

THE  
**VANISHED**

SECRETS TO KEEP

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*The Vanished*

*The Accused*

*The Targeted*

*We Three Kings: A Romance Christmas Collection*

by Crystal Caudill, Cara Putman, and Angela Ruth Strong

SECRETS TO KEEP

THE  
VANISHED

CARA PUTMAN



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*The Vanished*

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*To My Family*

*When I started this journey to publication, I hoped to write one book, but it was a dream that was precious and hard to share. Thank you for never laughing and always supporting me even when it meant I had to sit at the computer and ask for five more minutes rather than do fun things.*

*Here's to celebrating forty books together.*



## Chapter 1

*Saturday, October 22*

### *WHAT HAVE I DONE?*

The thought pounded through Janae Simmons's mind as the wheels melted beneath her Mazda SUV's tires. The sun lingered above the horizon in its downward descent as she drove through Kedgewick, Virginia, a breeze ruffling her hair through the cracked windows. Her belongings were packed into boxes and suitcases that stuffed her vehicle's trunk, back seat, and passenger seat. The last ten years compressed into the smallest space possible.

Coming home had felt like a good idea in the face of a case gone horribly wrong. But now she wound her way along the final miles, wheels racing away from the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia to the gentler pace back home in Kedgewick, where she'd grown up. Now she second-guessed the decision that led her back to the small town located at the edge of the Blue Ridge, the bedroom community of the Washington, DC, metro area.

After leaving the quaint town behind, the drive morphed into gently rolling hills on a road laced with trees that were covered in the vibrant jewel-toned hues of autumn. Coming home should have felt as peaceful. Instead, unsettled and ready to turn around, she signaled and turned left off the highway and onto the county road that led to her parents'

## The Vanished

home. She considered detouring to her grandmother's house, testing the response to her return inside the thick stone walls of the centuries-old abode. Instead, she followed the lane back along the horse pastures to the estate that sat on the hill—the stables, barn, schoolhouse, and pavilion nestled around it.

Where there should be peace, a small, panicked voice inside warned that abandoning her safe job was a colossal mistake . . . even if that job sucked the life from her.

Normally, she'd discuss life changes with someone, but this time she'd made the decision on her own after some thought and moments of prayer. Even her parents didn't know she was visiting—much less staying.

She'd live with the result.

Janae fought the tremble that coursed through her, refusing to give in to the fear that pricked her as she drove under the sign of a stylized horse at the entrance to the driveway portion of the road. After parking near the schoolhouse, she stared at her parents' two-story home, the oak tree standing sentinel to the left of the front door ablaze in yellow and orange. Had her best option really distilled down to escaping home to her old room? Even if it was for a short season until she found an alternative, it still meant stepping into her past where everyone knew the old, practically perfect Janae.

They didn't know the new one who had lost her latest client millions of dollars in a botched settlement effort.

She forced herself to reframe the option. Maybe starting over in her hometown wouldn't redeem that mistake, but it would allow her a fresh beginning.

"To move forward." The whispered words did nothing to calm her nerves.

The cardinal-red door opened, and her mother stood framed on the threshold. Willowy with salon-inspired color, Mom drove into Purcellville for her calling as a speech-language pathologist at one of the local elementary schools. She poured her care and love into her kids each day, which earned her the adoring recognition of her young clients. Ano-



nymity evaporated when she worked with small fry, making her recognizable everywhere.

Janae opened her car door and met her mom halfway down the sidewalk, feeling the warmth of the hug cut through the chill kissing the October air. “You shouldn’t be out here without a jacket, Mom.”

“I couldn’t wait another minute to hug you.” Her mom squeezed her again, then slipped to her side, and they walked up the half dozen steps together. “It’s good to have you home. But this feels sudden. You sure you’re all right?”

Janae forced a nod and refused to give the moisture in her eyes a path out. “I needed a change.”

Her mom eyed the car, and Janae could see the moment she took in all the containers. “There’s a story in those boxes.”

“Not really. Just coming home for a bit. I needed to get away from Philadelphia and the lifestyle there.”

“Well, your room is always ready if you need a place to land.” She tightened her hold on Janae for a moment. “And I’ll enjoy every moment while you do.” She released Janae and followed her inside, then hurried to close the door with a shiver. “The meteorologists can’t decide if we’re going to get a dusting of snow or a mere freeze this week.”

“Must be nice to have a job where you can consistently”—her mom joined her for the last words—“be wrong.”

