

Chapter 1

January

MARGEAX ROBBINS SPUNTED FROM HER parked Sonata toward the Loudoun County Courthouse, miles from her comfortable office on the Monroe College campus in Kedgewick, Virginia.

She crammed her empty Java Jane's coffee cup into an overflowing trash can, then crossed the street, dodging a late-turning car as she hopped onto the sidewalk. She waited for her turn in the security line while attorneys with court IDs bypassed the X-ray machines and hurried to the stairs. When through security, she hustled to the two elevators, the main one ornamental with its old-fashioned cage and sliding door. Unfortunately, the more modern elevator only held six or seven squished people. Based on the waiting group of suit-clad attorneys surrounded by clients in front of the elevators, she'd be better off clickety-clacking up the stairs, but she didn't want to reach the third-floor courtroom only to huff like an out-of-shape racehorse sucking air. Not the most flattering image, and exactly why she wanted to avoid it.

When the metal doors clanged open, and after waiting for a stream of people to exit, she pressed into the older elevator. As the doors began to shut, a masculine hand shot between them. A moment later a dark-haired man wearing a tailored navy suit and silver tie joined the

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crush within. There was an aura of familiarity about him, something that made Margeaux riffle through her mental Rolodex as she worked to place him. Their gazes connected. He dipped his chin in a slight nod as he stepped against the wall and the doors slid closed.

“It’s good to see you.” His deep words startled her as his smile sparked something inside.

Where did she know him from? She couldn’t remember—a hazard of working on a campus surrounded by students and colleagues. She tipped her head slightly as she searched for his name, her lips slipping up at how much she wanted to remember. “Good to see you too.”

She turned back to the doors, wondering when the elevator would finally move.

He pointed toward her chin, his piercing gray eyes taking her in. “You’ve got something there.”

She touched her jaw. There was no way. All she’d had was coffee.

“Here?”

“No.” He shifted closer. “May I?”

“Oh no.” Someone behind her snickered and she waited for the floor to drop out from under her. “That’s an old line. You’ll have to try better than that.” Why couldn’t she place him? Must be that movie star vibe he had from the tip of his perfectly styled hair to sable wingtips.

A woman in khakis and a blazer leaned toward her. “He’s right. It’s a hint of whipped cream or something.”

Margeaux felt heat climb her chest to her neck, knowing he had to see each moment the red hit her pale complexion. She blew out air in a slow, steady stream, praying the elevator would reach the floor and the stupid doors would open. What was taking so long anyway?

“It’s only fair to warn you.”

She refused to look his way. “I’m sorry?”

“The spot.”

Her gaze betrayed her by turning back to him. “What?”

He quirked an eyebrow and pointed to the corner of his mouth, exactly where his lips tipped in a smirk. “It’s still there.”

Her gaze traveled to meet his, and she lost the ability to speak. Her

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mouth opened and closed like a carp stuck on one of her grandpa's fishing hooks. Then she swallowed and forced her shoulders back as she tipped her chin to better hold his gaze. Mistake—total and complete—as the words she'd about marshaled into order fully abandoned her. And she made her living with words.

Her fingers brushed the edge of her mouth.

"A little more to the left."

She edged her fingers over, and they collided with a speck of cream. She rolled her eyes.

"You're welcome." His words were laced with . . . what?

Margeaux quirked a brow at him. She knew him, but she still couldn't remember why—her brain was a complete blank.

"This isn't your usual haunt." He spoke as if he knew her, but he didn't. Did he? Why couldn't she remember? His wasn't a face one would easily forget with its Roman features.

"You know how it is. I leave this form of combat to others."

"Yep."

"What?"

"You like to teach while others do."

Those few words hit hard, an echo of every time her grandpa reminded her she only taught undergrads at a small school. "You know that's a ridiculous insinuation, right? No one believes that teaching isn't worthy of my time."

The doors clanged open. Finally.

He waved an arm. "Ladies first."

"Thank you." Margeaux stepped off the elevator and turned right rather than pause to gain her bearings, wanting to escape this man's watchful gaze.

"Court's the other direction."

"I know." She breezed past the people lining the walls and sitting on benches, scanning quickly for her student as her phone buzzed in her pocket. Juggling her bag and files to one arm, she used her right hand to dig through her pocket.

The alert for the class she'd canceled to be here.

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“The hearing begins in fifteen minutes.” The man winked at her and strode toward a courtroom.

Should she follow him? Considering she wasn't sure they were here for the same hearing, she'd confirm her destination first. Even so, she let her gaze trail Mr. Darkly Handsome until he disappeared. Maybe she'd catch his identity when the judge recited the names of the attorneys present into the record. It was the kind of mystery she didn't mind.

Where are you?

