

UNCOMMON  
JUSTICE  
BOOK 1

*NEVER  
LET GO*

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Mom, you taught me to love books.  
Inspired me to write them.  
More importantly, you showed me the way to Christ  
by walking with him every day of your life on this earth.  
Because of him, we'll be together again!

## PROLOGUE

WEDNESDAY, 12:30 P.M.  
TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

*Nursing scrubs? Check. White sneakers? Check. Keycard? Check.*  
Calm, even breathing? Nope.

She had everything she needed to get in and out quickly. The plan seemed so easy. Too easy. Then why did her heart pound against her rib cage until it ached? Why did her pulse roar in her ears as she walked the sterile hallway, heading for the maternity ward?

Palms sweating, she pushed through double doors into a wide corridor. Almost there.

Everything inside screamed for her to keep her head down. But that might give the wrong impression.

Forcing her chin high, she carried the file folders with purpose as her sneakers squeaked down the long white hallway. She made it to the wing where mothers and their newborn babies rested until released and found it busy with food service workers, janitorial personnel, and other hospital staff. Good. She'd been right to carefully calculate her arrival for the lunch hour.

Without missing a step, she traded the folders for a food tray sitting on a cart against the wall and then counted down the rooms, twenty-three forty-two, twenty-three forty . . .

Twenty-three thirty-eight.

Her heart palpitated. She slowly drew in a calming breath. It was now or never. She had no choice, really. This was better for everyone.

*Please don't let hospital staff be in the room . . .*

With forced confidence, she shoved open the door and entered. “Lunchtime,” she proclaimed in what she hoped was a pleasant, singsong voice, but instead the word sounded hoarse and gravelly to her pulse-buzzing ears. There was no turning back now.

A nurse glanced up from a hospital bassinet where she was changing the baby’s diaper. The woman in the bed pulled her gaze from her infant and offered a puzzled smile at the lunch tray.

*What do I do? What do I do?*

When the nurse paid her no attention, she snapped out of her panic and moved forward as if she had every right to be in the room. Another tray of food already sat on the bedside table, untouched. No wonder the woman had given her a funny look. Her breath hitched. She’d fooled herself into thinking this had been too easy. The plan was far from easy. It had only been easy before she entered the room where she had to engage with others.

She smiled at the mother—a fortyish-looking woman with dark circles under her eyes. “Oh, they already brought you lunch. I’ll just return this tray.”

She pivoted, but the mother called out to her. “Wait, what did you bring? The other lady brought me ham and it doesn’t look good. I have no appetite as it is, so I’m hoping for something at least palatable.”

She turned to face the mother. The nurse exited the room without comment. Perfect. It was all working out. She lifted the domed cover from the plate. “Looks like turkey and dressing.”

The mother shifted to sit up higher on her bed. “My favorite.”

“Wonderful.” After removing the plate with ham, she set the new tray before the woman, then without another word glided over to the pink newborn in the nearby mobile bassinet. “While you enjoy your meal, I’ll take this little princess to the nursery and return her in a bit.”

She didn’t dare look into the woman’s eyes. She had to flee the room before the mother registered she was gone or thought to ask any questions. Besides, another glance into the sad eyes of the mother dying of cancer might thwart her resolve to see this through. She had a heart, after all. And she knew what this was going to do to this woman—kill her faster than any disease. But the mother wouldn’t be able to care for the baby for very long anyway. This was all for the best. And she needed this baby more than the dying mother needed her.

Shoving through the door, she pushed the bassinet as if she belonged.

This would be the hard part.

She lifted the baby.

Yes, definitely the moment of truth. Could she do this? Could she really take this baby, who would become her daughter, and walk right out of the hospital without anyone noticing her? She realized she could, in fact, carry through with the plan. A satisfied smile lifted her lips as she cooed to another woman’s baby in her arms.

# *CHAPTER ONE*

A family tree can wither if nobody tends its roots.