They laughed, and Janae felt something release inside her. Then Mom led her down the short hallway past the living and dining rooms to the back with the open kitchen and family room. The island and its unique stools had been her favorite spot from the moment they moved into the house when she was in eighth grade. It was magic to watch her mom pull hot chocolate chip cookies out of the oven after her days at school. They’d sit on the stools, drink their milk, and eat cookies while Janae chattered about her friends and classes. She smiled as her mom pulled a cookie sheet from the oven.

Mom noticed and brushed hair from her forehead with a shrug. “Guess I was missing you this afternoon. It feels right.”

Yes, it did.

## The Vanished

Maybe retreating home would be okay. At least for now.

Mom set a plate with two cookies and a small glass of milk in front of her, then turned and picked up an envelope from the counter. “I received strict instructions to give this to you as soon as you arrived.”

“Wait a minute. How did you know I was on my way?”

“You know one of the ladies from church works at a law firm in town. She might have slipped word to me the moment she heard a rumor you were taking a job here.”

“And you didn’t say anything?”

“Figured it was your story to tell. Kiddo, Kedgewick is still a small town.”

“I guess it is.” Janae took a bite of the perfectly gooey cookie while eyeing the envelope. “What is it?”

“I have an idea but didn’t open it for you.”

“You’ve always said it was a mother’s prerogative.”

Mom rolled her hazel eyes that mirrored Janae’s. “When you were sixteen, yes. Not now that you’re twenty-nine.”

“Gee, thanks.” She dusted her fingers on her jeans and then picked up the envelope. After opening it, she pulled out an embossed cardstock invitation. “A gallery opening?” She looked at her mom. “Who sent this?”

“It arrived by courier. Seemed fancy.” She shrugged and tapped the envelope. “I don’t know for sure who sent it, but that opening is all anyone can talk about. It’s invitation only, and the first show launched by the new director at the Elliott Museum of Art.”

“The one at Monroe College?”

“Yes, he’s some hotshot from Atlanta.”

“If he was really a hotshot, he wouldn’t be here.”

“Says the woman who’s come home.”

“That’s the key. It’s home for me.” And it wouldn’t be for this man. “Well, it seems very mysterious and out of character for Kedgewick.”

“Maybe it’s from one of your high school or gymnastics friends.”

“Maybe.” She glanced at the date again. “It’s for tonight? I can’t possibly go.”

## Cara Putman

“Sure you can. Rest, clean up, and go be part of the event of the fall.”

“I don’t have anything to wear.”

Mom arched an eyebrow. “You have a car packed with things. You have something.”

Janae squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Mom, I love you. But I did manage to run my own life for the years I was at college, law school, and in Philly.”

Mom cocked her head, hazel eyes sparking. “Then why are you back now?”

“Because you and Grandma need help.” And she needed a break from her high-pressure, unrelenting associate position. Much as she loved the law, it was a demanding taskmaster. And she’d been run ragged at the large litigation firm. She pushed off the memory of just how broken she’d become in the process of trying to keep up and earn a partnership.

“If you think I needed you to give up and move home, you should leave now.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Janae didn’t have the energy for this conversation. Not after the long drive. Not when she wondered if she’d like the small firm that had offered her a job. The lead partner’s son hadn’t been a great human being in high school, and the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. However, she didn’t have many options in Kedgewick. The idea of starting her own firm had caused a near panic attack and forced her from that option quicker than she could letter *not on your life* in her journal. “I’ve gotta unpack so I can find the dress for this shindig you think I should attend.”

Mom came around the island. “I’m sorry. I want you to be happy and that requires being back for the right reasons.”

“Well, I already quit my job, so I’m here for the near term. Probably longer.”

“Grab the box with your dresses, and I’ll get one ironed while you rest and freshen up.”

An hour later, she kissed her mom on the cheek. “I’d better hurry or I’ll be late. Not the kind of entrance I want to make. Night.” Janae

## The Vanished

opened the door and slipped out before her mom could fire another barrage of tips and reminders about all the ways life had changed since she left Kedgewick.

