



# A Walking Shadow (Sasha McCandless #16.5)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Sasha and Leo are back in A Walking Shadow: A Sasha and Leo Novella!

Sasha McCandless-Connelly has it all—a thriving law practice, a tight-knit family, and a reputation as a formidable litigator. But beneath the surface, shes burning out fast. As she grapples with her crushing fatigue, a routine case takes an unexpected and dangerous turn.

Meanwhile, Leos facing a professional crisis of his own, leaving him and his family exposed to a threat from an unknown source.

As the couple navigates these changes, they find themselves tested by a mystery that changes everything they thought they knew.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

# Page 1

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1

Monday

Sasha saw the punch coming. The fist was headed straight for her right cheekbone. She bent her knees to duck, weave to the side, and then bob back up. Clean and easy. At least it should have been. But she misjudged her timing, and the blow caught her on the side of her head between her pterion and her ear. Pain radiated along her skull as her head snapped back.

Sloppy. Sloppy and slow, she berated herself. Then she shoved the self-criticism aside. There'd be a time to critique her performance. The middle of a fight was not that time.

She wiped the sweat from her eyes and pummeled her attacker's solar plexus. Left, right, left. The flurry of gut punches was met with a deep, low grunt from her adversary. She bounced lightly on her feet, anticipating his next move. Then, just as he was feinting to the left—a clear indication he was going to come at her from the right—the alarm on his mobile phone sounded.

Daniel stopped mid-swing and silenced the alarm. Then he held out his fist; she bumped it lightly with her own.

“That was a good session,” he panted, bracing his hands on his thighs to catch his breath.

“Mmm. That's not true, and you know it.”

He gave her a look then jerked his head toward his office. “Water?”

“Sure.”

He loped across the room and retrieved two ice-cold stainless steel bottles from the mini-fridge shoved beneath his desk. He tossed one over the half-wall that separated his small workspace from the Krav Maga studio, and she snagged it with her left hand.

She twisted off the cap and took a long drink.

“You might be a little off your usual speed,” he allowed. “Something going on?”

“My reflexes are crap.”

“You can’t run on empty forever, Sasha. Eventually fatigue will catch up with you.”

She gave her hand-to-hand combat instructor a long, level look. “I think it finally has.”

He frowned but said nothing. He didn’t need to. She already knew she was violating one of her personal rules: Eat when you have the opportunity; sleep when you can. A nourished, rested brain and body were weapons. But despite her best efforts, she couldn’t seem to get adequate rest. Her metaphorical plate was so full it was piled higher than a towering Thanksgiving dinner platter.

Across town, Leo Connelly rubbed the dried rheum from his eyes and reread the text that had torn him from his sleep:

Check your email. We have a mtg at FISC tmrw.

Finally. After months of agitating for a meeting to get clarity about their role, it appeared he and Hank had broken through the bureaucratic wall of inaction that had been blocking them from doing the job they'd been hired to do.

He thumbed out an upbeat response to Hank and caught himself whistling as he rolled out of bed and padded barefoot into the bathroom to start his day. Leo drew energy from his work, and the long months of being chained to a desk had begun to wear on him.

But no more, he told himself, as he brushed his teeth. The calculated risk he and Hank had taken had paid off. He cupped his hands under the faucet, rinsed his mouth with cold water, and smiled at his reflection.

## Page 2

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2

Sasha took her last greedy swallow of cold water and handed the metal bottle back across the half-wall to her instructor.

“Thanks for the water. I have to run so I can have breakfast with Leo and the kids before I head into the office.”

Daniel held up a hand. “Hey, before you leave, could you take a quick look at something for me?”

She resisted the urge to check the time. “Sure.”

He handed her a folder before vaulting over the waist-high wall and landing next to her with the grace of a cat.

She flipped the folder open and scanned the document inside. It was a legal pleading. “You’ve been named in a federal complaint?”

“Sort of,” he said. “I mean, yes. But my dad said it’s a BS complaint.”

Daniel’s dad, Larry Steinfeld, had been a lion of the criminal defense bar for decades. When he finally quit practicing, the district attorney’s office had been so relieved they’d thrown a huge party for him at the Grant Street Tavern. The place had been packed wall to wall with prosecutors toasting to his retirement.

“If your dad says it’s BS, it’s BS.” She flipped the folder closed and extended it

toward him.

He shook his head and didn't take the file.

"I believe him, but I need somebody to represent me. I tried to talk him into coming out of retirement and handling it. He laughed me out of the room." He gave her a hopeful smile and waited.

She suppressed a groan. She absolutely did not have time to take this on. But Daniel wasn't just her Krav Maga instructor. He was a friend—a close one.

"Sure, of course."

"I'll pay your usual rate."

"Why don't you pay me with extra private lessons instead? I clearly need them."

"You've got a deal," he said.

"I'll look at this later today. Can you give me the short version?"

"Over the summer, I got a call from a guy named John Boone. He wanted me to run a weekend-long Krav Maga boot camp for him and some of his buddies."

"Is that something you do?"

Daniel shook his head vigorously. "No. I declined at first, but Boone was persistent. He said to name my price—money wasn't an object. It was clear he'd find somebody else if I turned him down. So, I figured, why not? I could make a nice chunk of change, and he wouldn't end up with some clown who would teach him and his friends poor form and get them all hurt."

He paused and eyed her.

She nodded her understanding. “Makes sense.”

She knew as well as he did that most people holding themselves out as experts weren’t actually trained in the self- defense system. Daniel, like his father before him, had trained directly with the Israeli Army. He was one of the best of the best.

“I sent over a basic contract. I charged him five grand for the weekend. That seemed fair for twenty to thirty people, all day for two full days.”

She had no frame of reference, so she shrugged. “Sure.”

“He said that was fine, signed the contract, and we moved forward. I showed up and did my thing. They seemed engaged, happy to be there.”

“Who were they—the students?”

“I thought they were just his buddies. Typical middle-aged guys, mostly mildly out of shape. Weekend warriors. No women.”

She pulled a face at that. Then she wrinkled her brow as his words sunk in fully.

“You thought they were. Does that mean they weren’t?”

“Turns out that’s exactly what it means. But I didn’t know it at the time. We’ll get there.”

If nothing else, he’d piqued her curiosity. “Okay, so what happened?”

“What happened was he didn’t pay me. When I was getting ready to leave, he asked me to come into his home office so we could settle up. I told him there was no need,

that I'd send him an invoice. He could just send me a check or call and give me a credit card number over the phone. He insisted he wanted to pay me right then. That was fine by me if that's what he really wanted to do. I said sure, I'll take your money now. Except it wasn't money."

"What do you mean it wasn't money?"

"He tried to give me some kind of fake check. He called it a negotiable redemption note."

"A negotiable redemption note?"

"Yeah. Ever hear of one?"

She laughed softly. "No. It sounds like U.C.C. word salad."

"Funny you should say that. When I said I only take U.S. currency, he told me this thing was a valid instrument under the U.C.C. What even is that?"

"The U.C.C. is the Universal Commercial Code. And, while it's been a long time since I studied it in law school, I assure you there's no such thing as a negotiable redemption note."

"Right. And then it got weird. He started spouting how U.S. currency wasn't even real because it's not backed by the gold standard and?—"

She groaned. "You're dealing with a sovereign citizen."

"The newest iteration," he told her with a heavy sigh. "They call themselves Citizens to End Oppression. They have this whole thing about maritime law somehow meaning they don't need driver's licenses. I looked it up later. But at the time, I



didn't know any of this. I threw his monopoly money back on his desk and left."

"You just left?"

He gave her a steady look. "What does my dad always say?"

"The surest way to win a fight is to walk away from it," she parroted dutifully.

"There were thirty of them and one of me. It didn't make sense to escalate. A few weeks later, when I was doing my bills for the month, I sent him an invoice. He sent me back the pretend note. I mailed it back to him, then called to offer him a discount. You know, some money's better than no money. He wouldn't take my calls or return my calls. I sent him two past due invoices thirty days apart. By then he was ninety days overdue, and it started to piss me off. I worked hard that weekend. I sent him a certified letter notifying him that if I didn't get paid by the end of the month, I'd file in small claims court."

"Let me guess, he sent you the negotiable redemption note and then used that as his defense to your filing?"

"You're partially right. He sent me back the note but didn't bother to answer the complaint. So I got a default judgment. I don't know how I'm supposed to collect on it, but I have it. Then I got served with this federal complaint last week. I can't even make heads or tails of it. Neither could my dad, not really."

"I'm not surprised," Sasha said. "Most people who represent themselves will likely make a mess of it. But these sovereign citizen arguments are next-level tortured logic."

"Oh, he has an attorney, but the complaint is definitely gibberish."

“He does?”

She’d assumed Boone would have filed pro se. Who would represent someone who didn’t deal in U.S. currency? She flipped to the end of the document and scanned the signature block. Gray Simmons.

“Never heard of him,” she said.

“Neither has my dad. He looked him up and said he practices out of a firm in Peters Township, in McMurray. Boone’s compound is near there.”

“Compound?” She didn’t like the sound of that.

“He has a big rural property. It’s not really a farm, it’s more of a compound than anything.”

“Okay, I really do have to run. But I’ll call you tomorrow with a plan. I’ll get this complaint dismissed, Daniel. Don’t worry about it.”

“I appreciate it. I should’ve just written off the money. I knew I’d never collect, but it was the principle of the thing.”

“You did the right thing. You provided him a service and your expertise, and he’s going to pay you for it—with real money.”

“I owe you one.”

“And I’ll collect in the form of private sessions.”

“Great. That’s a win-win. Why don’t we also get together with our better halves for dinner one night soon?”

“Definitely,” she said.

“We’ll host. You can even bring the rug rats. Chris will make them his famous homemade flatbread pizza.”

She almost said yes. Then, the image of Daniel and Chris’s immaculate all-white and glass apartment popped into her head. Instantly, the image dissolved, replaced by one where the couch was sticky, the carpet was stained, and every glass surface was smudged with small, greasy fingerprints.

“How about we do it at our place?” she said.

“Okay, I’ll talk to Chris and get some dates. We’ll still bring the flatbread.”

“Perfect.” Chris’s creation was somehow both airy and light and chewy and satisfying at the same time. She assumed magic was involved.

“Will I see you tomorrow morning? We could spar before my six o’clock class.”

She slung her bag across her chest and hesitated at the door. The correct answer was yes, of course. Instead, she said, “I don’t know. I might sleep in.”

“That’s fair,” he said. “Prioritize rest. Just don’t make it a habit to skip your workout. You have to stay sharp. You should know that better than anyone.”

She gave him a look over her shoulder. “I’m out of that business, Daniel. I haven’t gotten into trouble in almost a year.

She pulled her softest warm fleece—the light blue one that made her feel like she was wearing a cloud—over her head, opened the door, and left.

“Now you’ve jinxed it,” he shouted after her, his laughter following her down the stairs.

“Hello?” Sasha McCandless-Connelly paused in her typing, her fingers hovering over the keyboard, and tilted her head to turn an ear toward her office door. She could have sworn a door just clicked shut. But now all she heard was the soft whoosh of the building’s HVAC system.

She checked the day of the week on her monitor to confirm the cleaning service wasn’t scheduled. They weren’t. Then she flicked a glance past the door, which had been ajar since her friend and legal partner Naya Andrews had popped her head in to say good night hours ago. The sliver of the hallway visible from her desk was empty. And dark.

She exhaled through her nose. There’s nobody here, she reminded herself.

The office had been deserted on her last circuit through the empty floor in a fruitless search for a snack. She’d had to settle for a peppermint from the receptionist desk and had then spent twenty minutes creating a reusable shopping list for her newish office intern, who wasn’t really all that new and who definitely should have known better than to let the kitchen cabinets go bare. There was an inexplicable can of beets tucked behind the coffee filters, but she doubted she’d ever be desperate enough to eat those.