The number, the message, annoyed Chase Crandall. He was the attorney. He'd be there, and he'd be early. He always was. This college student was Exhibit A for why Chase was tired. His patience for irritations like uncertain clients had waned. Annoyance and impatience was a dangerous combination and made him wonder if he should move over for a recent law school grad filled with passion, if not experience, to take over his criminal defense work. They couldn't do a worse job than he felt he did with the press of too much work.

He'd prayed about it but wasn't sure what to do. Make the call and accept an interview? Stay where he was? He refocused. He couldn't solve the dilemma in the moment. Instead, he had to focus on David Roach, yet another college student who'd driven with one too many drinks in him and had found his way to Chase's firm thanks to a friend of a friend's referral.

They didn't warn you in law school how hard it could be to cobble together enough clients, especially paying ones, when you didn't work for a big firm. Of course, more than one of his classmates at the big boys had lost their positions in the last couple of years, so even those jobs might not be stable anymore.

He reached the outside of the courtroom and scanned the bodies packed there, pausing to hammer out a quick text to his missing client.

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Where are you? Looking for
you outside the courtroom.

Waiting inside. It's where all the
action is.

Chase strode into the courtroom and wove around attorneys huddled with clients behind the bar. The quick preliminary hearing should be speedy. Then he'd be back to the office for the next round of meetings with clients.

Finally he spotted David. The young man wore khakis and a hoodie topped by a denim jacket. It looked casual yet not dressed down. Not what Chase had coached him to wear but better than a lot of the defendants whispering with their attorneys.

"There you are." The young man's gaze darted around the courtroom. "What's going to happen?"

"Like I explained yesterday, this is quick. The prosecution has to prove probable cause that you were involved in the alleged incident."

"We can't dispute that can we? My car's totaled."

"That's hard evidence. What we can focus on is that the prosecutor charged you with the wrong crime. A felony is too harsh for what happened. A misdemeanor will have lighter long-term consequences for you, with less jail time too."

The young man's shoulders climbed toward his ears like he was a turtle crawling into his protective shell. "Dad thinks I should waive the preliminary hearing."

Great. The absent parent was interfering. "That would have been better handled at your arraignment." Chase kept his voice steady and low. "If you're sure that's what you want to do, I'll tell the assistant commonwealth's attorney."

"Whatever makes this go faster."

Chase considered the young man. "Look. I know you're overwhelmed, but rushing to trial isn't always in your best interest."

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“I can’t sleep or think right now.” He held trembling hands in front of him. “Look at me. I’m a mess.”

“That’s natural after getting arrested.”

“I won’t be able to practice law if this ends up as a felony, but if they charge me with that, and you prove they were wrong, then I can’t be charged later with a misdemeanor.”

“Who told you that?”

“My professor told me it would be double jeopardy.” He gestured across the room. “She’s even here to support me.”

Chase followed the gesture and stilled when he picked out the woman David pointed to. The petite dynamo from the elevator. Margeaux Robbins didn’t remember him, but that was okay. Any interest that had sparked when he teased her earlier dissipated in the light of her interference with his client. He refused to roll his eyes at the armchair lawyering. “It’s a big if. The commonwealth could also press forward with the felony and prove its case.”

“Not with you as my attorney.”

“You’re sure?”

The young man gave a decisive nod, and the hood of his sweatshirt bounced.

“All right.” Chase scanned the audience, his gaze colliding with the opinionated professor. He’d love to stomp over and tell her what her meddling was doing, but instead he narrowed his eyes, surprised when she responded in kind. Then he marched over toward the commonwealth’s attorney. Better to get this over with than wait until they were called.

“Mr. Crandall.” Judge Archibald Twain’s voice stopped him.

He pivoted and addressed the judge. “Your Honor.”

“A word.”

“Certainly.” He strode to the dais, keeping his stance open when he reached it.

“Disturbing rumors have reached me, Mr. Crandall.”

Chase’s breath caught, then he forced confidence. “There are always rumors, sir.”

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The man tapped his right hand against his desk. “That you’re leaving criminal practice.”

“I always have conversations with prospective clients, Judge. It doesn’t mean I’m leaving criminal law.” How had the judge learned of any rumblings in this direction? He hadn’t made up his own mind or talked to anyone who would tell the man.

“You can switch fields, but I’ll still appoint you to key criminal matters.”

Chase nodded. “Understood, Your Honor.”

As he walked away, he didn’t doubt the judge’s threat. And that left a new weight buried in his gut.

