

# PROLOGUE

*St. Mary's County, Maryland*

*Wednesday, 1:14 am*

The road appeared just like any other country road; one lane in each direction, faded striping, lined with lanky loblolly pines on both sides, and illuminated only by the moonlight, when and if the moon bothered to show up. It was miles removed from any major highway, and the only sound was the *swish-swish* of a 13-point buck moving majestically through the woods. As the brown-coated animal approached the road, they could hear the faint drone of an automobile in the distance. Hearing no other sound, the buck quickly crossed the road before the automobile's headlights came into view.

The car's engine slowed, and the car, with Maryland tags, came to a stop on the side of the road near an opening in the trees. Three other sets of headlights were visible farther down the road and were slowly approaching.

With the car's engine still running, a man climbed out of the driver's seat and pushed open a wrought-iron gate stretched across the opening in the trees, revealing an unpaved driveway that led deep into the woods. The man got back in his car and drove down the driveway. One of the approaching cars, with Pennsylvania tags, followed the first car into the gloom of the woods. The second car, with Delaware tags, was not far behind. A final car, with Maryland tags, rolled just past the gate, then stopped. The engine and the lights switched off. A man, roughly six-foot seven tall, got out.

The man, wearing an Army combat camouflage uniform that meshed with the late summer foliage, walked to the mouth of the driveway and poised himself against a tree, making himself almost impossible for passers-by to see unless he revealed himself. And he would do just that if some poor inquisitive soul dared to figure out what was going on at the end of that driveway.

What was there was very nondescript. The driveway ended abruptly at a bank of trees, and a narrow, almost invisible trail led to

a circular clearing a few yards beyond. The clearing was a 25-foot diameter patch of dirt dotted with a few tufts of grass and a mixture of fresh and decaying leaves. At the center of the clearing sat a bunch of smooth stones arranged in a circle, with ashes in the center. Tiki torches stood at 5-foot intervals along the edge of the clearing. To the casual observer, it appeared to be a camping site. But this was private property, converted to function as a clandestine meeting spot that, due to the natural canopy formed by the curve of the tree branches above, was invisible even to flyover aircraft.

Three white men and three black men climbed out of the three cars that had parked at the end of the driveway. Each carried a folding chair. Using flashlights, they trudged along the path until they came to the clearing. One man lit two of the torches using a cigarette lighter, but left the others untouched. They arranged the chairs around the circle of stones and sat down.

They remained silent for a moment, listening and looking around to ensure there were no interlopers or eavesdroppers nearby. The site was fairly remote, with no dwellings or other buildings within a half mile. But their paranoia and need for extreme secrecy demanded that they be extra careful and vigilant.

Satisfied that no other human was anywhere within earshot, one of the black men, the leader of the group, broke the silence. "I have an update on Gary Walls."

The other men leaned forward in interest.

"The Southern District, Georgia sector reports that Mr. Walls was located. He has been taken care of." There was a menace in his voice.

Another man, wearing a gray suit, answered. "That's good news."

The leader nodded. "Indeed it is. If Mr. Walls had told anyone else about us, we might have had to go dark. And that, gentlemen, is not an option." He looked around at the other men, the orange glow from the Tiki torches flickering on his face. "I hope we're on the same page here."

The other men nodded.

"Good. Our man in the Georgia sector is working to locate any other preachers Walls may have told." The leader looked at the

man in the gray suit. "What about the preacher he talked to at the conference?"

The man with the gray suit gave the leader an assured smile. "The plan is in place. Roth's going to take care of that tomorrow, during the rally."

"Make sure Roth knows to do it before the preacher talks to any media. We don't want him blabbing to any news stations about what he knows."

"Don't worry. Once we take care of this, the Maryland and D.C. sectors should be sound."

"Good." The leader looked at another man. "Any news from the Pennsylvania sector?"

The Pennsylvania sector leader said, "Nothing to report."

"Delaware sector?"

The man representing Delaware said, "Nothing to report."

"So, after we take care of the preacher, we can confirm that there are no loose ends in this district?"

The men nodded again.

"Good. We can't afford for anyone to find out about us. It was a huge mistake bringing Gary Walls into our fold to begin with. My team is working on tightening up vetting procedures so that this does not happen again. Gentlemen, I'll stress again that in order for us to accomplish our mission effectively, society at large cannot know we exist. Our adversaries cannot win this war if they have no idea who they are fighting against. Even if we have to silence more people, we cannot give the dogs any trace of our scent. I hope we are clear on that." The leader removed a bulging folded envelope from his jeans pocket and handed it to the man with the gray suit. "Hand this to Roth on the way out. Make sure he doesn't botch this."

The man in the gray suit scoffed while taking the money. He motioned toward the driveway, where the tall man was keeping guard. "Roth is the most ruthless enforcer in this country. When have you ever known him to botch anything?"

"He's also the most expensive," the leader pointed out.

"Well, you get what you pay for. Trust me, at the rally tomorrow, Pastor Benjamin Lyons will be handled, and no one will have a clue what happened."

The leader nodded gently while maintaining a steady gaze at gray suit. "Seems dangerous and ill-advised to do this so publicly, when a clandestine approach might be more effective."

The man in the gray suit looked away. He hated to be second-guessed, especially when he was confident his plan would work. He parted his jacket to put the envelope in his inner jacket pocket. As he did so, he revealed a security access badge hanging on a lanyard around his neck. The badge was labeled with the words *Senior Pastor, Harbor Christian Cathedral*.

The man with the gray suit closed his jacket. "As I explained before, this has to look as if it is connected to the rally, which will throw any suspicion off us in case Mr. Lyons told others about us. This'll work. Trust me."

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### *Freedom Plaza*

*Benjamin Lyons*

*11:16 am, Wednesday*

*Freedom Plaza,*

*Washington, DC*

The preacher stood behind the red oak pulpit and looked out over his audience. As he prepared to speak, his heart felt both elation and disappointment. He and his pastor's coalition had been planning this Rally for Racial Reconciliation for over three months. Several suburban white churches and several urban black churches had agreed to come together to sing, preach and pray, presenting a united front against racism. He quickly estimated there were over 500 people in the crowd standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the concrete plaza in the blazing sun on an eighty-degree day. A few wit-

nessed the event from the fringes. Some stood on the steps of the Wilson Building, the seat of the District of Columbia government, directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from the south side of the Plaza. Others filed in and out of the Marriott Hotel on the north side of the Plaza, stopping long enough to see if the event would interest them and then either staying or moving on. Despite his rally having been scheduled for a weekday morning, Pastor Ben Lyons was pleased with the turnout.

However, Pastor Lyons was not happy about the lack of news media. He saw only one reporter with a tripod-mounted camera close-by. He wasn't sure how many print reporters were there, but there didn't appear to be many. He had sent out press releases and called media contacts weeks before the event, trying to draw attention to societal racism. Pastor Lyons was disappointed there had been no requests for on-location interviews. He knew that without substantial press coverage, events like this were not as effective. *Maybe I would have drawn more media had I held this event on the Capitol grounds instead of the Plaza*, he thought. From his vantage point on the Plaza, he could see the Capitol dome, even though it was fourteen blocks away.

Knowing he would probably get only 15 seconds of coverage on a local station during the C block, he would press on. He pulled a cotton handkerchief from his pants pocket and wiped the sweat from his bald, dark head. He saw he had the crowd's rapt attention—they had been waiting to hear from the man who had championed this cause of racial unity ever since his 17-year-old son disappeared in a Birmingham suburb two years before. Speculation from residents was that a white police officer killed his son in a racial profiling incident, then disposed of to cover up the crime and avoid the ire of the city's black residents. No evidence had ever come forth to support this theory, but Pastor Lyons felt in his spirit that the theory was likely correct.

Pastor Lyons adjusted the microphone, the clunking noise ringing loud over the speakers and the constant roar and drone of nearby traffic. Several pastors, both black and white, stood behind him on the raised platform, fanning themselves under a green tent. Feeling their energy, he started his speech. "First of all, I want to thank all of you for being here today. It warms my heart to know

that so many of you are willing to come together to present a united front, to show our elected officials, our communities, our families and our churches that people of different racial backgrounds can lock arms together, despite the continued racial animosity that exists in our country.”

His remarks earned a few amens from the crowd. He looked over briefly and saw that the news crew was recording his comments on camera. Pastor Lyons couldn't see what station was recording him. He hoped it was the AP, or maybe Reuters, which gave him the chance of getting broader coverage beyond the local channels.