Since that interruption, she’d been typing double-speed, eager to finish her notes on the bewildering legal pleading Gray Simmons had filed on behalf of his client. She was committed to getting home in time to tuck her twins into bed before digging into the dinner the world’s greatest husband was keeping warm for her.

She shrugged off the noise and resumed writing. Her fingers flew over the keys, and the mechanical clacking would have drowned out any sounds that might or might not have been coming from the corridor. The sudden brightness as the motion-activated hall light outside her door blazed to life was unmissable, though.

She froze, silent and still, and stared at the door. The only way that light would come on was if someone was within fifteen feet of her office door. She knew this for a fact because the sensor was mounted to the wall inside her door. This was the compromise she, Naya, and their third partner, Will Volmer, had reached when Will had undertaken an audit of McCandless, Volmer & Andrews' utility usage. Because Sasha was, more often than not, the last to leave, she wanted the ability to adjust and override the lights as needed.

And right now, it was needed.

She saved her document with a quiet keystroke and powered down the laptop. Then she rolled open the bottom left drawer of her desk to retrieve her bag, leaving the drawer open a quarter inch to avoid making any noise of her own by closing it. She eased her feet out of her high heels then nestled the shoes in the bottom of her bag before pushing back her chair, standing up, and creeping to the doorway with the bag slung horizontally across her chest to rest on her hip.

She took a deep breath, mentally counted the steps between her office door and the fire exit, and hit the switch on the wall, plunging the hallway into darkness. Then Sasha ran.

She made no effort at stealth as she dashed down the stairs and burst through the steel emergency exit door into the parking lot. She'd walked to work this morning, so she kept moving. She sprinted through the dark alley and around to the front of the building. Despite the late hour, a steady stream of cars and pedestrians flowed by, coming and going from restaurants and clubs. Several glimpses over her shoulder

confirmed that nobody had followed her out of the building. Still, she ran down the block until she reached a bus shelter. Only then did she dig her shoes out of her bag and return to them to her now-dirty and sore feet.

Her heart rate returned to normal, and the surge of adrenaline dissipated. Suddenly, she felt ridiculous. Why had she fled? There was almost certainly an innocuous explanation for what had happened in the office. Probably a junior associate, who'd come in to pick up a file and didn't want to get waylaid by a chatty partner—or worse, one looking to pawn off an assignment. Even more likely, the motion sensor needed to be adjusted to a lower sensitivity. But if someone had been in the office, running was a complete overreaction. She was a business owner, for crying aloud. She should have investigated. She pulled out her phone and set the office alarm using the security company's app. Then, still feeling sheepish, she rose from the disconcertingly sticky bench.

She strode confidently along the sidewalk, her shoulders erect and her eyes alert as she searched the shadows. By the time she reached the leafy, residential street where her home sat, lights aglow, she'd convinced herself her outsized reaction was another symptom of her overworked state. She brushed off the remnants of uneasiness that clung to her like a cobweb and climbed the steep steps to the front porch.

As she approached, she heard Mocha barking with excitement, followed by the gleeful shouts of “Mommy's home!” When she stepped inside her bright, warm house, Connelly greeted her with a long, firm kiss and a glass of good red wine. She closed the door on the chilly night air and, with it, the events of the day.

4

Tuesday

Leo stood at the mirror in his bedroom and straightened his tie. His gaze was not on his reflection but on his wife, who lay in the bed behind him with one arm thrown over her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked without turning around.

“Yes,” she answered without removing the arm that shielded her eyes from the first rays of the rising sun that filtered through the window and cast her in a faint golden hue.

He frowned and walked over to sit on the edge of the bed. Sasha McCandless-Connelly was a creature of habit, and her habit was to rise before the sun, work out, shower, drink copious amounts of coffee, and then eat breakfast with him and their twins. After breakfast, she walked to her office and, as a rule, was well into her workday before any of her colleagues or employees arrived. Today, however, she’d apparently skipped her workout and was still lazing in bed at the indecent hour of seven o’clock.

“Are you sick?”

The concern in his tone must have reached her. She pulled her arm away from her eyes and dropped it down onto the bed with a soft thud before pushing herself up on her elbows to meet his gaze with her bright green eyes.



“No, Connelly, I’m not sick. I’m tired.”

“Tired,” he repeated.

“Yes, tired.”

What he thought, but didn’t say, was she was always tired. As far as he knew, tired was her natural state; she pushed through her exhaustion. But the woman looking back at him was not a woman who was pushing through.

“You’re sure it’s not more than that?”

“I’m sure,” she said, lifting herself from the bed to kiss him lightly. “I worked late last night, remember?”

Of course he did. But she hadn’t worked that late, not for her anyway. He searched her face carefully. “Work’s going well?”

She hesitated before answering, and he felt that she had been about to say something else.

What she said was, “Honestly? I could use a break, but there’s no room in the schedule for a getaway any time soon.”

“Not even a short trip to the lake house?”

She contemplated it for a fraction of a second, then sighed and slumped back against the padded headboard. “Not even.”

“Maybe we could have a staycation—a long weekend. You could take a day off, a Monday or a Friday.”

“Maybe,” she allowed. “I’ll look at the calendar.”

“I thought hiring an associate was supposed to lessen your workload.”

She blew out a long breath and ran her fingers through her messy hair. “Ellie’s great, but she’s a very junior associate. I need to mentor her to make sure we’re building on a solid foundation.”

“One workday—or even two—without your guidance isn’t going to ruin her forever.”

She shrugged, then cocked her head. “What’s with the suit? Wait, let me guess, you could tell me, but then you’d have to kill me.”

“Something like that. Are you mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

To his surprise and her credit, she appeared to be telling the truth. They’d promised one another to stop keeping secrets, but in this case, Leo was nearly as in the dark as she was.

More than a year ago, his boss had been approached to start up a new shadow agency—one so secretive that Leo and Hank still didn’t know what their actual mission was. It wasn’t a surprise that the wheels of the U.S. government’s bureaucratic machine turned slowly, but this wheel didn’t seem to be turning at all. They’d finally complained loudly enough or to the right set of ears and had been called in for a meeting.

“Hank and I have a meeting with some higher-ups. They didn’t see fit to share an agenda.”

“Oh, you’re about to get promoted again,” she guessed.

“Or fired.”

“Bite your tongue. If you get fired, I’ll never be able to take a day off.” She flopped her arm back over her face.

He laughed. “Should we wait for you for breakfast, or should the kids and I do our own thing?”

She groaned. “Okay, okay, I’m getting up. Start breakfast, and I’ll be down after I shower.”

“No workout today?”

“I’ll do it during lunch. If I can squeeze in a lunch.”

“Busy day?”

“Yeah. I picked up a case for Daniel yesterday.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you don’t have the bandwidth for that.”

“I don’t. But it’s Daniel. Besides, you gave me a brilliant idea.”

“That sounds like me. What pearl of wisdom did I bestow upon you?”

“This case is perfect for Ellie. I’ll bring her on to help me with it.” She grinned up at him from under her tangled hair.

“I am brilliant,” he agreed.

She laughed and stretched like a cat. Then he caught her eyeing the coffee he'd brought her over an hour ago.

"Don't drink that," he warned. "It's gonna be lukewarm."

"I need it." She picked it up, took a cautious sip, and grimaced. "Why is room-temperature coffee so bad?"

He snatched it from her. "Go start the shower. I'll bring you a fresh mug."

"I don't deserve you."

"You deserve so much more," he corrected her. Then he planted a kiss on the top of her head. "Now go."

She pulled herself from the bed and he gave her a gentle push in the direction of their bathroom. He watched her go and considered stopping her and pushing her to tell him what was wrong. Because something was wrong. But he understood her well enough after all these years to know the harder he pushed, the more she'd pull back. She'd talk to him when she was ready. Until then, he'd keep her fed, loved, and caffeinated.

Sasha stood beneath the stream of hot water, clutching a stainless steel travel mug of coffee in her hand. Shower coffee was a new low even for her, but desperate times called for desperate measures. She was tired, just as she'd told Connelly, but she wasn't just tired—she was more than tired. This was a bone-deep weariness she hadn't been able to shake for months.

For her entire professional career, she had bounded from bed, if not bright-eyed and bushy tailed, always eager and ready to face her workday. But now, it was as if her brain were wrapped in cotton and her limbs were encased in cement. Getting herself moving physically and mentally was becoming harder every day.

In fact, last night's scare in the office had been surprisingly comforting. The fear that gripped her when the lights came on in the hall had been the first real spark of energy she'd felt in a long time, and she was gratified that her instinct had been to spring into action rather than to freeze. Not that it mattered, not really. As terrified as she'd been in the moment, she realized the whole thing had almost certainly been a glitch—a problem with the sensitivity setting on the sensor, most likely. She added checking the sensors to her endless mental to-do list, right under getting new shoes for Finn, whose feet were growing at a disconcerting speed.

As she washed and rinsed her hair, she fantasized about checking into some obscure bed-and-breakfast in a European village where she didn't speak the language and sleeping until mid-morning, then moving into a garden or a pool chair and reading and resting all afternoon. This fantasy filled her with guilt because her husband and her children played no role in it. As if on cue, her phone chirped on the ledge outside the shower to remind her that her law firm—the firm she'd built from nothing, the one that bore her name—was also not in it.

She turned off the shower and stepped out into the steamy bathroom to dry her hair. Then she dressed quickly and swiped a berry-colored lipstick over her mouth. As she stepped into her favorite tan pumps, she promised herself she'd spend some more time digging into what was bothering her. She needed to shake things up, but for the first time in her life, she was at a loss as to how to take action or what action to even take.

But introspection and reflection would have to wait. She needed to get into the office, review her notes on Daniel's case, and bring Ellie up to speed. That was the thing about handling other people's problems for a career: it gave her precious little time to deal with her own.

She headed down the stairs with Java winding around her ankles and meowing. At the bottom, she was greeted by Mocha, whose tail thumped excitedly against the

hardwood. She bent and gave the cat and the dog each a scratch between the ears before continuing on to the kitchen.

“Morning, sunshine; morning, firecracker.” She dropped a kiss on each of her twins’ damp heads, then smoothed Finn’s cowlick.

“Dad already tried to make it lay down,” he protested.

“It’s a losing battle,” Connelly agreed from the stove where he was flipping pancakes.

“Pancakes? Nice.”

“Blueberry pancakes,” Fiona corrected her. “Whole-wheat blueberry pancakes, Mom, for protein and to give us energy throughout the day.” She took the travel mug from Sasha’s hands and refilled it with all the efficiency of a miniature barista. “Here,” she said.

“Thanks, darling.”

“Mom, sit down,” Finn said. “Rest.”

She shot her husband a look.

He shrugged. “They’re worried about you. We’re all worried about you.”

He balanced an entirely too-high stack of pancakes on a platter and carried it over to the kitchen table.

“These are piled up to the sky,” Sasha said, trying to lighten the mood.

She failed.

Fiona pointed a fork at her. “You need to see your doctor, Mom.”

“I’m not sick, honey. I’m just tired.”

“Then you need an earlier bedtime,” Finn told her. “No screens after dinner.”

“Hoisted by your own petard,” Leo chuckled.

She glared at him. “Hope you don’t get any syrup on your tie.”

“That sounded more like a curse than a hope,” he said with an easy grin, flipping the tie over his shoulder and digging into his breakfast.

The twins giggled, and she smiled. The banter and familiar domestic routine soothed her heart. But she knew it was only temporary. Moments of happiness and joy like these had been increasingly fleeting in recent months. She added this fact to the growing list of things to worry about later and raised her coffee mug to her lips.