Chapter 2

Friday, March 7

AS MARGEUX GATHERED HER CLASS file and other detritus, she knew she had to hustle or be late for the last class standing between some of her students and their break. This section had a blend of undergrads who wanted to attend and those who'd been coerced by graduation requirements. Add in a handful of grad students, and it was an odd mix. They were each hers for this semester, though none really loved the scholarly purgatory between a late lunch and sleep. Stir in the fact that spring break commenced in mere hours, and Margeaux had her work cut out for her. The bigger goal today was the same one she embraced every day—connect with each of her students and their personal story. Some of those stories were laced with pain and others with grace. Each layered in unique ways.

A rap at the door yanked her attention from the frantic search for her phone. Without it, she couldn't log on to the classroom computer, which meant no slides or other bells and whistles the students expected.

"I'm going to be late for class." Then she noted her colleague Kelly Chupp's drawn face, her beautiful curly white hair straggling around it. "Are you all right?"

"It's David Roach." The words were choked as Kelly forced them out.

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“What?” Margeaux sank onto her chair as she braced for whatever else Kelly needed to tell her.

“He was killed this morning in the jail. His name just leaked.”

Margeaux rubbed over her heart as the words sank in. “I planned to check on him next week.” Spring break had been the earliest she could slip away.

“I thought you’d want to know. Since he was in your class, I wanted to arm you with the information in case a student mentioned it.”

“Thanks.” Margeaux’s mind spun as she considered the implications. How could this have happened? He would have been free in a few more weeks. And now he was dead? It didn’t make sense. That young man had a bright future in front of him, one that had been snuffed out. What was she supposed to do with that knowledge? “What do I say?”

“There’s no script for situations like this.” Kelly wrapped her arms around her middle.

“It would make it easier if there were.”

“Maybe, but then we’d miss what the students in front of us need.”

Margeaux acknowledged that truth with a nod. “You’re right, and they need me to show up fully.” Sometimes it exhausted her, but it also remained her favorite part of the job. Being there for the students and authentically offering what they needed from her. “Thank you for letting me know so I wasn’t blindsided.”

“Been there and it’s no fun.” With a quick hug, Kelly was gone.

Margeaux grabbed her files and the phone underneath them and hurriedly left her office, closing the door behind her. How could she help her students process this information? *Father, help me navigate this situation, please. Guide my words.*

No one gave instructions for handling tragedies. What to say. What to avoid. How to address the new reality without causing trauma.

She swallowed as she felt the pain rising inside her. She pushed it down, just like she had every time she’d been injured on an apparatus in the gym. She didn’t have time to deal with her grief now. Maybe later, but she had to get to the classroom.

The worst part was that David shouldn’t have served any jail time,

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even ninety days. But the judge had been determined to teach him a lesson with the felony DWI, even if the largely suspended sentence was designed to catch his attention before his partying turned into addiction. That short sentence had converted to the young man's coffin.

She entered the classroom and moved to the lectern where she logged on to the computer.

Margeaux's heart hurt considering how David's mistakes had led to his death. The lowest level felony should not transform into a jail cell death, and that could have been avoided if he'd pled to a misdemeanor. But negotiating a plea would have required effective assistance of counsel.

She clicked to the class website and downloaded the slides she'd uploaded for the lecture.

Chase Crandall thought he'd had everything under control, but he'd been overconfident in his abilities to avoid the charge. She'd noticed him strutting around the courtroom, overzealous until the tables had turned in an instant when the jury found David guilty. The irony of the legal system was that the attorneys never paid. Their clients did.

Margeaux felt eyes locked on her and blinked.

She forced her thoughts back to her current students. The ones who came to class deserved her best efforts. She lifted her head, looked at the students, and cleared her throat.

Some days she taught from the zone and easily shocked them into a place they could learn. Other times she couldn't find that sweet spot of connection. Today was feeling like one of the latter.

"I wanted to make sure you knew one of your classmates died this morning. You may have heard that David Roach, who began the semester with us, passed this morning." She paused and tried to assess how each student was absorbing the news. Then she quickly explained the campus resources and invited students to talk with her if they wanted, though she didn't know what she would say.

She blew out a breath and scanned the students before picking up a whiteboard marker. A quick transition might be best.

"Who can tell me the four elements of negligence?" She leaned against the table that rested in front of the whiteboard and waited.

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The sixty-some students in her introductory business law course shouldn't be surprised by her opening question. Margeaux had asked a similar one in the prior lecture, and she would repeat it in these hallowed halls of learning until her students could list *duty*, *breach*, *causation*, and *damages* without conscious thought. If she was fortunate and did her job exceptionally well, they might even remember the legal concept each represented.

The silence lengthened like taffy stretched to the breaking point.

She kept her expression firmly in place as she eyed row after row of students hunched over laptops or slouched against the black plastic chairs bolted to the floor in the Fairbanks School of Business at Monroe College. The large clock on the back wall warned her she had forty more minutes to make her point before the students were released to dash to their next class.

