

BLUE JUSTICE



# **CALLED TO PROTECT**

**LYNETTE EASON**



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Dedicated to those who put their lives  
on the line day in and day out.  
Thank you for all you do.



[illegible]

On my honor,  
I will never betray my badge, my integrity,  
my character, or the public trust.  
I will always have the courage  
to hold myself and others  
accountable for our actions.  
I will always uphold the constitution,  
my community, and the agency I serve.



# Prologue

**SIX MONTHS AGO**

**MAY**

Sixteen-year-old Penny St. John smoothed the shirt over her slim waist and turned to admire herself in the mirror. He'd like the look. Just thinking about Carson Langston made her smile. She'd never had a real boyfriend before. She'd been more interested in gymnastics and running track, but Carson had caught her eye at the mall when he'd struck up a conversation with her in line at the pizza place.

That had been three weeks ago. Tonight, he said he had a surprise for her. Anticipation swirled. She didn't fancy herself in love. She was too practical for that, but she did like him a lot. Just yesterday he'd given her the gold bracelet she now wore on her left wrist.

Penny pulled her phone from the back pocket of her shorts and tapped the Instagram app. Posing with pouty lip, she snapped a picture and posted it. Next, she grinned and posted that one. Wow. She looked good.

With a giggle, she made her way downstairs and found her cousin, Linc St. John, in the kitchen with her brother, Damien. "Hey, you two, don't you have anything better to do on a Friday night than sit around and talk cop stuff?"



Damien frowned at her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Going out with a friend, why?"

"Because you need to put on something besides that pajama top. And don't you have a pair of jeans or something? Those shorts are too short."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "They are not. They come to mid-thigh. And this top is fine. It's loose and comfortable."

"It shows too much skin."

"My shoulder, Damien. My bathing suit is more revealing and you know it. Seriously. You need to get a life."

"I have one. It's my mission in life to watch out for you."

Penny rolled her eyes. "You mean harass me to death."

"Has Mom seen that shirt?"

"Yes." She walked over and kissed his forehead. "She helped me pick it out. I'll be back before midnight. See ya. Bye, Linc."

"Bye, Pen. Be careful," he said.

He was more than twice her age, but he was one of her favorite cousins. She almost turned around and went to change, but truly, Damien knew as well as she did that the shirt was fine. He was just having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that she was growing up. And, honestly, she was grateful for his protective instincts even as she strained against them.

The shirt was fine and Carson was waiting.

"Who are you going out with?" Damien asked.

"A friend," she said again with a glance out the window. "And there he is. Talk to you later. Love you."

"His name, Penny."

"Carson Langston." She stuck her tongue out and bolted out the door.

She heard him yell her name as she dashed down the walkway, but she wasn't about to let him have an opportunity to give Carson the third degree. How embarrassing.

Just because Damien was twenty-four years old, he thought



that made him her keeper. She was determined to prove it didn't and that she could take care of herself.

She shot a quick glance over her shoulder as she opened the door and her eyes locked on Damien's. For a moment, she regretted the way she left and sighed. She'd apologize to him tomorrow. For now, she was going to enjoy the night. She slid into the car, turning toward Carson. "Thanks for picking me up."

"Of course." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Anything for you." He pressed the gas and pulled from the curb.

"So, what's my surprise?" she asked.

"I'm taking you to meet a friend of mine."

She frowned. "Okay."

He laughed. "What? You don't want to meet my friends?"

"Of course, I just thought it was going to be the two of us."

"Don't worry, we'll have a blast. My friend is going to love you. Now relax."

Penny's worries eased at his friendly smile and twinkling blue eyes. "Fine, we'll meet your friend, but then we're going to go do something. Just you and me, okay?"

Without taking his eyes from the road, he reached over and stroked her cheek. "Okay."

Ten minutes later, Carson wound through one of the nicest neighborhoods in Columbia. "Your friend lives here?"

"Yep."

"Wow. What does he do?"

"He's in sales."

One mansion after the next passed her window. "What does he sell?"

"Whatever will make him money."

"Hmm." That sounded . . . weird. What did he mean by that?

A kernel of unease curled in her belly. Carson took her hand and squeezed it, then lifted it and pressed his lips to her fingers. She sighed and smiled at him. He was so good to her.