Sasha bypassed Jake's coffee shop in the lobby and jogged up the stairs to the second floor. She let out a relieved sigh when she emerged into a dim corridor. The offices of McCandless, Volmer & Andrews were empty, which meant nobody would ask her why she was running late or whether something was wrong.

She stopped at the lobby doors and reached into her oversized bag to fish out her key card. Behind her, a floorboard creaked. The hair on her nape rose. A wave of adrenaline rushed through her, just as it had the previous night.

She dropped the card back into the tote, let the bag fall to the floor with a thud, and whipped around, shifting her coffee mug from her dominant to non-dominant hand in one smooth motion. The liquid inside was hot enough to slow down an attacker if she splashed it in their eyes, but she wanted to leave her left hand free in case she could land a clean punch. Her brain synapses fired these messages, fast and clear, and the fog that she'd been under lifted.

She faced ... a dark, empty hallway. There were no motion sensors here. The light switch was on the wall on the other side of the locked lobby doors—a fact that had never bothered her until now. Her gaze shifted to the door at the end of the corridor, which swung gently on its hinge.

She might be alone now, but she hadn't been a moment ago. As she stepped toward the doorway, the groaning elevator approached. It shuddered to a stop and sounded its chime. Then the doors parted, and Caroline Masters, the firm administrator, stepped off the car.



“Sasha, good morn—. What’s wrong?”

“Did you see anyone on the ground floor while you were waiting for the elevator?”

Caroline frowned. “Of course. There’s a line out the door at Jake’s.”

“Anybody else? Somebody headed for the stairwell, maybe.”

The older woman’s gaze shifted to the door at the end of the hallway for a moment.

“No. Why?”

Sasha shook her head and mustered up a smile. “No reason. It must’ve been my imagination.”

She felt Caroline watching her as she grabbed her bag and waved her card in front of the reader. Caroline trailed her inside and flipped on the hall lights. Sasha kept moving.

“Please ask Eleanor to come see me when she gets in,” she said over her shoulder.

“Certainly. Let me know if you need anything in the meantime.”

“Thanks, I will.” She pretended not to hear the unasked question in Caroline’s voice as she hurried down the hall to let herself into her office.

There had been someone behind her. She knew it in her bones. She’d heard the creak. Felt the warning tingle on the back of her neck. Seen the door swinging in the would-be intruder’s wake. But whoever they were, and whatever they wanted, they weren’t here now. And she had work to do.

She put the incident in the hallway firmly out of her mind, booted up her laptop, and

passed the time until Ellie arrived at the office scrolling through articles about Citizens to End Oppression and other modern offshoots of the original sovereign citizen movement. This, at least, was a useful task in contrast to her efforts the previous night to wade through the circular reasoning and complete fantasies that populated the complaint Gray Simmons had filed.

During her summer clerkship after her first year of law school, her judge had marveled at the innovative twists that pro se litigants came up with. As the sucker charged with making sense of the arguments, applying the law, and drafting decisions that treated them seriously, she'd been less impressed. The pleadings were sometimes utterly divorced from reality. But the most bananas argument she'd encountered had nothing on Gray Simmons' pleading. She had no idea how to begin to respond to the fantastical interpretations of the Constitution and statutes he'd set forth in the complaint. The thought of trying made her head throb.

A light rap on her door interrupted her deep dive. She raised her head to see Eleanor Prescott smiling at her from the doorway.

"Caroline said you wanted to see me," Ellie said.

"Come on in. I have a case for you."

The junior lawyer launched herself into the room with all the excitement of Mocha being promised a peanut butter dog treat. Sasha suppressed a smile. She could remember, just barely, when she was a baby lawyer with that same eager puppy energy. Although she was inexperienced, Ellie was whip-smart. More than that, though, she had a strong sense of self and unshakable integrity, which was more than Sasha could say for Ellie's late father. Cinco Prescott had been the bane of Sasha's existence when she worked for him and somehow managed to be a thorn in her side even after she left his firm.

“Billing number?” Ellie rested her legal pad on her knees and sat with her pen poised.

Right down to business, Sasha thought. “Bill it under the firm administrative number.”

“Oh, pro bono?”

“Not pro bono. This is a favor for a friend.”

Bare emotion flickered in Ellie’s eyes. It took a moment for Sasha to place it. Worry.

She leaned forward. “You’re not at P&T anymore, Ellie. You don’t have to worry about your billables. This work counts.”

Assuming the system hadn’t changed in the decade-plus between Sasha’s employment there and Ellie’s, the younger attorney had come from a firm where she had to meet hour quotas for billable work, pro bono work, and administrative work. And if that weren’t onerous enough, if she went over in one category, the extra hours didn’t roll over to make up a shortfall in another one. So the most effective way to break an associate’s spirit had been to load them up with pro bono and/or admin work, making the high billable hours requirement virtually impossible to meet.

Ellie’s face softened with relief as she smiled. “Right. I guess I’m still hardwired to tense up at the thought of admin hours.”

It’ll take her nervous system some time to feel safe, Sasha thought. The lawyers at Prescott & Talbot walked around in a constant state of hypervigilance.

All she said was, “I get it. Believe me.”

“Thanks. So who’s the client?”

“Daniel Steinfeld Krav Maga in Squirrel Hill. He’s been sued in federal district court.”

“Are we representing Mr. Steinfeld or the business?”

“That’s a good question. I believe Daniel has an LLC, but double-check the corporate filings with the commonwealth. I may be wrong about his corporate structure.”

“Doesn’t it specify on the complaint caption?”

“He’s been sued as a free person.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me correctly. The plaintiff is a sovereign citizen so everything is drafted through that lens. We can’t rely on this complaint for any statements of fact.”

“Oh-kay,” Ellie drew out the two syllables. “So the plaintiff’s representing himself.”

“Nope. There’s an attorney involved. His name is Gray Simmons.”

Ellie jotted the name on her legal pad.

“How much do you know about sovereign citizens?”

“A little. They believe the federal government is illegitimate so that means they don’t have to pay taxes or register their vehicles. That sort of thing. There’s also something about the gold standard.”

Sasha nodded. “You’ve only scratched the surface, but you’re essentially correct. The movement’s evolved over the decades. There are multiple organizations now, all with

slightly different ideologies and theories. We're interested in Citizens to End Oppression, or CEO."

"Oppression?"

"Right. Based on a, shall we say, unique reading of the Fourteenth Amendment, they believe we're all enslaved. John Boone, the man who sued our client, is evidently a leader of the local unit of CEO."

She waited to continue until Ellie's pen stopped moving.

"Okay, so the part where they reject U.S. currency is relevant here because Boone hired Daniel to run a Krav Maga boot camp for thirty people—members of his organization, I believe."

"Why do they need to know Krav Maga?"

This was a question Sasha didn't want to consider too carefully because there were no good reasons. Just a few years ago a member of a different sovereign citizen group had shot and killed a police officer. Much like the world at large, this group seemed to lean toward violence.

"I don't know," she finally said. "It's not material. What is material is that Boone and Daniel entered into a contract, and after Daniel performed the work, Mr. Boone tried to pay him using a negotiable redemption note."

Ellie scrawled the words then stopped and looked up at Sasha with tented eyebrows. "I've never heard of a negotiable redemption note."

"That's because it doesn't exist. The complaint cites the definition section of the U.C.C., claiming it defines a negotiable redemption note. It does no such thing,

although it does define various negotiable instruments. Simmons literally pulled discrete words from several definitions to cobble together a description.”

“Is it a fake check or pretend money or what?” Ellie wondered.

Sasha flipped to the back of the complaint and pointed to an exhibit. “Here’s a copy of it. It looks more like a certificate. I should have thought to get the original from Daniel.”

“I’ll call him when we’re done here,” Ellie said. “Is it okay to send a messenger over for it?”

“Absolutely.” The tension in Sasha’s shoulders eased the tiniest bit as Ellie took on the task without being asked to or given instructions for how to do it. “And, thank you.”

“Of course. So I’m guessing Mr. Boone tried to pay Daniel with this funny money, and Daniel rejected it?”

“Dead on. They went around and around for three months. Finally Daniel told Boone the invoice was ninety days past due. Daniel gave him an ultimatum: pay it in legal U.S. tender or Daniel would file in small claims court. Boone didn’t pay, and Daniel filed.”

“And Simmons removed it to federal court?” Ellie guessed.

“No, Boone did nothing. He let Daniel get a default judgment against him, and then he filed a new original action in federal court.”

Ellie was shaking her head, and Sasha knew what question was coming.

There were only two ways to get a case in front of a federal court: diversity jurisdiction, which requires that the parties be residents of different states and the amount in controversy exceed seventy-five thousand dollars, and federal question jurisdiction, which requires the claim to arise under federal law and be supported by a well-pleaded complaint. On its face, Boone's complaint met none of these requirements.

She explained, "He filed under federal question jurisdiction, citing the Constitution, internal Federal Reserve guidelines, and the good old U.C.C. It's the antithesis of a well-pleaded complaint."

"So we're going to ask the court to remand it back to the state court? Or will you ask for dismissal?"

"We need to research this, but my inclination is to answer the complaint and file a counterclaim."

"Counterclaim? What grounds?"

Sasha was curious to see what she'd come up with on her own. "Take a guess."

Ellie tapped her pen against her lips and thought. "Well, it's financial fraud."

"It is," Sasha agreed. "Which is a crime. So we could refer that to the Department of Justice but we can't bring a criminal cause of action in a civil case."

A frown creased Ellie's lips, and a matching furrow appeared on her forehead. Sasha sipped her coffee and waited for her to think it through.

Finally, she ventured another guess. "So, what are you thinking? Fraud in the inducement?"

“Exactly. The contract didn’t specify the payment method. It’s reasonable for Daniel to have relied on payment being in the form of generally accepted currency.”

“You really want to stay in federal court?”

“I do. We have a better chance of getting the DOJ to take a close look at this group if there’s a pending federal action. While our primary goal is to ensure Daniel is paid, we might as well try to shut down this group, too, if we can.”

“I love it. This is great!”

She clearly meant it. She was bouncing in her chair with excitement. Sasha imagined this case was probably more interesting than anything Ellie had worked on until now.

“Hang onto that energy, because you’re going to need it. When you read the complaint, you’ll see. It borders on gibberish.”

“Okay. Do you want me to start analyzing the arguments and doing the case research?”

“I do, but your first assignment after you get that instrument from Daniel is to find out everything you can about Gray Simmons. He works out of a firm in Peters Township called the Sinclair Law Group.”

“You want me to research all his published cases?”

“Yes, get copies of his cases and any press reports about them, but I also want you to learn everything you can about him as a person.”

Ellie’s pen stopped moving. “What?”



“I realize it’s an unusual request, but this is an unusual case.” Sasha paused. “Did you know Prescott & Talbot has a private investigation firm on a retainer?”

She shook her head. “I had no idea.”

“They do. We don’t. When we want to look into the background of a witness—or in this case, opposing counsel—we do it ourselves.”

This wasn’t strictly true. By ‘we’ she meant Naya Andrews because Naya could find anything on anyone. But Naya was a name partner and running a burgeoning transactional practice. She didn’t have time to play PI anymore. One of the things Sasha had to do if she didn’t want to be so tired all the time was learn to delegate. Just because Naya might be able to do it faster and better didn’t mean she could go to Naya, just like she couldn’t keep writing all her own briefs and checking all her own citations. And Ellie wasn’t going to learn how to do it unless she did it.

“Okay, so where do I start?”

Sasha gave her credit for asking instead of pretending she knew what she was doing.

“Start by asking Naya to take twenty minutes to walk you through the most effective and efficient way to do background research on a person. And take copious notes.”