Monroe College was famous for having all buildings within ten minutes of each other across pastoral grounds, but whoever had timed it ran, not something her students liked to do unless voluntarily for fitness.

What would it be like to have a bailiff in her classroom? Someone to call the wandering minds to order when they slipped away. She considered clapping, turning off the lights, or doing magic tricks. Today deserved grace if any day did, but she also needed to help them focus through the distractions of the day. *Okay, we'll use the Socratic method.*

"Anyone been in a car accident?"

A few students reluctantly nodded. Apathetic. Oblivious. Seemingly concerned only about what would stream next to their multitude of devices. At thirty-two she felt ancient, even though she was only ten or so years older than them.

"What happened?"

Silence.

"Donovan?"

The young man filled a chair in the second row, his dreadlocks bouncing around his head in ordered chaos, a small smile tilting his

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lips to the side. He liked to pretend he was disinterested in class, but his quizzes exposed his sharp intellect and curiosity. Then he'd come to office hours and solidified his place in her mind as a potential law student.

"A fool sped in front of my momma's car and clipped us."

Margeaux grimaced as she imagined the crunch of metal. "Was everyone okay?"

He shrugged. "I got outta school for a couple of days thanks to the headache."

Margeaux looked at the class, noted the sympathy in other students' eyes, the way one of the girls rubbed her neck as if she'd experienced a whiplash-induced ache of her own. "How was her car?"

"Totaled. Momma was not happy to let that little Datsun go."

Margeaux could imagine what a setback that had been for the family. "Did the police come?"

"Yep. Said it was the other driver's fault for ignoring the stop sign. 'Course, he didn't have insurance, so we got to ride the bus for a couple of months while Momma worked to get a down payment on a new-to-us car." He shrugged. "Seems the law failed us."

"What do you think, class?"

There was shifting in the seats before Natalie slowly raised her hand. One of Margeaux's goals was to help Natalie and the other young women in the class fill their space, to embrace the truth that they had valuable contributions to make. Some days her efforts didn't make an impact, but she'd keep chipping away at the target.

"Natalie?"

"It depends."

The other students snickered as Natalie parroted Margeaux's answer to every question.

"What does it depend on?"

"Whether the driver was insured. Whether there was anything that Donovan's mother did to contribute to the accident." Natalie shrugged thin shoulders beneath a bulky navy sweater. "It's the law, so there's a lot that it depends on."

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“I told you he didn’t have insurance.” Donovan rolled his eyes. “That’s why I called him a fool.”

“In Virginia, there used to be an option to pay a five-hundred-dollar fee to the state to avoid carrying insurance, but if you failed to either carry insurance or pay the fee, it’s a misdemeanor.” Margeaux hurried on as she noted a student slide lower in his seat with eyes glazing over. There was one way to attack that. “Josh, why do you think Virginia allowed an opt-out fee?”

“So people could drive without insurance. Seems dumb though. Why let people drive without insurance? It just hurts people like Donovan’s mom.”

“Maybe that’s why the law changed. What do you think?” She tossed the question to the class and let the conversation build before bringing it back to the four elements. A glance at the clock and she wrapped up with a quick comment. “Next class we’ll talk about the rest of the chapter on torts. We’ll focus on intentional torts and how they’re the flip side of many crimes. Have a great rest of your day and enjoy your break.”

Students bounded up, hefting backpacks over shoulders with more energy than they’d exhibited during class. Margeaux took a minute to close the slides and log out of the computer before picking up the eraser and swiping the words and charts off the whiteboards with sweeping strokes. She’d survived the class, and maybe now she could find a corner to process and grieve David’s loss. When she turned around, Anneliese Richter lingered a foot away, her arms clutching the straps of her backpack as her feet shifted.

The German student had arrived on campus in late August to launch her year abroad, and she still moved about like a mist that hadn’t quite formed and stabilized in her new location. She’d spent several days with Margeaux and her family over Christmas, but their relationship had frozen there. Though Emma saw Anneliese on occasion, the young woman seemed to avoid Margeaux. This morning Anneliese’s brown hair was brushed into a low ponytail that emphasized her high cheekbones and brown eyes. Her form-fitting turtleneck overlaid hip-hugging jeans and

high boots with stiletto heels. Margeaux had to admire her skill at moving without a sound on those spikes.

“Do you have a moment?” Anneliese’s soft voice held a musical tone that hinted at the wind flowing through the trees in the Black Forest near her home in Berlin.

Margeaux resisted glancing at the clock on the wall. There was always something next on her calendar. “Walk with me.”

The boots weren’t so silent as Anneliese followed Margeaux into the tiled hallway.