Then he was turning into a driveway that curved around to the front of a four-story home. “Do you want me to wait here? I’m not exactly dressed for anything fancy.”

“You look awesome.”

“How do you know this guy?”

“I work for him. I just need to drop something off.”

“Oh.”

But he got out of the car without anything. Maybe it was a flash drive or something in his pocket. Or money. But why wouldn’t he just say so?

He opened her door and held out his hand. She reached for it and he laced his fingers through hers as she followed him up the stone walkway to the front steps. The door opened before they reached the top and he released her hand.

A man in his midthirties stood there with a wide smile on his face. “Come on in. So glad you’re here.”

With Carson’s warm hand against the small of her back, Penny stepped inside the massive foyer. Marble beneath her feet and a bazillion-dollar chandelier above her head. Wow.

The door shut behind them and the man’s smile faded. His eyes roamed over her and he shot a look at Carson. “Good, good. Nice.”

Alarms instantly jangled. “Um . . . I don’t mean to be rude, but could I use your restroom?”

The man lifted a brow, and at first she thought he was going to refuse, but then the smile returned. “Of course. Carson can show you the way.”

“Thank you.”

Carson gripped her hand, harder than he’d ever done before, and pulled her with him.

“What are you doing?” She jerked out of his grasp. “That hurts.”

Anger flashed in his eyes for a split second then disappeared. “Sorry.”



“Did I do something wrong?” she asked. “I mean, I can wait on the bathroom if I have to.” But she didn’t plan on it.

Her willingness to please him did the trick and his features smoothed out. “No. Of course not. It’s fine, but don’t take forever.” He opened the door for her. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Once inside the bathroom with the door shut, she pulled out her cell phone and tapped Damien’s name. The phone rang twice. “Penny?”

“Damien, I think I need your help,” she whispered.

“Where are you?”

“At a house in—”

The call dropped. With a frustrated groan, she glanced at the battery. It was full. She’d had it plugged in the entire time she was getting ready. She dialed her brother’s number again. And got nothing. The signal on her phone was gone. Had they done something to make it so she couldn’t call out? “No. Come on, come on, please.”

She tapped a text to him even as she knew something was terribly wrong. Fear like she’d never felt before twisted inside her. She was so stupid. Every warning Damien had ever lectured on about human trafficking rang through her mind.

But no. Carson wouldn’t do that, would he?

Flashes of his behavior tonight confirmed her fear. She pressed send on the text and got the little message that it was unable to be delivered. Tears sprang to her eyes and she drew in a breath. She would not panic. She’d keep her cool.

A knock on the door caused her to jerk. “I’ll be there in a minute.” She flushed the toilet and eyed the cabinet under the sink.

“Come on, Penny.”

“I’m washing my hands.” She turned the water on, reached under the cabinet, and pressed her hand against the base of the sink. She did the same near the back of the toilet bowl. Then she



snagged a few hairs from her head and dropped them behind the picture on the wall. Her last act was to shut the sink off, take her cell phone, and type as much as she could before the next knock.

“Penny! Come on! Do I need to come in there?” The knob rattled.

It would have to be enough. He was going to kick the door in if she didn’t hurry up. She slid the phone under the large armoire-like corner cabinet, then stood.

With a prayer on her lips, she opened the door. “What’s the rush, silly? I—”

A liquid spray hit her in the face and she gasped. Exactly the wrong thing to do. Whatever he’d sprayed her with burned her lungs. Carson’s face blurred. “What—”

She went to her knees before Carson caught her. “It’s okay, Penny, don’t fight it.”





**PRESENT DAY**  
**THURSDAY, 11:00 AM**  
**NOVEMBER**

Officer Chloe St. John pulled her SUV to a stop on the Gervais Street Bridge behind the teeming chaos just ahead. A cargo van had crossed the double yellow line and gone headlight to headlight with an eighteen-wheeler, causing a minivan to slam into the rear left corner of the trailer. All in all, the fifteen-car pileup had caused multiple injuries and fatalities.

She climbed out and the rain hit her in the face. Chloe shuddered. The torrential downpours that had hit Columbia over the last seventy-two hours had caused the water under the bridge to turn into a raging, turbulent force to be reckoned with. At least today only a light drizzle fell from the still-swollen gray clouds.