She spent the short drive into downtown Kedgewick clearing her mind and steeling herself for the night. If she pretended she were about to enter the courtroom rather than an art gallery, maybe it wouldn't feel so excruciating to wonder what the people who knew her as a teen thought of her now. It shouldn't matter, but she'd left Kedgewick all those years ago to get a fresh start, and many might delight that she'd returned. And now she found that the in-your-face antagonism of the courtroom was preferable to the hidden barbs of "friends." Still, part of her wished she were parking near the courthouse rather than on the edge of Monroe College. The courtroom had become her second home in the five years since law school. She hadn't darkened the doors of Monroe College's museum since finishing an art appreciation paper during Thanksgiving break of her junior year at Purdue. It felt like a lifetime ago, but the Virginia-limestone facade of the three-story museum sat unchanged, with couples walking up the steps and across the covered portico to the double doors. Now she was headed to some fancy event here—something she'd never done before. Light spilled from the museum each time one of the large front doors opened.

Did she want to do this?

Did it matter?

She took a deep breath and slid from her car. She teetered across the museum's parking lot on high boots she never should have bought. Fashion should give way to comfort, but sometimes you had to look the part. Tonight was that night, but she hoped she hadn't leaned too close to *Legally Blonde* style. It wasn't the look she was going for.

Several people walked up the stairs to the front of the Elliott Museum of Art, and white lights twinkled over the threshold, illuminating the way. Janae allowed a bit of space, then climbed the rest of the stairs. The wind fought her grasp on the heavy door, seeming to push the door firmly so she couldn't yank it open.

When it finally relented, she stumbled into the foyer of the museum,

balancing on boots with too narrow a heel for stability on the slick surface.

Someone grabbed her elbow to steady her, and she felt heat flush her neck.

She quickly righted herself. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” The rich baritone should soothe, but instead she stiffened, embarrassed anyone had seen her utter lack of grace.

Put her on a balance beam, and it could be magic. Put her in heels, and she was a stumbling oaf. Then her gaze traveled up until it collided with eyes the bright color of an Italian sky in midsummer, and for a moment she lost her sense of place. His brows quirked as a question filled his eyes. “You all right?”

Janae blinked and pasted on her professional *I-rule-the-courtroom* smile. “Of course. Just here to enjoy the art.” Wow, that was articulate. Everyone should hire her to represent them based on that display of oral brilliance.

“Then you’re in the right place. I hope you enjoy the exhibit.” He stepped back, and she acutely felt the moment he let go. “If you need anything, ask.” When he turned, she noted the way his suit perfectly draped his form.

A woman stepped around the ticket kiosk, pulling her attention away. “May I take your coat?”

Janae fought back a shiver but nodded, hoping her hot pink cashmere sweater and brown skirt would keep her warm as she strolled through the galleries. She’d likely be underdressed, but it had been the best she could do on an hour’s notice—her dresses had been too wrinkled for even her mother to salvage. “Thank you.” She removed the coat and handed it over, accepting the claim ticket in exchange. “Any particular place you’d recommend I start?”

The young woman startled, her red lips forming an O. “No one’s asked. Most start in the gallery to the right, but the best painting is through the one on the left. I don’t know what it is, but everyone stops and absorbs it.”

“Thanks. How will I know which one?”

## The Vanished

“You’ll know.” She took a step closer. “It’s where you’ll find the new director. He’s worth a look even if you don’t like art. He was just here, but every fifteen minutes he drifts back there. Oh, wait. You just spoke with him.” The college student giggled and then straightened and approached the couple who’d just entered.

Janae headed in the direction the young woman had indicated. It wouldn’t hurt to start with the best piece and work out from there. Long ago these halls were familiar, but she hadn’t visited recently. She stood in the doorway and watched couples and individuals, some standing in front of art, considering it, others appearing aimless as they flowed around the room. High school art class was the last significant time she’d spent here other than for that one college paper. She hadn’t truly valued art until she’d taken an art appreciation class in college. That had ignited an understanding of how art developed over time, while also giving her favorite artists whose work she could look for whenever she visited a gallery. Maybe she should have started by asking the gal at the entrance where to find the museum’s Pissaros.

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Nerves jittered through Carter Montgomery as he observed a couple wander past without noticing an exquisite painting by Thomas Gainsborough. He’d found it sitting in a small conference room and decided the painting of an English woman from the 1780s was a perfect addition to the exhibit his predecessor had created on Women in Art. It had felt like a light touch, adding his mark to the gallery. Very few would ever recognize it that way, but he hadn’t expected people to walk by without seeing her at all.

However, one woman stood transfixed by another painting in the collected works.

