

Is he training  
the rookie,  
or is she  
training him?

# JUSTICE AT DAWN

VALERIE MASSEY GOREE

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## *Dedication*

Many years ago, I worked with a teacher assistant who was a couple of years older, but we both had two children who were the same ages. One day we discussed the stress of when our youngest children obtained their driver's licenses. My dear friend, Mrs. Briggs, sighed and stated she and her husband never rested until their sons were safe at home. She was quick to add that the boys were excellent drivers, but there was a greater chance of them getting stopped while driving at night. In my naiveté, I asked, "Why?"

"Because they're black."

Then it hit me. Sure, Mrs. Briggs and I had much in common, but she was an African American mother, and there were parts of her life that I would have a difficult time understanding, if ever.

I named my Kitty Claire Briggs after my late friend and included the essence of this conversation in my story. God bless your sons, Mrs. Briggs.

## *In Appreciation*

To the editors at Pelican who believed in my writing and offered so much support. I appreciate the spiritual qualities in their company philosophy.

*Other books by Valerie Massey Goree*

***Weep in the Night***  
***Day of Reckoning***

## *What People are Saying*

"Day of Reckoning by Valerie Massey Goree offers a fast-paced Christian fiction romantic suspense novel with plenty of action and hold-on-to-your seat twists and turns to keep readers holding on until the end."

~ CBM Christian Book Review,  
10.0 out of 10.0 stars"

"I'd recommend this story to anyone who enjoys suspense."

~ Loree Peery, author of *A Cup of Christmas Kindness*

# 1

*“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.” ~ Psalm 37:5–6*

The child seated across the aisle from Agent Cooper Callahan gripped the armrest and squeezed her eyes shut as the plane descended. “I don’t want to go. I don’t want to.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Cooper tapped her hand and passed the unaccompanied minor an unused napkin. He’d chatted with her briefly during the flight from Miami and learned she was being met by her grandmother. But there’d been no hint of anxiety. Until now. “Hey, kiddo, what’s wrong?”

Ten-year-old Monica shook her head and sniffed into the napkin. “I want to go home.”

“It’s too late for that now, young lady. You’d best discuss your desire with your family.”

The plane bumped down, engine roaring, and they taxied along the runway.

“Welcome to San Diego. Local time is ten twenty-five. Sunny, sixty-two the expected high. You may now turn on your electronic devices.” The flight attendant

concluded his instructions with reminders to stay seated until safely at the gate.

Like most of the other passengers, Cooper activated his cell phone and then checked his work-related e-mail messages. One received his full attention. Another rookie agent to train, his intake interview scheduled for noon. One of the perks of his job. As chief instructor in the trainee program for the International Retrieval Organization, he got to mold—

The kid whimpered and hugged the purple, heart-shaped pillow she'd received as an early Valentine's Day gift to her chest, rocking in the seat.

With twelve years under his belt as an IRO operative, Cooper knew better than to ignore signs of distress. But what could he do? Monica wore the requisite ID tag and attendants had checked on her periodically. Legit. Keep an eye on her until safe with her grandmother. Yeah, that much he could do. He shoved his phone into his pocket. Details of the trainee that were provided in the e-mail could wait.

An attendant boarded when the door opened and escorted Monica off the plane. Seated in the fourth row, it didn't take long for Cooper to exit. He hurried up the ramp onto the concourse and headed toward the baggage claim area although he'd only brought a carry-on. Among the throng, he spied the attendant with a distinctive auburn braid and the kid by her side. So far, so good. Monica still held her pillow close, head down, brown curls hiding her face, shuffling steps. Not good.

Cooper positioned himself three yards behind the



pair and followed them to the greeting area. They approached a short, middle-aged woman with spiked blonde hair. The grandmother? Yeah. Who knew grandmas could be so hip? Monica melted into her arms, sobbing and laughing.

Partially satisfied the kid was OK, he remained alert. Years of experience told him something was not quite right. Although he believed Monica was with family, or at least someone she knew, she remained tense and on edge. Eyes darting, mouth grim. Arms tight around her middle.

At the luggage carousel, Cooper scanned the crowd from his six-foot-five advantage. One guy stood out because he wore a heavy navy jacket—too much coat for the mild February temperatures. The baseball cap low over his brow would keep his face shielded from any video monitor. The man of average height and build sidled closer, stepping behind a group of teens with their feet resting on the conveyor belt frame. Dangerous, but not Cooper's concern.