“Anything else?”

“Just one thing. Don’t call Daniel’s studio. It will roll to voicemail and he won’t listen to it until his classes for the day are over. I’ll give you his cell phone number.”

She picked up her cell phone to get his number and noticed that Daniel had texted her. She opened the thread.

“Oh, he sent some pictures from the boot camp,” she told Ellie. She pulled up a group photo and read the message attached to it.

“This is Boone,” she said, pointing to a tall, rangy man in the center of the photo.

She was about to enlarge the picture to focus on Boone, but Ellie’s eyes passed over John Boone and landed on the man directly to his right. Her face went white.

“Ellie, what’s wrong?”

“I saw him this morning.”

“Boone?”

“No, him.” She lifted a finger and pointed toward the man next to Boone. “He was in the alley.”

“Our alley?”

“Yep.”

“You’re sure?”

Ellie met her eyes. “I’m positive. Why? Who is he?”

She turned her laptop around so Ellie could see the screen and clicked on the tab for the Sinclair Law Group. “That’s Gray Simmons.”

“What?” Ellie gaped.

“Close the door.”

After Ellie did as instructed, Sasha gestured for her to sit back down.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I parked in the back lot, and, as I was walking around to the front of the building, I ran into two men in the alley. They startled me.”

“And one of the men was Simmons.”

“For sure.”

Sasha frowned and swiped to reopen the text from Daniel. “Was the other one Boone?”

Ellie leaned in for a closer look. Then she shook her head. “No, this guy had a sturdier build.”

“Another lawyer maybe?”

“I doubt it. He was wearing sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt, like maybe he’d been out for a run.”

Sasha cocked her head. “Did they say something to you?”

“No, they heard me coming and jumped apart. You know the way people do when you catch them talking about you?”

“Huh, that’s odd. And this was when you got here?” She checked her watch.

“Yeah, he was literally skulking around in the alley. That’s strange, right?”

Sasha flashed back to the sensation that someone was behind her this morning and then to the sudden burst of light that filled the hallway the night before.

Yes, she thought, that's extremely strange .

But she said, "It's probably just a coincidence."

Ellie gave her a long look. "I thought you don't believe in coincidences."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:24 am*

6

Leo loaded the dishwasher while Sasha washed the pots and pans he'd used to make dinner. Upstairs, Finn and Fiona were putting away their clean clothes. Fiona had decided they were old enough to do their own laundry. Leo was more than happy to hand over the task. Based on the squeals of laughter floating down the stairs in sporadic bursts, they were more than happy with the arrangement, too.

"What do you know about CEO?" Sasha asked as she scrubbed a skillet.

"The CEO of what company?" he stalled.

"Not a CEO. The organization. Citizens to End Oppression. You've heard of them, I'm sure."

He eyed his wife's back and considered his options. She always said she could never tell what he was thinking. But he didn't want to risk lying to her, even though most of what he knew about CEO was classified.

"Yeah, I've heard of them."

"Are they violent?"

"Anyone can be violent."

"Does the organization have a reputation for violence?" she pressed.

“They’re not on the radar as a domestic terrorist group, if that’s what you’re asking me.”

She switched off the water and turned to face him, letting out a huff to let him know she was reaching her the limit of her patience. “What I’m asking is if they’re violent.”

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re asking?”

“Remember how I told you I’m representing Daniel? CEO, or a regional leader, more accurately, hired him to run a two-day hand-to-hand combat camp.”

His gut tightened at the idea of a group like CEO being armed with Krav Maga tactics, but he kept his expression nonchalant. “That’s kind of odd.”

“I thought so, too. Daniel wasn’t aware of who they were when he agreed to do the training. He only found out when they tried to pay him with their fake money.”

He snorted. “That sounds like CEO.” Then his laughter faded as he studied her face more closely, taking in her tense jawline. “Do you have any other reason to think they’re violent?”

“Maybe. For the past two days, I’ve had the feeling that I’ve been followed or watched. I think someone’s been in the office at least twice outside of business hours when I was there alone. And today, Ellie saw CEO’s attorney and another man lurking in the alley between our building and the antique shop. I doubt they were treasure hunting.”

Leo’s heart pounded and his face heated. He fisted his hands then shook them out in an effort to remain calm. “Did you confront the lawyer?”

She shook her head. “He was long gone by the time Ellie told me about seeing him.

But I called his office. He claims he was in town for a meeting and just stopped at Jake's for a coffee."

"A coincidence?"

She twisted her mouth to the side. "So he says."

A long, silent moment passed between them.

"I don't like it, Sasha," he said.

"I don't like it either. If they think they can intimidate me, they picked the wrong attorney."

"You need to be careful. Because even if CEO isn't breaking into your office or following you, someone is."

"I know. That's why I caught a ride with Naya this evening. I made sure she, Ellie, and I all walked out together. I don't want anyone there alone at night until I figure out what's going on."

He frowned. It was a start, but it wasn't enough. "The kids and I can pick you up, you know. Just call."

"Connelly, you don't need to worry. I'm going to talk to Will about getting someone to do a security audit for the office. Anyway, you wanted to tell me something?"

He laughed shortly. "I don't think this is the time."

She dried her hands and stepped over to close the dishwasher, then she looked up at him with serious green eyes. "Part of not keeping secrets is not protecting me from

news when I've had a bad day. Tell me how your meeting went. You got promoted, didn't you?"

"Nope."

"What then?"

He laughed bitterly. "I got fired."

She stared at him wide-eyed for a wordless moment, then she turned on her heel and pulled down two Glencairn glasses. She opened the freezer door and dropped two oversized ice cubes into the glasses with a click. She pointed to the high cabinet where they kept their liquor out of the twins' reach. But, of course, that meant it was out of her reach, too.

"Scotch," she instructed. "You really got fired?"

He took down a bottle, cracked it open, and poured two fingers into each glass. "I really did. Hank, too."

"What happened?"

He clinked her glass tipped his head back and let the amber liquid run down his throat, savoring the heat and the burn before answering. "They said it was a downsizing because of budgetary issues, but they made no effort to place us anywhere else."

"So you're not working for the government anymore?"

"Nope."



“How long do you have?”

“What?”

“A month? Two weeks? When does your position end?”

“It ended at, uh ....” He checked his watch. “At 1:11 p.m. this afternoon.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Hank and I were escorted out of the building.”

Her face went a shade paler and her green eyes popped. She took a sip of her scotch, and he watched her consider her next question.

“Since you don’t work there anymore, can you tell me what you did?”

He reached for the bottle again and shrugged. “Why not?”

She gasped. “Really?”

“Yeah, you’re right. There’s no reason to keep it from you now.”

This wasn’t strictly true. The position itself had been classified. But the rationale for that classification had been to protect the unit’s operations. But since he and Hank had been the entire unit, there was nothing left to protect.

“Plus,” she said, “I have spousal immunity if you ever get sued for telling me. They can’t make me testify against you if you get in trouble for it.”

“Spoken like the lawyer you are.”

She laughed. “Let’s move to the couch.”

They took their glasses into the living room. She curled up and, as was her habit, put her feet in his lap. He massaged her arches, as was his. The cat and the dog followed them in and took up their usual positions. Java in Mocha’s soft dog bed, and Mocha stretched out beside it on the floor.

“We really ought to get a second dog bed,” Leo said.

“I don’t know. I’m holding out hope that eventually Mocha will get the courage to crawl in there with the cat.

“If it hasn’t happened by now, I doubt it’s happening.”

“Hope springs eternal,” Sasha told him. Then she patted his arm. “So tell me.”

“Last year, Hank and I were approached by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.”

“Wait. You’ve been working for the FISC?”

“We have.”

Her eyes widened. She opened and closed her mouth but seemed unable to find the words she was looking for. Then she shook her head. “What could you two possibly be doing for the court?”

He understood her confusion. The FISC, or the FISA Court, existed primarily to hear and approve the government’s foreign intelligence-gathering activities carried out under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, especially those that take place in the United States involving U.S. citizens.

“The judges on the FISC regularly review top secret/SCI. You know what that means, right?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s sensitive compartmented information, so they have to do it in a SCIF, right?”

“Right. And there had been a series of cases in recent years that didn’t raise any eyebrows or concerns in a vacuum. But when the court was putting together some statistical information for a big budget review, the data team found some irregularities.”

She took another small sip of her scotch. “What kind of irregularities?”

“The kind that required someone with SCIF access to clear them up. And Hank and I both have the necessary clearances.”

She looked at him blankly. “Okay. But don’t lots of people have those clearances?”

“They do. But since our agency was so small and didn’t really exist officially, we were the obvious choice.”

“That only makes sense if the court thought the intelligence agencies themselves were corrupt or compromised.”

He gave her a long, steady look.

After a moment, she exhaled sharply. “No.”

“It’s what the evidence suggested. So, to prevent anyone from learning what we were doing, the court created roles for us within their admin unit so nobody would ask questions. That also meant the FISA Court, and only the FISA Court, had oversight.”

“What kind of irregularities did the court find that got this ball rolling?”

“There were too many surveillance authorizations that didn’t yield any actionable evidence.”

“Isn’t that part of the nature of an investigation?”

“Sure, of course. But there was a pattern. There was a subset of these fruitless requests where the targets had extremely sensitive jobs—the types of jobs that gave them access to information that would definitely be of interest to a foreign power.”

“But none of them turned out to be foreign assets?”

“Not a one. And the court became concerned that the agencies might be compromised.”

“In what way?”

“Imagine if the national security and intelligence apparatus was seeded with double agents who are using our government resources to target citizens to gather the information for foreign powers.”

“Double agents,” she scoffed. “That sounds like something from a thriller movie.”

“It’s not as farfetched as it sounds.”

“There really are sleeper agents?”

“There were. The Soviet Union had a program decades ago. It’s largely been shut down, but I imagine some of those agents evaded detection. They might still be here, embedded into communities. They’ve had children and maybe their children have

children.”

“Second or third generation sleeper agents?”

“It’s possible. Nobody would ever suspect. They could be anybody.”

“How would they pass a background check at a federal agency?”

“If they’ve been here long enough and their papers were good enough back when the trail wasn’t electronic, it could happen. I mean look at me. My dad was a Vietnamese gangster, and the government didn’t find him.”

She shook her head but said, “So the FISA Court believes the targets aren’t Russian assets but the investigators are?”

“Not just the Russians. Cartels, domestic terror organizations, foreign terror organizations, anybody could have agents working in our national security apparatus. That was the theory, at least.”

“And if this theory is correct, no existing agency could be trusted to investigate because you don’t know who’s compromised. So that’s where you and Hank come in.”

“It was,” he agreed, placing heavy emphasis on the was.

She screwed up her face and sipped her scotch. “So why were you fired? Didn’t you find anything?”

“We never looked.”

She tilted her head and blinked at him. “What do you mean you never looked?”

“I mean, we haven’t done anything. It’s been over a year and we haven’t gotten the green light to actually investigate anyone. We had regular meetings, but we never moved forward. Hank and I started to get antsy. You know we’re not desk jockeys. We’d rather be out in the field than pushing paper, but we weren’t even doing that. We were just waiting. We never got a first case.”

“Why?”

“They always had a different reason. Some of it, especially in the beginning, made sense. But as time dragged on, we got fed up and tried to bypass official channels.”

“That sounds like you,” she said with a knowing grin.

“And Hank. My superior was on board.”

“Is that why you were both fired?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, they told us it was a budgetary issue. But I suspect we went too far. We helped ourselves to some files under the theory it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission. Somehow the judges found out and had the court administrator set up a meeting—she said it was to give us the official go-ahead.” He barked out a bitter laugh. “While we were in the meeting, human resources terminated our access to the systems and disabled our IDs. We were locked out.” He drained his glass and placed it on the coaster with a quiet bang.

