

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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COURTING JUSTICE



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## COURTING JUSTICE

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## *Chapter 1*

*“This is Martin Long reporting live from the steps of the U.S. District courthouse in lower Manhattan. We’ve just been told that a verdict has been reached in the federal case against Senator Ivan Russ. So far the headlines have been dominated by the prosecutor and the defense attorney in the case—a legal battle between two high-profile lawyers dubbed the “Thriller Maxilla” and the “Italian Hellion.” According to sources, defense attorney DeAngelo Di Meglio has gotten his client, Senator Russ, acquitted on all charges. Government prosecutors, headed by Attorney Samuel Maxilla, were shocked when their key witness in the case broke down after only fifteen minutes on the stand under cross-examination from Di Meglio.”*

*The reporter shifted the microphone to his other hand. “Under relentless questioning by Di Meglio, Congresswoman Andrea Vermeil shocked everyone in*

*the courtroom with her confession that she had framed Senator Russ in a conspiracy to embezzle over a half million dollars in campaign funds...*

DeAngelo Di Meglio tuned out the reporters surrounding him and braced himself for the onslaught of media that would descend on him the moment he left the courthouse. This case was what he'd worked hard for his entire career, one that would make him a household name, one that would put him at the top and establish his legal reputation. And now at the ripe old age of thirty-four and after practicing law for ten years, he'd finally done it.

"Mr. Di Meglio, how did the case come together?"

"Why didn't the senator admit to the affair with the congresswoman to save himself?"

"Are you upset the senator wasn't truthful with you about everything?"

The reporters' questions came at him from every direction.

He'd had a gut feeling the moment Congresswoman Vermeil had taken the stand, and his instincts made him push her in his cross-examination. Maybe it was the "I'm about to hang you by the balls" look she'd given his client, Senator Russ, who denied having an affair with the congresswoman and was willing to risk prison time to keep the affair from his wife, who was terminally ill. DeAngelo shook his head. Ivan Russ had actually believed that it was better for his dying wife to believe he was an embezzler rather than find out he was unfaithful.

The reporters continued to bombard him with more questions despite his response of "no comment."

"How do you feel about breaking this case?"

"What do you think about the federal prosecutors and how they handled the case?"

The scene outside the courthouse reminded DeAngelo of the very first time he'd lost a case and how he'd felt then. He remembered the advice his parents, both of whom were lawyers, had given him: *If you can't say anything nice about somebody, then don't say anything at all.*

He looked straight into the TV camera pointed in his face and said in a direct, confident voice, "No comment for now. We'll answer questions at the press conference."

A short while later he was back in his office, surrounded by family, friends, associates and the law firm staff. They had all dropped by his office to congratulate him on winning a case many had thought would last for weeks or months. In fact, a few had even assumed there was only a snowball's chance in hell of winning the case. The federal prosecutors had boasted that they had an airtight case against the senator, and when they found a briefcase filled with half a million dollars buried in his backyard, many assumed he was guilty.

Although the evidence had been damaging, for some reason DeAngelo had believed Senator Russ's claims of innocence. But DeAngelo *had* suspected the senator wasn't being truthful when he'd asked him if he knew of anyone who would want to frame him. DeAngelo got the sense that Senator Russ was trying to hide something, trying to protect someone. But no matter how he'd tried, he couldn't get Ivan Russ to tell him anything other than that he didn't plant the money in his backyard.

Momentarily distracted, DeAngelo blinked when his father snapped a finger in front of his face.

"Daydreaming, son? If you are, then you're entitled. That case has consumed you for months now, and I speak on behalf of this entire firm in saying that you made us proud today."

“You most certainly did, Angelo,” his mother chimed in with a huge smile on her face.

Coming from his parents, it meant a lot. He’d always appreciated their opinions—even at times when he didn’t want to hear them. “Thanks, Dad, Mom.”

His mother and father had always been his heroes. The two were highly respected attorneys who’d made a name for themselves and the Di Meglio law firm in Manhattan. The family firm had been established generations ago by his great-great-grandfather, and now included his parents, his father’s two brothers—Federico and Leandro—and their sons, Maddox and Damon. They were all Di Meglios, and had made a name for themselves representing the rich and famous. The only person who wasn’t part of the law firm was his younger sister, Samari. She was a partner in two law firms—one in Houston and another in Oklahoma City—and she had called moments ago to congratulate him and to tell him how proud she was of him.

“Same here, Angelo,” his uncles chimed in, as they grinned from ear to ear. “We want you to take some time off. You deserve it,” his uncle Leandro, the eldest of the three Di Meglio brothers, said. “Besides, you need to prepare to take on all those interviews and book offers that will be coming your way. The case not only made national headlines, it even made news overseas. Winning this case makes you one of the hottest lawyers around.”