The elderly woman with silver coiffed hair stared at a Paula Modersohn-Becker painting on loan for the exhibit, a piece that had reappeared from a private or state collection in the last few years. The Expressionist painting of children had pulled the tiny, birdlike woman

into its orbit, and she hadn't twitched. She looked frail enough that she might break at a touch. Yet there was something granite in her slightly stooped posture and the way she didn't move. She barely breathed. An oasis in the slow swirl of others moving from painting to sculpture or standing like small islands talking, waiting to be seen rather than to see.

The painting was nice. Lovely in a way. While Modersohn-Becker had an exquisite touch, she wasn't as well-known as Vincent van Gogh and others from her time. The museum owned more popular paintings than this one on loan, and around the corner were two additional famous paintings on loan from other museums—a Donatello and a Raphael.

What about this painting had arrested her attention so completely?

"She hasn't moved in fifteen minutes." Ariel Sharp, his young, inherited assistant, came and stood next to him. "If I didn't know better, I'd wonder if she'd died."

Carter cut her a sharp look. "Be careful."

"She's as old as the mountains around here."

"And worthy of respect." Before Ariel could say anything else that annoyed him to the point of firing her regardless of who her daddy was and what the board thought, he strode toward the elderly woman. He made a bit of noise as he approached so he didn't startle her. "You like this one."

"Yes." There was the faintest hint of an accent lacing her word. European? Maybe.

"What about it captured you?" He was always curious to know what attracted people's attention.

The woman placed a hand at her chin and tilted her head, making her even more birdlike as she continued to gaze at it. "This painting was a gift to my grandmother on the event of her fortieth birthday."

That was . . . unexpected. "Really? That's incredible."

"Not as incredible as the fact this painting was stolen from my family, and I long for the day it returns home."

His mind whirled as he considered how to respond. A claim like that was far-fetched. And to drop it in the middle of an exhibit—like she

## The Vanished

discussed the weather and how wonderful the sun felt—was startling and left him floundering. “Why don’t we set a quiet time to meet?”

“Why not now? I have already waited seventy years, and my family has waited even longer to find and recover this piece of our heritage.”

He gestured to the gallery beyond them. “Right now I have too many guests to give you the attention your story requires.”

“I understand.” The words whispered from her, causing him to lean close. He felt the gravitas that infused them. Made the simple words firm and unyielding. And from such a small, unassuming person.

“I look forward to it.” Noting others watching them, he gave her a half bow.

She turned toward him for the first time, a sad tilt to her fuchsia-colored lips, the color feathering out through her wrinkles. The edges of her eyes turned down, reflecting the weariness of her sloped shoulders. “Until then.”

He walked away, careful not to flee, feeling her gaze and those of others in the room. What had just happened? He wasn’t sure, but he needed to find an attorney for the museum.



## Chapter 2

*Saturday, October 22*

JANAE TOOK A LEISURELY PATH down the broad hall, noting each work and stopping when something caught her attention. It might be the colors, the subject, or the brushstrokes. She hadn't made time for such immersion while she worked eighty hours a week.

That was something she could change with the return to Kedgewick. Something she could reset.

Eventually she left the hall and entered the gallery and took in the paintings displayed in heavily gilded frames, noting one on the far wall. Standing next to an older woman was the man she'd encountered at the entrance. The director? She should look away but was intensely curious about what the unlikely pair discussed. If her gaze traveled to the man more than the small woman in an elegant coat dress, who could blame her? There was something compelling about him.

Maybe she stood there longer than she thought, because the next thing she knew someone sidled next to her.

"You might want to quit ogling the new director." Margeaux Robbins's teasing tone didn't stop Janae's embarrassment from flaming her skin.

"You're not supposed to call attention to it." Janae gave her a quick side hug, noting how thin her lifelong friend felt.

## The Vanished

“I’m glad to see you noticing.” Her friend waggled her eyebrows.

Was Margeaux eating? They had spent hours together in the gymnastics facility growing up, forming a tight bond, and there had been seasons Margeaux had struggled. Janae forced her attention away from her concern. “Why aren’t you watching?”

“Because I joined the museum’s board of directors last month, and that makes me his boss.” She wrinkled her nose in a way that reminded Janae of every time her friend got ready to take the floor. Margeaux was a dynamo when she tumbled, and somehow doing that nose wrinkle had helped her release tension before competing. Taller than the average gymnast by a good six inches, Margeaux had channeled her power into a beautiful blend of grace and pure strength that lightly kissed the floor rather than pounding it like a stumbling elephant.