—Unknown

MONDAY, 8:31 P.M., PRESENT DAY  
ANDERSON CONSULTING OFFICES  
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

While death was no stranger to her, a courteous knock on the door to give warning this time would have been appreciated.

Willow Anderson had been blindsided. Hadn't seen it coming. Everyone faced death sooner or later. Reading obituaries and looking at tombstones were a part of her job, after all. Her life. So why had it come as such a surprise? Either way—warning or no warning—she had to face what had been left behind. There was no point in putting things off.

She stood at the edge of a cluttered desk and stared blurry-eyed at the stack of mail piled high. A fluorescent light in the corner of the office that had been converted from a warehouse flickered and buzzed, then dimmed, leaving her with less-than-adequate lighting. But she wouldn't be deterred and rifled through the envelopes in a daze, dropping each one on JT's desk as she went. Electricity.

Water. Something from the appraisal district? Oh, look, JT won a free Caribbean cruise. Junk mail. More bills.

The next one looked like a check. She ripped it open. Sure enough, a check had been made out to Anderson Consulting for services rendered. Willow hung her head. Wait. Not Anderson Consulting. In her grief-stricken state, she'd read that wrong. The check had been made out to James T. Anderson, her grandfather.

Everyone had called him JT. Anguish gripped her. Had he really been gone two weeks? He'd been the lifeblood of this forensic genealogy business. How could she keep it going without him?

She let the remaining envelopes fall back to the desk, where they fanned out.

A stupid tear escaped. Raced down her cheek. Tonight she'd mustered the courage to return to the office and face what JT had left behind when he'd been killed. Willow could have let Dana Cooper, JT's assistant, take care of some of it, but she'd told Dana to leave the office alone. They both needed time to mourn. Besides, Willow wanted to be the one to go through his things, including the mail.

She crumpled a piece of junk mail in her fist. Maybe she'd feel less fragile if she waited a few more days. Except the bills couldn't wait until Willow had finished grieving. Nor could clients in any outstanding cases on which he'd worked.

*I can do this. I have to do this.*

What choice did she have?

The heat kicked on, reminding her of the chill in the air. She rubbed her arms. Only a corner of the warehouse had been renovated into offices for Anderson Consulting. The rest seemed like a waste to Willow, but JT had thought he'd gotten a great deal on real estate at the time. The vaulted space had given them room to spread out, but now it felt far too . . . empty. Willow would have to figure out what she would do with the business and the real estate it occupied.



With the mail spread out, an envelope from the Washington State Department of Health caught her attention. She tugged it from the pile. Hands shaking, she carefully slit the envelope with a letter opener and pulled out the official document.

Her grandfather's death certificate.

Air whooshed from her lungs. Willow sank into a chair.

*He's gone. Really gone.* She wouldn't hear his words of wisdom. His jokes and boisterous laughter, or warm and friendly banter. At least not in this life.

JT had been one of a kind.

She touched his name on the certificate and, for good measure, let the shock of his death roll over her again. That moment she'd first heard the news.

JT had been killed riding his bike. To think he'd taken up the hobby as a way of extending his life after being diagnosed with cardiovascular disease. No plan had ever backfired so completely.

*Why, why, why? You weren't supposed to die yet.*

Tension corded her neck. A sliver of anger cut through her that he'd died when he'd had so much life left in him. But trying to come up with answers when there were none was a futile endeavor. Willow forced herself to focus on the task at hand. At this rate, it was going to be a long night. She rolled her neck around to ease the stiffness.

The outer office door opened and closed. "Willow? You in there?" Dana called.

Great. She'd wanted time alone. "Yep. JT's office."

A few seconds later, Dana appeared at the door. Willow masked her irritation. The woman meant well. "You didn't have to come."

Dana dropped her designer bag in a chair and frowned. She shrugged out of her sparkly jean jacket and stepped closer. "You didn't think I'd let you go through this alone, did you?"

"It's late. Don't you have a husband or something?" Willow forced warmth into her voice and then a half smile slid onto her

lips. She was glad to see Dana after all. The woman knew what Willow needed. No wonder JT had leaned on Dana all these years.