“Hey, but don’t get the big-head,” his cousin Maddox warned.

“If you do, then we’ll have to take you down a peg or two,” his cousin Damon threatened. Both tried to look serious, but Angelo saw the amusement lurking behind their dark eyes.

He was about to tell both of them—who he thought of more like brothers than cousins—to kiss him where the sun don't shine when he remembered his parents and uncles were still in the room. Instead he glanced over at his uncle Leandro. "I doubt things will go that far, Uncle Andro. I may be news today, but history tomorrow."

"Don't be too sure of that, Angelo," his uncle Federico warned. Fed—as everyone called him—was the middle Di Meglio brother, and the uncle who was the most fun to be around. He was the Di Meglio who'd covered for Angelo and his cousins over the years when they'd gotten into trouble.

Over the next three hours, DeAngelo's uncle's warning was born out when his phone kept ringing nonstop. It seemed that winning a high-profile case had not only given a boost to his career but also to his love life. In reality, he'd stopped considering himself a "ladies' man" a while ago. These days he dated just for fun, and always let the women he went out with know beforehand that there was no chance of emotional involvement. That had been deliberate on his part once he'd decided just what his future was.

He paused a second after locking his office door and glanced around. Everyone had left hours ago, but he and his two cousins had stayed late to celebrate some more. He had begged off Maddox's invitation to go back to his place to party and have a good time. Back in the day he would have gone along with the kind of partying Maddox had in mind—beautiful women and lots of champagne—but not now.

He knew his cousins were wondering just what the hell was wrong with him since for the past couple of years his wild bachelor lifestyle had begun winding down. They accused him of no longer being any fun—

like tonight. No doubt Maddox and Damon had hooked up with some hot women and had plans for an outrageous night.

Bidding good-night to the firm's security guards, Angelo left the office and caught the elevator to the parking garage. He had received lots of calls that day. Some he'd preferred not to have received. There were the morning talk shows that called to get an interview and several well-known publishers offering book deals. Tomorrow, he decided, he would hire someone to handle all the press.

Then there were the calls from women he hadn't dated in months—deliberately. Evidently they hadn't gotten the hint since most of their calls made it seem as if they were still his flavor of the month, and would enjoy being by his side in the spotlight. He thought to himself, that wouldn't be happening.

He fished his car keys out of his coat pocket. He opened the door to his two-seater Mercedes sports car and slid in. Whether his admirers knew it or not, his absence hadn't been by accident. He had stopped seeing them for a reason. It seemed that lately one woman in particular seemed to dominate his thoughts.

After buckling his seat belt, he pulled out his cell phone and checked his messages. He would have to clear some of them out, he thought as texts and voice mails nearly totaled a hundred. He frowned as he realized the one call he had wanted most wasn't among them. He had expected her call if for no other reason than because he was her best friend's brother and he'd won an important case. Since she was a lawyer herself, she would know what that meant and how it felt.

Even now he remembered the first time he'd met her, the first time his sister Sam had brought her two

best friends from law school—Mackenzie Standfield and Peyton Mahoney—home to spend the holidays with the Di Meglio family at their Long Island estate. Both women had been lookers, but there had been something special about Peyton that held his interest, if only for a moment. It was easy enough to see that she had issues. For starters, he sensed that she was uncomfortable surrounded by the Di Meglios' wealth. She'd had a chip on her shoulder the size of the Rock of Gibraltar. Later, he'd found out why when he heard about the hard life she'd had growing up on Chicago's South Side. He couldn't help but admire her.

Although he rarely saw her, over the years he'd come to realize that he was attracted to her. It was subtle—and sexual, or so he thought—but his interest increased whenever he saw her. At first, he chalked it up to her being different. But then things changed when he made a surprise visit to his sister in Oklahoma, only to find she was away on a business trip in Florida for several days. At the time, Peyton wouldn't hear of him staying at a hotel and had invited him to crash at her place until Sam returned to town.

It was during those five days that he'd gotten a chance to really know Peyton Mahoney and see a side of her she probably reserved for only those closest to her. With him, she let her guard down. And in doing so, he found her even more intriguing. She hadn't been as unapproachable as he'd thought she was. During that time he'd discovered just how compassionate and loyal she was and that she didn't have a pretentious bone in her body. Those five days had been special. And it was during those days, as unlikely as it might seem, that he had become totally enamored with her, although he'd done a good job of hiding it and ignoring his feelings. The

man who could have any woman he wanted was hot and heavy for a woman who probably didn't want anything to do with him, even if she knew how he felt.

He was about to slide his cell phone back into his pocket when it rang. He glanced at the caller ID and when he saw it was an Oklahoma number, he heaved a sigh of relief. He felt a twinge that sent a fluttery feeling through his body. He'd been waiting for this call. He pressed the key to connect the call. "This is Angelo."