He acknowledged a few key individuals who were there, men and women who had helped him to organize the rally. He gave shout-outs to several who weren't there—his wife, who was at his upper northwest Washington church preparing a luncheon for rally organizers, several D.C. Councilmembers, the mayor, a few other prominent pastors. For good measure, he threw in the reps of the National Park Service, with jurisdiction over Freedom Plaza.

Pastor Lyons continued. “We stand just across the street from the hotel where Dr. Martin Luther King wrote his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, and this plaza is named in honor of him. It is unfortunate that although we have made a few strides in the area of race relations, the—”

They were the last words out of his mouth before something slammed into the outer corner of the pulpit and shattered a chunk into splinters. A few seconds later, Pastor Lyons jerked back and then fell backward on the raised platform.

The crowd stood shocked for a moment. Someone yelled, “He's been shot!” Then, chaos broke loose. Amid screams, shouts, and confusion, some spectators dropped to the ground. The rest of them scattered in various directions, causing traffic to screech to a halt on Pennsylvania Avenue and on 15<sup>th</sup> Street to avoid hitting them. Spectators spewed into the street as fluid as water, knocking down the green metal barriers that surrounded the Plaza, some tripping and falling over them. The pastors standing on the platform ran to the rear and crouched down behind it. A few bravely ran up to the platform to attend to Pastor Lyons. They could see the jagged hole in his jacket just above his waist, and the widening pool of red

moisture surrounding it.

A few spectators ran up the steps and inside the Wilson building, which alerted the guards inside to the melee. "Somebody's shooting," the spectators yelled. The lieutenant in charge of the guards quickly sprang into action. Using an active shooter scenario, he ordered the building shut down, and sent word through the building's intercom that all employees should shelter-in-place, at least until they can determine there was no greater threat. He ordered another guard to dispatch police and an ambulance to Freedom Plaza, although myriads of people had dialed 911 on their cell phones.

Two police officers, who were already in the area, sprinted to the Plaza, guns drawn, to see what was going on and to mitigate any threat. After seeing the officers and deciding there was no longer an immediate threat, the people that stayed at Freedom Plaza gathered around the pastor and prayed. The pastor had slipped into unconsciousness. A woman cradled his head in her lap and rebuked whatever demons interrupted a peaceful event with sickening violence.

A man knelt next to the pastor, his head nodding as the woman prayed, his hand laid on the pastor's shoulder. His actions appeared genuine and caring to everyone around him, but were as fake as the knockoff Gucci loafers he wore.

Just hours before, this man had changed into a black suit from the gray suit he had worn earlier that morning in St. Mary's County.

*Wynn Delano*

*Two hours prior*

*Freedom Plaza*

The assignment editor had called him earlier that morning on his day off. "Windy, get down to Freedom Plaza. Pastor Lyons is giving some sort of rally down there. I'll shoot you the NR."

Wynn Delano, a one-man-band reporter at local station NewsNetwork 10, had only been at the station for a year, not long enough to ruffle feathers by refusing to work on his day off. And besides, all the station's other reporters were across town covering the aftermath of a violent storm that had blown through in the early morning. Wynn was often assigned to do filler stories that aired after sports, stories not important enough to merit airing during the coveted A block. Wynn knew that almost every producer in town thought Pastor Lyons to be a blowhard using his son's disappearance as an opportunity to gain publicity for himself and his church. Most producers had decided not to accommodate Pastor Lyons' media hogging any longer. But one producer for NewsNetwork 10's dinnertime broadcast was a member of Lyons' church. The producer assigned Wynn just so he could save face, although the story stood almost no chance of airing.

Wynn arrived at Freedom Plaza and parked his black Ford Escape in the prohibited parking spots along the northern neck of Pennsylvania Avenue. According to the news release that his station had sent to his cell phone, the rally was scheduled to start at ten; at least three hundred people were already present and watching the stage hands as they installed sound equipment. A group of nattily dressed men and two women stood off to the side of the platform and appeared to be in an impromptu meeting. Wynn saw Pastor Lyons among the group and was tempted to approach and get comments from him before the rally began but decided against it. He was probably too busy and things were too hectic right now. If need be, he could always pull Lyons to the side afterward. Best to see how the event would progress.

Wynn checked himself in his car mirror, hoping that his carefully coiffed black hair, peaches-and-cream skin, and his boyish good looks would one day win him an anchor position, or, at least, the attentions of one of the lovely young corporate ladies he had seen walk past his vehicle.

Wynn popped out of the vehicle and surveyed the Plaza for a moment. He walked to the rear of the SUV, popped the hatch, and pulled out his camera, tripod, and a fistful of cords and microphones. He approached the Plaza, walked up three steps to the Plaza floor, and found an abutment, raised higher than the floor,

where he could set his tripod and record the events without worrying about people walking in front of his camera.

Just as he had set up, a multi-racial choir of about 40 singers took the stage. Wynn pointed the camera toward them, found a good angle, and let the camera record. He hadn't been to church in almost four years, but from the looks of it, he would get plenty of church today.

### Celia Rayburn

*Six minutes before the shooting*

"So, did I get the job?"

That was always Celia's last question at interviews. If she had absolutely no chance at getting the job, that question would make interviewers squirm, which was her sign she should not expect a call back. But if the interviewer was engaging and encouraging, she figured she might have a shot.

The interviewer responded with, "Well, you were better than the last two candidates. We still have a few more interviews to do before we can decide who gets the job."

Ambiguous, but at least it wasn't an outright denial. Celia thanked the interviewer, expressed once again her interest in the job, and stood to leave.

Her interview had taken place at a corner table in the food court of a sixteen-story office building directly across the street from Freedom Plaza. The manager of the pizza place had no office in the booth where he served pseudo-Italian fast food, so he would meet potential employees in the dining area. Celia didn't mind people buzzing around while she was being interviewed. Having come from a family of five siblings, she was used to such distractions.

Celia took the escalator downstairs to the lobby and headed for the Pennsylvania Avenue exit. She felt confident the pizza place guy would call her back and offer her the job. Her ace in the hole was mentioning that she had worked in her father's restaurants in Detroit and Canada.

When Celia left the building, she saw that the rally that had just gotten started when she entered the building was in full swing. The

message of racial unity resonated with her and struck a personal chord. She was a twenty-six-year-old African American woman who, five years ago, married Justin Rayburn, a white man four years her senior. In Celia's old Detroit neighborhood among her peers, marrying outside of her race was an act akin to voting for a Republican.

Celia stopped for a minute, adjusted her purse on her arm, and watched the goings-on. Her parking meter wouldn't expire for another thirty minutes, so she still had enough time to hear the words of the preacher, who had just started his speech. Her silk-linen white suit, the only one she owned, was sharp and professional, yet still lightweight enough for her to survive a few minutes in the heat, although she despised wearing it with a passion. She would have preferred to wear ripped blue jeans and a crop-top, but knew it wasn't proper. Besides, the suit covered the blue-ink lace-and-rose tattoos on her upper arms. She didn't want some stick-in-the-mud potential employer to write her off because of her ink. Her uptown salon had styled her hair into a bob with rose-colored streaks that shone in the sunlight and danced in a slight breeze around a face the color of Ceylon cinnamon and eyes big and round with full eyelashes. She would have preferred her naturally curly blowout Bohemian look.

Celia watched as the pastor's words were cut short with a grunt and a sonorous dull, cracking sound, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to an old rotten oak tree. Bits and pieces of the edge of the pulpit catapulted into the air, and suddenly the preacher was on the ground. There was no sound other than the crashing of wood and the muted thud as the bullet hit Pastor Lyons' body.

Despite the chaos and screams and scattering of several people from various directions of Freedom Plaza, Celia stood transfixed, shocked, unable to believe or register what she was seeing. *Did she just see a man get shot?* She felt the urgency and fear as people ran for their lives. There was no sound of gunfire, and she saw no apparent assailants, but the confusion and uncertainty of what was going on compelled her to move. She rushed back inside the office building and stood in the lobby, watching the scene through the floor-to-ceiling windows. At least ten people gathered around Pastor Lyons' body, and several people ran up the steep stairs to the

Wilson Building to promptly alert the D.C. Protective Service guards inside. And just ahead of her, there was a cameraman, standing on an abutment, who was intently recording everything around him, seemingly unconcerned about his own safety.

