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Black Thursday

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Thanksgiving Day, 2004

7:30 a.m.

The offices of the venerable Prescott & Talbott, one of Pittsburgh's largest, most prestigious law firms, were dark and silent. Here and there, scattered across the law firm's eight floors, a random square of light shone out of an office.

One such office was located halfway down the east corridor on the fourth floor. Inside, a white iPod thumped out Maroon 5's "Harder to Breathe" at full volume while Sasha McCandless typed furiously on her keyboard, keeping time with the music.

Her typing slowed momentarily as she flicked her eyes toward the time display on her desk phone. She had to finish the first draft of this brief in support of a motion to dismiss before noon or her mother would have her head. *Bear down. Just get it done.* She stopped to take a swig of coffee from her travel mug and saw her mother's disappointed, but resigned, face when she'd explained she had to spend the morning at work.

Sasha had only been working at Prescott & Talbott for three months, but already the McCandless clan had come to expect her to flake out on family obligations.

"Not today, mom," she'd promised, when she'd stopped by her parents' home on her way to the office before the sun had risen. She'd found her mother in the kitchen, a striped apron tied around her waist, already working on dinner.

"Okay, honey," her mother had said, not meeting her eyes, as she hefted the giant turkey into the roasting pan. "Hold the pan, would you, Sasha?"

Sasha had steadied the pan while her mother had guided the bird into it.

"How big is that thing?"

"Thirty pounds. Everyone's coming. You know, it's been five years . . . since Patrick."

Patrick, the oldest of the four McCandless children, had been killed in November 1999, a week before Thanksgiving, during Sasha's sophomore year of college. Every year since, Sasha's mother had channeled her grief into her holiday dinner preparations. They'd become increasingly elaborate over the

years. This year, in addition to the enormous turkey, soup served in individual pumpkins carved into bowls and stuffing that began with homemade bread were on the menu. None of the extended McCandless family had missed the dinner since Patrick's death.

"I know, Mom."

"Your brothers will miss you."

"Mom, I'll be here. I promise. I just have to go in for a few hours."

"Why today? Why not tomorrow?"

Sasha sighed and didn't answer the question, because she couldn't. She didn't know why the brief *had* to be drafted on Thanksgiving, why it couldn't have waited until Friday.

But the e-mail she'd received from the partner on the case at eleven thirty the night before had made it clear: Marco DeAngeles expected a draft in his e-mail inbox before the Lions and Cowboys kicked off. With no Steelers game to watch, Sasha expected he'd spend his time rooting against Dallas and tearing her draft to pieces.

"Can I get a warm up?" Sasha asked, waving her mug toward the coffee maker by the sink, instead of answering.

"Of course," her mother said, her eyes back on the turkey.

Sasha filled her mug and then kissed her mother's cheek on her way through the kitchen to the back door.

"I'll see you later, Mom. Is dinner at two?"

"Yes. Your Nana's coming, you know."

"I said I'll be here. I'll be here," Sasha called over her shoulder as the screen door slammed shut behind her.

The song ended. Sasha stood and stretched. The brief was already in decent shape. Sasha was asking the judge to dismiss the plaintiff's fraud complaint for failure to plead the cause of action with the requisite specificity. It was hardly a novel argument, and she'd found ample precedent to support her position. And, for once, the facts seemed to line up nicely with the law.

She allowed herself to feel confident for the briefest moment. Having a work product she could deliver to Marco in the next four and a half hours should be no problem. No problem.

And then a problem waddled in through her doorway.

Hannah Marsden-Smythe had one hand cupped around her cartoonishly large pregnant belly. She braced the other hand against Sasha's door frame.

"Hey," Hannah said, out of breath.

"Uh, hi."

Sasha didn't know Hannah well. She was a highly-regarded mid-level litigation associate, whose office was on the other side of the building. They saw each other mainly at firm luncheons. Sasha had signed the card and popped in

to the baby shower some of the secretaries had organized for Hannah, but she doubted they'd exchanged twenty words total.