"Hey, this is Peyton. I don't want to take up much of your time, but I just had to call to congratulate you. I've been keeping up with the trial and you were simply fantastic."

The first thought that ran through his mind was that she could never take up too much of his time. And the second, a compliment coming from her meant everything. "Thanks, Peyton. I appreciate you calling. It was difficult at times."

"I can imagine. I'm involved in a messy case now myself. I go to trial in a couple of weeks, so wish me luck. I want some of that Di Meglio courtroom magic to rub off on me."

He smiled, thinking that the Di Meglio good fortune wasn't the only thing he wanted to rub off on her. The thought of his hands touching her skin sent shivers of desire down his spine.

"Well, I'll let you go, Angelo. I don't want to hold up The Man."

She'd always referred to him as that: The Man. Now he was beginning to wonder what it took to go from The Man to her man. "You're not holding me up. Besides, I'm on my way home from the office. I've got nothing better to do tonight."

"Yeah. Right."

He could tell from her voice that she didn't believe him. She still thought he was that skirt-chasing Di Meglio who enjoyed adding notches to his bedpost. He rolled down the car window to let in the summer breeze as he drove toward his place in Long Island. His parents had invited him to drop by their house, but he'd wanted to go home.

"I mean it. I don't have anything better to do tonight." *Anything I'd rather do than talk to you*, he thought silently. He wondered where she was. At the office? Home? "I enjoy talking to you," he added.

"Thanks for being sweet and saying that, but I can't indulge you, at least not tonight. I have to be back in court first thing in the morning. The attorney for the plaintiff is trying to play games, and I'm not in a playing mood. Gotta go, Angelo. It was good talking to you. Congratulations."

He couldn't imagine her taking a break. In all the years he'd known Peyton, he'd never seen her let her hair down and just enjoy life. She usually worked from sunup to sundown on her cases, and when she did take a break from the office he knew that she usually headed back home to Chicago to do pro bono work in the community. She probably didn't know the meaning of relaxing, or pampering herself, or just plain chilling.

"Well, don't celebrate too much tonight."

He chuckled. If only she knew that was the last thing he intended to do. He would go home, shower, retire early and lie in bed savoring her phone call. "I won't and I hope you have a good day in court tomorrow."

"Hey, thanks. I'm going to need it. Next time I see you I hope you're willing to share your secrets. You've won so many cases this year and I'd like to know how you do it."

The answer to that question was easy. *By staying focused and understanding what I really want out of life*, he thought to himself. “Yes, next time we see each other I’ll be more than happy to share my secrets with you.”

He could hear her laughter and the sound was more sensuous than anything he’d heard in a while. Goose bumps pricked his skin and stoked his libido in a way that only she could do. She didn’t have a clue just how sexy he thought she was.

“Good night, Angelo.”

“Same to you, Peyton.”

After disconnecting the call, he was exhilarated yet felt a sense of longing. As the breeze blowing through the window floated across his face, he decided it was time to finally put his plan into action. There had to be some reason why he was so attracted to her, why he sought her out whenever they attended parties or family functions together and why he got jealous of any man who dared try and talk to her.

It was time for him to discover what it was about Peyton that had him fighting feelings he wasn’t accustomed to. When he got home, he would call his sister Samari, who had voiced her suspicions that he had a thing for her best friend. She’d known it and no telling how many others did as well—except for the lady herself.

Tonight he was going to enlist his sister Sam’s help in orchestrating his plan. His sister had been the first one to notice the attraction. And of course he had denied it, mostly because at the time he hadn’t been sure just what his feelings were. All he knew was that he was intensely attracted to Peyton.

As he drove along the expressway toward home, he couldn’t help but smile. There was a feeling of peace and tranquility that flowed through him. His friends and

family had nicknamed him “Smooth Operator.” And because of his courtroom success, the media had dubbed him the “Italian Hellion.”

Right now, the only thing he wanted to be successful at, the only thing he wanted to be known as, was the man who conquered Peyton Mahoney.

*Two weeks later...*

Peyton stared across the table at the two women who had been her best friends since law school—Samari and Mackenzie Madaris. She looked down again at the early birthday gift they’d given her—a gift certificate for two weeks at Dunwoody Cove, the exclusive five-star, singles-only resort on a private island in the Bahamas.

Knowing the cost of a stay at the posh resort, her eyes widened. She glanced up and a smile touched her lips. “Have I been so much of a bitch lately that the two of you felt you needed to get rid of me?”

Of course it was Sam who smiled sweetly and said, “Your being a bitch we can handle. But a horny bitch is a little too much for anyone to have to deal with, Pey.”

Mackenzie gave Samari a playful punch on the shoulder. “Hey, Sam, did you have to go for the jugular?”