A shrill beep sounded, and bags tumbled onto the belt. Passengers surged forward.

Cooper kept watch on the man who only had eyes for Monica and her grandmother. Not much Cooper could do unless the guy acted. Couldn't very well attack him for wearing a winter coat. By now, Cooper had maneuvered near Monica.

She pointed. "My suitcase is coming, Grams. It's the green one with a yellow bow on the handle."

Almost as tall as her grandmother, Monica clung to the woman's arm.

“Please let go, child. I need both hands to grab your bag.”

Monica released her hold, and Grams pushed through the people.

Bad move.

The man in navy slipped his arms around Monica’s waist and hauled her backward.

Cooper was ready. He, in turn, threw his forearm around the guy’s neck and squeezed.

Spluttering and choking, the assailant released Monica, and attempted to free himself.

“Don’t bother, chump. You’re not going anywhere.” Cooper now held the guy in a bear hug, almost gagging on the strong tobacco smell from his clothes. He dragged him to the luggage carts and dumped him in one. “Security, I have a suspicious package for you.”

Thirty minutes later, after debriefing with authorities, Cooper strolled out of the airport. He hailed a cab and gave the driver the address for IRO headquarters. The fare for a taxi ride was cheaper than paying for parking at the airport’s short-term lot.

The e-mail regarding the new trainee provided few details. A full report would be waiting on his desk. Bowen Boudine, boss of the San Diego office, conducted all initial interviews and background checks, talked with references, and collected detailed educational and work histories. Cooper would provide on-the-job training and assess the rookie’s skills and personality. Get to the nitty-gritty of who the person really was beyond answers to application questions.

Facts available at this point: female, twenty-six years old, and a marksman. Or should that be markswoman? Interesting.

The cab slowed, stopped. Cooper paid the driver, unfolded himself from the backseat, and carried his duffle bag to the door. He used his key, and once inside the foyer, waved at the camera tracking his movements.

However, the security door remained closed. Why? Usually someone manned the inside lock twenty-four-seven. He knocked, and finally the door clicked open.

Inside the office, a slew of people waited. They applauded as he entered.

“What’s going on? It’s not my birthday.”

“We’re celebrating anyway.” Jay Vashon, a new agent who’d recently completed the training course, slapped Cooper on the back. “Come.” He led Cooper to a computer and punched a couple of keys.

Bowen joined the group of agents. “It’s all over social media. You’re a hero.”

Cooper’s take-down of the guy in navy played before his eyes, video from various cell phones, no doubt.

“This tall dude came out of nowhere and picked up the man like he weighed nothing,” one witness said.

“Yeah. Then he dumped him in a cart, all folded in half, like,” another interviewee announced.

Cooper ignored the rest of the comments and walked through his comrades toward his office in the

rear.

“Wait, Cooper. Give us details,” Bowen said.

In as few words as possible, Cooper explained his interaction with Monica and his unease regarding the situation. “Turns out her parents had recently gone through an ugly divorce. Mother has sole custody. Her dad called her right as she boarded the plane and told her he’d be waiting for her, and if she told anyone, he’d kill her grandmother.” Cooper adjusted his tie. Why was everyone looking at him? “Anyway, Monica’s safe. Her dad was arrested. And now, can I get back to work?”

He escaped to his office, stashed his bag behind his desk and sank into the chair. Whew. Peace, at last. Not that he didn’t like or appreciate his coworkers, but he certainly preferred to slide under the radar. Do his job with no fanfare or praise.

Eating pretzels from the plane, Cooper studied the rookie’s folder. Kitty Claire Briggs, born in Virginia, California high school, college degree in Kinesiology. Only one job listed, stunt double in Los Angeles. Cooper did a double take. Yup, he’d read it right.

Kitty had left that job two years ago. Gaps in a work history could be problematic. Although she’d passed Bowen’s investigation, Cooper would check, if for no other reason than to satisfy his curiosity.

He returned to her headshot. Short, black hair. Pleasant almost mischievous smile...

A knock on his door.

And prompt. Good sign.

He closed the folder, stood, and said, “Come in.”

Hand extended, he smiled.

Kitty Claire Briggs walked in.

Cooper's smile disappeared as his mouth gaped.

He was expecting an African-American woman. But three features threw him—her exceptional height, her sparkling gray eyes, and her bald head.

## 2

Oh, yeah, KC had surprised him. Could have scooped up his jaw with a trowel.

"Hi, Agent Callahan, I'm KC Briggs." She shook his hand and waited for him to respond.