The sounds of sirens blared in the near distance over the noise of traffic. Celia watched as two D.C. police cruisers charged the wrong way down 15<sup>th</sup> Street and screeched to a stop on the western edge of the Plaza. Two officers got out of each cruiser, and they immediately squirreled to a far corner any remaining people still on the Plaza. Within three minutes, an ambulance and ten more police vehicles pulled up. Swarms of officers in Crayola blue shirts blocked off streets around the Plaza. One officer shoed the cameraman away from his vantage point just at the edge of the Plaza and stretched yellow crime scene tape around the perimeter.

An office building security guard came to the window and stood beside Celia. "What's going on?"

"A minister got shot over there."

The security guard uttered a vulgar phrase that meant, "No kidding?" He walked out of the building, but a canvassing police officer ordered him to go back inside. The security guard quickly obeyed and stood next to Celia, watching as U.S. Park Police officers arrived, adding to the throng of cops. About fifteen police vehicles and 40 police officers, some holding assault rifles, were now milling around.

"This city," the security guard huffed. "Always something."

Despite the seriousness and the fact that a minister was shot, Celia's mind now drifted to other concerns. *Lord, how angry will my husband be if I come home too late?*

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### *Wynn Delano*

This was Wynn's big opportunity to get out of the C block dungeon. This story just turned from an insignificant fluff piece to the biggest catch in D.C. at the moment. *A shooting of a high-profile D.C.*

*pastor, and he had caught it live on camera.* And he was the only reporter on the scene. He had already called his producers at the station and texted one of his contacts at D.C. Police's public relations office, trying to get some inside information on what had happened. Now he needed to talk to some witnesses, the ones that hadn't scattered away, and get their perspective. And he needed to do it quickly. He had to get this story on the air before the other stations found out about it.

Using his camera, he rolled back the footage and watched it again, trying to catch any details so he could craft more compelling questions for witnesses. As he watched the moment leading to the shooting, something caught his eye, something strange, maybe inconsequential, but suspicious.

Only thirty seconds before the shot was fired, a man, standing on the dais behind Pastor Lyons, looked up and to his right. Wynn froze the footage. Yes, the man was looking upward toward one of the hotel windows. No, this didn't look like a momentary glance at something that had just invaded his peripheral vision. Nor was he looking at a bird flying overhead. Wynn slowed the footage and saw the man glancing furtively around as if to see if anyone was paying any attention to him. From what Wynn could see, all eyes were on Pastor Lyons and no one seemed to notice the man's strange behavior.

The man's next move told Wynn that something was amiss. The man gently took two steps back and moved to the left, away from the pulpit and several feet away from Pastor Lyons. Several seconds later, the gunshot found its target.

Wynn continued to watch. After Pastor Lyons hit the ground, the man stood there, watching. Even as everyone else scrambled away, he stood there, for more than a few seconds, with no sense of surprise or danger. Then he ran off the platform and hid behind it. Due to the chaos on the Plaza, casual witnesses would not have noticed his hesitation and his delay in retreating, but Wynn saw it clearly. This guy was as dubious as a three-dollar bill.

A few seconds later, a beefy police officer ordered him behind the yellow police tape stretched around the block. It was not a problem. Wynn had gotten enough footage to fill out his story. He gathered his equipment and moved outside of the crime scene tape,

looking around for the man he had seen in the video. He spotted him, standing on the other side of the Plaza, behind the crime scene tape, talking with a group of men and a woman as they watched the EMTs prepare Pastor Lyons for transport to the hospital.

Wynn ran this over in his mind. This was his chance. Being on the air before the other stations was no longer a concern. He now had an angle the other stations did not have. He was certain this man knew the shooting was about to happen and moved out of harm's way. The other stations could only report what had happened. Wynn had a suspect.

He grabbed his equipment and hauled it to the other side of the Plaza. He set up the equipment just a few yards away from his suspect and set the camera to record. He then approached the man, who had been eying him since he rounded the corner to the side of the Plaza where he stood.

"Hi," Wynn said to the man, ignoring the others in the group. "I'm Wynn Delano with NewsNetwork 10. May I speak with you for a minute?"

The man, wearing a crisp black suit as if he had prepared to go to a funeral, nodded affably. "Sure." He moved a few yards away from the group, closer to the camera, with Wynn following.

"Again, I'm Wynn Delano." He extended his hand. "Your name is?"

The man reluctantly shook Wynn's hand, then hesitated. "Um, I'm Jonathan Newberry."

"It looks like you were close to the pastor. I wanted to get some on-the-air comments from you about the shooting." Wynn removed his notepad from his pocket. "Would that be okay?"

"We were friends, but I wouldn't say we were close."

Wynn noticed the man's use of past tense. *We were friends*. Was he so sure that Pastor Lyons was already dead? "No, I mean you were standing right next to him," Wynn clarified.

"I'd prefer not to comment." Jonathan avoided eye contact with Wynn. "My friend has been shot, and I'm not in any mood to make any comments at this time." He looked to the right and saw that the EMTs were moving the pastor on a stretcher toward the ambulance.

"I understand that, but there is some footage on the video that

makes you look rather suspicious. I'd like to ask you about before I turn it over to the police."

Wynn hoped his bluff would work. He had no intention of turning the footage over to the police, and such a thing would have to be handled by his bosses, anyway. It surprised him that no cops had requested his footage, even though he was recording. But in this age of video-enabled cell phones, umpteen people probably caught that shooting on camera. Maybe the cops had all they needed from other people's footage.

Jonathan's eyes finally turned to Wynn. "I need to get to the hospital to see about my friend. Can I speak to you there? I should be in the waiting area."

Wynn could tell he had gotten this man's attention. "Do you know what hospital?"

"GW, I believe."

"Not a problem. I'll meet you there." Wynn pulled a card out of the cardholder in his pocket and handed it to Jonathan.

Jonathan glanced at the card, then moved away. "I'll see you there."

"Thank you." Wynn watched as Jonathan joined the group again as they gathered near the ambulance.

Wynn needed someone else to comment. He looked across the Plaza, remembering earlier seeing a petite black woman with rose-colored streaks in her hair standing not far away from where his camera had been perched. The woman was pretty and was professionally dressed, and he was instantly attracted to her. Now he had a reason to approach her. He needed someone like that in his life rather than the Emo women he usually hung out with.

Wynn gathered his equipment again and walked to the other side of the Plaza, near the office building where he had seen the woman. If she was still there, he might kill two birds with one stone: get a comment for his story, and get her telephone number. If he did that, it would be a relatively successful day.

As Wynn rounded the Plaza, Jonathan Newberry did not take his eyes off him.

*Celia Rayburn*

The urgency of danger seemed to have passed, and there was nothing else to see, so Celia decided to get home before her meter expired and a D.C. parking control officer slapped her car with a pink love note. As she walked out of the building, a man approached her directly, as if he had every intention to speak with her and no one else.

“Did you see that?” Wynn asked her.

“See what?” Celia responded, thinking how rude of this man to ask questions before he introduced himself.

“Pastor Lyons get shot.”

“Yeah. I was looking right at it.”

“Would you be willing to be interviewed on camera?”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Wynn was a little miffed that he still had to introduce himself, even though he had been filing stories on the air for the station for a year now. Maybe she wasn’t local, or maybe she didn’t watch the news. Wynn gathered his equipment on his left arm and extended his right hand. “I’m Wynn Delano, a reporter with NewsNetwork 10.”

Celia shook Wynn’s hand. “Celia.” She intentionally left out her last name.

“Celia, would you be willing to give an interview on camera about what you saw across the street?”

Celia quickly agreed. Being on the news would give her a readily confirmable alibi on why she was getting home so late. Plus, the exposure couldn’t hurt her job prospects.

“Cool. Give me a minute to set up.” Wynn found a spot directly in front where he could interview Celia against the backdrop of Freedom Plaza. Once he was set up, he motioned for her to come over and had her stand in front of the camera, her back to Freedom Plaza. Wynn pulled a notepad and pen out of his pocket, switched on the camera, and started his interview.

“Please state your full name,” Wynn asked.

“Okay. Celia Rayburn.”

“Can you tell me what you saw over there, Celia?”

Celia recounted everything she had seen from the moment she walked out of the office building following the interview. Wynn periodically interrupted with questions to get more detail. When

the interview was done, he switched off the camera and nodded his thanks.

“Appreciate it, Celia.” Wynn offered his business card. “You know, I’d really like to thank you by taking you to dinner.”

Celia scoffed at first, but then checked him out. He was decent looking. Not the most handsome man she had ever seen, but since she was certain she would be in divorce court with her husband within a year, she would entertain his interest. A dinner wouldn’t hurt. She momentarily wondered what it was about her that attracted so many white boys.