“Can you help me with the assignment? I do not understand the . . .” She waved her hand as if that would help her pluck the right word from the air. “. . . The orders.”

Margeaux fought to keep her smile in place. She wanted to point Anneliese to the syllabus . . . again. “The key right now is to figure out your topic. The paper is what takes your work to the honors level, because it’s the additional work.”

“Yes, this I know. But the details? Those are unclear.”

“Recheck the assignment on the website. Make a list of specific questions, and we can meet after the break.” Her watch vibrated, alerting her to an incoming text. She glanced at its face. *The department head wants to see you. Now.*

“Sorry, but I have a meeting with my boss. Make that list, and we can talk.”

“Danke.”

“*Bitte.*” The German response brought a small smile to the student’s face, and she paused while Margeaux picked up her pace and hurried across the lawn to the business administration building. What could Timothy Tobias want with her on the spur of the moment? Her mind spun like a carnival ride and her stomach tightened. It was Friday and she was ready for the weekend—a rare one that wouldn’t be filled with grading. She wanted to climb in her car and drive the thirty miles north-east to Sugarloaf Mountain for a bit of hiking if it wasn’t too cold. The exertion combined with the views and time outdoors was exactly what she needed to clear her mind and rebuild for the midterms after spring break.

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Time to breathe. That's what she longed for more than anything.

But if this meeting was like the prior ones with Dr. Tobias, breathing space was the last thing she'd get. The department head would have his own ideas about what her time should be filled with. She'd hear words like *publication*, *student mentoring*, and *service to the department and college*. She could do those, but she longed to invest her time in teaching with the occasional bit of research rather than vice versa. To watch the light bulbs switch on over students as they realized what they learned in her class mattered in their future careers but also met their current needs. Unfortunately, that wasn't what was required to secure tenure.

After dropping her bag on her office chair, she slipped her keys and phone in her suit jacket pocket and grabbed a notepad and pen before walking to Dr. Tobias's office.

Climbing the couple of flights of stairs left her taking a deep breath before rapping on his open door. "You wanted to see me?"

He glanced from his computer screen to her, eyes glazed behind glasses and longish hair ruffled as if he'd gripped it while working a problem. Probably something within his specialty—finance and banking. His bent toward numbers rather than people turned her mind to mush and left her asking why—often wondering what to expect from him. He blinked, then gestured toward the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat."

She shifted a pile of academic journals and papers onto the floor and perched on the edge of the leather chair as she waited. The man was brilliant in front of others, but when he was deep in thought, it could take a while to unearth what he wanted. Even after three years in the business college, she felt like an interloper who had sneaked onto campus and no one had noticed—yet. She needed to remain focused while she wrote and taught, until she had tenure.

"I've learned that Gerald McCormick will retire at the end of the semester." His deep words led her wandering thoughts back to the moment. "That leaves me in a pinch and with a need for someone new to become the assistant department head."

Her brow furrowed as she tried to read the meta-message. "Yes?"

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“I’d like you to apply.” He studied her intently, and she fought the urge to react.

“Why?”

“It will give you the administrative experience you’ll need.”

“Are you asking me to do the job?”

“Apply. Let’s see how the process goes.”

“Who makes the hiring decision?”

“I do, but others will have input.” He leaned back and steepled his hands in front of him. “What do you think?”

“I haven’t considered something like this.”

“It would be a good move if you want to make your career in academia.”

“I do.” More than anything, though an image from January’s hearing and trial flashed through her mind. If that’s how attorneys performed in court, she could do better than what she’d witnessed. Then perhaps she could have prevented David’s death. After all, she taught the law, and you couldn’t do that if you didn’t know it. But she wouldn’t have worked so hard in law school and her clerkship if this, teaching, hadn’t been the goal. She’d created the life she wanted despite what people told her was possible.

He dipped his chin, his hair flopping forward over his eyes before he brushed it to the side again. “You’ll find the information waiting in your inbox. Give it careful consideration.” He nodded again.

“Yes, sir. And thank you.”

A moment later she hesitated in the hallway, slightly dazed as a couple of students brushed past her on the way to the faculty offices that lined either side.

Chapter 3

Monday, March 10

ONCE UPON A TIME, CHASE could walk into court with an idea and a prayer and things happened. Now? He didn't want to be there, and it went deeper than just an uncertainty about the job. He didn't know if his purpose aligned with the work anymore. That unsettled him at his core, making him wonder who he would be if he wasn't a litigator. He tried to shake free of the thought as he made the short drive to the courthouse in Leesburg.

Friday's hearing had been a disaster, followed by the terrible news his client David Roach had died in jail, the apparent victim of a wrong-place, wrong-time situation. Chase had spent the weekend trying to reconcile the loss and couldn't. He agonized over the idea that God could have stopped the tragedy and didn't. David should have had a bright future in front of him, but he'd heeded bad advice from his father and meddling professor.

