

The courthouse coffee was terrible, but the morning after Valentine's Day was no time for a domestic-violence prosecutor to go uncaffeinated. Anna poured the inky brew into a Styrofoam cup, took a sip, and grimaced. Scalding and bitter—a fitting start to a day of sorting through last night's crimes. At least she'd have help. Anna pulled out her cell phone and called her officemate.

"DV Papering," Grace answered in crisp singsong.

"Hey, it's Anna. I'm in the cafeteria. Want some coffee?"

"That'd be fabulous." Grace hushed her voice. "And grab a bunch of napkins. There's a woman bleeding all over your chair."

Grace had been a prosecutor for four months, but Anna was still new enough that the information jolted her. "Should we call an ambulance?"

"She's okay. A lot of scrapes and bruises, and a very messy nosebleed. Nothing life threatening. I can cover till you get here. And can you snag me a muffin? I'm starving."

"Sure. Be right there."

Marveling at Grace's calm, Anna grabbed a muffin and got in line to pay. Three people stood in front of her: a tall guy in a dark suit, a man wearing a Redskins jersey over a blue collared shirt, and a buxom woman in fishnet stockings and a spandex miniskirt. Lawyer, Anna guessed of the first man. Then a policeman, hiding his uniform so courthouse visitors wouldn't ask him questions. And a prostitute, just getting off work, here to see her probation officer. The one thing Anna liked about the courthouse's grim basement cafeteria was its democracy. The cop might arrest the prostitute later tonight, and the lawyer might skewer the cop during cross-examination, but everyone had to wait in the same line to get their corned-beef hash.

After paying, Anna hurried to the napkin dispenser, but the tall lawyer who'd been ahead of her took the last ones.

She looked at him in dismay. “Actually, I really need those,” she said, nodding at the napkins in his hand.

Something about the man’s dark hair and lanky figure seemed familiar, but out of place. His tailored suit and buttery leather briefcase were common in the federal court next door, but marked him as several income brackets above the D.C. Superior Court crowd. He probably worked for some big Washington law firm, in one of the high-paying jobs she’d turned down to work for the government.

The man glanced down at her and suddenly grinned. “Anna Curtis! Hey! It’s been a while.”

“Hi, um . . .” She shook her head.

“Nick Wagner. Harvard Law School. I had a ridiculous beard? And hair down to here.” He tapped his shoulder and blushed slightly. “Your team beat mine in the final round of Ames Moot Court. Kicked our asses, in fact.”

“Nick! You used to play guitar in the Hark during Friday happy hour.”

“You got it.” His smile widened. “I guess you made more of an impression on me than I made on you.”

“Sorry—I’m just in a rush, and focused on those napkins.”

Nick placed them ceremoniously in her palm. “Some kind of food spill emergency?”

“Thank you. Bloody nose. Abuse victim in the Papering Room. So—I’ve got to go.” Anna began to walk out of the cafeteria, looking over her shoulder with regret. “I’m sorry I can’t really talk now.”

Nick hurried along with her through the labyrinth of the courthouse basement. “So, you’re a prosecutor—and you pulled papering duty on the day after Valentine’s Day? What’d you do, run over the U.S. Attorney’s dog?”

She had to laugh. Papering was the most despised assignment in the U.S. Attorney’s Office, a task only the greenest prosecutors could be compelled to do. Anna would turn arrests from the last twenty-four hours into criminal case files: typing information into a computer, two-hole-punching police paperwork, condensing lifetimes of violence into slim manila folders. The tedium was broken only when a victim came to tell her sad story in person. And Valentine’s Day was notoriously the worst time for domestic violence. People were two-timing each other, or paying too much attention to their baby’s mother and not enough to their wife, or just plain forgetting a card.

It was surprising how often a lovers' quarrel turned into a trip to lockup.

"I just started in January," Anna explained, "so I'm still in the hazing period."

"Well, we should catch up sometime."

"Sure," she answered as they rounded a corner. A crowd of police officers lined the hallway outside the papering room. She'd never seen so many blue uniforms in one place before. It was going to be a long day.

"How about dinner tonight?" Nick asked.

"I don't know." Anna glanced sideways at him without slowing her pace. Despite the poor timing, it was a tempting offer. She'd been feeling homesick and disconnected in her new city. It would be nice to talk with a law school acquaintance. She stopped in the doorway to the papering office and handed him her business card. "Call me. Let's see how things look later."