"So, I'm in finishing up a deposition outline for Peterson," Hanna began, then stopped and bent over, with both hands under her belly now. "Ooooooh," she moaned.

"Do you need to sit down?" Sasha asked. She felt awkward and irritated. She had too much work to do to talk to Hannah now.

Hannah shook her head no, her golden curls bobbing against her shoulders, and put one hand up like a stop sign. A moment later, she raised her head. Her face was red.

"Anyway, I got up for a walk because otherwise my feet will swell."

"Okay." Sasha really didn't want to hear about her pregnancy woes.

"Thank God you're in. I heard your music down the hall. I'm in labor."

"What?!" Sasha ran around to the front of her desk. "What should I do?"

Hannah laughed. "I called my husband. He's on his--," she paused and let out another moan, longer this time, then said, "way. Relax. I don't want you to deliver any babies. Just finish this outline for Peterson, okay? The deposition's Monday, and he's meeting with the client tomorrow. He needs it tonight."

*

After walking Hannah back to her office and helping her pack up her belongings, Sasha stayed with her until her husband arrived. While they waited, Hannah filled her in on the deposition and the case, which had something to do with banking regulations and accounting. Her narrative was punctuated by intermittent, distracting moans, which Sasha assumed corresponded with contractions. Sasha was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the information Hannah was downloading, because the moans were coming closer together and getting louder and longer. More like grunts and growls, really.

Finally, she just swept the files off Hannah's desk into a pile that she balanced on her lap. She willed herself not to tap her foot or check the time. Where the devil was Hannah's husband already?

"I've got it, don't worry," she told the laboring woman.

Hannah exhaled and tried to smile.

"Thanks. I owe you."

"Boy or girl?" Sasha asked.

"One of each," Hannah said, before doubling over.

Just then, a tall, thin red-hair man came running into the office.

"This is Bill," Hannah said.

"Congratulations, Bill, and Happy Thanksgiving!" Sasha said, patting him on the shoulder before she made her escape.

Halfway down the hall, she broke into a jog, as if the thirty seconds she would shave off her travel time would somehow enable her to finish her brief, get up to speed on an entirely new case, and whip off a deposition outline in time to be sitting at her mother's Pledge-scented dining room table in time for grace.

She flung Hannah's files on her desk and sunk into her ergonomic desk chair. She then wasted a full minute trying to sketch out a schedule that would enable her to get everything done in time. If she pushed back her departure until one thirty, she could go straight to her parents' house from the office.

She snuck a peek at the time. 8:18. It was *possibly* doable. Then, she looked down at her outfit: a long-sleeved base layer shirt, running tights, and her Sauconys. Her original, now ridiculously optimistic plan, had been to run home from the office, shower, and dress in appropriate holiday attire. Nana Alexandrov wouldn't be amused by the workout gear, but there wouldn't be time to go home first. That much was clear.

She scrolled through her playlists until she found the driving beat she needed if she was going to pull this off. Eminem's "Lose Yourself" seemed like a good start. She hit play and then read through the last section she'd drafted of the brief to get back into the flow before she started writing again.

She didn't stop until she reached the conclusion. Her mouth was dry, her coffee was cold, and her need to pee was urgent. But she had a finished draft. And it was only 10:48.

Sasha leaned back in her chair. She swore she could feel the acid eating away at the lining of her stomach. She looked out her floor-to-ceiling window. The cloudy, gray day beckoned her. She decided she'd earned a short walk.

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Sasha hurried back into the office building, pushing hard to force the door open against the gale of cold wind that swept up from the river. Once in the lobby, she stamped her feet and blew into her hands. This weather was crazy.

It had been sixty degrees when she'd dragged herself home right around midnight the previous night—the last remnants of a glorious Indian summer. Now the temperature on the Mellon Bank sign down the street read 35.1 degrees and a light, cold rain was falling.

"They're callin' for snow later today, you know," the sleepy-eyed security guard at the front desk announced out of the blue.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeppers." He eyed her. "Little thing like you, you're going freeze to death with no coat on. There's nothing to you."