Peyton ignored the jab as she stuffed the tissue paper back into the gift bag and grinned. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but—”

“But that’s exactly what you need, Peyton—bones,” Sam interjected. “You need some fine man’s bones to jump. Then maybe that’ll get you out of this funk you’ve been in lately.”

Peyton didn’t say anything, because Sam was right. They knew the source of her bad attitude lately. It was just weeks before her thirtieth birthday, and she was still

single with no love life to speak of. Her two best friends, however—Sam and Mac—were not only married to drop-dead gorgeous men who happened to be cousins, but both were mothers to two beautiful babies. Mac had a three-month-old son named after her husband, Luke, and Sam had a beautiful little girl named Blair, who would be celebrating her first birthday in a few months.

“You’re going to the resort for two weeks, aren’t you?”

Peyton glanced at Mac. Her friends, who were genuinely concerned, didn’t know the half of it. Although the part about her being horny was up for discussion, she was never one to constantly need male companionship. But what she did need was a break from Oklahoma and from her caseload.

She’d won her last case a few days before, but it hadn’t been easy. Opposing counsel had tried to play hardball, but she’d shown them that when pushed, she could take things to a whole new level. She had proven when provoked, she could go toe-to-toe with anyone in the courtroom.

She was glad the case was over and wasn’t ready to take on another one. She just needed some time away from work, and it would be nice to go somewhere other than Chicago. Although she liked going home, since her grandmother who’d raised her had died a few years ago, the South Side hadn’t been the same.

She met Mac and Sam’s expectant gazes. “Yes, I’m definitely going,” she said, inhaling deeply.

“Hallelujah!”

Peyton knew that what she really needed to do was figure out the reason why she’d recently begun thinking about things she’d never considered before—like settling down, getting married and making some ba-

bies. She could very easily attribute it to Mac and Sam. Lately, they'd been all smiley-faced.

Sam had a huge smile on her face now. "That means we get to go shopping," she said.

"For what?" Peyton said.

"For some lingerie."

"I'm going to the resort to rest, Sam, not necessarily to get laid. Besides, I have lingerie."

"It's a singles resort, kiddo. Of course you're going there to get laid," Sam said, giving her a pointed look as Mac leaned back in her chair and grinned.

"And we're talking about sexy lingerie, Peyton. There's no way you're going to the Dunwoody taking that granny-panties underwear you have," Sam added.

Peyton rolled her eyes knowing not to take offense at Sam's comment and feel insulted. Been there, done that. And with Sam it was only a waste of time. Sam was Sam and there was no changing her. In law school, they had gotten off to a bad start, mainly because they'd come from two totally different backgrounds. She'd seen Sam as a spoiled little rich kid and Sam had seen her as the tough South Side of Chicago girl who still had a chip on her shoulder because she came from the wrong side of the tracks. It was one of the reasons Peyton still believed in defending the little guy.

Thanks to Mac, who'd always been the peacemaker, the three of them had come to an understanding and their friendship had survived the test of time, including some of Sam's exorbitant shopping sprees. The woman could spend money like she had her own personal mint, while Peyton still watched her pennies, something she'd always done. She had grown up not knowing where her next meal was coming from or when it would get there.

Besides, both Sam and Mac knew that when it came to sharing her bed, she was as picky as hell.

“So what time do you want to meet us at Sylvia’s tomorrow?”

Peyton immediately held up her hand. “Whoa! Back up! I will not go shopping for anything at that place again.”

The last time Sam had talked her into going to Sylvia’s to shop, what she’d spent on a nightgown could have fed the entire block of the housing project where she grew up. She enjoyed nice things like anyone else, but the prices at Sylvia’s were utterly ridiculous. Personally, she didn’t think the lingerie looked any better than what she’d bought at Victoria’s Secret.

“Okay, we’ll go to Diana’s Boutique then.”

Peyton rolled her eyes. The prices at Diana’s were just as bad, but she decided that now was not the time to argue with Sam or things could get ugly. And she didn’t want that. Especially after the wonderful gift they’d given her. She was not particularly outgoing, so it would be hard at first for her to socialize with a bunch of strangers at a resort. But she would try.

Although she, Mac and Sam still did things together, it wasn’t the same. Now they set their watches to get home to their hubbies and babies in time. She couldn’t much blame them and was happy for them, really. But she still remembered those times when they would work hard during the day and head over to Cello’s for dinner and to party. Now those days were long gone.

“Okay, so it’s all set. Tomorrow we’ll meet in town at noon at Diana’s.”

Peyton opened her mouth to argue then closed it. She glanced over at Mac who gave her a playful wink, and

she couldn't help but chuckle. She didn't have a fighting chance against these two. Somehow she would get through this or she would end up killing Sam.