The result had been deadly, and Chase couldn't reconcile why.

He parked and climbed from the car, the air slightly warmer than it had been over the weekend. He'd gone for a long, cold walk in the foothills of the mountains Saturday but hadn't found the peace he usually did while communing with God in nature. He knew he'd find what he listened for, but God had been frustratingly silent. Nowhere to be found

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as he'd hiked. Instead, Chase was bone-level weary. He couldn't keep fighting for clients who didn't know how to avoid trouble. If he didn't make changes, his practice would kill him. Then he tried to avoid that thought, because the fact was that David should never have been sent to prison.

If the kid had only paid attention to Chase, the one person in his life with courtroom experience.

So did he want to begin his week in court? The answer was no, even if this time he sat in Magistrate Hopkins's courtroom for a quick trial.

"Judge Hopkins, this witness is not qualified to serve as an expert under the *Daubert* standard." Chase leaned into the defense table with his arms relaxed at his sides, a confident thrust to his shoulders. The jury needed to believe he was right even if the judge overruled him.

This was all about planting a reasonable doubt in one juror's mind.

That's all it took.

Elaine Liddell, the deputy commonwealth's attorney, lurched to her feet. "Your Honor." She turned and glared at Chase. "Mr. Crandall obviously ignored the list of this man's qualifications."

As he hoped the jury had. The litany of degrees and board certifications the doctor had earned would weigh a person down. Or bore a person to sleep. Either worked for Chase. He loved the battle of the courtroom.

The judge tapped her glasses against the papers that rested on the raised bench in front of her. "Counselors, let's stay focused." She turned to the jury, the lace collar around the neck of her black robes shifting with the movement. "This court rules Dr. Lynch is eminently qualified to testify as an expert."

Chase hid a grimace at the use of the word *eminently*. Maybe no one on the jury would understand it. At least there wasn't a professor or high school English teacher serving today. "Thank you, Judge."

He unbuttoned his jacket and sank onto the hard wooden chair.

His client, Albert Trales, leaned over. "That go okay?"

He couldn't tell him no. "We'll know soon."

Each criminal defense client deserved a vigorous defense, but normal

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work was nearly beyond Chase's grasp today as he slogged through the grief and questions David's death had generated. What if the same type of accident happened to Albert? That fear, though outsize and ridiculous, still gripped Chase. He couldn't protect his clients in jail. Trials like today's could easily spin out of control with unpredictable moments. He could replace one expert with another, substitute one witness to the crime with another, but the risk and uncertainty remained the same.

Albert had gotten caught in the opioid culture, and some jurors wouldn't understand how unrelentingly the addiction could assert its grip.

What jurors could forget as they drove home was that each defendant deserved a fair trial, an opportunity to confront their accusers. That conviction had lit a fire in Chase's belly throughout law school and his first ten years of practice.

Albert elbowed him. "The judge wants you."

Chase smoothly rose to his feet and rebuttoned his jacket, a sequence of moves he'd made often in court. Had it become too rote?

"Judge?"

The woman eyed him carefully. "If we've regained your attention . . ."

He refused to flinch.

"It's time for cross-examination."

He glanced at the prosecutor, who smirked his direction.

The judge gestured toward the box. "The witness is yours."

Chase's gaze stole to the jury box, where twelve sets of eyes stared back.

Albert slumped back with a groan. "Come on, man."

Chase patted his client's hand in a placating motion. "Thank you, counsel, Your Honor." He squared his shoulders and studied the witness.

Dr. Edward Lynch held teaching privileges at James Madison University and claimed he could prove that Albert waving a gun in the face of the victim had caused the heart attack that killed the older man. If so, the charge would transform a misdemeanor into a felony and the sentence would multiply. He blew out a slow breath and collected his hard-won confidence.

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“Dr. Lynch, did you examine John Lloyd?”

“Yes.”

“How closely to the time of the heart attack?”

“As soon as I was hired by the prosecution.”

“And that was?” Chase had seen the paperwork, but the jury hadn’t. He liked to remind them the man had a pecuniary interest in the success of his testimony.

“Six months ago.”

Chase riffled through a stack of papers on the table in front of him, then dramatically held up a set of papers. “Wasn’t it July 10? More than a year after the heart attack?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” The man shrugged as if the detail couldn’t matter.

“Do you know the condition of John Lloyd’s heart prior to examining him over a year after the heart attack?”

“Not personally, no.”

“Did you take a health history during the examination.”

“Of course.”

“And did you learn anything about John Lloyd’s heart during that history?”

“Like what?”