"I will."

He smiled at her: a warm, radiant smile. Despite herself, she felt a natural pull toward him. This might not turn out to be such a bad day-after-Valentine's Day after all.

That thought died as she walked into the papering room.

A tiny woman sat at one of the two sagging desks, flanked by Grace and a uniformed policeman. Blood had soaked the woman's white button-down shirt and splattered the gray linoleum at her feet. A few dark red drops flecked the bottom of the mint green cinder block walls. Her beautiful brown face was marred by two black eyes so swollen they were nearly shut. Raw red abrasions covered her left cheek in a messy cross-hatch pattern. She held a piece of bloodstained office paper to her nose and rocked herself back and forth, moaning softly.

Although Anna had read a lot of police reports describing gruesome injuries lately, she hadn't seen a woman this badly scraped up since her childhood. A wave of memories, guilt, and anger stunned her into a momentary paralysis. But today was her day to pick up cases, so this victim was her responsibility. Clenching her teeth, she strode over to the woman and held out a couple of napkins. "Here," she said gently. "Try these."

The woman swapped them gratefully for the paper at her nose.

"My name is Anna Curtis. I'm an AUSA, an Assistant U.S. Attorney. I'll be handling your case."

“Laprea Johnson,” the woman said. Her voice was so soft it was barely audible.

Suddenly Laprea gasped. The pain on her face transformed into a puckered mask of rage. At first, Anna wondered what she’d said to infuriate the woman.

But she was glaring *past* Anna—at Nick, who stood frozen in the doorway. His face had turned an ashy white. The wounded woman spat her words at him.

“What the fuck are *you* doing here?”



2

Laprea Johnson couldn't believe who was standing at the door. She'd come all the way downtown to see *him*? What kind of sick joke was this?

"Laprea—oh no." Nick groaned and stepped into the office. "Was it . . ."

"D'marco?" Laprea stood up and stepped toward Nick. "You *know* it was."

"Oh shit, Laprea, I'm so sorry."

"You should be sorry!" She stood on her tiptoes, so close to Nick her nose almost brushed his chin. Her hand itched to smack his face.

The police officer put a gentle hand on Laprea's arm and backed her up a few steps. "Hey, hey. Easy, ma'am," the officer said. "Calm down."

Laprea yanked her arm away, but softened when she saw the sympathetic look on his face. Officer Bradley Green had been polite and kind since he'd come to her house in response to the 911 call. It was hard to be mad at him.

"I'm sure D'marco feels terrible about this," Nick said.

"He was feeling fine when his fist was in my face!" Laprea glared at Nick. In a way, this was his fault.

"Excuse me." Anna stepped between them. "How do you two know each other?"

"He's D'marco's lawyer." Laprea pointed at Nick.

Anna turned to him in surprise. "You represent the man who beat her up?"

"Allegedly," Nick said automatically. "I'm with the Office of the Public Defender. I've represented D'marco Davis on different matters for two years." He turned to Laprea. "I really am sorry. I'll have a talk with him."

"He don't need no *talk*!" Laprea shouted. "He needs to be locked up!"

“Nick, I think you need to leave this office.” Anna said. “Now.”

“Right. Sorry.” He started backing out of the room. “I should go to the cellblock anyhow, apparently. I’ll talk to you later.”

As soon as Nick was gone, Laprea’s anger drained, leaving just pain and exhaustion. Both of her eyes were throbbing, her cheek stung, and her arms ached. She collapsed into a chair. Now that she wasn’t yelling, her chest started to tremble and her breathing became shallow gulps. She’d been bawling all morning; she couldn’t seem to stop. Laprea put her head in her hands and cried as quietly as she could. She was ashamed to be here like this: a bleeding, sniffing mess, beaten up by the man who was supposed to love her. Everyone in this room must think she was such a loser. Her embarrassment just made her cry harder. She wondered where her mother was. She felt so alone.

Laprea was surprised to feel the prosecutor put an arm around her shoulder. Anna knelt down so they were face-to-face.

“It’s okay,” Anna said, patting her back. “You’re safe here. It’s going to be all right.”

Grateful for the comfort, Laprea leaned onto the lawyer’s shoulder. Anna kept holding her and murmuring soothing words. Laprea hoped she didn’t get any blood on the woman’s suit.