He said it as if were somehow her fault she was all of (not quite) five feet tall and (just shy of) one hundred pounds. Sasha was accustomed to reactions to her size, but judgmental sniffing was a new one.

The most common conclusion strangers drew about her was that she was insubstantial. That rarely boded well for them.

When she was all of eight, her maternal grandmother had found her crying under the kitchen table because her brothers were calling her pee wee. Nana Alexandrov had marched her straight out to her boxy old station wagon and torn off toward the library, where they'd checked out *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Back home, they'd worked through the text together until Nana Alexandrov reached the part where Helena says, describing Hermia, "And though she be but little, she is fierce."

Nana had looked into Sasha's eyes and said, "That's you, my girl."

What her Nana hadn't realized is that Sasha had read on and memorized Hermia's rejoinder: "'Little' again? Nothing but 'low' and 'little'!—Why will you suffer her to flout me thus? Let me come to her."

She'd repeated the words in her head, over and over, until her Nana had left, and she could run up to her room and write them down in her diary. Then, she'd dragged out her parents' big dictionary with the tabbed pages, and looked up "flout." Finally, she had pestered Patrick, who was in high school, until he'd confirm that Hermia was, in fact, planning to beat up Helena.

And there was born her obsession with hand-to-hand combat. If poor Nana knew that Sasha credited her with her interest in Krav Maga self-defense training, she'd probably say a rosary. She found Sasha's training in fending off attacks most unladylike. Even more so than the practice of law.

Sasha laughed to herself as she took the four flights of stairs to her office. She still had a smile on her lips when she walked into her office.

It disappeared the second she saw Noah Peterson, the managing partner of the complex litigation department, sitting in her guest chair, drumming his fingers on her desk. His head snapped back when he heard her approach.

"There you are," he said by way of greeting.

"Hi, Noah."

Sasha focused on staying calm. She had never worked for Noah, but he had a reputation for being exacting and unforgiving. He was also widely considered one of the best litigation partners to get in good with. If Noah took an associate under his wing, she got excellent professional development opportunities along with the dollops of abuse. He was a star maker.

"I understand you're stepping into Hannah's role," he said.

"She asked me to finish the deposition outline for your meeting with the client tomorrow," Sasha said.

"Yes, she called me from the car. It's unfortunate timing, her going into labor. I was going to let her defend this one."

Sasha was impressed. Defending the deposition of the corporate representative at a 30(b)(6) deposition would have been a nice box for Hannah

to have checked on her self-evaluation, evidence of her client relations skills and Noah's trust in her.

"Well, I suppose Hannah's bad luck is your good fortune, eh?" Noah continued, picking an imaginary piece of lint off his black and maroon argyle sweater.

"Excuse me?" Sasha said. She winced at the sound of her voice: squeaky and faint.

Noah squinted at her as he considered her response. Then, he sighed and said, "I'll be honest. There's only one way to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner with my wife's family, and that's to let the wine flow freely. I don't intend to be in any kind of shape to prepare Ron Murphy tomorrow. And, if I'm not doing the prep, why would I defend the deposition?"

Sasha thought she must be misunderstanding him.

"You want *me* to do it?"

"You did pass the bar exam, didn't you?"

"Well, yes."

"And you do wish to practice litigation, correct?"

"Yes, of course. But, I'm a first year—"

"Indeed you are. And a tiny one, at that. But Ron's a bright guy, he's the chief financial officer of a publicly traded company, for chrissake. He's been around the block. He won't need someone to hold his hand."

He was serious, Sasha realized. Noah Peterson was dropping a 30(6)(b) deposition in her lap. By rights, she should have to wait three, four, maybe five years--more than ten thousand billable hours--to get an opportunity like this.

Adrenaline rushed through her body in a cold wave. *Hell, yeah.*

"Great," she said.

"Great. Well, let's walk through this quickly. I have to get back before Laura realizes I've gone."

"You left without telling your wife?"

The words flew out of Sasha's mouth before she could stop them.

