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DEFENDERS *of* HOPE, BOOK THREE

ENDURING
JUSTICE

A NOVEL

AMY WALLACE



MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

*And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice,
to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

— MICAH 6 : 8



The wall she'd built with years of secrecy started to crack. Hanna Kessler wrapped trembling arms around her waist and stared through the glass door into her parents' backyard. A place she'd avoided her whole stay. Sunlight danced in the still water of her mother's koi pond and highlighted all the landscaping changes Dad had made since Mom's death.

Hanna closed her eyes against warring memories of past and present. As a child, she'd loved feeding the beautiful orange fish and hearing Mom laugh as the koi swarmed to the food. Now the little pond area was the only bit of her mother remaining. Maybe that was why she'd glanced outside and then stood transfixed. She needed her mom now more than ever.

Swallowing hard, she opened her eyes and focused on Mom's teakwood dolphin statue and the white rocks around the water, glinting in the late afternoon sun. She reached out to touch the warm glass but couldn't force herself to open the door. Goose bumps trailed her arms and she shivered.

She couldn't go outside.

But she had to do something. Had to get away. So she stumbled into the rustic living room, her favorite place in the house. The surrounding family snapshots reminded her of simpler times. Boating on Kentucky Lake. Thunder over Louisville. Playing at Iroquois Park. Times when Mom and Dad and her brother, Steven, had wrapped her in their protection and love.

The front door rattled, then creaked open. "Anyone home?" A

man's deep voice carried through the safe place she'd escaped to months ago. It wasn't safe anymore.

But her frozen feet refused to move. Where could she hide? Footsteps thundered through the front hall, drawing closer. She had to get out.

Choking down the lump of panic in her throat, she ran back to the sliding glass doors and forced her feet to move outside, onto the concrete patio. She could get to her car from there.

The keys! Turning back to the house, she focused on the tall form stepping out of the house and walking toward her.

"Hanna-girl, what's gotten into you?"

Her brain snapped to attention. The man in front of her was no threat.

"Daddy!" She ran into his outstretched arms.

Andrew Kessler kissed the top of her head and chuckled. "You looked like you'd seen a ghost. Didn't you get the message I left this morning?"

Heartbeat still pounding out of her rib cage, she inhaled a few deep breaths before answering. She hadn't checked messages today. And no way could she admit she'd listened to most of the messages her family had left, never intending to return the calls. "I...I must have missed it. Sorry, Daddy."

Try as she might to hide it, calling her father Daddy only happened when she was terrified. Or hiding. And she'd done a lot of hiding.

Dad stepped back and tilted his head, still holding her in his arms. "Well, I'm in Louisville for the weekend and had to see my girl. I miss you. So does everyone back in Alexandria."

Even Michael? She wouldn't ask. She had no right. Not after ignoring all the calls and letters he'd sent. The ones declaring his love even though she'd run away from everyone after her brother's wedding.

She couldn't meet Dad's eyes.

"Hanna, look at me." He tilted her chin up. She fought to not pull away. "Steven asks about you every day. I'm surprised your brother and Clint and the rest of their FBI friends haven't hightailed it up here to drag you home."

“They wouldn’t.” Especially not Michael. Not after almost two months of her frosty silence.

Dad laughed again. He had no idea the pain his questions, his presence here, caused. “Steven’s planned it. So has Michael. But they’re waiting for you to come back, on your terms.”

As if that would happen.

“Susannah’s birthday party is a week from Saturday. Clint and the rest of us are praying you’ll come. Take pictures. Let us show you how much we love having you in Alexandria.”

A week from Saturday. The twenty-fifth of August. She wouldn’t be there. Couldn’t face Clint Rollins. Not after her negligence had nearly cost Clint’s son his life.

Tears slipped past her clenched eyes.

“Oh, honey.” Dad gathered her back into his arms. “No one blames you, Hanna. No one. You need to let the past go. Everyone is safe now. All the Rollins clan. Even Conor.”

So Sara’s baby was still alive. Just like Steven’s and Clint’s messages had said. Relief rushed through her, causing her knees to wobble. But other guilt arrows pierced her heart. All the lies she’d told Steven and Michael. Dad too. Clint’s son wasn’t the only reason she’d fled Alexandria.

“You’ll be there for Susannah’s party, right?” His hopeful blue eyes begged.

She pulled out of his arms and walked back into the house. Dad followed. “I...I need a Kleenex.” Searching through the oak cabinets in the kitchen didn’t produce any tissues. So she grabbed a paper towel from the counter. “What brings you in town? During our phone calls last week, you never mentioned coming home.”

“If I had, would you have been here?”

Ouch. “Yes, Daddy.” Another lie. “So are you here to check on the Mall St. Matthews coffee shop? I’ve been working there every day, just like you arranged. It’s going well.” And she was babbling.