Chase rummaged through more papers before holding up a thick sheaf. “Like a diagnosis his attending cardiologist made three years prior to the heart attack, which stated after a series of tests that the man had less than twenty-five percent heart function.”

“I saw that in a review of his medical records.”

“Isn’t it true that a diagnosis like that would leave him with a strong chance of a heart attack at any time?” Chase scanned the jury as he waited for the answer. The architect seemed attentive to the line of logic as she met his gaze.

“I suppose.”

“You suppose?” He arched an eyebrow, then quickly continued. “Isn’t it a medical fact that a heart that has compromised function at those levels will make someone more susceptible to a heart attack than you or me?”

The Accused

Dr. Lynch's gaze skittered from Chase to the jury and back before swallowing and nodding. "Yes."

"So Mr. Trales here"—he gestured at Albert—"had nothing to do with the heart attack."

"No. In my expert opinion, the act of forcibly stealing Mr. Lloyd's briefcase contributed to the attack." Perched slightly above the rest in the witness box, the man raised his chin and looked down at Chase.

"But it's not assault and battery. No further questions."

He sank into the chair and felt the lift of what he'd accomplished. He'd taken a disaster and salvaged it. Albert slid down in his chair, and Chase elbowed him to nudge him back up. The jury didn't need to see his client disrespecting the court and them. Not when Chase had successfully questioned the expert's opinion.

An hour later the case headed to the jury. As often happened, the prosecutor was good, but Elaine had left too much riding on the testimony of the cardiologist. An attorney who consulted long enough with an expert believed the testimony or a piece of evidence held the key to the case and got sloppy. Sure, Chase had a momentary lapse, but he'd recovered well. Enough so the jury wouldn't let Dr. Lynch's testimony sway it.

Until they returned a verdict, coffee sounded like the ticket.

He gathered his notes into the rolling case. He saluted the bailiff. "I'll return this to my office and be back." The county courthouse wasn't in Kedgewick but twenty minutes away in the Loudoun County seat of Leesburg. Not as simple as walking across the street to the town square. But it wasn't a commute into DC either.

It wouldn't take that long to make the round trip to Kedgewick.

"I'll be here." The man gestured toward Albert. "I'll keep an eye on him and call when the jury comes back."

Chase grabbed the briefcase handle. "I won't be that long."

Not when his small storefront office filled a spot on the town square. He'd drop off the bulk of the trial documents and then grab a to-go cup of dark roast. At Java Jane's the baristas knew his name and prepared his order before the door closed behind him.

Cara Putman

When he reached his office twenty minutes later, Leigh Lundstrom sat at the desk in the small reception area, a headset strapped on. His right-hand assistant, Leigh served as a combination paralegal and hall monitor. She also made sure his associate stayed on task, as Marcus Shell took each client's plight personally. Chase had originally appreciated that passion, but the pace of it now exhausted him. Marcus would have to learn to balance the highs and lows, or he'd burn out faster than Chase.

"How'd the trial go?" Leigh glanced at his roller bag. "Want me to put that away?"

"Trial was short and good. The best kind." He hoped. "And I've got it. I'm dumping it in my office before I grab coffee. Want anything?"

"And stay up half the night?" She raised an eyebrow in that way all mothers perfected.

"Right." They'd covered this script before, but he'd learned not to forget to ask in case she changed her mind. The one time he had assumed he understood what she'd say, she'd pouted for two days after a particularly rough night with a sick toddler.

"Jim Clary called for you. Something about a civil case or something." She shrugged as she slipped him a sheet of paper. "He was vague but insisted he speak with you. Soon."

"All right." He took the page and read it before placing it in his pocket. "I'll call him back."

"I know. Later or never." The light on the phone flashed, and she pasted on the perky expression she wore when answering in her friendly way.

Chase moved past the desk to the short hallway. An abstract piece a local artist created in her garage brightened the crisp gray walls. He found the slashes of color more interesting than the typical office walls lined with pastoral pictures or photos. He'd invested his funds in the small conference room and adjacent library but stuck to bare bones in his office, using a desk he bought at the college surplus store and a knockoff office chair that looked like it escaped an episode of *Junk Finders*. He didn't need a throne and appreciated the price.

He released the handle to the rolling briefcase, and it coasted to a stop next to his desk.

The Accused

Might as well see what the man wants. He placed the call and waited for an answer.

“This is Jim.”

“Hi, Jim, Chase Crandall returning your call.”

“Thanks for getting back to me so quickly. I have a few questions for you and a possible business proposition. Do you have time to meet in the next few days?”

“Possibly. What’s this about?”

“A client who needs an attorney and is considering bringing one in-house.” Chase heard a few clicks. “I just sent you an email with pertinent details outlined.” The man paused. “When can we meet?”