Noah just laughed. "Of course. In life, as in the courtroom, it's better to ask forgiveness than permission. Why tell her beforehand? It would have just resulted in . . . a discussion, shall we say . . . before I left. No matter how angry she'd gotten, I'd still have come in. Now, if she notices I was gone, at most, she can scold me about it while I have a pre-dinner cocktail, and I will have spared her several hours of stewing. Much better on balance, wouldn't you say?"

"Uh, I guess."

"Now then, let's turn to the deposition notice. Get your things; we'll camp out in a conference room."

*

1:50 p.m.

Sasha sat in the oversized leather chair and watched the promised light snow fall outside the window of the Scaife Conference Room--named for one of the firm's wealthier clients--while she waited for Noah to pause for a breath. He was explaining why the whistleblower at their client's company had filed a *qui tam* action.

"Each accounting entry that she's identified as being improper is a separate violation of the statute, with a separate financial penalty. And, of course, as the relator in a *qui tam* action, she'll recover a percentage."

"Of course," Sasha said, although she'd never heard the words *qui tam* before in her life. Noah, will you excuse me for a moment?"

He checked his diver's watch. "Let's take ten and meet back here."

Sasha returned to her office and tapped her parents' telephone number into the keypad of her phone.

Her father answered on the second ring. "We're all here, so it must be Sasha."

"Hi, dad."

"Happy Thanksgiving, baby."

She took a breath. Then, she blurted, "You, too, daddy. Um, dad, I'm still at the office. I'm going to be late for dinner."

He said, "We figured. Let me get your mother."

"No! I mean, don't bother her, I'm sure she's busy getting dinner on the table."

He ignored her and yelled, "Val, hey, Val, Sasha's on the phone."

Sasha could hear platters clattering.

After a long silence, her mother's distant voice called back, "Ask her should we hold it?"

Sasha knew she was worrying about her turkey drying out. Not to mention hosting a house overflowing with hungry, cranky grandchildren and adults drinking on empty stomachs.

"Honey," her dad said in her ear, "your mom wants to know if you want us to wait for you."

"No, don't do that. You guys go ahead. I'll be there in time for pie and coffee. That was always Patrick's favorite part, anyway," she said.

She heard a smile in her father's voice when he said, "It was. As long as the coffee was Irish."

She hung up fast because she could feel tears building behind her eyes. She would sooner walk naked down Grant Street during rush hour than let Noah Peterson think she was upset about missing a family meal.

She squared her shoulders and returned to the conference room.

Noah was already back, paging through a document binder that Hannah had prepared. He looked up at her and asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yep."

He looked back down at the spreadsheet in front of him and said, "It gets easier. They get better about it as time goes on."

*

6:40 p.m.

Noah was long gone. Back to his Sewickley mansion and his well-lubricated Thanksgiving feast. Sasha's stomach growled. She ignored it. It growled again. Louder.

She pushed her chair back from the conference room table and went off in search of sustenance. She'd stayed in the conference room after Noah had left. First, because it was easier to work with her documents spread out across the table. Second, because she wouldn't have to hear her ringing phone as her brothers and their wives left the increasingly belligerent messages she knew would be flooding her voicemail box.

Across from the conference room, a small pantry served as a staging area for catered events. She pushed through the door and blinked as the bright overhead lights came to life with the motion of the swinging door. She headed for the stainless steel refrigerator drawer built into the counter.

She rummaged through the bottles of Perrier until she found a plastic storage bag filled with cheese cubes left over from a cocktail hour. She leaned against the counter and ate bite-sized squares of cheddar and swiss straight from the bag. Then she washed it down with a lemon-flavored water.

Her Thanksgiving dinner complete, she tossed the water bottle into the recycling receptacle and eyed the coffee maker. *Might as well.* She'd already missed dessert.

She did some stretches while the coffee brewed. Then she poured herself a mug and headed back to the conference room. She spotted the red blinking light on her Blackberry before she was through the door. She put the mug down carefully on a cardboard coaster branded with the P&T logo and checked her messages.

Crap.

Marco had read the brief and e-mailed his comments so she could revise it and send it back. Immediately.