“I’m here to meet with some old friends on Friday and talk about upcoming business opportunities.”

Old friends. The memories rushing in unbidden surfaced more tears. And more cracks in the wall of secrecy. She needed to get out of the house, out of the neighborhood. Now. Maybe then she could exhibit some self-control.

“Why don’t we grab a late lunch at the Cheesecake Factory? After your long drive you’re bound to be hungry, right?” She forced a smile.

“Okay, Hanna-girl.” He wiped away one of her stray tears. “On one condition.”

Please don’t ask about the party, Daddy. Please.

He lifted his bushy graying eyebrows. “Promise you’ll come back to us and take pictures at Susannah’s birthday party next week.”

The very thing she couldn’t do. How would she get out of this without telling more lies or spilling everything? She had to avoid that. Maybe one last fib would get her through the weekend with Dad.

Then she could find somewhere else to run.



Another Friday stuffed in a suit and having to smile for congressional district work.

There were plenty of other places RJ would rather be on a summer morning than his sparsely decorated office. On his computer at home—alone—was high among the choices.

“Congressman Reeley?” His young intern poked her perky red head through his open office door. “It’s almost time for the meeting to start.”

“Are all the business leaders present?”

“Yes sir. Everyone you invited. And all the talk indicates positive interest in a Kentucky branch office for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.”

“Good. Very good.”

“Any last minute details I can help with?”

“No, Brittney, but thank you. Is my wife already in there?”

“Yes sir. Working the room. She’s amazing. Everyone will be begging to help with whatever you propose.” Brittney gave him a megawatt smile and left the office.

So Helen had ignored his request to stop by his office first. No matter. She was the perfect political partner. Money, charm, and pure ambition had cemented their wedding vows fifteen years ago. She guaranteed his future in the White House.

He stood and stared out the window at Kentucky’s bluegrass and a few old oaks swaying in the breeze. The wind did nothing to abate the blazing temperatures of mid-August. And unlike his fellow representatives on the Hill, he’d take air conditioning over a golf green any day.

Unless he could be outside working in his backyard garden like he'd done so many years ago. When life seemed full of promise. When Gloria was still alive.

A knock on the door startled him out of the idyllic memories of summers past.

"Come in." He straightened his green tie. Better to avoid red or blue so as not to offend the alumni of rival Kentucky colleges. Life was all about keeping up appearances and making everyone happy.

"Hello to the Honorable RJ Reeley, Kentucky's favorite US representative." Andrew Kessler stepped through the door and turned back the clock with his smile.

"Well, hello to you, old friend. Long time."

Andrew shook his hand and clasped him on the back. "I keep thinking I should call and set up another fishing weekend. Especially since we both spend most of our time in DC nowadays. But I talk myself out of it, knowing you're far busier than I'll ever be."

RJ fought with his representative persona, longing to be back on Kentucky Lake with Andrew talking about coffee shops and flower gardens. He leaned back against his desk. A very physical reminder of the present. "Last report you were taking the coffee business by storm and enjoying every spare minute with your beautiful new wife."

"New?" Andrew's graying hair belied the spark of life still bold in his eyes. "Compared to the thirty years Cindy and I had together, I suppose Sue and I are still in the newlywed stage. But we'll have been married six years this October. Six very happy years."

"I'm glad for you, Andrew. But I apologize that so much time has gotten away from me." RJ's guard dropped with every tick of the clock. A dangerous situation. "Cindy was a wonderful woman. I imagine Sue is just as special."

"Yes. She is." Andrew's eyes pierced him. "I remember your wedding to Helen. God has been good to both of us with such incredible second chances."

Second chances? "Yes...well. You're right." This conversation drew

too close to memories better left untouched. Yet no way to change the subject entered his rattled mind.

The buzz of a cell phone broke the awkward silence.

Andrew reached for his belt and checked the display. "That's Steven. Mind if I slip into your sitting room and take this?"

Steven Kessler. FBI Agent. Not a man RJ wanted to tangle with or delay. Best to stay off his radar. "Please, be my guest. I'll wait for you."

Andrew stepped to the door and paused. "No need to wait. I'll slip in when I'm done here."

RJ nodded. But wait he would. Who knew what information might be gleaned from phone calls with the FBI?

"Hey, son."

RJ walked to the sitting room door and strained to hear.

"How long has the child been missing?" A stretch of silence. "How old is the little girl?" Andrew's voice dropped when he continued. "She's the same age as Gracie's students?" Another pause, then RJ heard something about the child being Asian.

A missing Asian child? RJ's pulse hammered. Ignoring images from last night, he listened again. He had to know more.

"I'll be praying, Steven." Andrew's voice wavered. "I'm sorry. Sorry any child or parent has to deal with this."

Andrew's footsteps moved closer.