Chase leaned over and woke up his computer. What would it take to get it to move faster?

He heard the man tap a pen against something hard. “Let’s get it scheduled and then you can read the details. If you hate what you see, you can always call and cancel.”

“All right.” After picking a time, Chase ended the call and glanced through the email. The details were sketched outlines but indicated a client who wanted a dedicated attorney to take care of all the company’s legal needs. The work would be civil, not criminal, and the thought had a little appeal—enough to learn more.

As he glanced at the bare wall and sterile overhead light, he considered what would need to change if he moved into the corporate space. For those concerned about spending years behind bars, image fell off the priority list. Corporate clients paid better with the work more certain, but they also had different expectations.

He might not have a choice though. In the hours after David had died in prison, he’d received a rash of calls from current clients asking if he’d get them killed too. Some said they’d fire him if they had a choice, but since the court had appointed him to represent them, they didn’t. It had been only two days, but he already sensed a downturn in non-court-appointed criminal clients, which could fast-track his decision to make a change.

Most importantly, he needed to get back in the game and back to court.

Cara Putman

He slipped out the rear door and walked along the alley. A few steps later he walked into Java Jane's.

"Yo, Chase." Grayson, the prince of coffee, waved from his position at the oversized espresso appliance. It whirred and steamed like a fantastical steampunk machine. "Typical?"

"The usual."

"Nothing usual about you." The man worked his magic as Chase took his place in the short line.

After the mother with a toddler on her hip ordered, he stepped to the butcher-block counter.

He glanced at the new barista's name tag. Eva. "Chase Crandall."

Her smile was like the sun cracking through the clouds. "Nice to meet you. I'm new and so excited. Grayson's going to teach me how to make drinks." The man cleared his throat, and color climbed into her college-aged cheeks. "But first I have to take your order."

"It's a dark latte." Grayson intoned the words mournfully. "No whip. No sugar. No fun. Kind of like an attorney."

Chase kept a straight face. "If I really ordered like a lawyer, I'd take an Americano."

"Guess I should count my blessings." Grayson rolled his eyes as Eva tallied the order.

Chase tapped his card on the credit card reader, then glanced at his phone. "Gotta get back to court."

"Good thing I've got your drink." Grayson handed it across the counter. "Till next time."

Chase lifted the drink in a salute, then hurried toward the door and straight into a soft mass.

Spring break should have meant Margeaux could finally step into a corner of one of her favorite off-campus sanctuaries and catch up on work. Last week she'd asked students to bring an assignment on paper as well as submit it online so she could step away from the computer for a while.

The Accused

Enough had complied that she could sit at a table in a coffee shop this morning rather than hunch in front of a monitor in her office, where myriad distractions awaited.

The breath oomphed from Margeaux's lungs as she rammed into someone, and something warm splashed across her front. Seriously? All she wanted was a quiet corner to grade the stack of essays she had collected. Without a grading fairy who would magically take the stack and, with a wave of a wand, turn the papers into meaningfully commented-on ones that the students would actually read and respond to, she needed this time.

She glanced down and groaned at the brown liquid discoloring her silk blouse. There was no way to salvage this mess. Then she looked up into soft gray eyes and froze. Oh no. She did not need this. She blinked and turned slightly away, trying to ignore the familiar man.

"You." The word was an accusation, but she didn't stop it.

His mouth opened but no words came out. And that's when she put it together. Chase had been familiar because he was often at the coffee shop at the same time she was. They'd never had a need to speak since they operated in different circles, even if she'd caught him watching her on occasion.

"Adding careless with coffee to careless with my student?" Color rose in his face, but she didn't stop. "Did you miss the day in kindergarten when they taught that caring for others more than yourself is a superpower?" Margeaux swallowed, feeling the warmth soak through her shirt. She knew she wasn't responding rationally, but everything felt raw. "Excuse me, but I need to deal with this."

He scrambled through his pockets. "Here. Send me the bill." He shoved a card at her. "I'm truly sorry." He glanced from her to the street and his lips slipped down. "I just got the call the jury's back. Sorry."

She stepped into the doorway at the same time he did, and they danced around each other.

Then he was gone.

The man was a menace. Parading around like he was good and on the side of justice like a real-life Captain America . . . except he was only watching out for himself.

Cara Putman

She pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to breathe.

She needed to find a new third space, because she couldn't risk running into him again—not considering what he did to her nerves or her clothes.

Margeaux hesitated inside the coffee shop, soft jazz flowing from hidden speakers, and stared at the card. Chase Crandall. No way she'd call him. Instead, she spun on her heel and left the shop, dropping the card in the trash as she walked by. She'd replace the blouse herself rather than rely on the man who sent David Roach to prison to die.