“Congratulations. I hadn’t heard.”

“Thanks. I haven’t posted it anywhere yet. It could be a lot of work, but it lets me send invitations like the one you received.”

“I wondered who it came from. Thanks.”

“Sure. I wanted one friend here, and since you thought you might come back to town . . .”

“It was a big night.”

“You’re here.” Margeaux grinned at her.

“Show off.”

“Just like being right.”

“There is that.” Janae looked around. “You’ve always liked spending time here.”

“True.”

Janae noted everyone already holding long-stemmed glasses. “Looks like your people are waiting for you.”

“I don’t know about that, but I should pretend I’m an extrovert for the next hour or two.”

“No pretending needed.” Not when Margeaux managed to find common ground with most people in a matter of minutes. It was what made her a professor who easily connected with her students. But her departure would leave Janae to work her way around the fringes.

Cara Putman

Margeaux leaned over and gave her a quick air kiss. “I’ll keep an eye out for you. I think Chloe plans to stop by too.”

“It would be good to see her.” Janae hoped her return meant she’d spend time with her childhood friends, but everyone had their own lives. “Go do your thing. I’m fine.” And she would be. She had to be, because the alternative meant the move from the high-pressure firm to home had been the worst decision of her life.

A waitress walked by, black apron over a crisp white shirt, holding a tray of glasses. “Would you like one? Prosecco is on the left and sparkling grape juice on the right.”

Janae lifted a white grape juice. “Thank you.”

Glass in hand, she walked through the foyer into the first gallery on the right. This one was filled with Virginia artists, none internationally known, but the landscapes captured the best of the state she loved. The older woman had moved in here and now stood in front of one. Janae couldn’t help overhearing when a tall man approached her.

“Mrs. Seeger, do you have a moment?”

The woman didn’t turn toward the man. “You are?”

“Jarod Shaw, attorney-at-law.”

Janae should move but couldn’t. Maybe she could learn something from the way he approached people. She took another sip of her sparkling juice and continued to study the landscape before her.

“I know your family’s history and would like to help you reclaim what is rightfully yours.”

“I do believe that time has passed, young man.” There was no irony in her voice even though the man had to be in his early forties. “I did all I could to put forth a claim fifteen years ago.”

“But did you know where your family’s paintings were then? The ones on display here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe we can talk somewhere private.” He handed her his card. “Next week I can come to you. I think we can make something happen now.”

“I’ll call you.”

## The Vanished

“I look forward to it, ma’am.” He melted into the crowd, leaving the woman fingering his card before she slipped it into her clutch.

Before Janae could be caught staring, she moved to the next painting. Then she strolled past several more, nodding to a couple she recognized from when she visited her parents’ church. She paused in front of her favorite landscape, a scene of the Shenandoah Valley in the full color of fall. Approximately four by six feet in the frame, it was a painting she could stand in front of for hours, and she had in fact done that on a dare in high school.

“Like what you see?”

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The woman next to Carter startled, then seemed to force herself to still, as more bubbles floated to the top of her fluted glass. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes, noting the understated perfection of her outfit. She looked like she was ready to cheer on the latest hunt, except for the brightness of her sweater, but somehow she pulled it off. There was an easy elegance to her style, yet she didn’t seem quite comfortable standing in his museum.

*My museum.* Carter had to grin at that thought. He’d worked long and hard to reach this point in his career. In fact, he’d reached it years before his plan or peers had predicted, even with the disaster he’d experienced at his prior job. His one regret was that his older sister wasn’t here to see this success. Charlotte had always encouraged his dreams, and his breath still caught in his chest at the reality he’d never see her again.

He glanced around without really moving and noticed Stanley Dukes, the chair of the board and his former colleague, staring at him. There was something in his gaze that set Carter on edge. All was going well with the gallery opening. There were plenty of guests and donors enjoying the evening. Why was the man studying him?

Then a man in a blazer sidled next to Stanley, and the silver-haired man moved into the next room with him.

## Cara Putman

Carter refocused on the woman next to him, who had stayed silent. “I’m Carter Montgomery, the new director here.”

“I’d heard there was a new one. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

Her chin tipped up to meet his gaze six inches above her, styling him as a giant next to her petite frame. She held out a slim hand, nails neatly trimmed but free of polish. “I’m Janae Simmons, attorney-at-law.”

He bit back a snort at the way she said it. “Nice to meet you, Janae, attorney-at-law.”