When she finally ran out of tears, Laprea lifted her head and accepted another napkin from the prosecutor.

Anna Curtis, she noticed, hardly looked old enough to be a lawyer. Real pretty, with honey blond hair and big, serious blue eyes. She had the tall, slim figure of an athlete on a Wheaties box. But the woman obviously did nothing to play up her looks. Hair in a tight ponytail, plain black pantsuit, sensible low-heeled shoes. Would this girl be any match for D’marco’s lawyer?

“Did that attorney have something to do with all this?” Anna asked. She sat in her desk chair and faced Laprea.

“He just keep getting D’marco off,” Laprea said, blowing her nose. “D’marco’s gotta learn a lesson.”

The woman at the other desk looked up from her computer. “What was Nick Wagner doing here anyhow?”

Laprea looked over at Grace, the woman who’d greeted her when she and Officer Green first came in. Was she a lawyer, too? She didn’t look like she belonged in this sad little basement room full of mismatched furniture and old office equipment. The elegant black

woman had the bone structure of Queen Nefertiti and the style of Oprah, in a gray silk suit and a string of giant pearls.

“You know him?” Anna asked Grace.

“Oh yeah. Whenever a local station needs to trot out an impassioned defense attorney, they call that guy. He’s always railing about police corruption on WTOG or denouncing something in the D.C. *Bar Bulletin*. The man’s made quite a name for himself.”

“I had no idea. We went to the same law school. Ran into him in the cafeteria—he gave me the napkins. I didn’t know he was a defense attorney.”

Didn’t know? How inexperienced was this girl? Laprea wished the older black woman had her case. But Laprea understood how the government worked—she didn’t have much of a choice. And she didn’t want to hurt the younger woman’s feelings by making a fuss.

Anna turned back to Laprea. “So tell me—when did this happen?”

Laprea struggled to put a time to the flurry of violence this morning. The kids had just left with Rose, and Laprea was just getting dressed for work, so it must have been—

“Just after seven this morning, ma’am,” Green answered.

“Almost an hour ago.” Anna looked at the officer with surprise. “Why hasn’t she been to the hospital?”

“Ms. Johnson refused medical treatment, ma’am.”

“What? Why?”

“If we called an ambulance, she’d get charged for it. It’s a couple hundred dollars a call.”

At least the policeman understood the system. He looked pretty boyish, with his cropped light brown hair and scrubbed-pink baby face, but Laprea guessed he was around thirty. And he was cute—although he could probably lay off the Ben & Jerry’s. The buttons on his blue uniform shirt strained against his stomach.

“Anyway,” Green went on, “she stopped bleeding before I brought her over here. But she started crying again, and it got her nose bleeding all over again.”

“We have a nurse here in the courthouse,” Anna said. “Let’s go upstairs.”

Laprea didn’t need a nurse. She would put some Neosporin on her cheek when she got home. For the rest of it, there was nothing a nurse could do. She’d been through this enough before. Her body just

needed time to heal. She just wanted to go home and lie down in her own bed.

“No.” Laprea said. “I want to get this done now.”

Just then her mother walked into the room. Laprea exhaled with relief. “Sorry I’m late,” her mother said. “I got somebody to watch the kids.”

Rose Johnson wore her favorite pink tracksuit and a pained expression. Laprea had called her as soon as D’marco ran off. Rose was the one who had called 911, put an ice pack on Laprea’s face, and shepherded the twins to the back porch so they wouldn’t see their mother covered in blood. Rose was great in an emergency—but Laprea dreaded the lecture she’d get when they got home.

Anna introduced herself as Rose set her wide body down with a grunt. Rose kissed her daughter’s head, then rested her elbows on her knees and leaned toward the prosecutor.

“What you gonna do about this, Ms. Curtis? D’marco Davis is outta control. You gonna keep him in jail this time?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“The *hell* does that mean? That man done this before and he just keep getting away with it! Does my daughter have to be dead before you people will lock him up? If he kills her, it’ll be *your* fault!”

Anna grimaced, and Laprea felt sorry for her. Her mother was taking her anger out on the only available target. The person Rose really wanted to yell at was D’marco. Or her.

“We’ll *ask* for pretrial detention, Ms. Johnson. But it’s up to the judge.” Anna paused to thumb through some paperwork. “Since D’marco’s already on probation for a prior conviction, he’ll probably be kept in jail until trial. Even if he’s released, we’ll get a restraining order so he can’t contact your daughter.”