“I’m sorry it went down that way.” She put her hand on his arm. “But you never would’ve been happy in an environment that wouldn’t let you use your judgment. You’ll find something better.”

He frowned. “Maybe, maybe not. My skill set is highly specific.”

She thought for a moment. “You and Hank could make your cover official.”

“You mean open a private investigations agency?”

“Why not? You’re more than qualified.”

He considered the idea. “Maybe. Hank already had a vacation planned. We agreed to talk when he gets back.”

“Maybe this’ll end up being a good thing. Don’t you sometimes wish you could just start over, do something completely different?”

“No, never.”

“Really?” She furrowed her brow.

“Yeah, really. I love my job. Just like you do.”

She choked on her drink.

“Are you okay?”

She coughed, and nodded. “Yeah.”

“You do still love your job, right?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said in a tone that was anything but convincing.

Before he could ask any questions, she popped up to her feet again and clapped her hands brightly. “I know what will cheer you up.”

“What?”

“Getting your butt kicked at Scrabble.” She grinned at him.

“You think that would cheer me up?”

“I do.”

He grinned back. “Well, that’s too bad then. Because I don’t know anyone who’s capable of kicking my butt at Scrabble.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep.”

“Set up the board, big talker. I’ll get us some snacks.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:24 am*

7

Wednesday

A shadow fell across Sasha's open doorway, and she looked up from the email she was drafting. Ellie stood on the threshold, a mug from Jake's in each hand.

"May I come in?"

"Absolutely, since you come bearing caffeine." Sasha gestured for her to take a seat.

Ellie smiled and extended one of the mugs toward her. "Fair warning, I asked Jake for a black coffee for you, but he insisted you need to try this. He said to tell you to taste it before you pass judgment."

Sasha took the cup and gave it a suspicious sniff. "What is it?"

"It's an homage to autumn," Ellie told her.

That sounded like a poem. She had nothing against poems. But she didn't really care to drink one.

"Which means?"

"Sorry. He said you have to taste it before I tell you what it is."

She huffed and took a cautious sip. The coffee was rich and strong, but not acidic

and, darn, if it didn't taste like autumn, slightly spicy. "It's pretty good. What is it?"

"Jake said it's a triple ristretto macchiato dusted with brown sugar and cinnamon. Whatever that is."

"Basically, it's a stronger, less bitter, espresso triple shot with a dot of steamed, foamed milk. And apparently, Jake felt compelled to dress it up to make it sweet and spicy."

"So you like it?" Ellie gave her a hopeful look.

"Sure. Wanna why tell me why you're here with a bribe?"

Ellie screwed up her face. "Well, I asked Naya the best way to break bad news to you, and she said to come bearing coffee and chocolate." She slipped her hand into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a dark chocolate bar.

Sasha squinted at the wrapper. She knew that brand. "You just happen to have 80% dark chocolate on your person, Ellie?"

"No. This is from Naya's private stash."

Sasha cocked her head. "Naya doesn't like dark chocolate. She thinks it's too bitter."

"She does," Ellie agreed. "But she has this private stash on hand for you. It's in a box labeled 'emergency Sasha chocolate.' She said she uses it the way that lion tamers use raw meat."

"Delightful and so flattering," Sasha said dryly.

"Does that mean you don't want it?"

“Hand it over.”

Ellie snorted and pressed the bar into Sasha’s hand. Sasha unwrapped the bar, broke off a square and let it melt on her tongue for a beat. Then she washed it down with a sip of her ristretto, savoring the richness while she waited for Ellie to gear herself up to tell her whatever it was she’d come to say. But Ellie seemed unable to get the words out.

So Sasha took a guess. “Is this about Gray Simmons? Did you find something that hurts us?”

“No. My memo’s almost finished. He’s not really a member of CEO—more of a hanger-on. Seems he got involved after his divorce. He’s really bitter about being ordered to pay spousal support. Professionally, he’s had a string of warnings from judges in several courts about making frivolous arguments and two referrals to the disciplinary board.”

“Perfect. When we get in front of a judge, we can use his history of overreaching.”

“About that ...,” Ellie trailed off.

The bubble of optimism rising in Sasha’s chest deflated.

“Yeah?”

“We’ve been assigned to a judge.”

“Who is it?”

“Macomber.”

“She’s good,” Sasha said. “She runs a tight ship. I’m surprised she got the case because she’s handling a massive monopoly trial right now.”

“Right, and Naya said that case is probably why the judge has already set a hearing date for us. She probably wants to get rid of the case. Maybe dismiss Simmons’ complaint and our counterclaim.”

“Maybe. Or maybe she’ll grant us judgment on the pleadings. The counterclaim is solid. If this is the bad news, I’m not so concerned.” She shrugged and sipped her coffee.

“That’s not the bad news.”

“Rip off the Band-Aid, Ellie.”

“The hearing’s the day after tomorrow.”

“This Friday?”

She nodded, wide-eyed. “That’s really fast, isn’t it?”

“It is. What else are you working on?” Sasha drained her mug in one long gulp and broke off another square of chocolate.

“I think the correct answer is I’ve cleared everything else off my plate.”

“Have you?”

“Not yet.”

“Go do that and then meet me in the small conference room.”

Ellie hurried out of the office. Sasha waited until she'd vanished from sight to let her head drop to the desk with a groan. There was no doubt Naya was right. Macomber absolutely wanted to get rid of this case, which meant she had until Friday morning to come up with a rock-solid argument why her counterclaim should be granted and Gray Simmons' complaint should be dismissed.

Once upon a time, this challenge would have energized her. Now it exhausted her before she'd even started. She knew she'd get it done, but she also knew she'd be depleted all weekend. She hated that she wouldn't be emotionally present for Connelly, who'd just been summarily fired. But she knew from experience she'd be a zombie.

Once this case was over, she'd make time to help her husband come to grips with his sudden unemployment. But now she had to focus, so she scooped up her files, undocked her laptop, and headed down the hall to her favorite conference room, the little one on the end where nobody would hear her blasting her pretrial playlist.

The remnants of the lunch Caroline had ordered in from Sasha's favorite Greek place littered the table and the looping playlist had long since faded into background noise, the pulsing beat no longer noticed but still driving Sasha and Ellie forward. It was one of Sasha's favorite prep tricks, inspired by her long-ago mentor Noah's ritual of watching Braveheart before every trial. It kept the team pumped up, energized.

Ellie's phone beeped and her laptop dinged simultaneously. Sasha lifted her head from the case she was reading and watched the junior attorney scan the notification.

"Gray Simmons got back to us about a meet and confer. He said he'd come here tomorrow morning so we can meet in person."

"Sure, since he likes Jake's coffee so much."

Ellie gave her a puzzled look.

“I asked him what he was doing in the alleyway yesterday, and he told me he just happened to be in town for a meeting and stopped by for Jake’s coffee.” She snorted to make clear what she thought of that reason.

“It’s possible,” Ellie insisted. “Jake’s did make the Best of Pittsburgh list. It’s turning into a hot spot.”

“Maybe,” Sasha allowed. The recent press might make the purported coincidence less suspect, but she still didn’t trust Gray Simmons. And surely there was a decent cup of coffee available somewhere between McMurray and Shadyside.

“Let’s go over the facts one more time,” she told Ellie. “Then I’ll call Daniel and?—”

This time, it was her notification that chimed. She read the message and smiled.

“What is it?” Ellie asked.

“I reached out to a friend in the U.S. Attorney’s Office. If this case does wrap up the day after tomorrow, I want to get Boone on their radar now so they can be prepared to file criminal charges right away, if that’s what they want to do.”

“Hit them fast.”

“Exactly.”

They returned to their work. The next time Sasha looked up, she was surprised to see that it was past five o’clock. She blinked, yawned, and stretched her arms over her head.

“Let’s take a break. Stretch our legs, get some water.”

Ellie let out a sigh of relief and stood, but before they could make good on the plan, Naya popped her head into the room.

“Hey, Mac. Leo’s here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s talking to Will.”

“Huh. Okay.” She couldn’t imagine what her husband and her law partner could have to discuss.

“One other thing,” Naya told her. “I told Will about your hearing, so we’re moving the partners’ meeting from the morning to the end of the day Friday.”

“Boo. Does this mean no French pastries?”

“It does, but Will’s no fool. He said he’ll order an aperitivo from the Italian place where he threw that birthday party for his wife. They’ll send over something light but tasty.”

“That works, too. Thanks for thinking to move the meeting.”

“Sure. How’s it going in here?”

“We have a winning argument, but it’s going to come down to whether Macomber is willing to take the time to write a decision or whether she’ll dismiss both the complaint and the counterclaim to get us off her docket.”

“I think you’ll be okay,” Naya said. “I heard she took on an extra clerk.”

“Still got your finger on the pulse of the legal community, I see.”

“Always,” Naya told her, turning to leave.

Sasha stopped her. “Wait. Ellie and I are pretty much done here. I might sneak out with Connelly.”

“You should.”

“I meant what I said yesterday. I don’t want anyone here alone after hours. So please make sure you walk out with somebody. And spread the word to the others.”

Naya gave her a quizzical look. “What’s going on, Mac?”

“I’m not entirely sure. And, until I am, I’m serious—nobody stays alone here after dark.

Ellie nodded her understanding.

“Is this about CEO?” Naya pressed.

“It could be. There’s no evidence this group is violent, but similar groups have been. And they probably wanted hand-to-hand combat training for a reason. Just humor me until I know for sure.”

She held her friend’s gaze until Naya said, “I will. I promise.”



8

Sasha packed up her bag. It was exceedingly rare for her to leave the office this early, but she and Ellie had accomplished a great deal in one day. She was halfway to Will's office when she bumped into her husband in the hallway.

"I heard a rumor you were here." She stretched up on her toes to give him a quick kiss.

He rubbed her bare arm, sending a delicious shiver along her spine. "I Just finished talking to Will."

"About?"

"You said you were going to arrange for a security audit."

"I did say that."

"Well, I have time on my hands, and I do know a thing or two about security."

"You're going to do the audit?"

"Already did it. We're upgrading the security system to include the hallway outside the lobby doors, installing a panic button behind the reception desk, and putting some cameras in the hallways."

She frowned. "The cameras will be too invasive."

“They’re only in public spaces. Will checked the employment agreement, and they won’t violate anything.”

“Still, isn’t that a bit excessive?”

“It’s your choice: Cameras or I give myself the new job of being your personal bodyguard. I’ll sit here and watch you work all day every day. I don’t think you’d enjoy the latter.

“It could have its benefits.” She gave him a sly smile. “My office door locks.”

“Attorney McCandless-Connelly, are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

She couldn’t hold back a giggle, but then she remembered the promise she’d just extracted from Naya and Ellie and grew serious. “For real, though, you’re the expert. If you think that’s what we need, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Good.”

“By the way, where are our children?”

“I dropped them off at Riley and Ryan’s place after school for a cousin playdate and dinner.”

“You could have done the audit while they were at school,” she pointed out.

“I could have,” he said. “But I thought we could grab a bite, just us.”

“A weeknight date?”

“Wild, I know. I didn’t know about your hearing, though, until Will told me. Can you spare the time?”

She let a slow smile spread across her face. “Absolutely.”

She popped into her office to click off her desk lamp and gather some work to take home before they headed down the stairs to the first floor. Sasha asked him to give her a minute to run into the coffee shop to compliment Jake on the autumnal macchiato.

When she returned to the hallway Connelly was thumbing out a text. “Riley’s making her homemade mac and cheese,” he said without looking up.

“Finn’s going to be over the moon.”