“That was pretentious, wasn’t it?” She took a quick sip, and he noted the way her hand trembled. “I’m newly back in town and not sure how to explain who I am, and everything feels wrong. It all comes out jumbled or snotty.” She clapped a hand over her mouth and rocked her head side to side. “I need to stop, don’t I? I’m babbling now.”

“Actually, I find this”—he ran a hand up and down in the air—“adorable.”

She grimaced. “That’s not exactly the aura I was going for.” Her shoulders slumped like someone had pricked a hole in her balloon. “Events like this are tricky. I’m a hometown girl, but I’ve been gone more than ten years. So everyone who believes they know me is wrong. Well, other than one of your board members.” She clamped her lips together.

He quickly pivoted back toward the art before she could read his face. Had he met anyone quite like her? Carter hadn’t had this much fun engaging with someone in a while. She came across as natural and unaffected, a combination that piqued his interest.

“You can look again.”

He couldn’t hold back the guffaw, not quite the reaction he wanted others to see, as they turned to stare. He was new in town and an outsider, so no one wanted to know him in this tight-knit community. Best to move the conversation to more artistic territory. “Which is your favorite?”

“Of these?” She glanced around the gallery. “I’m really not much of an Impressionist girl. I prefer Italian art from the 1300s.”

He almost believed her until he noted the faint twitch at the side of

## The Vanished

her perfect mouth. “Now that is interesting. I find most people seem drawn to masters like Manet and Monet.”

“I personally like the ones where the people are dancing across the canvas on tiptoe. Give me some good old Agnolo Gaddi or Paolo Veneziano. Add a little gold leaf for color and I’m hooked.”

“You’ve been to the national gallery recently.”

“Guilty as charged. Even took the tour.”

“And no interest in Raphael or da Vinci?”

“They’re so . . .” She paused as if searching for the right word. “Common.”

“Ah yes, nothing to seeing the only da Vinci in the western hemisphere.”

She mimicked the woman who’d been talking to him earlier, tipping her head to the side as she studied the Pissarro. “Nothing at all.”

## Chapter 3

*Saturday, October 22*

THIS MAN GIVING JANAE HIS full attention? A surreal yet wonderful experience. Why would he do that when there were so many important people here? She didn't know, but she was deeply enjoying their repartee. She took a sip of the sparkling grape juice, letting the fizz tickle the back of her nose before she swallowed.

Carter wore a dark navy suit, red-striped shirt, and blue-and-red-check bowtie. It could have looked ridiculous, but somehow the fit made him seem more artsy and unique rather than eccentric. She decided she liked it better than those of the stuffy attorneys she'd spent her time with before. She yanked in the thought. She'd barely made it to town and two hours ago hadn't known about this event. She did not need to let her thoughts wander to what might be possible with a man she'd just met.

She needed a redirection. Fast. "Which is your favorite?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Person?"

"No, though you could tell me." She tapped the glass lightly against her lips as she searched the room. "I was thinking along the lines of paintings. Surely one holds a special place in your heart."

"That's like asking a parent who's their favorite child." He shoved his hands in his pockets and her heart dropped at his words.

## The Vanished

“I’m sorry. That’s probably too personal.” Surely he couldn’t have kids. He was too young, and a quick glance at his left hand would fill in the important detail. Though maybe not. Not everyone cared about getting the wedding before the children. Guess she was an old-fashioned woman at heart.

“No, it’s a good one for me to consider.” He pulled a hand free and pointed at a landscape. “That one is my favorite because I’d swear the Blue Ridge still looks like that even though it was painted over a hundred years ago when Georgia O’Keeffe spent her summers here.” Then he shifted toward the one with five children that the elderly woman had soaked in. “This one is so different, yet there’s something animated and energetic even as the children sit on that beach without faces we can clearly discern.”

“It is unusual.”

“Sort of like the O’Keeffe. People forget that she lived in Charlottesville at the UVA campus for a series of summers. She painted more than large flowers and stark southwestern art. I love how unexpected her perspective was of the campus and mountains. She favored watercolors here, a medium she strayed from later because it wasn’t perceived as real enough for a true artist.”

“I get inspired by Instagram and YouTube videos, but can barely get anything but a blob of gray when I attempt watercolors.”

“Look at hers and you’ll see what I mean about the detail she added while working in that medium.”