“I’ll call you,” Celia said, intending to control the communication so her husband didn’t discover.

Wynn had heard that before. He knew he would never hear from her again. “Not a problem. Call me anytime, day or night.”

Celia heard a siren and looked back at the Plaza. The ambulance, with Pastor Lyons inside, was speeding away to the hospital. Some police officers were milling about while others were talking to the witnesses who had not run away. She watched as Wynn dismantled his equipment and made his way back over to the Plaza, hoping to speak to an on-site police supervisor about what had happened.

Celia, feeling as if there was nothing more to see, headed back to her car, knowing she would have a whopper of a story to tell when she got home.

## CHAPTER TWO

Celia and Justin

*August 2012*

They had been legal adults for several years, but both twenty-one-year-old Celia Wise and her sister, 23-year-old Meagan Wise, had, only now, defied their parents' conservative values and celebrated at the Loris Nightclub in downtown Detroit.

Meagan Wise had just landed a job as an on-air reporter at a local Detroit television station. The achievement was especially noteworthy because it was unheard of for such a young candidate with no prior experience to be hired as a reporter in a big city market. Yet, Meagan had prepared years for this, starting from her childhood days when she would mimic mentor-in-her mind Carole Simpson, studying her voice, cadences, and mannerisms.

Meagan had heard her parents say many times that the Lord had blessed her, and they planned to have a fellowship celebration at their church for her. That was fine, but Meagan wanted to party. *Really party.* So, with her younger sister in tow, she stepped out on a hot August Friday night wearing the sexiest red dress she could find and walked into the Loris Nightclub at 10 pm like she owned the world.

Celia, two years younger, eight inches shorter, and much more introverted than her older sister, had never been in a nightclub before now. This was not only due to her more reserved nature and the Christian values that were a mainstay in her family home, but she could not legally go to a nightclub until she had turned 21. Nonetheless, she was so proud of her sister that she readily agreed to hang out with her, knowing she might not see her sister as frequently once her busy career kicked off.

A few men sized up the two beautiful women immediately after they walked in the noisy club. Within an hour, several men had propositioned Meagan, and she soon accepted an offer to dance from a tall man who looked to be ten years her senior. While Celia sat at the table alone, a handsome guy approached her.

"Hi, I'm Justin." He pointed to her nearly empty Moscow Mule sitting on the table. "Can I buy you another drink?"

Celia smiled and nodded, which Justin took as permission to fetch her a drink. When he turned to go to the bar, Celia checked him out. Besides his deep voice, his perpetual tan, unruly brown hair, square face, prominent cheekbones, and lanky frame gave off the vibe of a schoolboy fresh out of puberty, although he had to be

at least 21 years of age to get into the club.

After ordering a Mule and a Jack Daniels from the bar, Justin sat and took in Celia's round face, big, round eyes, and bushy curly brown hair. "May I ask your name?"

Megan had warned Celia never to give her real name in a club, just in case a creepy stalker guy wanted to track her down. Maybe that was Meagan's experience, but Justin seemed safe to her. "I'm Celia."

"Pretty name for a pretty girl."

"Thanks."

"You know, this is awkward for me. I don't go to clubs often," Justin admitted.

"Neither do I." Celia sipped on her drink.

"You from around here?"

"Born and raised in Detroit. What about you?"

"No, I'm not from around here. I'm from Baltimore."

"What brings you to Detroit?"

"Automotive conference. My employer sends several of us every year. One of those boring things you have to endure in exchange for getting a free trip out of town and a nice hotel room." Justin shifted in his seat. "A couple of guys wanted to come out to the club to unwind a bit, and so here I am. It was either that, or sit in a hotel room by myself watching *Sons of Anarchy*. What about you?"

"Celebrating with my sister. She just got a great job."

Justin looked around. "Who's your sister?"

Celia directed his attention to the center of the dance floor. "That's her in the red."

Justin nodded, staring, for a little longer than he should have, at the woman in the red dress grinding and bouncing against a man that looked old enough to be her father. Justin returned his attention to Celia. "Doesn't look like she's going home alone tonight."

Celia drew back and frowned. "What does that mean? Are you saying my sister is a ho?"

Justin held up his hands as in surrender. "Not saying that at all."

"Sure sounds like it."

Justin stumbled over his tongue a few times, trying to justify his flip comment. After failing miserably, he said merely, "I apologize. I didn't mean any offense."

"My sister is an upright, Christian woman," Celia added. "She's having a bit of fun, but she's not going home with any man tonight."

"Pardon my question, but if she's a Christian woman, what's she doing here?"

"Christians can enjoy good music and dance just like anybody else." Celia knew how much her parents would give her a good tongue-lashing if they heard her say that. "Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean you can't have fun."

"Well, I hope you forgive me for putting my foot in my mouth." Justin's lips curled into a smile. "I really am a great guy if you get to know me. And just so you know, I'm not here on the prowl. You seemed like a nice young lady, and I wanted to talk to you. No strings attached."

"You expect me to believe that?" Celia scoffed. "Guys don't come to clubs just to 'talk' to girls." She made air quotes as she said the word *talk*.

"Well, like I told you, I don't really go to clubs, so I don't know what they do or don't do in clubs. But I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't hoping for a friendship out of this."

"Why do you want to be my friend? You don't even know me."

"There's something about you," Justin said without a bit of hesitation.

Celia scoffed.

"No, really, that's not just a line," Justin continued. "There's something innocent, fresh about you. I mean, even the way you dress. All these other girls got everything hanging out, but you show up with a pair of conservative black slacks and a blue blouse. I mean, you could be just at home at church in that outfit. When you see that kind of purity in a nightclub like this, it makes you kind of curious."

Celia scoffed again. "Translation: I can't have my way with all these bad girls in this club, but a goody-two-shoes like her I can have my way with."

Justin lowered his head. "You really got me pegged all wrong. Why don't you let me take you out to dinner, so I can prove it? Again, as just friends."

Celia couldn't avoid being attracted to this man's confidence and

irascible charm. But she would need to talk to this man more before deciding on any dates with him. So, there in the club, they would continue to talk until 1 am, a conversation which ended with an exchange of numbers and promises to keep in touch.

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After calling his producer and updating him on the situation downtown, Wynn Delano headed to GWU Hospital and parked in a public underground lot in a building across the street from the hospital. Knowing that due to patient privacy rules he could not record any footage inside the hospital, he left the camera equipment inside his SUV, took only his notepad and pen, and walked across 23<sup>rd</sup> Street to the entrance of the hospital emergency room. After checking in with the security guard, Wynn walked through the ER waiting area, passed through a set of double doors and found the visitor lounge area, where he found a sizable number of dignified-looking people standing around talking in three separate groups. He noticed Jonathan Newberry in one group and stood to the side until Jonathan noticed his presence. Jonathan excused himself from the group and walked over to Wynn.

“What did you want to ask me, Mr. Delano?” Jonathan asked, annoyed that Wynn had followed up on his request to meet him at the hospital.

Wynn motioned his head toward the lounge area door. Both men stepped out into the corridor. Wynn waited until the corridor was clear before he spoke. “I need you to explain something to me. Just before Pastor Lyons was shot, I saw you glance up at something, and then move a few feet away from the pastor. Now, someone looking at that might think you were trying to avoid getting shot yourself. But I’m certain that’s not the case. So, what happened?” Wynn flipped his notepad to an empty page and held his pen ready to write.

Newberry scoffed, and his eyes darted back and forth before he answered. “That’s simple to explain. The sun was in my eyes, and I was trying to get to a spot where the glare wouldn’t be in my eyes.”

Wynn knew immediately that was a lie. As a reporter quasi cameraman, he had to study the sun’s position in the sky to cap-

ture the most effectively lit footage. He knew that the sun was above Newberry's head, and slightly behind, but not in a position to shine glare directly into his eyes. Nonetheless, he jotted down Newberry's response and then went on to the next question.

"You also didn't seem surprised that Pastor Lyons was shot. You just stood there for a few seconds, almost as if you knew it was going to happen."

Newberry stood there for a moment, giving Wynn the blankest of expressions. He finally drew near to Wynn just a hair short of violating his personal space. "Are you accusing me of something, Mr. Delano?"

Wynn dared not answer that question as affirmatively as he wanted to, for Newberry was close enough to sucker-punch him. Instead, he responded, "I'm not accusing you of anything. I just want answers."

