small notebook and pen from her lab coat and started sketching. She drew a large circle and labeled it *stem cell*. “You hear a lot of talk about stem cells. Stem cells found in bone marrow

can make red and white blood cells as well as platelets.” She drew three more circles connected to the stem cell and labeled these *red*, *white*, and *platelet*. She pointed to the white cell. “In bone marrow transplants we take healthy white blood cells from a donor and give them to the patient. In a successful transplant those healthy white blood cells can strengthen the patient’s immune system, but it doesn’t always work. Sometimes the cells aren’t available in a format the patient can accept.”

Caroline nodded as she studied the sketch. “You mean there isn’t a match between donor and recipient?”

Anna smiled. “Exactly. That can lead to complications, especially with blood-borne cancers. For example, graft-versus-host disease happens when the patient’s body attacks donor cells.”

“So you want to treat Bethany’s cancer with her own white blood cells?”

“That’s right. But specifically, we want her T cells, which is something the white blood cells make.” She drew two more offshoots from the white cell and labeled one of them with a T.

“How can you do that if the cells aren’t healthy in the first place?”

“That’s where CAR T-cell therapy comes in. We genetically modify the patient’s T cells to recognize and fight cancer cells—turn them into those superhero ninjas—then reintroduce them to the body. The results have been exciting, but it’s all still early. In the beginning, CAR T-cell therapies used mouse cells to modify the patients’ T cells, and some bodies rejected them.”

“So what is Praecursoria’s therapy, specifically?”

Quentin spoke up. “We’ve found a way to hide the mouse cells inside the patient’s own cells.”

Dr. Johnson nodded. “If it works, Praecursoria will be on the cutting edge of what we in oncology are calling the fifth pillar of cancer treatment. But bone marrow transplants will remain the first-line standard of care until we get more therapies and better longitudinal

studies. We need data and time to support that CAR T-cell therapy can be used as an alternative to bone marrow transplants rather than a last-ditch option.”

Caroline looked into Bethany’s room. “This trial is her only option?”

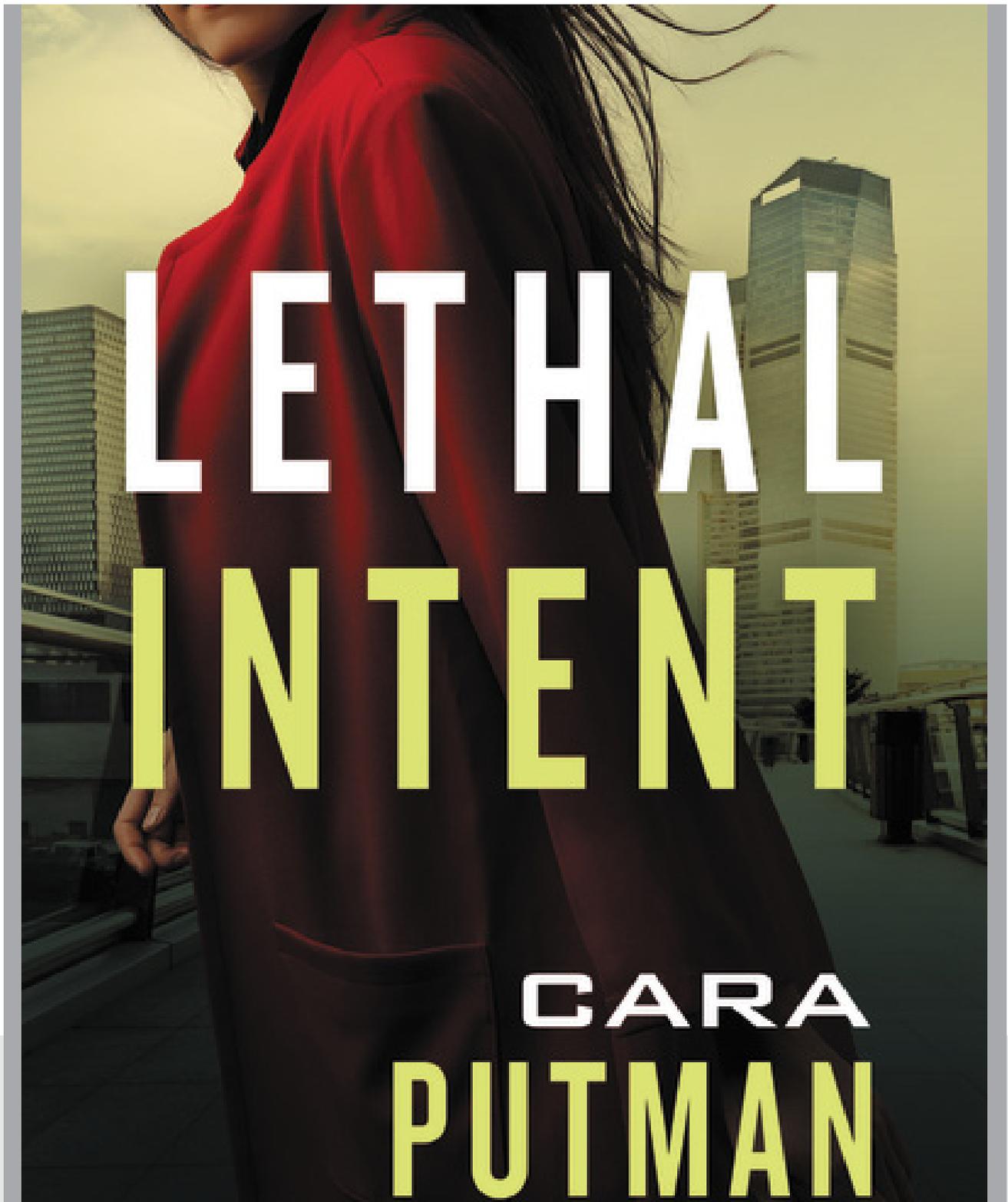
“Her Hail Mary. I hate to be so blunt, but yes.” Dr. Johnson’s shoulders lifted and fell. “If Samson—Dr. Kleme—agrees, we could start harvesting her T cells tomorrow in anticipation of the test results coming back positive.”

“And the state approving her treatment,” Brandon added.

“That too.” Dr. Johnson sighed. “Every day matters for her.”

So this was what Praecursoria did. Offered terrible hope to those who had none.

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