His Aunt Riley’s baked macaroni and cheese was one of his favorites. And with good reason. Riley covered the top with buttered panko breadcrumbs and baked the dish until the cheese bubbled and browned. She always served it with a salad with a sharp dressing to counterbalance the creamy fat. It was the most comforting of comfort foods.

“Now, I kind of want to go over for dinner,” she joked.

“I’ll make missing it worth your while,” he promised. “How does Thai sound?”

“Who needs mac and cheese?” she said by way of answer.

Then, she slipped her hand into his and he snugged her into his side.

Dinner was leisurely, and once Sasha's brother texted with an offer to bring the kids home, it became even more leisurely. By the time they left the restaurant, the sun was setting a pale gold in the gray sky.

"Let's go through the alley instead of taking Ellsworth Street," Sasha suggested.

Connelly smiled knowingly. "You want to see if that maple tree's turning red yet, don't you?"

"Nailed it."

The massive tree at the entrance to the long narrow alley that ran behind their street was one of her favorite touchstones of autumn. Its leaves turned a dramatic scarlet shade each autumn. The effect was striking against the drab sky and even more beautiful when the fiery maple leaves floated to earth to carpet the ground.

They crossed the street and headed toward the alley that would lead them to their backyard. To her disappointment, the tree's leaves remained solidly green.

"Boo," she joked.

"It won't be long now," he told her.

"It's something to look forward to," she agreed.

He stopped and turned toward her, pulling her in close. “You really need that, don’t you?”

“Need what?”

“Something to look forward to.”

She gave a little laugh. “You know my mom always says to have your next vacation planned. I never really understood her reasoning until recently.”

“What’s going on with you?”

His voice was gentle but probing. She swallowed hard, then said, “I think I’m burning out. I’ve been fantasizing about quitting.”

“Quitting ... your practice?”

“Maybe. I’ve had enough.”

“Of what?”

She thought. “Of fighting. In courtrooms, and boardrooms, and dark alleys. Of blood and guts, and angry clients, and legal citation format. Of charity balls, and billable hours, and death threats.”

“So, everything?”

“I don’t know, Leo,” she sighed. “I’m forty-seven years old, a business owner, the mother of twins, and the freaking library volunteer at their school. The things I’ve spent my adult life striving for and fighting against are exhausting. There has to be more than this. Doesn’t there?”

He was quiet for a long moment. Finally, he said, “I don’t know.”

“I’m thinking I might take a sabbatical. Did you know we have a sabbatical program?”

He chuckled. “No. You do?”

“Yeah. Prescott & Talbot has one. When Will joined me, it was one of the few things we wanted to replicate. Of course, no one has ever used it.”

He gave a knowing nod. “They’re waiting for you to do it. You’re the leader.”

“Maybe.”

“Then, do it. You’ve certainly?—”

Whatever he was going to say was lost in the night, when two men stepped out of the shadows of the Vanderkamps’ garage.

“Sasha McCandless-Connelly? Leo Connelly?” The shorter and stockier of the two men spoke. Beside him, the taller guy rested a hand on his hip.

Gun? Sasha wondered instantly.

“Who’s asking?” Connelly demanded.

“We’d like you to come with us,” the guy responded.

“Yeah, no,” Sasha told him as she planted her feet firmly, hip-distance apart.

The two men exchanged an unhappy look. Sasha and Connelly kept their attention

directed to the men, but she could feel him getting ready to fight if need be. They didn't need to look at each other to read one another's energy.

The tall man darted forward and wrapped his hand around her right wrist.

Game on. She covered his hand with her left and pulled him closer. Then she brought her foot down hard on his.

He wrenched his hand free and bounced back on his heels, ready to fight. He drove a sharp elbow into her ribs. She winced at the impact before recovering and throwing a jab to back him off.

She flicked her eyes toward Leo and the stockier man. Her opponent took advantage of her distraction to backhand her across her left cheek, hard. She jerked her head back, her face stinging from the impact and raised her fists up by her face.

“Ma’am, please stop. We want to?—”

She cut off whatever he was about to say with a fast palm heel strike to the bridge of his nose, recoiling in disgust as hot blood spurted over her left hand. She wiped it on her dress, hooked her foot around his ankle, and knocked him to the ground.

He kicked out at her, catching her right knee, and she bobbed back. He rose to his feet, unsteady but furious, lowered his head, and charged her like a bull. She darted to the side, and he ran past her. She took the opportunity to risk a glance over her shoulder at Connelly.

Her husband had the other man pinned against the brick side wall of the garage. The guy's shirt was fisted in Connelly's hand as Connelly lifted him nearly off his feet. Incongruously, she noticed the silver streaking Connelly's dark, spiky hair before she spotted the open cut on his cheek.

Anger rose like a wave in her belly as the man lurched forward and head-butted the love of her life. Connelly growled, kneed the man in the groin, and then kneed him a second time in the face as he crumpled to the ground.

The Vanderkamps' porch light clicked on with a burst of illumination, and Mrs. Vanderkamp stared out into the dark night.

"You damn kids get away from my garage!" she shouted, her raspy smoker's voice shaking with rage. "I already called the cops."

As if to prove her point, the distant wail of a siren filled the air. The tall guy yanked his buddy up to his feet and pulled him toward the street. Vindicated, Mrs. Vanderkamp shook a fist at their backs as they vanished into the night.

Connelly led Sasha toward the Vanderkamps' backyard and tipped her chin up to examine her face in the dim light.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she told him, brushing his hand away. "But your cheek is bleeding." She glanced down. "And your knuckles."

"He had a hard face."

She managed a laugh, as Mrs. Vanderkamp stumped through her yard. "Sasha? Leo? 'Zat you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Connelly called back.

"What the devil? I thought you were those blasted McNally kids messing around again. You know they stole a case of hard seltzer from the Jacksons last week?"



“I didn’t know that,” Connelly said somberly, but Sasha caught the undertone of amusement in his voice.

“You two look like hell,” their neighbor informed them, peering over her chain-link fence at them.

Sasha smiled weakly. “You should see the other guys.”

Mrs. Vanderkamp snorted. “You okay?”

“We will be. Thanks for calling the police. Will you send them to our house when they get here.”

“Pshaw, I didn’t call the cops. I just said that.”

“But there was a siren.”

“Honey, are you new here? There’s always a siren.” She grunted and turned back toward her house, laughing to herself at Sasha’s perceived naivety.

“Good night,” Connelly called after her. She lifted a hand over her head and gave them a wave without turning around.

As Sasha limped along beside him on her swollen knee, she wondered aloud, “Do you have any idea what her first name is?”

“Not a clue. Why?”

“We should send her a thank you note or something.”

They reached the end of their backyard and the flood lights mounted on the back of

the house switched on.

“I don’t think Hallmark makes a ‘we’re grateful you broke up our street fight’ card.”

“Well, they should.”

He chuckled as he lifted the latch on their back gate and ushered her into the backyard.

As she turned her key in the lock and pushed open the kitchen door, she suggested, “Let’s text Riley and Ryan and ask if the kids can sleep over?” she said. “I don’t want them to see us like this. And if we decide to call the police and they come to the house for a statement, I’d rather they not be here.”

“Step ahead of you,” he told her, holding up his phone. “Riley already responded. She said they’re more than welcome and she’ll take them to school in the morning.”

Sasha flipped on the kitchen lights while he locked the door. He fed the dog and cat dinner and filled their shared water bowl while she got down the first aid kit and took two bags of frozen vegetables from the freezer. She tossed him one for his knuckles and kept the other for her knee. After they’d cleaned and dressed their various wounds, they took their frozen peas and corn into the living room and collapsed on the couch.

“Some date,” she observed.

“Hey, you can’t say it wasn’t memorable.”

“True.” After a moment, she added. “I don’t think those guys picked that up after one weekend of Krav Maga training.”

“No,” he agreed. “They fought like professionals.”

“You don’t think it’s CEO?”

“It seems unlikely.”

She nodded. “So. Are we calling the police?”

He made a low humming sound then clicked his tongue against his teeth. “I’m not sure what the right call is.”

“Depends on who it was.”

“Right. And whoever it was knew both our names.”

Leo could see that Sasha was fading fast. He handed her two painkillers and a cup of chamomile tea and sent her upstairs with instructions to have a hot bath, drink the tea, and read a few chapters of her book before turning in. In part, he wanted her to rest, and in part, he wanted talk to Hank in private.

Once he heard the tub filling, he opened the link Hank had sent him earlier. His friend and longtime boss's face appeared on his computer screen.

"You two okay?" he said without preamble.

"Yeah, like I said in my text, we got banged up but the other guys are in worse shape."

Hank laughed but there was no humor in it. "You gonna file a police report?"

"Do you think there's any point?"

"Eh, maybe. I made some inquiries. Nobody's heard of Boone or this lawyer, Simmons. CEO's had some issues in other states out west, but this local outfit isn't well organized—almost certainly not capable of giving you and Sasha a real fight, which it sounds like you got."

"We did. If it's not CEO, do you have any theories?"

"I wish I did." Hank's expression was rueful.

“For the past few days, Sasha’s thought she was being followed.”

“What?” He leaned in, his taut, worried face filling the screen.

“Long story. But, whoever they are, they must have a team because nobody followed us from the restaurant. I’d have noticed a tail because I was looking for one.”

Hank rubbed his forehead. “They were waiting for you in the alley.”

“Right, which means they had a surveillance team and comms.”

“You thinking it’s a foreign power?”

“Maybe. Or one of the agencies. Maybe they thought we were getting close to unmasking them. Maybe that’s why they shut us down.”

Hank considered the theory and then shook his head. “We barely scratched the surface.”

“We know that. But maybe they don’t.”

“Keep your head down. I’ll be back on Sunday. Next week, we’ll visit Homeland Security and get some answers.”

“How? We’re not supposed to disclose what we were doing for the FISA Court.”

“They should have thought of that before they gave us the axe.”

“This is a dangerous game. You’re going to burn bridges.”

“Yeah, well, let the light of the bridges I burn guide our way if your family’s in

danger. Speaking of your family, what are you going to tell the twins? Because your face looks even uglier than usual with that cut on it.” He grinned widely.

“Ouch,” he joked back “Sasha’s going to have a bruised cheekbone, too. Luckily Fiona and Finn were having dinner with Sasha’s brother’s family. Riley and Ryan are going to keep them for the night.”

“Consider having them stay with their aunt and uncle through the weekend if you can.”

Leo twisted his mouth to the side. “That might be excessive.”

“Until we know what we’re dealing with, Leo, nothing’s excessive. At least think about it.”

“I will. And you keep your head on a swivel, too. Because if we did stir a hornet’s nest, whoever this is won’t have any trouble finding you and your kids.”

Hank’s face was grim, but he nodded briskly. “I know. I’ll talk to you when we get back.”

“Try to enjoy the rest of your vacation.”

As they said their goodbyes, Leo heard the tub draining. His adrenaline had long since ebbed, too, so he decided to turn in early. He walked through the first floor turning off lights and checked every window and door to make sure that they were all locked up. Then he called for the dog, and they started up the stairs. Java raced past them in a flash of gray to take the lead.

Sasha was already asleep when the trio padded into the bedroom.

11

Thursday

Unsurprisingly, Sasha had slept poorly and felt simultaneously sluggish and wired when she arrived at work, escorted by Connelly, who refused to let her walk or drive alone. As irritated as she ordinarily would have been by this protective alpha behavior, she found herself grateful for it this morning.

“You really don’t need to walk me up,” she assured him as they stopped on the sidewalk outside her office building.

He checked the time, and she wondered briefly where he was going next. “Are you sure?”

She leaned up to kiss him. “Positive. And you don’t have to bring me home. I’ll get a ride with Naya or Ellie.”

He frowned. “Will you try to leave before it gets dark?”

“I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises. I have a hearing to prepare for.”