"Why is that important?" Newberry was close enough that Wynn could smell the mint of his chewing gum. "You report that Pastor Lyons got shot, and that's it. Why am I so important to your story?"

"Because if something looks suspicious, it's my duty to report it to the cops," Wynn answered with as calm a voice as possible. "It keeps our relationship with the police tight in case we need something from them. Now, if I am misreading the situation, I would just as soon keep the footage out of the cops' hands."

"So, the police don't have it?"

"Nobody has it but me."

"Hmm." Newberry removed his smartphone from his pocket and punched and swiped while he spoke. "Well, like I said, I was trying to avoid the sun. And the reason why I did not respond with panic, like so many others did, is because I did two tours in Ramadi during the Iraq War." Newberry looked up from his phone at Wynn. "I'm used to people being gunned down around me. My first instinct is to swoop in and try to save my fallen comrade, and that's what I did."

"Hmm, I see." Wynn finished taking notes, and then looked up at Newberry. "I guess that's fair. I mean, why would a preacher be involved in getting another preacher shot, right? I mean, preachers can sin just like anybody else, but usually, their sin is getting horny,

not committing homicide.”

Newberry’s eyes narrowed. “Any other questions for me?”

“How’s the pastor doing?”

“Not sure. If you stick around for about 15 minutes, I may be able to get some information for you.”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

Newberry headed back to the lounge area. Wynn flipped the notepad shut. He still didn’t believe Newberry’s story, and that made him want to put on the mantle of an investigate reporter. Wynn had another two hours before he had to turn in his footage for the early afternoon newscast. He intended to stick around and talk to some other witnesses before he left and then head back to Freedom Plaza to talk to investigators and prepare for a live shot for the afternoon newscast.

Newberry walked into the lounge but did not rejoin his conversation group. Instead, he retreated to a far wall out of earshot of the others in the room and dialed a number on his phone.

A voice with a German accent answered, “Hallo.”

“This isn’t done,” Newberry said. “He’s still alive. And a reporter caught the whole thing on video.”

“What reporter?”

“His name is Wynn Delano, out of News Channel 10. He has some footage that may incriminate me. I need you to take care of it.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s here at GW. I can text you a link to his online profile. You may be able to catch him on the way out of the hospital if you get here in time.”

“On my way.”

“Don’t do it anywhere near the hospital.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be handled.”

*12:16 p.m., Wednesday*

Celia’s apartment was on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of a luxury sixteen story high-rise in Silver Spring, a city in Maryland at the upper north-eastern edge of the District of Columbia. The neighborhood was

downtown Silver Spring, just over the D.C. line, boasting a large shopping and dining district. The one-bedroom apartment cost \$1700 per month and had a great view of downtown Silver Spring. It was the only apartment she had lived in since leaving Detroit five years before and was a far cry fancier than any flat she had rented in the Motor City.

Yet she still dreaded coming home because of who was waiting for her inside.

When she inserted the key in the door, she hoped — prayed — that he wasn't at home. Her hopes were dashed when she opened the door, and a strong smell of skunk weed assaulted her nose.

Celia rushed inside, dropped her purse on the carpet, and headed for the kitchen just to the right of the door. She grabbed the aerosol air freshener from under the kitchen counter and sprayed liberally around the living room and in the outside corridor near the door. Lord, she couldn't stand that smell. She quickly closed the door and headed to the bedroom.

Justin Rayburn lay on the queen-sized bed, a joint smoldering in the ashtray on a nightstand next to the bed. He wore only a pair of dingy, wrinkled boxer shorts. A daytime talk show was playing on the flat screen TV affixed to the wall across from the footboard of the bed. As Celia entered, Justin never took his eyes off the TV.

"J, I thought I told you, you can't smoke in here," Celia's voice trembled slightly. "This is a non-smoking building."

"Who are these people to tell me what to do in my own apartment?" Justin's defiance rode on a very smooth, deep voice.

"It's *my* apartment," Celia said with an edge that on any other day would have earned her a smack in the face. But thanks to the effects of the weed, Justin was much too mellow now. It was a different story when he had three or four boilermakers in his system.

"How'd the interview go?" Justin feigned interest.

"Might be a possibility."

"What took you so long?"

"Something happened downtown. Somebody shot a preacher speaking at a rally. I saw the whole thing."

Justin grabbed the remote and switched channels. "Nothing on TV about it."

"It's probably gonna air on Channel 10 tonight. The reporter in-

interviewed me.”

“Why d’you do something dumb like that?”

Celia was used to Justin criticizing her, but this time, it especially bugged her. She had told him she saw a shooting, and all he could think to do was to call her dumb. Maybe she was, for thinking that Justin would care about her enough to ask how she was doing. “Don’t be dramatic. I just told him what I saw.”

“Like I said, dumb.”

“Dumb how?”

“Snitches get stitches.”

Celia scoffed. “I wasn’t snitching. I don’t even know who did the shooting.” Celia turned toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Justin asked.

“To make lunch,” Celia responded. “And to put something out for dinner, if you don’t mind.”

Getting no further response from Justin, Celia kicked off her shoes, left the room and headed to the kitchen. The kitchen was a lot smaller than she desired, with only a stove, a refrigerator, and six feet of faux oak counter space spilt in half by a stainless-steel sink. It was a kitchen made for people who didn’t cook often. However, Celia didn’t see it as an issue when he first rented the apartment. There were so many restaurants nearby, she knew she wouldn’t spend much time cooking.

She opened the refrigerator and found one package of chicken legs, the only thing edible in the fridge except for a carton of milk and two half-drunk bottles of beer. Food was scarce these days. Justin had been unemployed for several months after losing his job as a car mechanic because he couldn’t stop getting high. They were two months behind in rent, and Justin’s meager unemployment payments weren’t helping much.

Celia’s attempt to find employment was the last-ditch effort to get money flowing into the house before they got evicted. At least, that’s what she wanted Justin to believe. But Celia’s real plan was to make enough money to get as far away from Justin as humanly possible.

Celia switched on the kitchen radio, hoping the smooth sounds of singer Jill Scott would infuse pleasure into what had been a challenging day.

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It may have been the chaos of the event, or the uncertainty of what had happened, but no one at the hospital would go on record with Wynn. His statement from Jonathan Newberry and the on-camera interview from Celia would have to do. He could always get more from the Metro police PIO.

He needed to get back to Freedom Plaza to meet the production truck and prepare for a live shot teaser before the afternoon newscast. His producer had been hounding him to get the footage to the station quickly, as other news stations had now heard about the shooting and were likely headed downtown for their own live shots.

Wynn, confident he had gotten as much information from the hospital as he could, left the ER just before 2:00 pm. He walked a block to the public parking garage, retrieved his SUV, and headed out of the garage into ever-increasing weekday traffic. He had only an eighteen-block drive from the hospital to Freedom Plaza, a route that would take him past the White House and the Ellipse. But in city traffic, it could take almost a half-hour to get there.

Making the left turn from 23<sup>rd</sup> Street onto Virginia Avenue, he was barely five blocks from the hospital when he heard the familiar chirp of a police siren behind him. In his rear-view mirror, Wynn saw the red and blue light bar flashing from inside the vehicle, but the car didn't appear to be a standard marked police cruiser. Nonetheless, he pulled over into a metered parking space directly across from the US State Department. The police car stopped behind him and to the left, blocking off one lane of Virginia Avenue.

The man who got out of the police car was not a uniformed cop, but had a badge around his neck. *Maybe he's a detective*, Wynn thought. The man approached Wynn's vehicle and leaned down. "Good afternoon, sir. You know why I pulled you over?"

"Not a clue," Wynn said.

"You made an illegal left turn back there."

That struck Wynn as strange. "I didn't see any signs saying I couldn't."

"You must have missed it. License and registration, please."

Wynn knew it was no point arguing with a cop. Since he was on

the clock, he'd let the station's lawyers fight for him. He fished his wallet out of his rear pocket and handed the officer his license and registration card.

"Be back in a few minutes." The officer walked back to his vehicle and got inside. As Wynn looked back, he could see another shadowy figure sitting in the passenger's seat. Wynn figured it was another cop.

Wynn faced forward, checking his watch. He had no history of moving violations, so he fully expected a warning. He hoped it came quickly, so he could get to Freedom Plaza.

Suddenly the police car switched off its light bar and shot off. Wynn watched it pass by him and head straight down Virginia Avenue. "What's this guy doing?" he said aloud. "He has my license and registration." He continued to look down the road to see where the police car was going. It had registered much too late that when the car passed by, the second person was no longer in the car.