One second, two.

He cleared his throat. "We use first names here. I'm Cooper. Please have a seat, Kitty."

"Oh, no. Coop. I'm no kitty-cat." She balanced on the edge of the chair. "Small and soft, that's not me. The little assistant who showed me in, I can bench-press her in a heartbeat. KC. Plain KC."

"There's nothing plain...I mean, um. Let's get started." He fingered a scar on his chin.

Ouch. Bet there had to be a major story behind that wound. It ran from his left eye, across his cheek, down to his chin.

"Did you download and print the handbook, KC?" he asked as he sat.

"No, sir. I figure I have it on my smart phone and laptop."

"Not sir, please. Just Cooper." He raked a hand through his hair.

Sandy-blond, real short. He should grow it out. Ooh, green eyes...

"We don't always have adequate reception in the areas we work. So for now, please print the handbook."

"Sure thing. But I've studied it cover to cover. Ask me anything."

"That's not the point. You need to have it with you so when we're on assignment, I can direct you to the right course of action."

"When do we start field training?"

Coop tented his fingers.

Cool, calm. Ha. Cool Coop. KC grinned but sobered when he cocked his head and stared at her. She scooted back in the chair and pressed her lips together.

"You've been accepted into IRO as a rookie. It's my job to ascertain your skills and determine whether or not you'll make an effective agent. All that takes time—" Coop held up his hand when KC opened her mouth. "Let me finish my spiel, please."

"Sorry, I'm excited."

"Really? I would never have guessed." Coop's lips curled in a brief smile.

Aah. KC leaned back. A human existed under the granite exterior.

"Obviously, I've read your application, but I have a few questions."

"Sure. I've got no secrets." She crossed her legs and smoothed the teal blue linen of her pant suit.

"Before I get to your history, I need to review important policies. Where's your personal handgun?"

"I left it at home."

"Bring it tomorrow, and I'll show you where we stow weapons while at the office."

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"The bad guys don't take off weekends. As a rookie, you'll be free Sundays only. If you pass muster and become a full-fledged agent, you'll work until your assignment is concluded."

"Sure. I understand that part, but I didn't expect I'd have to come in tomorrow." KC twisted the strap of her purse. Mother and Dad would have to go without her. Rats. She hated to miss her volunteer session at Riverview Children's Center. The kids enjoyed her amateur dramatic club so much.

"Do you have plans?"

"Yes, but I'll change them." She squirmed under Coop's visual probe. Man, those green eyes could pierce a steel door.

"How about your go-bag?"

"In my car. I followed the handbook guidelines and packed all the essentials. And a few extras. I can't imagine only having two changes of clothes—"

Again the hand.

KC placed a finger against her lips.

"A go-bag is not intended to provide everything you need for a week-long vacation. We're usually... Never mind. Next, your choice of clothing. Although you look very smart today, that, um, outfit is not suitable for a field assignment."

"My outfit, as you call it, cost a bundle. What's wrong with it?" KC lowered her chin and traced the outline of the antique pin on her lapel. She inhaled the



citrus and vanilla aroma of her body lotion. Her jumpy nerves calmed.

“We certainly want to look professional, but we have to be practical, too. Jeans are always a good bet, T-shirts, jackets with pockets, and sturdy shoes, or preferably boots. Comfortable clothing you wouldn’t mind getting dirty or ripped. All stated in the manual.”

“Then why are you wearing a suit?”

Coop folded his arms. “I just returned from a trip to deliver a runaway teen to his parents. I dressed appropriately for the job.”

“And so did I.” She held his gaze, and when neither of them blinked, she said, “Please continue.”

One eyebrow rose a fraction. “How did you earn marksmanship cred?”

“My two brothers vied for slots on the USA Olympic shooting team. Neither made it, but I always had to try everything they did. Whenever they practiced, my father took me along and taught me how to shoot. I’ve used numerous handguns, rifles, shotguns, and...” KC hung her head. Coop’s eyes were glazing over. “I tend to go on and on.”

This time Coop burst out laughing. “Believe me, I noticed. Your enthusiasm is commendable. Now, I need an explanation for the gap in your work history. You indicated—no, I have to ask. Why a stunt double? That has to be the most interesting career a rookie has ever had.”

“I’m not a run-of-the-mill gal, and I wanted a job that was exciting and different. I have the physical strength and agility to do it and the knowledge of body

movements, et cetera.”

A silent pause.