A young woman approached, dressed in a skintight minidress that looked very out of place among the more elegant dresses most women wore. “Carter, one of the board members is looking for you. Said something about needing to discuss something.”

“Thanks, Ariel.” He turned to Janae. “I’m sorry. I have to leave.”

“I should probably circulate anyway. It’ll be good to let people know I’m back and can solve their legal woes.” She clapped her free hand over her mouth again. “Why do I keep saying the first thing that pops into my mind?”



Cara Putman

“I must bring out the best in you.” The edge of his mouth tipped in an adorable hint of a smile.

“Something like that.” She took a final sip of the juice and then looked around but couldn’t see a safe spot to deposit the glass.

“No need to frown. I’ll take that for you since I need to check on the other galleries after I find this elusive board member.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I insist. But first . . .” He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a square business card, which he extended to her. “I find the museum may be in need of an attorney. Could you have your assistant call in the next morning or two to set up a meeting?”

Of course she would. Once she had an assistant and a dedicated office. Landing the museum as a client could give her needed clout as she established a reputation in town and talked to others about letting her work for them. “I arrived in town today but will reach out in the next couple days.” She paused as a thought flitted through her mind. “Does the museum use the university’s attorney?”

“Not for items like this. The general counsel has deferred every art-related matter to us. He’s insisted it’s outside his area of expertise. I can confirm with him if you prefer.”

“That would probably be best and give me time to get settled.”

“That should be fine.” He looked around at the hubbub. “It’ll take a while to get everything sorted, but I would like to connect about this, since I anticipate he’ll continue to ask us to handle all art-related matters.”

“Of course.” She exchanged the card for the glass. “Thank you.”

“The pleasure has been mine.” He paused as if waiting for her to give him one of her cards.

She gave a small shrug. “Need to get new cards.” She could only hope Ashley and Ashby would have some ready for her when she arrived Monday.

He nodded. “I’ll look forward to hearing from you.” Then he followed Ariel from the gallery.

## The Vanished

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*Monday, October 24*

Butterflies fluttered aggressively in Janae's stomach as she steeled herself for her first day at a new law firm. Ashley and Ashby filled the role of a small-town Virginia fixture. She remembered the original Ashley and Ashby as overweight, seersucker-clad old men who'd scared her as a child. Now her best option was walking through that door and working for their sons. Mark Ashby had gone to school with Janae's mother and had assured Janae they'd have work for someone with her skills. However, the way he said it made her think he didn't believe she had skills. After all, what could she learn in the big city that would have value in good ole Kedgewick?

Guess she'd demonstrate exactly what she could offer.

She straightened her bright red peplum suit jacket over its matching skirt, then opened the door and strode into the reception area.

A mousy woman with teased hair grimaced at her. "Can I help you? We don't open for another fifteen minutes."

Janae paused, a bit taken aback, because this wasn't her mother's friend whom she knew well from church, the one she'd talked with when setting up the position. "I expected Caroline Stone. She asked me to arrive now to get set up."

"Caroline is out for several weeks with an emergency. I'm filling in for her."

"Oh." Janae puffed a quick breath as she recalibrated, and then held out her hand. "I'm Janae Simmons, the new attorney."

"Who?" The woman's brow furrowed as if she couldn't understand what Janae had said.

"The new associate. Mark hired me." Well, she supposed it was a joint decision, but Ashley's first name escaped her in the haze of change. "He and Mr. Ashley." And Caroline, but that didn't seem worth mentioning right now.

"They didn't say anything to me." She pursed her hot pink lips, the lipstick already bleeding past her lip line. "Let me call back." Her

voice dropped but Janae still caught the next words. “And see what they say.” She swiveled slightly as if to block Janae from hearing anything.

Janae bit back the urge to say something that wouldn’t help the woman’s skepticism. Why hadn’t the receptionist done the bare niceties and given Janae her name? Even for a temp she’d done a poor job. Janae would mention something if it wasn’t her first day.

The woman had to have an inflated sense of the value of the firm.

Seriously, why would someone come to town and pretend to work for them? She’d have to be extremely desperate.

Maybe she was.

Janae took in the chairs that had probably been used since the 1970s, the vinyl cracked and repaired in places with colored duct tape that didn’t match. A fake mimosa tree stood in a corner, the dust coating its leaves visible from where she stood. *Men’s Health*. *Popular Mechanics*. *Sports Illustrated*. *Wired*. The magazines spread across the laminate console table dated from at least a year earlier. The issues hinted that old and middle-aged men were the firm’s primary clientele.