“Stan is fine. On his laptop and watching television. He won’t miss me.” Dana leaned over the desk to look at the certificate. “Besides, he wanted me to make sure you were all right.”

She slowly slipped the certificate from Willow’s hands and studied it. “Are you sure you’re ready to go through his things here? I can do this for you.”

Willow covered her eyes. “I thought I’d accepted he was gone, but seeing his death certificate . . . it’s so final.”

“Oh, honey. I know it’s hard.” Dana rushed around the desk. After offering a comforting squeeze, she handed Willow a tissue, then snatched another from the box.

Willow wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “It’s okay. I’m okay. I have to do this.”

“I wish I hadn’t told you about Mrs. Mason’s call. But it was the only case he was actively working. You really don’t have to get back to business so soon after your grandfather’s death.”

“I appreciate your concern.” Willow touched Dana’s arm. The woman had held her hand over the last two weeks—through the tragic news of JT’s death, selecting a casket, and seeing him buried. In her fifties, Dana was more like an older sister or a best friend than a mother figure despite being two decades older than Willow. She was practically part of the family, though she had one of her own—a doting husband, two grown children, and four grandchildren who kept her busy outside of work.

Willow tossed the tissue into the wastebasket. “Decisions have to be made, and I’m the one to make them now. I need to call Mrs. Mason back and tell her that JT’s gone. But I have to know what the case is about first. Maybe I can finish it up for him.” If Mrs. Mason would allow her, and if Willow had the required skills.

Her grandfather was the talent behind their consulting business. Willow didn’t want to ruin the reputation he’d garnered. She

hadn't mentioned it to Dana yet, but she was seriously thinking about closing up Anderson Consulting.

"Dig into a new project." Dana gathered the scattered mail into a pile again. "It might help take your mind off things if you get busy again."

"Can you get her file?"

"I can do better." Dana smiled. "He videoed their conversation."

"What? When did he start doing that?"

"With Mrs. Mason. You were traveling, looking for the lost heir for that law firm. He came into the office one day with a GoPro camcorder, more than pleased with himself and anxious to try it on the next client."

Willow had missed spending the last few weeks of JT's life with him. She wanted more time.

While Dana sat down and started the desktop computer to bring up the video, Willow looked at the framed photographs on the walls. The floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with history books and dusty old journals. Curio cabinets showcasing collectibles and souvenirs. Her grandfather had provided an adventure as they traveled around the world conducting research about people's pasts. She'd watched as he'd used DNA and genealogy techniques for solving mysteries, such as identifying remains of World War, Korean War, and Vietnam War servicemen. Even law enforcement entities had often contacted him for assistance. The list went on and on.

"Okay, here it is." Dana grabbed another chair.

Willow sat next to her friend. The video started up on the computer screen. Her grandfather's voice boomed loud and confident. His boisterous laughter and warmth made the slender, sixtyish woman smile in return.

JT offered Mrs. Mason coffee and made her feel right at home. He had a way about him that made him personable. Everyone responded to his warmth.

He didn't have any enemies.

Or so she believed.

Willow paused the video. "He never met a man, woman, or child he didn't like." The words rasped out past the lump in her throat.

Dana sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that JT took up such a big part of the video. You don't have to do this tonight. We can tackle it later."

Shaking her head, Willow pressed play. "Tackling it later isn't going to make it easier for me."

As they continued watching the video, Willow smiled, her love for JT swelling in her heart. He propped his ankle up on his knee in a relaxed pose. His blue eyes were bright and intelligent. He acted like a man in the prime of his life, not someone in his late sixties, as he told a few jokes that made Mrs. Mason genuinely laugh. In fact, both Willow and Dana joined in the laughter, adding a few snuffles. Her grandfather was a force to be reckoned with. A pleasant, jovial force that the world would miss.

Then Katelyn Mason leaned forward and began her tale.

"I came all the way from Texas to speak to you about taking on a project for me," she said.