“Piece of paper can’t stop a fist.” Rose harrumphed. But she sat back and let the lawyer continue.

Anna looked at Laprea. “I know this is hard, but I need you to tell me what happened. First, what’s your relationship with D’marco Davis?”

A simple question, but Laprea didn’t have a simple answer. What do you call the man who used to be the boy of your dreams? They’d been sixteen when they met. He was so handsome and tall. All the other girls had been jealous when they saw him waiting for her after school. Back then, when D’marco got mad about her talking to other

boys, it seemed romantic, a sign of how much he cared about her. She'd been crazy about him—heart-pounding, hand-sweating crazy. She got pregnant her junior year. She thought it would bind D'marco to her forever. Instead, as she got bigger and needier, his mean streak came out. He started hitting her when she was six months pregnant. Laprea realized—just a little too late—that they weren't going to live some modern fairy tale. Then the twins arrived. They were beautiful, and for a minute, everything was okay. But the reality of being teenage parents set in. D'marco didn't come by much. When he did come around, she needed so much from him: money for diapers and formula, baby chores, but mostly his attention. He pulled away. But the less D'marco was around, the more he thought she was with other men, even though she was stuck in a house with her mother and two babies. He started drinking more, and the beatings got worse. He always apologized afterward. He cried about how sorry he was; he begged her to forgive him. When he was apologizing, he was the nicest he ever was to her. He lavished her with attention and finally said all the things she wanted to hear. It was like he only realized how much he loved her right after he'd hit her. She always took him back.

Laprea put a hand to one throbbing eye.

"He's my babies' father," Laprea said at last. "We been on and off since D'montrae and Dameka was born. They twins—a boy and a girl. Four years old. Anyway, since D'marco been out of jail, we was on, I guess. I thought it'd be different this time."

Anna nodded sympathetically. "What happened this morning?"

Laprea took a deep breath. "I was getting ready for work. I'm a cashier at the Labor Department cafeteria."

Laprea looked at her watch. She was over two hours late for work. She would call them as soon as she got out of here. She hoped they'd understand. She needed that job.

"My mom left out—she was taking the kids to visit family in Baltimore. D'marco came over after she was gone. At first, I was happy to see him. But he was drunk and suspicious because I wasn't home last night, on Valentine's Day. We didn't have no plans—I was just at my girlfriend's! But he ain't believed me.

"I told him he was being crazy, and that put him over the edge. He started hitting me. Once he started, he wouldn't stop. He was just punching me everywhere, my arms and chest and legs. I couldn't get away."

Her mother cut in. “Show her the bruises.”

Laprea rolled up her sleeves to show the nasty welts on her arms. She spread apart her shirt’s neckline, where a big bruise was forming on her chest. She grimaced as she remembered the thudding sounds D’marco’s fists made as they landed on her body.

“He must’ve been hitting you very hard,” Anna said.

“I think he been working out in jail.” Laprea let out a short, bitter laugh. “I ran out the house, but he caught me right outside the door. He smooshed me right there, out on the front porch, for all the world and God to see.”

“‘Smooshed’?” Anna asked.

“To grab by the face and push, ma’am,” Green said.

“It was so embarrassing,” Laprea continued. “I wasn’t even thinking about how much it hurt right then—I was thinking I didn’t want my neighbors to see. I just wanted him to go away. So I told him I *should* see someone else, ’cause he don’t deserve me.”

Laprea began crying again. Anna handed her another napkin.

“Then he grabbed me and threw me against the side of the house and started punching my face. My nose was bleeding, and I couldn’t hardly see out my eyes. He mashed my face into the brick wall so hard, I felt the skin on my cheek burning.”

Laprea dabbed her swollen eyes delicately. The worst thing about this beating wasn’t the pain, or the shame, or even the heartache. It was how she was going to explain her face to her kids. Other times, she’d told them she walked into a door or fell on the sidewalk. But they were getting old enough that they were questioning her “accidents.” They had seen D’marco lay hands on her. It terrified them.

She swore to herself that they would never have to see that again. She would do whatever it took. For now, she just had to finish this terrible story. She took a ragged breath.

“He was holding my face against the wall, and he came in real close. He put his mouth to my ear, like he about to tell me some sweet nothing. And he whispered if he ever caught me with another man—he’d kill me.”