He heard his unlocked passenger door open. By the time he could turn toward it, a menacing-looking tall man was sitting in his passenger seat, pointing right between Wynn's eyes the largest bore barrel of a gun he had ever seen. "Give me all the tapes you recorded today." His accent was thick German.

"Back there," Wynn responded, shaking and without an ounce of hesitation.

The tall man reached for the camera bag on the rear seat. He rummaged through it and found several HDCAM videotapes. "Which one did you use to record the shooting today?"

"It's still in the camera," Wynn pointed again to the rear seat.

The tall man dropped the camera bag at his feet, then leaned back, the gun still pointed at Wynn's head.

"Drive."

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It was 5:30 pm when Justin suddenly announced, "I'm going out for a minute."

Celia knew what that meant. He was headed to a bar, where he would hang out for a few hours and then come home drunk, if he came home at all. Celia almost wished he *wouldn't* come home.

When he stayed out all night, the buzz would wear off, and she stood little chance of being beaten because of the least little thing she said. She tried to convince herself that when he stayed out all night, he was just sleeping it off in his car or on a park bench somewhere. It couldn't be that he was with another woman, because who, other than her, would want a drunk, unemployed stoner? These were the things she told herself to make herself feel better. But her woman's intuition never stopped nagging her, and it told her he was likely hanging out with some woman who was as much a loser as he was. But it also meant that between his episodes of intoxication and womanizing, he had little interest in her, which was all right with Celia.

At 5:58 p.m., Celia reclined in her living room on a modernesque aqua leather couch she had bought from a nearby furniture store during her more lucrative days. She favored pastels, as everything else in the living room was white or pink. She switched the flat screen TV to channel 10 and watched the teaser while she enjoyed fresh-out-of-the-oven barbecue chicken and some canned green beans. Celia was disappointed to see that the teaser did not mention the pastor's shooting.

Celia grabbed the remote and switched to another channel, and then another, and then another. All the other local channels had the pastor's shooting as the lead story and were working the angle that the shooting was likely a hate crime in response to the racial unity aspect of the rally. Some channels had obtained cell phone footage from attendees at the rally.

Celia turned back to channel 10, hoping that maybe they would cover the story later. She eventually watched the entire half hour telecast, but there was only a passing mention of the Plaza shooting from the anchor. No footage, no interview. Her fifteen minutes of fame dwindled to nothing.

Celia grabbed her purse and pulled out her phone and Wynn's business card. Within five minutes she had accessed several TV and print news sites on her phone; all of them listed the Plaza shooting as one of their top stories. On NewsNetwork 10, only an AP report, but no footage or interview.

Celia read all the stories and pieced together a few facts. Police were investigating the shooting as a hate crime due to several

threatening racial messages left on the pastor's voice mail and social media accounts. They guessed that the shot likely came from a sniper in one of the buildings surrounding Freedom Plaza and that the bullet that had struck the pastor was from a military grade weapon. This wasn't a casual drive-by from some street hood. This was a carefully calculated assassination attempt.

But the best part of the story for Celia was that the pastor was still alive. In critical condition, but alive. She prayed, as she had done several times that day, that the pastor would recover from his injuries.

Then she looked at Wynn Delano's business card. She thought about calling him, if only to discover why NewsNetwork 10 had no footage of the shooting. At least, that would be her excuse for calling. She knew that after discussing the reasons for the lack of coverage that Wynn would segue the conversation into a more personal one. Then, she could decide if she wanted to risk cheating on her husband and go out with this guy.

After a few minutes, Celia thought the better of it and decided not to call, at least not now. She had no desire to sneak around Justin, although she was certain he was sneaking around her. No, first things first. Get enough money, then an apartment away from Justin, then the date with the forlorn news reporter.

Celia slipped the card back into her purse, hoping that within a month, she could put that card to use.

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### *November 2012*

It was three months later when Celia decided that her relationship with Justin was serious enough to warrant his meeting her parents. One November evening, Celia picked up Justin from the airport and drove to her parents' modest Alpheus Street home for dinner. They parked on the street outside of the house, after which Celia felt the need to prep Justin before they entered the house.

"Okay, you remember what I told you about my parents, right?" Celia

said.

Justin removed his seat belt. "Yeah. And I should be sweating bullets right now."

"It'll be okay." Celia brushed a speck of lint off her black polyester coat. "Just remember that they are very straight-laced. They probably won't like you, but I'm not doing this because I want to get them to like you. I just want to give them the opportunity to formally meet you, but no matter what they say, remember that I love you and that the decision to be with you is mine."

"I'll remember that, babe."

"Having said that, please don't say anything that'll set them off."

"I'm sure they are not that bad, Celia."

"Are you kidding?" Celia took the keys out of the ignition and shoved them into her brown Coach purse. "Think of the most judgmental Christian you have ever encountered. Multiply that by 100, and you have my parents."

"Don't worry. I'll keep my abundant arsenal of four-letter words to myself. And I won't tell them that I strangle chickens after midnight."

"I'm serious, Justin." Celia leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Just be good."

"Best behavior."

When they got out of the car, Justin looked around. Men sitting on stoops of run-down houses eyeballed him, their breath vapor emitting furiously in the 30-degree chill. "You grew up in this neighborhood?"

"Yep." Celia walked around to his side of the car.

"Why is everybody staring at me? They've never seen a white boy before?"

"Usually if a white boy is in this neighborhood, he is either a cop or looking for drugs. They're trying to guess which one of them you are. You grew up in BMORE. You know the deal."

Celia and Justin walked through the gate and approached the front door. Before Celia could get her hands on the door knob, the door swung open, and standing there just beyond the threshold was a thin, ebony-skinned woman with black tresses hanging to her shoulders.

"Baby!" Marjorie Wise's ebullient greeting made it seem as if she hadn't seen her daughter in years; in fact, they had seen her the day before. Marjorie stepped forward and gave her daughter a hug; Celia was grateful that her adult years had not robbed her of appreciating her mother's embrace.

After the hug, Celia enthusiastically looped her arm with Justin's and almost shoved him in front of her mother. "Mom, this is Justin."

Justin got an identical greeting, then Marjorie swept them in the house and shut the door behind them. The living room was small but cozy, well-furnished, with several family photos and knick-knacks neatly hung on walls and arranged on table tops. After Marjorie took their coats, Justin's attention went to a large photo hanging on a nearby wall.

Marjorie noticed his interest. "That's my family at Tiger Stadium, the last game the Tigers played there. Celia was only seven years old in that picture. She was such a tomboy." Marjorie leaned forward and pointed out Celia in the photo.

Justin cut an eye at Celia and smiled. "She's so cute."

Celia rolled her eyes.

"Celia's father was a caterer for the team back then," Marjorie noted. "We took this before the game started. There's Selig, Archer, and Moehler. There's my husband, and my daughters Rosalyn, Meagan, and Hope, and my sons Brian and Lance."

"Pretty large family."

"Yes, and they've all been a blessing. None of them have been in jail or been arrested. None of them are on drugs. It's through God's grace and mercy that I was spared from that kind of headache."

Celia sensed a preaching spell from her mother coming on, so she quickly interjected. "Where's Dad?"

"I'll give you one guess."

"In the kitchen?"

"Where else? Putting the final touches on his chicken."

Celia elaborated. "Dad makes great charbroiled chicken. He's planning to open his own restaurant."

"It smells great," Justin said.

"I'll tell him you're here." Marjorie excused herself and disappeared into the dining room, headed toward the kitchen.

"Your mom seems nice." Justin wrapped an arm around Celia.

"I'm glad you like her," Celia stated. "I hope they feel the same about you after dinner."

A few seconds later, Marjorie walked in with her husband. George Wise was, similar to his wife, tall and thin. His salt-and-pepper closely cropped hair revealed an age on the east side of 50. Many had mistaken them for brother and sister, which the Wises explained was due to God drawing them so close together they almost looked alike.

George Wise wiped his right hand on the side of his dad jeans and extended it toward Justin. "I'm George."

"I'm Justin." Justin almost winced at how firm George's handshake was. *Was this guy trying to squeeze my hand off?* "Nice to meet you."

"Same here." George looked past Justin at his daughter. "Hey, Pookie."

"Hey, Daddy." Celia practically ran to him and embraced him.

Justin observed their long hug and knew that Celia and her father were close. *Daddy's girl.* At that moment, something ignited within Justin, a spark of jealousy that caused him to dislike Celia's father even before he got to know him.