"A Texan, huh?" JT chuckled and winked. "I never would have guessed by your accent."

The woman actually blushed and smoothed out her collar. Was JT flirting?

"Let me ask you a question," he said. "Why Anderson Consulting?"

"I read an article about what you've accomplished. You've done the impossible."

Though JT kept a straight face, amusement and satisfaction glimmered in his eyes. "Tell me your story."

"Twenty-one years ago my baby girl, Jamie, was taken from me in the hospital. She was only a few hours old." Mrs. Mason

hung her head for a moment, then raised her quivering chin to pin her gaze on JT.

Lines in his forehead deepened with his frown. “And the FBI? The police?”

“Failed to find her. It’s a cold case now. Through the years I’ve hired private investigators. They have all failed.”

“And why are you just now coming to me?”

“As I said before, I read that you can do miracles. I have . . . I have less than three months to live, so the doctors tell me.” Her voice hitched. “I believe with every fiber of my being that she is still alive out there, and I desperately want to say goodbye to her. I want her to know how much I love her. How much I have always loved her. And I never stopped praying for her. I believe you, Mr. Anderson, are the one to finally bring my baby home.”

JT cleared his throat. His tender heart must have flooded with compassion. Willow wanted to reach through the screen and comfort him. He got up and fiddled with the GoPro, his anguished face filling the screen. He understood the pain of losing a child. His daughter, Willow’s mother, had been killed in a car accident along with Willow’s father.

Mind racing, Willow shut the video off.

*Less than three months to live.* “When was this interview?”

“A month ago.”

Mrs. Mason had less than two months to live then, if her prognosis was accurate.

But a baby stolen twenty-one years ago? How had JT thought he could help? He’d never done this kind of project, especially one with such a short deadline. Still, Mrs. Mason’s desperate plea for help must have compelled him to take action. Willow understood why he hadn’t been able to say no. She had to think, so she got up and paced the room.

“You should finish this one. Find that woman’s daughter.” Dana’s voice broke the silence. “It would keep your mind off losing him.”

“Mrs. Mason believed JT was the one to finally bring home her baby girl. That’s what she said. JT was the one with the skills—the genius behind solving impossible mysteries.”

“You’re every bit as brilliant.” Dana sighed. “Look, he’s been training you since you were just a kid. Since your parents died. You know he meant for you to take over.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t have his knack for uncovering clues. Knowing which ones to follow.”

Dana vehemently shook her head. “You’re too hard on yourself.”

She flipped through the manila file folder she’d retrieved from the desk drawer. Something flickered in her eyes. What was it? Worry? Frustration?

“Okay, what *aren’t* you telling me?” Willow asked.

A smile quickly replaced the frown on Dana’s face. “No clue what you’re talking about.”

“Right. I know you well enough to see something else is on your mind.” Willow tried to snatch the file away, but Dana was quicker and held it close.

“Now I’m sure you’re hiding something.”

The woman buried the file back in the desk drawer already crammed with folders, then riffled through the same stack of mail Willow had been through minutes ago. “I can take care of these for you. You didn’t have to come in tonight.”

Willow crossed her arms. “You can’t put me off forever.”

“Okay, okay.” Dana rolled her head back and groaned. “Before he died, JT called Austin McKade to ask for his help on the Mason case.”

Willow’s stomach coiled. She pressed her hand against her mid-section. She’d had a hard enough time getting over Austin without having to see him again.

“He did? But . . . why?” Did Austin even know about JT’s death?

“It’s an FBI cold case. JT had hoped Austin could get information so he wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.”

Willow sank into a chair. “That makes sense. Total sense.”

But she wouldn't put it past JT to have wanted to use the Mason case to his advantage.

This case might have been the excuse he'd needed to call Austin when he had other motives. He had an uncanny ability to convince people to go along with his wishes or what he believed was best for them. He had believed that Willow and Austin should be together. He just wouldn't let go of it. But JT couldn't have been more wrong.

Willow and Austin McKade had already crashed and burned, and those ashes would never be resurrected.