“You’re done?” Coop asked.

“Yeah. I can be concise.”

“Touché. You left that job two years ago. I know you passed our background checks which means you haven’t been incarcerated. You’re under no obligation to tell me, but I’m curious. What have you been doing in the interim?” He rocked in his chair.

“There’s no way I can describe all that happened in a few sentences. Do you still want to know?”

“Yes. Just the facts.”

“I can do facts.” She giggled. “The two-minute version or the two-hour...?”

Coop’s facial expression remained stoic.

Either he was a master at hiding his emotions or he didn’t appreciate her humor. She cleared her throat. *Get serious, girl, or you’ll be fired before you’re hired.*

KC set her shoulder bag on the floor and stood. “I have to pace, if you don’t mind. Two years ago, I broke my left leg, a compound tib-fib fracture. Right here.” She bent and touched her lower shin. “Docs put in a plate, but then I contracted osteomyelitis—infection of the bone—and had to have more surgery, use a bone-growth stimulator.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It was. Eventually I wanted to return to my job at the studio, but my folks convinced me to quit. Besides, I’m too big to portray most women, and not big enough for some men. Also, my compromised leg might have been a liability, and there were certain

stunts I couldn't perform." *Don't go there.* "While recuperating, I worked in my family's insurance business. Sitting in a chair, with my leg propped up, entering online claims and stuff."

At the door, she shoved her hands into her pockets. This was always the hard part. *Oh, Lord, please let me get through without tears.* "No sooner had my leg healed, I was diagnosed with cancer. Ovarian. Six months of chemo, all that's associated with it." She rubbed her forearm to relieve the itch. Chronic dry skin, a leftover side effect. "And of course, surgery, you know, to remove bits and pieces."

Settling in the chair again, she ran a hand over her bald head. "Before chemo, my hair was black. When it grew out, it was gray and sparse. I don't like it, so I keep my head shaved." She drew in a deep breath. "All that kept me busy for two years. Any more questions?"

Coop's gaze had followed her as she spoke.

Now he openly stared.

KC couldn't decide what emotion played across his face. At least it wasn't sympathy. Maybe a touch of admiration, and, there, yes, sadness.

"No, um, thank you." He clicked his pen on and off. On and off. "You survived a lot—"

"Don't call me a survivor. Cancer is a nasty disease that's always lurking inside. It can return any minute. I have regular checkups, and so far, no reoccurrence." She gave him her broadest smile and meant it. "That's why I grab life by its pointy little ears, and I intend to make the most of every opportunity."

"I understand." He turned a page in a file. "Why

do you want to become an IRO agent?"

She had her rehearsed answer ready. "I like the idea of helping people in unconventional ways. As you can tell I'm not a nine-to-five, sit-in-an-office-all-day type of person. I want to be physically involved, and what better way than to retrieve those in need?" *And to gain access to IRO's advanced technical resources.* KC picked up her bag and made a pretense of rummaging inside, concealing her face from Coop's intense scrutiny. No way did she want him to know her answer had not been the whole truth.

A cell phone buzzed. Coop patted papers and files on his desk to locate it. He glanced at the screen. "Excuse me. I have to take this. Hey, Bowen."

He nodded, glanced at KC, and stood. "Got it. Send me the address. It's been a while since my last visit." Phone stowed, he headed toward the door. "Rookie Agent KC Briggs fetch your go-bag and change into more appropriate gear. We have an assignment."

KC's stomach lurched, and her heart plummeted.

Was she ready for on-the-job training?

### 3

Terry Franklin, the name displayed in the e-mail on Cooper's phone screen was more than familiar to him. Since transferring to the San Diego branch of IRO a year ago, he'd visited the home of the California State Representative twice to help deal with Andrew, his teenage son. This time the boy had come home from visiting friends in a highly agitated state, drunk, and hallucinating. His parents weren't able to control him. Not a typical IRO assignment, but Franklin and the boss had a history, and the job would serve as training for KC.

Cooper paced the narrow hallway outside IRO's locker room.

KC emerged seconds later, bringing with her the subtle orange and vanilla scent he'd first noticed in his office. Her head reached past his chin—she had to be close to six foot. In blue jeans, white shirt, and black boots she looked more like an agent now.

"Snap," she said, circling her finger at his blue jeans, white shirt, and brown cowboy boots.

"Yeah, let's not make it a habit." Hiding a smile, he led the way out of the building to his pickup and opened the passenger door.

"Do you open doors for your male trainees?"