He captured her hands in his and pressed them flat against his chest. She felt his heart beating under her palms.

“I understand, but try.”

“I will.”

They kissed again, and she walked inside. As the door swung shut behind her, a balding, freckled man ran up the stairs behind her. She caught it and held it for the man, belated recognizing him as Gray Simmons.

“Thank you,” he breathed.

He was nearly an hour early for their meeting. Instead of entering the stairwell and walking up to her office, she detoured and followed him into Jake’s. She got into line behind him, pulled out her phone, and bent her head over the screen, pretending to scroll.

When he made his way to the counter, Jake greeted him jovially and asked what he wanted. Simmons ordered a flat white and a scone. After he paid and stuffed his change into the tip jar, he stepped to the side to wait for his order and jerked his chin toward the espresso machine behind the counter. “I was here earlier this week. Best flat white I’ve had outside of Australia.”

“Thanks, man.” Jake beamed.

Sasha grudgingly considered that Simmons might actually just be a coffee aficionado.

Jake turned toward her. “Did you hear that?”

“I did. High praise.”

“It sure is. What’ll it be for you? You know Ellie already placed a catering order for your meeting, right?”

She didn’t, but she nodded. “Just a black coffee, Jake.”



He gave her a disappointed look. Maybe it was her imagination, but his gaze seemed to linger on her black-and-blue cheek. “I thought you liked the ristretto macchiato.”

“I loved it,” she assured him. “I’m just in the mood for a plain old coffee this morning.”

He harrumphed but held out his hand for her travel mug. She passed it over the counter. He filled it then handed it back.

“Thanks.”

He nodded.

She felt Gray’s eyes on her and turned to smile at him. “Free coffee’s a perk of being a tenant. Sasha McCandless.” She stuck out her hand.

Jake must have sensed something was about to go down because he disappeared into the kitchen.

“Uh, Gray Simmons.” He gave her hand a reluctant pump.

“I know.”

He shifted his weight and threw a desperate look toward the kitchen. “Just getting a coffee before our meeting.”

“Late night last night?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Were you up late? You know, preparing for the hearing? Or maybe fielding a call to

let you know the attack on me didn't go as planned?"

She watched his face. He screwed up his forehead in confusion and shook his head.

"What are you talking about?"

"Someone jumped me in an alley last night. Tell me it wasn't your client."

He held her gaze. "It was not my client. At best those guys cosplay at being tough. John Boone told me he couldn't walk for three days after that Krav Maga weekend. He pulled almost every muscle in his body."

Despite her best efforts, a tiny smile broke through to curve her mouth upward. After a moment, she nodded. "I believe you."

She raised her mug toward Simmons as Jake came out of the kitchen. "Enjoy your coffee and scone. I'll see you upstairs."

When she got to the office, she stopped to talk to the workers installing cameras in the hallways before heading to Ellie's small office tucked in beside Naya's.

"Knock knock."

Ellie looked up, bleary-eyed. "Who's there?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter who?"

"Doesn't matter what Simmons says, I just figured out how to win this case."

Ellie's eyes widened as Sasha stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind her.

When Ellie pulled her Volvo sedan up to the curb in front of Sasha's house, Sasha spotted Connelly peeking through the living room curtains like somebody's grandma. She gave her head a small shake before turning to the junior attorney.

"Thanks for the lift."

"Of course, any time."

"Are you nervous about the hearing?"

"A little," Ellie admitted.

"Go home. Eat some carbs and watch a documentary or read a dense non-fiction book."

"What?"

"You know how we've spent the past two days listening to music to get us amped up?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Now it's time to quiet your mind and gather your reserves."

"Why do I feel like you're about to spring another rule on me?"

"Nope. This one's not a rule, just a hard-learned lesson. You need to bore yourself tonight so you're fresh tomorrow."

Ellie gave her a dubious look.

“Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“No,” she admitted with clear reluctance.

“Then do it. Pasta and a thick biography. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She closed the door and waved a goodbye before hurrying inside.

Connelly greeted her at the door. “You made it home before dark.”

“Told you I’d try.”

He wrapped her in a hug. “Thank you. What were you yapping at Eleanor about? No, let me guess, you were sharing your bore yourself to death the night before a court appearance advice.”

“You know me too well,” she laughed.

“I know you just the right amount,” he countered. “So, what’s it going to be tonight—penne in vodka sauce or Riley’s mac and cheese?”

“That advice is for junior attorneys. I have a better way to burn off nervous energy.” She caught his hand and pulled him toward the stairs.

“Oh, you do, do you?”

“The kids are sleeping over at my brother’s place again, right?”

“Right.”

She dropped his hand, loosened her hair from the knot at the back of her neck, and unzipped her sheath dress. It puddled around her feet, and she stepped out of it and ran up the stairs, pausing to smile over her shoulder at him when she reached the landing. He was, as the saying goes, hot on her heels.

12

Friday

Judge Macomber's deputy clerk was waiting just inside the courtroom doors when Sasha and Ellie entered the room.

"Hi, Charlie."

"Sasha. And I take it this young woman is Eleanor Prescott?"

"Yes, ma'am." Ellie offered her hand with a confident, easy smile and no trace of nerves.

Sasha felt like a proud parent. Evidently, noodles and a three-hour-long biopic about an obscure sculptor had worked like a charm.

Charlene 'Charlie' Rush gave Ellie a quick handshake before turning her attention back to Sasha and getting down to business.

"The Judge wants to see you and opposing counsel in chambers as soon as Mr. Simmons gets here."

Sasha nodded, unsurprised. She'd have been surprised if Judge Macomber hadn't pushed for a settlement. As Sasha understood it, the monopoly case on the judge's docket involved fourteen regional trucking companies as defendants and was a multi-district morass. She didn't have time for what was likely to be a morass of another

kind—one with novel legal theories bordering on the frivolous, a plaintiff with a worldview bordering on the fantastical, and a counterclaim whose merits had already been decided by a small claims court. Not only was Sasha not surprised by this turn of events, she was counting on it.

But all she said was, “Understood.”

Gray Simmons arrived a few minutes later, his tie askew and his unbuttoned suit jacket flapping as he burst through the door. “Am I late?” he panted. “That marshal at the security checkpoint—Toland—targeted me for a full-body search.”

Sasha and Ellie hid their grins with varying levels of success. Charlie just shook her head and gestured for the attorneys to follow her. Simmons gave Sasha a look that was equal parts bewildered and pleading.

She took pity on him and explained, “The judge wants to see us in chambers. I assume to explore settlement.”

He nodded unhappily and straightened his tie while they trailed the deputy clerk to the door to the judge’s chambers.

Judge Kathleen Macomber sat behind her burnished desk, her black judicial robes hanging neatly behind her from an antique coat rack. A handheld steamer sat on the windowsill beside it.

“Counselors, let’s sit.”

She stood up and walked over to the oval table that stood in front of a wall of books and gestured for them to follow her. They did, and then they waited for her to sit before pulling out chairs and joining her at the table.

Once they were seated, Charlie, who was hovering behind the judge, leaned forward. “Do you want this to be on the record, Your Honor? Should I get Valerie?”

Judge Macomber shook her head. “No. We’re all set here, Charlie.”

The deputy clerk nodded and slipped out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

As soon as Charlie left, the judge ran her hand over her close-cropped white-blonde hair and eyed the lawyers from behind her red-framed glasses and sighed. “Why are we here, people? If ever there was a case that should have been settled right out of the gate, it’s this one.”

Ellie opened her mouth and Sasha placed a hand on her arm without glancing in her direction. The associate pressed her lips together, the message received: this was Gray Simmons’ party, let him do the talking.

Simmons cleared his throat. “Your Honor, counsel for the parties met yesterday for the requisite meet and confer. Unfortunately, we were unable to resolve our differences. I’m afraid we need the court to rule on this complicated issue. Mr. Steinfeld’s contract doesn’t specify which forms of payment are and are not acceptable. As contracts are construed against the drafter, that silence should not be used to bully my client into paying with a method other than the one of his choosing.”

Sasha watched for the flash of irritation in the judge’s dark brown eyes. Once she saw it, she leaned forward.

“If I may, Your Honor?”

The judge waved her hand in a circle. “You may.”



“What counsel says is fair enough. So the defendant/counter-plaintiff is willing to drop his claim and void the default judgment entered by the small claims court on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“We request that Mr. Simmons provide the court with one of two documents for an in camera review. One, a client agreement between John Boone and Mr. Simmons on behalf of the Sinclair Law Group showing that the law firm specified which forms of payment were and were not acceptable for their services. Or, two, if he cannot provide such an agreement, evidence that Mr. Boone paid Mr. Simmons’ fee using a negotiable redemption note or some other form of ‘payment’ that was not U.S. currency, a check written from a federally insured bank or credit union, or a charge to a credit card issued by such a bank or credit union or other regulated lending institution.”

The judge pushed out her lower lip and nodded as if she found this request to be reasonable.

Gray Simmons, on the other hand, sputtered in outrage. “This is ridiculous. My financial arrangement with my client is protected by privilege!”

Ellie coughed delicately. “While it’s true that there is limited case law holding that billing records for ongoing legal matters are privileged, that privilege is not absolute. Here, we’re only asking for the method of payment set forth in the billing agreement or evidence of payment, not the detailed bills themselves. And, moreover, we aren’t even asking to see this information, only for the court to review it.”

The judge turned toward Simmons. “I tend to agree with Ms. Prescott, counselor.”

“But, it’s not even remotely relevant,” he said, taking another swing.

“Oh, it’s entirely relevant,” Sasha corrected him. “Mr. Simmons’ argument is that negotiable redemption notes are a legitimate form of payment. If he himself doesn’t accept this instrument as payment for his services, then his argument wasn’t made in good faith. So in addition to the remedies set forth in our counterclaim, we’ll be bringing this to the attention of the disciplinary board.”

“Ball’s in your court, Mr. Simmons,” the judge told him.

Gray Simmons’ face turned first red, then gray. He bit down hard on his lip for a long moment. Finally, from between clenched teeth, he gritted, “We’ll drop our complaint.”

“I believe you mean you’ll drop your complaint, and Mr. Boone will remit payment for Mr. Steinfeld’s services via cash, wire deposit, or a cashier’s check in the amount of the original bill plus any interest charges, late fees, and the costs of bringing his suit in small claims court and before this court,” Judge Macomber said in a firm voice.

“That’s what I mean,” Simmons choked.

“I thought as much. Very good. And Mr. Simmons?”

“Yes, Your Honor?”

The judge pressed her hands against the table, and Sasha noted that her bright red nail polish exactly matched her glasses. She leaned over the table and stared at Simmons. “This court does not expect to ever again see you make this argument or one like it in a federal court. And the court strongly advises you not to make it in a state court, either.”

Simmons bobbed his head. “I understand, Your Honor.”

“Very good. Now, all of you, get out of my chambers. I have real work to do.”

“How did you know he’d go for it?” Ellie whispered as they lingered in the hallway, waiting for Simmons to leave first.

“I watched him pay for his coffee at Jake’s yesterday with a ten-dollar bill. And it clicked. Simmons knows what real money is. He’s not a true believer, and there’s no way his law firm would let him accept some bogus negotiable instrument as payment.”

“Logically, sure. But isn’t possible he did for just one case agree to it? You broke the cardinal rule. You asked a question you didn’t know the answer to.”

“Yes and no. He wasn’t on the stand. Besides, I checked the divorce decree you found. The ex-Mrs. Simmons receives her spousal support in U.S. tender, so I had a strong basis to believe that’s what Gray uses, too. It was a small risk for a big potential payoff.”

Ellie nodded. “And it worked.”

“And it worked.”