During dinner, Justin would regale the Wises with stories of growing up in Baltimore, being descended from Scottish immigrants who fled to the ports of Baltimore during the Great Irish famine. He would try to impress them with his strong family ties—his mother and father were office workers in Leesburg, his sister was married with two children and living in Locust Point, his cousins, aunts, and uncles were many and scattered between Maryland and Virginia; just for good measure, he even threw in a mention of his uncle, who was a pastor in Columbia, Maryland. The Wises listened intently during dinner, saying little, reserving their questions until Marjorie had served the chocolate cake for dessert. It was then that George Wise would begin what appeared to Celia as a thinly veiled interrogation.

"So, Justin, what church do you attend?"

Celia had prepared him for this question, so he confidently answered, "Walk in the Spirit Church in Baltimore." It was the name of a church he had attended twice in his teens but had not been to since.

"Your pastor's name?"

Justin made up a name; he doubted that George Wise would check. "Pastor John Mitchell."

"When the last time you attended?"

Justin made up another lie. He wanted so badly to impress George if only to please Celia. "A couple of weeks ago."

"What did the pastor preach about?"

Now that question Justin was unprepared for. He cut an eye at Celia, who had picked that moment to pop a morsel of cake into her mouth and avoid his gaze.

"Uh, well..."

Both George and Marjorie leaned forward, eagerly awaiting his re-

sponse.

“Actually, I was helping a deacon with some things downstairs, so I didn’t hear the message.”

George and Marjorie looked at each other. They knew a lie when they heard one. Celia’s downcast expression was as big a tip-off as anything. Marjorie stood and cleared empty plates from the table. Celia looked up and managed an uncomfortable smile, as she thought the questioning was over.

But George was not finished.

“Tell me what your beliefs are, son.”

To Justin, this seemed like an easy question. “Well, I believe in Jesus.”

“What about him do you believe?”

“Well, I believe He is the son of God.”

George merely looked at Justin, waiting to hear more. When Justin handed him a confused look, George would not relent. “Well, you believe. The Scripture says that even the devils believe and shudder. Tell me about your faith, son, and the outworking of it.”

Justin swept a hand across his forehead and again glanced at Celia, hoping she would say something to bail him out. To his surprise and chagrin, Celia didn’t utter a word. Knowing anything he said theological would likely draw more questions from George, Justin finally broke down.

“Sir, I gotta be honest with you. I haven’t been to church in years, and I don’t have a lot of faith. To tell you the truth, I’m not even sure God is real.”

Celia’s head popped up as if it were on a spring. *Not sure God is real.* He could have said anything but *that*. She glanced over at her father, whose face had become blank. She quickly tried to deflect. “Daddy, how’s the progress going with opening the restaurant?”

George turned to his daughter with the same blank expression. “Going fine, honey. There’s a place closing over on 8 Mile next week, so that looks like a good possibility.” George rose from the table and, without another word, headed into the kitchen, leaving Celia and Justin staring at each other wondering what had just happened.

A half hour later, while Justin relaxed in the living room, George and Marjorie summoned Celia upstairs to their bedroom. Once she arrived, George shut the door behind her. “Pookie, what are you thinking?”

“Dad...”

Marjorie chimed in. “This man doesn’t even believe in God. What are

you thinking getting yourself hooked up with this man?"

"Mom, he's a good man. He doesn't believe in God now, but I'm sure he'll change." Celia walked past her parents and sat on the edge of the bed. "Things are complicated for him right now. He's been through some stuff, and he's just doubting right now."

"I'm not sure I want my daughter dating a man who doesn't believe." George quieted his voice so it didn't travel. "And a liar to boot. We taught you better than that."

"Yeah, I know, Dad. Being unequally yoked."

"Exactly. So why would you go against what God wants for your life?"

Celia looked down, trying to fashion words to answer her father. She noticed the Bible sitting on the nightstand and glanced away from it. "Dad, Mom, you know I love you, right?"

Marjorie wasn't having it. "Uh huh. But?"

"Maybe your beliefs aren't all there is of God."

George furrowed his eyebrows. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Daddy, you used to take me all over the country to broaden my horizons, so I wouldn't think that the ghetto was all there was to life. Maybe the way we believe isn't all that God has for us. Maybe we can find God in people who don't necessarily believe the way we do."

George had learned over many years not to lash out at his daughter when she said things he thought were ridiculous. Instead, he sat next to her and kept his voice calm. "Pookie, is this what Justin is telling you?"

"No, Dad. I find Justin to be the most caring, considerate, compassionate person I have ever known apart from you and Mom. I mean he's more loving than many so-called Christians. He's such a great guy. How can loving him be wrong?"

Marjorie knelt before Celia. "Honey, the scriptures declare that even the devil disguises himself as an angel of light. Honey, the man is deceptive. He outright lied to us."

"He did that to impress you guys, Mom."

"That doesn't make it right," Marjorie retorted.

"Okay, maybe he didn't give you the greatest first impression. But if you get to know him..."

"I would say the same to you, honey." George reached for his daughter's hand and held it lovingly. "I know you like this guy, but it's only been three months. Don't make any major moves with Justin for at least a year. Take that time to get to know him. *Really* know him. Then come back to me after a year and tell me if you feel the same way."

Celia looked in her father's eyes for the first time since she had entered the room. "What if I still feel the same after a year? Will you give him your blessing then?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." George gently patted Celia hand and stood. "But honey, I walk in the spirit. And in the spirit, I'm just not feeling this dude. And I'm praying that within a year, the Lord will help you see what I see. In fact, I don't think it will take that long."

"Maybe he'll surprise you, Dad."

"Maybe. Just maybe."

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With Wynn's vehicle parked along the side of a remote road in Rock Creek Park, the tall man, still seated in the passenger's seat, flipped through a notepad he had retrieved from Wynn Delano's blazer pocket. Ignoring the flecks of red moisture on his hands and on the notepad, he tore out the pages, one by one, crumpled them and stuffed them in his pants pocket. But there was one page he left intact.

The tall man reached for his cell phone and dialed. After four rings, the man answered, "Officer Kirsch."

"I need another favor."

"Name it."

"I need someone located. She may have seen what Wynn saw. I need to tie up any loose ends."

"Less I know the better. Give me the info."

The tall man squinted to read Wynn Delano's undefined penmanship. "Celia Rayburn, Silver Spring, Maryland, telephone number 301-999-5674."

"Give me an hour."

The tall man ended the call, then slid into the driver's seat and guided the vehicle back onto the road toward upper Northwest. He needed to get rid of the body of Wynn Delano, who lay stuffed in the cargo hold of the SUV after meeting a deadly fate from a bullet in the center of his forehead.

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## George and Marjorie Wise

Forest Hill, Toronto

8:24 p.m.

With his stomach pleasingly overstuffed from another of his wife's fabulous dinners, George Wise headed toward his study just down the corridor from the living room. On the way, he opened a door, walked into the garage, and checked the garage side door to make sure it was locked. He then headed to his study.

He checked his postal mail at once upon arriving. Amid the voluminous pieces of junk mail and bills was a statement from Royal Bank addressed to his daughter in care of him. He sat at his desk and gently opened the envelope. He pursed his lips and gently shook his head as he read the numbers on the statement. He ran his hand over his closely cropped gray speckled hair as if trying to assuage a non-existent headache.

Seconds later, his wife, Marjorie, walked in. She flipped on a light switch. "Honey, what have I told you about reading in the dark?"

George did not respond to her comment, although he was proud he could still read so clearly in the dark at fifty years of age. Instead, he said, "Honey, come over here and look at this."

George watched his wife as she walked over. Marjorie stood just over George's shoulder and peered at the statement. "Only \$218.00?"

"That's right."

"She had almost ten grand last year."

"Should I be worried?"

"Maybe she has another account?"

"When she calls tonight, I'll ask her. And if I find out Justin is bleeding her dry..."

"Now, George, please don't go prodding into her affairs. You know how proud and independent Celia is."

"Marge, I can't just sit back and do nothing."

"That's *exactly* what you'll do." Marjorie's eyes widened, her voice sharp. "If Celia needs our help, she'll tell us. The last thing I need is for your trigger-happy self to go down to Maryland and

catch a case.”

The desk telephone rang, the one attached to the number for family only. George knew it was Celia, calling them faithfully as usual once per week. He answered quickly. “Hey, Pookie.” He put the call on speakerphone so Marjorie could hear.