Sasha rubbed her eyes then started packing up Noah's files.

The more time she spent whining about the work, the longer she'd be here.

Back in her office, she dumped Noah's work on her desk and woke up her computer to print Marco's edits. She took her coffee with her to the printer

station in the hallway and leaned against the wall, savoring the hot jolt of caffeine while she waited for the printer to whirr to life.

The clack of shoes against the marble floor behind her startled her to full alertness.

She turned to see Naya Andrews, one of the legal assistants assigned to the litigation group, stalking her way, a stack of papers in her hand.

“Am I glad to see you!” Naya said.

Sasha shook her head. “No way, whatever it is. No. I can’t help you.”

Naya narrowed her eyes. “Oh yes you can, and you will. Because Peterson called and told me you would. All you need to do is review these discovery responses and sign them.” She shoved the papers toward Sasha.

“What? Are you crazy? They don’t let me sign things, Naya. I’m a useless first year, remember?”

Naya’s views on junior associates were no secret.

“Yes, you are, McCandless. But Kevin Marcus’s plane was delayed and these were due *yesterday*. They were already six weeks overdue, so last week the plaintiff filed a motion to compel, which Judge Wentworth granted. So, if these responses aren’t waiting in this jackass’s e-mail when he hauls his bloated, overstuffed self into the office, he’s going seek sanctions. And, he’ll get ‘em. Stop your bellyaching and start signing.”

Sasha took the documents, and Naya crossed her arms over her chest and stared at her.

“What?” Sasha said.

“I’ll wait.”

“Naya, I can’t just sign them. I have to review them. And I guess the documents, too. Where are they?” Sasha stared back.

Naya shook her head, sending her dozens of beaded braids flying back and forth like a curtain. “I was afraid you’d say that. They’re in Work Room C.”

Sasha drained her coffee. “Let me get these edits done for Marco. Then, I need to finish this outline. And, then, I’ll get the discovery out.”

Naya sighed and checked her watch.

Sasha looked at the older woman. “Did you have plans?”

“Nah, it’s okay.”

“Naya, do you have somewhere to be?”

Naya hesitated and then said, “Well, I signed up to serve dinner at the soup kitchen for my church. Last shift is at seven o’clock. Nobody usually wants to work that one. You get a lot of drunks, homeless vets. Not so many thankful, poor nuclear families. And, it’s gotten cold. Below freezing now. They’re gonna be crowded.” She shrugged as if it didn’t matter to her.

Sasha could see from the stiffness in Naya’s shoulders that it did matter. A lot. She thought of Noah, probably already sloshed, eating some game bird

that rich people eat instead of turkey. She thought of the two empty seats that had sat like shadows over her mother's golden turkey with all the trimmings. Then, she thought of the drunk, cold homeless veterans who would miss out on Naya's sharp tongue and rough teasing.

She exhaled through her nose and said, "Just give me the guy's contact info. When I'm done, I'll scan them and send them out."

Naya shot her a blinding smile and punched her bicep. "Thanks, McCandless! I owe you one. I'll bring you a slice of my famous pecan pie tomorrow."

"Don't bother," Sasha mumbled, "I'll be on a plane to Duluth."

That reminded her. She needed to make her travel arrangements.

*

Friday morning, 2:15 a.m.

Sasha parked in front of her parents' house but left the car idling. She looked up at the dark porch. What had she been thinking? Everyone inside had likely been asleep for hours.

She shook her head at her own stupidity and pulled out, heading toward Mt. Washington and her drafty Victorian house. She had just enough time to shower, dress, and pack her bags for her six a.m. flight.

"Happy Thanksgiving," she whispered to no one, as her parent's home shrunk to a pinpoint in her rearview mirror.

She thought she should feel melancholy or guilty, but she was buzzing with excitement.

She'd drafted a brief. She'd signed discovery documents. She was going to prepare a client's CFO and defend his deposition. She was tiny, but she was fierce.

She cracked the window to let the cold air in and cranked the volume on her iPod. Through the car adapter, the speakers pumped out the heavy bass beat of "Lose Yourself."