And then the victims' terror reached her. As did an explosive splash.

"A second car just went over!"

"Help me!"

"Over here!"

Sirens screamed. Rescuers shouted orders. Chloe raced to the edge of the bridge and looked over. Divers were already in the



water. One of them was probably her brother, Brady. She sent up a silent prayer for his safety and the others’.

She returned to her vehicle and released Hank, her Dutch shepherd K-9, from his special area, and he hopped down beside her, quivering with energy and ready to work. She scratched his silky ears. “Hold tight, boy. Let’s get our bearings.”

EMS was already on the scene as well as multiple fire trucks and police cars. A helicopter hovered overhead. Chloe spotted a familiar face. Right where she said she’d be. “Izzy!”

Her sister turned, tension lining her features. “Chloe, glad you’re here. Bring Hank.”

Chloe and Hank trotted over to Izzy, who stood next to a woman holding an infant wrapped in a blue blanket. A paramedic rummaged through the bag on the ground. Chloe recognized the medic. Alice Johnson. The EMT looked at Izzy. “Can you bandage this?” A gash over the victim’s left eye looked like it needed stitches.

“Yes. Go.” She took the bandage.

Alice paused, then headed for her ambulance. “She needs a blanket. Hang on.”

“Is your baby hurt?” Chloe asked the woman.

“No.” The victim’s jaw trembled and shivers wracked her. “She’s fine, I think.” Shock. Alice passed Izzy a blanket and she wrapped it around the woman, who hunched under it, checking to make sure her baby was covered as well.

“I’ve got to go.” She spun.

“Hey, I need tape,” Izzy called.

The woman tossed her a roll. “I’ll be back.”

Priorities.

“What’s going on besides the obvious?” Chloe asked.

“We found drugs,” Izzy said. She held the white bandage to the woman’s head. “This thing is way too big. I need some scissors, and of course, she didn’t leave me any.”



“Hold on.” Chloe reached behind her service weapon into a small pocket on her holster and pulled out a Swiss army knife.

Izzy took it and used the scissors to cut the bandage to size. She handed the knife back to Chloe, then taped the bandage to the woman’s head. With a soft pat to the bowed shoulder, she said, “Sit tight, okay? They’ll get you to the hospital as soon as they can.”

Izzy stood and directed Chloe to the side of the road. “The drugs came from one of the vehicles and we need you and Hank to figure out which one. We suspect it’s the eighteen-wheeler sitting over there, but a cursory search hasn’t turned up any more and we’re too busy trying to help keep people alive to do a more thorough search.” Izzy was a detective, but she was also trained as a first responder. “The critical ones are being transported to the hospital immediately, of course, but we’re matching patients with cars, so we need Hank to do his thing. When we know which vehicle the drugs came from, we’ll know who to arrest. If the person’s still alive. So far we’ve got four DOAs and a couple of others who looked close to joining them.”

“Where did you find the drugs?”

“This way.”

Chloe followed Izzy through the ruckus. She sidestepped two paramedics rushing past her and pushing a stretcher. Izzy stopped beside the vehicle that had slammed into the back of the eighteen-wheeler. White powder from a couple plastic bags lay in the middle of the lane. Which meant there was probably more where that had come from. Question was, where had it come from? The truck or the van or the SUV that had T-boned the van? Or had someone thrown it out when they realized cops were going to be covering the area?

“You’re sure it’s drugs?”

Izzy shrugged. “Figured Hank would tell us.”

He took one whiff and sat. “There’s your answer.”

“I’m stunned.” Izzy rolled her eyes. “Want to see if he can find any more?”



“We’re on it.” Chloe led Hank to the damaged vehicle behind the tractor trailer. “Hank, find the dope.” Most commands were given in Dutch, but not this one. Hank went to work, sniffing the seats, the tires, the trunk.

And got nothing.

“This one’s clean,” Chloe said.

She led him toward the cab of the eighteen-wheeler to have the trailer doors opened. Officers Josiah Henry and Olivia Nash had the driver out of the cab and were questioning him. The man looked to be unhurt, but it was obvious he wasn’t happy. “I’m going to be late making my delivery and I’m going to get fired. I need to get out of here now!”

“Where do you think you’re going to go? You’re trapped right now.”