“Hey, Daddy.”

George noticed her voice was devoid of the usual spirit. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Celia lied. “How’s everyone?”

“Everyone’s great. Your mother’s here, too.”

“Hey, Mommy.”

“Hey, sweetie.”

“You wouldn’t believe what I saw today.”

George and Marjorie answered together. “What?”

“I was in downtown D.C. today, and this pastor who was leading a rally got shot.”

Marjorie drew in a sharp breath and covered her mouth “Oh, my God. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Mommy, I’m fine.”

“Is he dead?”

“No. The news said he was alive.”

“Thank Jesus for that,” George chimed in. “And you saw all this happen?”

“Yeah. I was right across the street. It wasn’t like in the movies, where somebody gets shot, and blood and guts fly all over the place. He was just giving his speech, and then he just fell like somebody gave him an uppercut.”

“What were you doing in downtown D.C.?”

“Meeting a friend for breakfast,” was the quickest lie Celia could come up with. She hoped it worked.

It didn’t. George knew something was going on. He shot his wife a disappointed frown for forbidding him from prying any further. “Pookie, are you sure you’re okay? It must have been scary to see someone shot like that.”

“Yeah, it was scary. But I’m okay. It reminds me of that time you took me up near Runners Mill, and we went hunting, and you shot that deer.”

“And you cried for two days and would not eat any of the

meat.”

“The funny thing was, I didn’t cry for that pastor. I don’t know why. Why would I cry for an animal, and not a human being?”

While George searched his mind for an answer that would never come, Marjorie broke in with, “Sweetheart, maybe if you knew this pastor, you’d feel differently.”

“But why should that make a difference? The man gets shot, and I feel nothing.”

“Maybe you’re distracted by something.” George hoped his subtle hint would draw something out of her about what was going on in her life. If this girl was okay, then he was a Chinese bamboo salesman.

Celia quickly skipped the subject. “How’s business?”

“Business is great. We got a write-up in one of the local papers. We were one of the 10 best charbroiled chicken restaurants for Millennials. How’s that for a ringing endorsement?”

“Wow, that’s great, Dad,” Celia said with barely detectable sarcasm. She could not understand how her father became a self-made millionaire off of his special organic recipe for charbroiled chicken. She cared little for the chicken herself, but with an average 1.2 million in sales at each of his restaurants around Ontario and in Detroit, there were a lot of customers who begged to differ. *Must be all those Millennials.*

Not that she was complaining. Once her father struck it rich, he moved the family 250 miles away from Alpheus Street to the tony Forest Hill village of Toronto. That allowed Celia to spend a few months in the splendor of wealth before she eventually hit rock bottom with Justin.

“Thanks, hon,” George replied. “Speaking of Runners Mill, we might be opening up another location there soon.”

“Dad, isn’t that a little far? It’s like a two-hour plane ride.”

“I know, but it’s a great opportunity. Rent is dirt cheap, and a good location right across from a Mickey D’s. But enough about me and my business. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, Daddy. Really.”

“You know I’m here if you need anything.”

“I know.”

“Okay, Pookie. Well, we have to hang up now. Me and your

mother are going to turn in early. She's joined a morning prayer group, and they pray at 4 in the morning." George rolled his eyes at his wife.

Marjorie clicked her teeth at him and said to Celia, "No distractions, no TV, no cell phone. Good time to pray, sweetie."

"Good time to sleep, too." George smiled.

Celia laughed.

Marjorie gave George a playful punch on the shoulder. "Okay, sweetie. Talk to you later."

"Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad."

Immediately after hanging up the phone, George's smile morphed into a frown. He turned to Marjorie. "Something's going on with her."

"Well, you can't blame her for inheriting your pride," Marjorie commented. "She probably won't tell us unless she absolutely has to. Until then, we are not going to butt in. We have to trust her. It's her life." She gave George a peck on the cheek and then left the room.

Muttering quietly to himself, George said, "Yeah, well if I find out that Justin is not taking care of my baby, it'll be *his* behind."

## CHAPTER THREE

### *On the Run*

#### *Celia Rayburn*

After talking to her parents, Celia enjoyed a bath in the apartment's Jacuzzi tub, then settled in the bedroom to moisturize with Mānuka honey and shea butter and catch the ten o'clock news. Justin had not yet returned home, and she was thinking this would be another one of his overnights. It was fine with her, as she had another interview the next morning, and she didn't need any drama

with Justin to affect her focus on getting a job.

Unfortunately, the ten-o'clock news had no added information on the Plaza shooting, so she watched another half-hour, then went to bed. She felt strange yet relieved that she didn't have the typical concerns about where her husband was at this time of night, but it didn't matter. Including the \$218 she had in her checking account, she had squirreled away some money now and then from Justin's unemployment checks. She hoped to have enough money to hire a divorce attorney. She was determined to do this on her own and not ask for money from her parents.

Celia turned off the TV, checked a few emails on the laptop next to her bed, and slid down under luxurious sheets. Before she closed her eyes, she remembered past times with Justin. After a year of dating, Justin and Celia got married in a ceremony that her parents reluctantly paid for, only because it was traditional for them to do so and they didn't want their daughter estranged from them. But before she moved to Maryland with her husband, her father gave her a piece of advice which she never forgot:

*Make sure you have your own. Don't mix anything of yours with his. Trust me, in this day and age, that's the best way to go. Keep your own bank account. Get the apartment or house in your name. Never let him have that much control over you. I would say that no matter whom you married. Let him prove himself before you start bringing everything together.*

That was the one piece of advice she kept. To her knowledge, Justin had no clue about the checking account because the statements went to her parents' house in Toronto. The apartment they shared was in Celia's name, which was not an issue for Justin, since he was so smitten, he would do anything she asked.

*My, how times had changed.*

Celia went to sleep remembering those times and trying to put out of her mind the monster that her parents had warned her about and that Justin had suddenly become.

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A crash coming from the living room jerked her awake. At first, Celia thought it was Justin in one of his drunken tirades. But when

the walls thumped and shook, and she heard another crash along with grunts and screams, terror struck Celia's heart.

She jumped out of bed and ran toward her bedroom door, forgetting she had nothing on but panties and a T-shirt. As she cracked open the bedroom door, she heard another huge thump, then a crashing of dishes and glass. Another groan and a scream rang out, this time from a voice not her husband's.

Knowing there was a fight going on, Celia backed up and grabbed a baseball bat from the corner of her walk-in closet. She hated her husband, but she would not let him get beat up, either. She walked out of the bedroom and turned the corner, the bat poised, ready to strike whoever her husband was fighting.

A tall man, dressed in a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and a ski mask, stood near the living room window, his back to her and about seven yards away. He knelt over Justin with his right boot on his head. He reached behind his back and pulled a pistol from under his shirt. Celia's heart went cold, and she froze, hoping that she was only having a nightmare.

The tall man aimed. Celia saw a flash and heard a small crack, like a faraway firecracker, not loud enough to register much beyond her apartment. Justin's bare feet, slashed and bloodied from the glass on the floor, jerked, and then lay limp.

Celia suppressed the urge to scream as adrenaline kicked in. She knew she could not traverse the distance between the bedroom door and the attacker, across broken glass before he turned the gun on her. Instead, still holding the bat, she made a mad dash for the open front door, just three yards ahead of her, and did not look back. As she ran into the hallway, she heard the crunching of glass behind her, a sign that the gunman was coming after her. She screamed as loud as she could to draw attention and picked up speed running down the hallway. Just as she reached a corner, she heard a loud clang against a fire extinguisher just inches from her and felt the pressurized chemical spray out against her side. She turned the corner just before another bullet thudded into the wall just over her head.

Celia shoved open the fire exit door and ran down a flight of stairs to the ninth floor. She continued to run down the hallway, finding herself quickly running out of breath, as she hadn't run like

this in years. She took another corner, found another fire exit, and then ran back upstairs to the tenth floor. Directly across from the fire exit was the trash chute room. She opened the door and squeezed herself into the narrow room, shut the door, turned off the light, and then plastered herself against the wall so the door could be opened part way with no one seeing her.

Her heart was beating so fiercely she could literally feel the blood pumping through her head. The brilliance and the stupidity of hiding in this trash room quickly became clear to her. The gunman, if he were still pursuing her, would likely not think she had returned to the tenth floor. But if he found her, she had no escape. She gripped the bat, closed her eyes, tried to pray the fear out of her trembling body, and hoped that the gunman had given up trying to find her.

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