The door to Judge Macomber’s outer office opened and Charlie poked her head out into the hallway. “Sasha, a word? Just you.”

Sasha turned to Ellie. “Why don’t you head over to Daniel’s studio and tell him the good news in person? I’ll see you back at the office.”

“I can tell the client we won?”

“Absolutely. Your research was instrumental, after all.”

Ellie floated down the hallway toward the elevators wearing a wide grin.

“She’s a fine young attorney, from everything I’ve heard,” Charlie said as they watched her go.

“She is,” Sasha agreed. Then she drew her eyebrows together. “What’s up?” She silently prayed the judge wasn’t about to appoint her to some dog of a case.

Instead of answering, Charlie jerked her head toward the office. Sasha managed not to sigh as she walked inside and the deputy clerk closed the door behind her. Charlie led her back to the room she’d just left and gestured for her to go inside the judge’s chambers.

But instead of the Honorable Kathleen Macomber, Connelly sat at the oval table. He was flanked by the two men who’d attacked them in the alley.

13

Raw fear flashed across his wife's face, and Leo raised his hands, palms up, in a gesture he hoped would reassure her.

"It's okay," he promised.

She held his gaze for a moment before shifting her eyes to the men on either side of him. Then she pulled out the seat across from him and sat down, all without uttering a word.

"Ms. McCandless-Connelly, we just want to talk."

The taller of the two men, the one Leo now knew as Camden Green, addressed Sasha in a grave, but calm, tone.

"So talk."

"My associate and I apologize for last night's misunderstanding?—"

She cut him off sharply. "There was no misunderstanding. You accosted us in a dark alley. You laid your hands on me. We kicked your asses."

Javier Rose chimed in, "Perhaps 'misunderstanding' is the wrong word."

"What's the right word, then?"

“Mistake.”

She nodded at that. “Go on.”

“It was a mistake to approach you the way we did.”

“Why did you approach us at all?”

Leo interjected himself into the conversation, “To offer us a job.”

Sasha searched his face. “A job. What kind of job?”

“A highly specialized position in intelligence,” Rose explained.

Her face clouded, then cleared, and she addressed Leo again, “You mean, these bozos want to offer you a job.”

He chuckled. “No, I mean us. And I’m intrigued, so maybe hear the bozos out.” Then he turned toward Green. “I warned you that she wouldn’t be an easy sell.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You want me to listen? I’m listening. Why don’t you start with which agency you work for?”

“We don’t work for the government,” Rose told her. “We work for The Lighthouse.”

Green took up the thread. “The Lighthouse is a global PIA, a private intelligence agency. Our mission aligns with those of the United States and its allies but we work independently. We became aware of the two of you because The Lighthouse was investigating a mole inside the FISA Court.”

“There really was a double agent?” Sasha asked.

Leo nodded. “The court administrator.”

“So that’s why you and Hank were fired.”

“Right.”

She turned back to Green. “I understand why you want to recruit my husband, and probably his colleague. But why me? I’m a litigator.”

Rose answered. “Two of our colleagues are talking to Hank Richardson as we speak—after another misunderstanding, er, mistake. But we’re interested in you because you’re trained as an attorney and you know how to handle yourself.” He pointed to his colleague’s busted nose as proof.

She smiled sheepishly, then shook her head. “I don’t understand what I can do for you, though.”

“We operate outside of the U.S. intelligence community, but we do operate within the law. We’d like to retain you to represent our organization as your sole client.”

“Wait, do you mean as in-house counsel?”

“No, you would continue to hold your title at McCandless, Volmer, & Andrews, but your partnership there would largely be a cover. You would work only on our matters to avoid any potential conflicts of interests.”

“And what would I tell my partners?”

“That we’re what we are—a private intelligence agency. We’ll also be your firm’s largest client by an exponential figure, so I doubt they’ll be too bothered by the arrangement.”

Leo watched her prepare to ask how they could know the details of her firm's finances and then answer the question herself. She nodded. "And Connelly?"

"He and Mr. Richards would work directly for us as field agents after they, and you, receive training."

"You want me to train as a field agent?"

The two men exchanged an amused look. Rose gestured for Leo to answer the question.

"They're realists, Sasha. They're aware of your background and your propensity for finding trouble. Rather than try to stop you from inserting yourself into dangerous situations, they'll train you to handle them. They also said depending on the mission, we could work as partners in the field on occasion. What do you say we make it official?"

His wife of ten years looked at him for a long moment, then a slow grin spread across her face. "I say it's going to be one doozy of a partners' meeting at my firm this afternoon."



Will's definition of 'light appetizers' was perhaps more elaborate than hers, Sasha realized as she surveyed the array of olives, meats, cheeses, and breads displayed on the conference room table. A silver tray held three fluted glasses, a pitcher filled with a bright orange liquid, and a bottle of prosecco in a marble chiller.

"Wow," she finally managed. "This is quite a spread."

"We heard you had a good outcome in your case for Daniel," Will explained. "I thought this partners' meeting should be celebratory."

Naya popped the cork on the sparkling wine. "Aperol spritz?"

"Why not."

Sasha filled each of the glasses with Aperol, club soda, and ice from the pitcher and Naya topped them off with the prosecco.

"Cin cin," Will toasted, raising his glass.

"Cin cin," they echoed.

After filling their small plates with food, the three partners gathered around the table, noshing and sipping. Sasha waited for an opening in the chatter about billable hours, charity sponsorships, and speaking engagements to bring up her news. Suddenly, Will and Naya fell silent and exchanged a glance. Will nodded almost imperceptibly at

Naya.

Uh-oh, what's this? Sasha put down her glass and eyed her partners.

Naya smiled broadly. "So, Mac."

"So, Naya."

"Will and I were talking, and we thought maybe you should consider taking a sabbatical."

Sasha burst into laughter. Her partners exchanged another look, this one more worried in nature.

"The program exists for a reason," Will told her gently. "It existed at P&T for a reason, too. And that reason is partner burnout. It's clear you've not been yourself. It's not a badge of shame to take some time to recharge, explore something?"

"Let me stop you right there." Sasha got her giggles under control and held up her palm. "I don't disagree. In fact, just last night, I told Connelly that I wanted to use the sabbatical program."

Relief flooded Will's face, and Naya let out whooshing sigh.

"Good. I think you'll find it rejuvenating," Will assured her.

"I'm not finished. But in the space of a day, my plans have changed. You're right, I haven't been myself. The law has felt like drudgery in recent months, rather than a calling. And when we feel that way, it does make sense to mix things up. Today, I was approached by a private intelligence agency that wants to retain the firm—retain me, actually—to do all of its work."

Naya frowned. “Won’t that be a conflict of interest with whatever the heck it is Leo does?”

“It would have been, but Leo is no longer employed by the government.”

“He’s no longer employed by the government for real, or he’s employed by another secret agency that doesn’t officially exist?”

“For real.”

“Well, if your concern is financial, remember that the sabbatical is paid. You don’t need to keep working if a break would do you good.”

“This prospective client will pay an annual retainer that’s more than three times last year’s total firm billings,” Sasha countered.

“Oh,” Will said.

“Oooohhhh,” Naya echoed.

“Right.”

“What’s the catch?” Naya demanded, narrowing her eyes.

“The catch is they want me to work for them exclusively.”

She could tell Will was running the numbers by the way he squinted at the ceiling. After a moment, he nodded and said, “With a retainer that size we could easily hire two junior litigation partners to take over your existing work. Or an army of associates.”

“Is this something you want to do?” Naya asked.

Sasha popped a bright green Castelvetrano olive in her mouth and savored the burst of brine before answering. “It is. The work they do sounds exciting. Engaging. It’ll be like taking a sabbatical without pausing my practice.”

Naya nodded.

“Well, this was an easy meeting,” Will declared.

“Not so fast. There are two more items to discuss,” Sasha told them. “One, someone should take a sabbatical—one of you. Nobody else is going to use the program until one of the name partners does it. They’ll think it’s a trap to weed out the undevoted or something.”

Will chuckled knowingly. “That does sound like lawyer thinking. And to be honest, I’ve been noodling over taking on an expanded role at the food bank. But perhaps, a six-month sabbatical to dig into their finances, revamp their programming, and hire a top-notch director while working on my novel would be just the thing.”

“You’re writing a novel?” Naya asked.

Will blushed a deep red and busied himself with his cheese and bread.

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Sasha told him. “What you about, Naya? Any interest in a sabbatical?”

“Not me. You forget. I haven’t been a lawyer as long as either one of you. I’m still in my world domination era.”

“Fair enough. But we should host a happy hour or another aperitivo for the entire firm

to let people ask questions about the sabbatical program and explain how it works.”

“The entire firm?”

“The entire firm,” Sasha insisted. “We should make the sabbatical available to all employees. Equity partners aren’t the only folks susceptible to burnout or whose happiness matters.”

“You’re not wrong,” Naya said. “And with this new client you just brought in, heaven knows we can afford to do it.”

“Then it’s settled,” Will proclaimed. “That was the second thing, correct?”

“No, that was more like 1b. The second thing is while I don’t want to take advantage of the sabbatical program right now, I do need to take a vacation. A one-month vacation starting on Monday.”

Will blinked, owl-like. Naya gave her the side-eye.

“Will your new client find that acceptable?”

“Yes. It’s prearranged.”

This was true. She and Connelly were picking the twins up from Ryan and Rylie’s place as soon as she left work to head to the lake house for the weekend—a quick trip before beginning their four-week training as agents of The Lighthouse on Monday.

“Then that’s settled, too,” Will said.

“To new adventures,” Naya proposed.

“To new adventures.”

15

Sunday evening

The McCandless-Connelly family waved goodbye to Daniel and Chris as Daniel backed the couple's Mercedes up the steep gravel driveway that led from the road to the lakefront house. At the top, Daniel gave a short beep goodbye before pulling out and driving away.

"Did they leave the leftover pizza for us?" Fiona wanted to know before the car had even vanished from sight.

"Where does she put it?" Connelly muttered under his breath.

"She must have a hollow leg," Sasha whispered back.

"What if we save the leftovers for your lunches tomorrow and toast marshmallows instead?" Connelly suggested.

"S'mores?" Finn countered.

"S'mores and one last sunset over the lake," Sasha agreed. "Go get the graham crackers and chocolate while Dad and I start the fire."

The twins squealed and hurtled down the driveway to the house, Mocha barking wildly and racing along with them.

“Big day tomorrow,” Connelly observed as he laced his fingers through hers and they strolled behind the kids and dog.

“It is.”

“Are you nervous or excited?” he asked.

She thought for a moment. “Both. It feels like the night before Christmas and the night before the first day of school all wrapped up together. What about you?”

“Pretty much the same. I’m excited to work together.” He grinned at her.

“You should be. I’m pretty awesome.”

“Yes, I am,” he teased back.

Then he hoisted her up over his shoulder and hauled her to the back deck, depositing her, breathless from laughter, in a blue Adirondack chair near the outdoor fireplace.

The kids and dog emerged from the kitchen. Java tagged along behind them.

“Is it okay if Java watches the sunset, too?” Fiona asked.

“So long as you’re responsible for her,” Sasha told her daughter—the only member of the family brave enough to put a collar and a leash on the cat.

Fiona nodded seriously. Finn passed around the S’mores ingredients, and Connelly speared four marshmallows onto steel toasting forks.

They ate their gooey treats as they watched the display in the sky. The sun filtered through the colorful leaves of the trees along the lake’s shore before spreading out over the water, which reflected it back in shimmering bands of fiery red and brilliant



orange. At last, it dipped below the horizon, leaving behind only a glow. The family stayed around the flickering flames of the fire until the sky turned a pale purple and the first stars winked into view.

Tomorrow held a new adventure, but tonight, Sasha's heart was full.