“I can push through with the truck if you’ll just get everyone out of the way.”

Chloe shook her head. What an idiot.

He spotted Hank and Chloe heading his way and his eyes went wide. He shoved Olivia into Josiah, climbed back into the seat of the cab, quick as a monkey up a tree.

Olivia grabbed the door handle and yanked. It was locked. She jumped up onto the step board and yelled that the passenger had scrambled out of the other side.

Chloe crouched to see the man’s legs underneath the trailer, then she and Hank sprinted back toward the minivan to cut him off.

“Hank, *apport!*” The command to get him. Chloe pulled her weapon.

Hank shot away from her, his sleek brown-and-black body a blur as he easily caught up with the fleeing man, who held a pistol in one hand. The dog lunged and latched onto the arm with the weapon, and the two of them went to the ground, with the man screaming his agony. “Get him off me! Get him off!” And yet he still clutched the gun. Victims screamed and ducked.



“Drop the weapon!” Chloe raced toward them. She was joined by two other cops, Greg and Sharon. All three of their voices blended as one. “Let go of the weapon and I’ll call him off! Drop it! Now!”

Their perp stilled and Chloe slammed her foot down on the hand that held the gun. Sharon dropped a knee into his upper back and grabbed his left arm.

He let out another howl as Chloe leaned over and yanked the weapon from his now slack fingers. “You broke my hand!”

“Hank, *los, laat los!*” The order to let go.

Hank released his bite and moved back to sit, tongue lolling as he watched the action.

Greg shook his head. “We’ve got a genius on our hands. Thought he was going to outrun Hank. Who really thinks that’s possible? What a dumb . . .” He continued to mutter his poor opinion of the idiot on the ground while he held him there.

Sharon removed her knee and jerked the man’s wounded arm behind him.

He screamed again. “I need a doctor! That dog nearly killed me! I’m going to sue you. I’m going to sue the whole department! I’ll have your badges. I’ll . . .”

Chloe turned a deaf ear to the threats and the stream of curses that spilled from him while she and Greg held him down. Sharon fastened her cuffs around his wrists.

And then a gunshot rang out.

Chloe ducked and spun. More screams rang out around her.

“Go,” Chloe told them. “I’ll hold on to this joker until you can put him in the back of your car.” She didn’t have room to transport a prisoner.

They took off. She pulled her charge to the back of the trailer and shoved him next to the large tire. Pulling her cuffs from the case on her belt, she attached one cuff to the pair around his wrists and the other cuff to a metal rail running along the bottom of



the trailer. "Stay there unless you want to get shot." She glanced at Hank, who hadn't taken his gaze from the prisoner. "Or bit."

The man planted his back up against the rubber and glared at her as he yanked on the cuffs. "Where do you think I'm going to go?"

She ignored him when she caught movement in the passenger side mirror and her heart thudded. He hadn't been there only moments before when her prisoner had scrambled out of that very door. So, a third one had been somewhere inside the cab? Chloe grabbed her radio.

*Pop.* Another shot. Then two more. Chloe flinched, even though none of the bullets came near her. But she couldn't help wondering whom they might have hit. Saying a prayer for her fellow officers, she kept watch, her senses on hyperalert and her gaze never resting.

Another loud crack.

The bullets were fired from the truck. Chloe glared at her prisoner. "You know who's shooting?"

"No." He scowled, his expression conveying his disgust for her and anyone who wore the same uniform she did. "This is ridiculous. I need a doctor. Take me over to that ambulance." He jerked his chin toward the vehicle sitting ten yards away on the side of the highway. The paramedics were bent over a patient and still working in spite of the gunfire, and using the ambulance as a shield.

Chloe kept her weapon ready and her head down. "We've got a live shooter and you want to cross that wide-open expanse? How stupid are you?" Big-time stupid. She mentally dubbed him Stupid Man.

He winced. "At least put my hands in front of me. My arm is killing me. That beast about took it off. I need stitches. Probably gonna bleed to death."

"I'm really worried about that," she muttered as she scanned the area. She kept up the running dialogue absently, while most of her attention was focused on the action going on around her.



He called her a name she didn't consider flattering, and she flicked a glance at him. Still secure and not trying to get away, in spite of his mouthiness. Good. Maybe he was slightly less stupid than she originally thought.