The vibe of the space suggested the owners had stopped trying sometime around the end of the last decade, if not earlier.

Everything about her standing here felt like a bad idea, but she didn’t see other options. The other attorneys in town said they didn’t need anyone, but if she wanted to volunteer, they’d gladly find work for her. She’d had to decide whether to laugh or cry.

Saturday she’d felt like the belle at a ball, and now she felt like the forgotten stepsister.

The receptionist cleared her throat. “Yes, sir. I’ll send her back.” She hung up and then looked at Janae. “I guess it’s your lucky day. He seems to think you should work here, though I have no idea why. We didn’t have a new client last week.”

“Maybe I’ll bring them in.” After all, the museum director wanted to talk.

The woman studied her and then shook her head. “Doubt that.”

So they wouldn’t be best friends. Janae squared her shoulders and

## The Vanished

straightened her posture. “Since we’ll be working together can you tell me your name?”

“You won’t be here long enough to need it.”

Janae felt the words like a punch. So much for collegiality. “Where am I headed?”

“Second door on the left. I’ve got to warn you. The only room they can put you in is the storage room. It’s overflowing with files.”

“I’m used to stacks of files when working on discovery.”

“Well, some of those go back at least a dozen years. Good luck.” She shook her head. “You’ll need it.” The phone rang and she picked it up. “Ashby and Ashley.”

Did the woman even notice she’d reversed the order of the partners? The original Mr. Ashley had to be rolling in his grave over that misstep. The receptionist took her temporary status seriously.

The woman shooed her back even as she kept talking.

No time like the present to see what she’d gotten herself into.

Three hours later, Mark Ashby hadn’t stopped talking, his hands resting on the obnoxiously striped, gravy-stained tie spread over his rotund middle.

As he paused for air, Janae quickly spoke. “Do you have anything for me to work on?”

He pushed to his feet and then looked at his watch. “I suppose you should see where you’ll sit, and then I have to head to the Rotary meeting. Time to remind everyone we’re ready to serve their legal needs. It’s chicken-fried steak day down at the diner. The best one if you ask me.” He eyed her. “Looks like you could use some of that. Put some meat on your bones.”

“My bones are fine and none of your concern.” She stiffened as her pulse sped up. What was he thinking making statements like that? This was moving from a questionable decision to a terrible one.

He took his time looking her up and down. “It is if you’re too weak to work.” He brushed past her through the door, and she refused to shudder. “Follow me.”

She released a breath. At least he wouldn’t make her walk in front.

One partner in Philadelphia had delighted in seeing how far he could push his assigned associates before they would quit. Complaining was never an option because no one believed the young women, at least no one who could do anything. If Mark was anything like that partner, she knew where his attention would focus.

They'd barely walked ten feet down the hall when he stopped.

"Here you go." He pushed open a door and reached inside to flip on a light switch.

Janae's mouth opened and she couldn't push words out at first. It was even worse than the receptionist had indicated. A desk was shoved into the far corner of the room with a computer and monitor on top of its surface. To get to the desk and chair, she'd have to squeeze between banker boxes piled against two walls in a double row. On the other wall a table was tucked with more boxes towering over and under it. Even more stacked around and in front of the table.

"This is what I left Philly for?"

"No one asked you to come home, Janae Simmons. But we're glad to give you this space and twenty-five dollars an hour to do paralegal work. If you get your own clients, we'll bill your time at a hundred fifty dollars an hour and pay you fifty."

She sputtered. "Are you serious?"

"As a dog wrestling a bone from the ground." His expression dared her to leave.

"You'll be making one hundred dollars an hour on my time." At least. Angry tears formed but she blinked them back. He was right that she wouldn't find other options without heading closer to DC. At least not quickly. This ugly reality was exactly why she'd left the small town behind and never looked back until now. The niggling concern she'd made a mistake threatened to overwhelm her.

The only thing that was more overwhelming was the risk of failure if she didn't stay here and do all he asked. Because fail was what she would do if she went out on her own. If she couldn't remember to file the correct documents on time when she had the support of a massive infrastructure, there was no way she would on her own.

## The Vanished

And she couldn't look like a failure in front of the people who'd already watched her leave.

She shook loose of the thoughts. "How can you expect me to get anything done here?"

"You're an enterprising girl. You'll come up with something." Then he tipped an imaginary hat at her and left.