RJ rushed to his desk and shuffled papers.

Andrew entered the office and stopped short. "I thought you were going to the meeting."

"A few notes to go over first." He held up the papers. "I couldn't help hearing you talk about a missing child. Is everything all right?"

Andrew sighed. "Nothing is right when someone abducts a child."

"I couldn't agree more." RJ swallowed the tremor in his voice. "When did she disappear?"

"She went missing yesterday afternoon."

Not the answer he'd hoped to hear. "How old was she?"

Andrew's raised eyebrows drew into a knot. "Why do you ask?"

Why indeed. RJ smoothed damp hands down his slacks. “Well...my interest in our country’s missing children is why I’m proposing the branch office for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.”

Andrew released a deep breath, and the stiffness in his shoulders lessened. “Of course, RJ. That makes perfect sense. It’s why we’re here, right?”

He could only nod and try to slip back on his congressional mask. Work beckoned. His safe place. “We’d better join the party in the conference room. Elizabethtown’s elite will only wait so long.”

“Ah, but you have the support of leaders from all over Kentucky. They’ll back your proposal for opening an NCMEC branch in our beautiful state. I, for one, hope the groundbreaking takes place in Louisville.”

“I’ll bet you do. Always the champion of Louisville’s development.”

“My hometown is in my blood. That’s why I accepted the city council’s invitation to participate in this grass-roots project. Steven wanted to be here today, but work kept him busy in DC.”

“He’s still with the FBI?” Not that RJ could forget that monumental fact. He motioned Andrew through the door, then walked with him down the hall.

“Yes. Still working with the Crimes Against Children Unit. He’s passionate about protecting children.”

Sweat beads trickled down RJ’s back. “It’s too bad he couldn’t join us. He’s a perfect fit for fund-raisers. His expertise and hero stature would be a great sell.”

“When it comes to keeping our nation’s children safe, Steven’s the first to step forward.” Fatherly pride oozed out of Andrew’s grin. “Time allowing, I’m sure he could be persuaded to help.”

Parental pride was something RJ had never experienced. Never wanted to either. One of many things that separated him from Andrew Kessler. No surprise they hadn’t stayed in touch much after Gloria died.

For that and a multitude of other reasons.

And now he had to remove his old friend and Andrew’s FBI son

from the mix. Things were safer that way. But for today, he'd keep up appearances and land support for his altruistic efforts to help the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Then he'd be well on his way up the ladder.

Obliterating his tainted past with present good.

Praise for *Enduring Justice*

“*Enduring Justice* is a dynamic and powerful installment to the Defenders of Hope series. Amy Wallace has crafted an engaging, tense story of racial hate, repressed pain, and redeemed lives. *Enduring Justice* is a great read!”

—MARK MYNHEIR, homicide detective and author of
The Night Watchman

“In *Enduring Justice*, Amy Wallace has done what few writers can. She’s given us a realistic portrayal of life, while finding hope in the despair. Pay attention to this one. She’ll be around for a long time to come.”

—BRANDT DODSON, author of *White Soul* and *Daniel’s Den*

“Amy Wallace writes spine-tingling prose. Prepare for plenty of adrenaline spikes as *Enduring Justice* races relentlessly from crisis to crisis. Wallace seamlessly blends the characters’ personal triumphs and tragedies with a time bomb of a domestic terrorist plot that threatens the core liberties of the nation.”

—JILL ELIZABETH NELSON, author of *Reluctant Burglar* and
Evidence of Murder

“The third book in Amy Wallace’s *Defenders of Hope* series is the crème de la crème! *Enduring Justice* is another multilayered FBI suspense novel that will keep you hanging on to your seat until the last page. While struggling with the fine line between revenge versus justice, Michael Parker learns to rely on God while the storms of life are raging. Amy does such a beautiful job in bringing her characters to life that you feel like part of the family. I look forward to more of Amy Wallace’s books!”

—LORI KASBEER, *Christian Women Online* magazine

“Amy Wallace packs an emotional punch in her new novel, *Enduring Justice*. She deftly confronts the shame and horror of child abuse by opening up the bruised psyches of its victims. Yet she also finds a way to

take readers inside the emotional struggles of FBI agents sworn to bring the perpetrators of this most shameful act to justice. Wallace has penned an unforgettable novel that won't soon be forgotten.”

—NANCY MEHL, author of *Cozy in Kansas*, Ivy Towers
Mystery Series

“If you love breath-stealing suspense, unforgettable characters, and remarkable spiritual depth in your fiction, *Enduring Justice* is a book to savor. Amy Wallace is at her best with this poignant, grace-filled addition to her deeply satisfying Defenders of Hope Series.”

—CLAUDIA MAIR BURNEY, author of *Wounded: A Love Story*

OTHER NOVELS IN THE DEFENDERS OF HOPE SERIES

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