Chloe peered around the edge of the truck again, letting her gaze take in the scene before pulling back. People hiding, cops planted with guns aimed at the cab of the truck. Her radio crackled with rapid-fire calls and codes. She kept one ear on it while she kept an eye on the man attached to the truck. "Who else is in there?"

His nostrils flared. "No one."

"Of course not." Liar.

As if to prove her right, the truck's engine rumbled to life. Where did they think they were going? With the front tucked into the headlights of a cargo van and a minivan slammed into the rear left corner, they couldn't go anywhere.

However, Chloe released Stupid Man from the truck and hauled him to his feet by his non-wounded arm. She led him around to the back of the trailer, away from the side mirror, wondering if the occupants of the truck's cab realized she and their accomplice were right there. If they did, they didn't care. If they didn't, she'd feel much better out of sight of that side mirror.

Once at the back of the trailer near the two large doors, her prisoner tried to run. Chloe tackled him, and she didn't even have to give the order for Hank to jump at the man's face, snapping and snarling.

Stupid Man curled into a fetal position. "Get him away! Don't let him bite me again!"

"Hank, *stil*." The dog backed away, his eyes still on the quivering man. "Get up and try to engage your brain," she ordered.

He complied and she refastened the cuffs to the handle of the trailer's door while she listened for more shots. And although she still heard screams and cries and harsh orders from law enforcement, she hadn't heard any more pops of gunfire.



The truck inched forward. Chloe stayed with the truck, using it as cover. Screams sounded. More shots rang out. None in danger of hitting her or Stupid Man, though, since the bullets came from the truck's cab.

The truck surged and rolled forward a good three feet.

With horror, Chloe knew the cab had to be pushing the vehicle in front of it. Along with any victims in its path. "Stop!"

Another lurch and the trailer separated from the minivan crunched into its rear. Chloe ordered Hank to guard Stupid Man, then raced to the front of the cab on the passenger side, away from any bullets that had been flying on the other side. "Police! Stop!"

The passenger looked at her and yelled something to the driver. And then she heard, "Shoot her!"

The man in the passenger seat turned and met her gaze. She held her gun on him. "Tell him to stop right now!"

In one fluid motion, he lifted his weapon, aimed it at her . . .  
. . . and pulled the trigger.

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Through the high-powered scope on his Colt M4 carbine, Derek St. John saw the passenger in the cab fire his weapon right at his sister's head.

And Chloe had dropped like a rock. Or had she dropped before the crack? He couldn't be sure.

Terror beat at him, his finger hovering over the trigger. Just before Chloe had appeared in his line of sight behind his target, a cop trying to get into position had run across his line of fire, causing Derek to miss his chance to pull the trigger. He wanted to punch something. Instead, he ordered his heart to slow and his mind to focus.

He'd been given the green light. The call had gone out over the radios and no one was supposed to move. And now Chloe might be dead because an officer had blown the shot for Derek. Had the man not heard the order?



At the moment, it didn't matter.

What mattered was Chloe.

Derek wasn't exactly in the most ideal position to make the shots, but it was the only one he had.

He drew in a steadying breath. He had to focus, to be cool, be steady, and return to the zone.

Looking through the scope once more, he saw the driver raise his weapon and aim it at an innocent victim. A woman not quite hidden behind her car.

Derek pulled his trigger and a nanosecond later the bullet hit its mark. The driver's body went slack. The passenger next to him jerked and turned, aiming his weapon at the cop now hovering at the edge of the driver's door, hand on the handle, ready to yank the door open in a heroic, if dangerous, possibly stupid, move. Derek could see the cop's plan as clearly as if he'd written it out with full illustrations. He was going to open the door, pull out the dead driver, and shoot the remaining passenger.

Fortunately, the passenger moved and Derek had a clear shot. A second pull on the trigger and the threat was over. The officer dove out of sight, hopefully appreciating how stupid it was to get into the line of fire from a sniper. Idiot.

Derek lowered his rifle and swiped a hand across his eyes. Two lives. He'd ended two lives. Two more faces he'd see in his dreams. But they'd made their choices, and if Derek hadn't made his, innocents would be dead instead of the two men bent on destruction.

And now . . .

"Chloe," he whispered.