

CHAPTER ONE

Six months ago

I hurry down the hall, my short heels clicking rhythmically along the tile floor. The smell of floor wax, something lemony and clean and antiseptic, intermingles with the ancient sycamore trees cut down hundreds of years ago, formed into the walls of the old school building. What once was likely light by rows of candles was now washed out in the white, head-ache inducingly so, LED lights overhead. *Flicker, flicker*, they flickered with each step as I sped up as fast I could, stray papers peeking out of a stack of multicolored files in one arm and the offending coffee that made me late (from one of the local, student-run coffee shops) in the other. It was the first day of spring term classes, only a few months away from graduation, and of course, I was late.

I'd spent the winter break wrapped in warm sweaters and oversized cardigans, wrapped in wide-knit blankets on my mom's fraying old couch, supplied with hot cocoa and earl gray tea as mom pattered around the house, denying my offers to help with the chores as I was now a guest, no longer apart of the household but still, my room hadn't been touched. Neither has dad's study.

It had always been more an office, devoid of the traditional rows of books or worn leather chairs and gold-green desk lamp you'd typically associate with a lawyer's study. Instead, it was furnished sparsely and hardly decorated besides a few family photos and mementos that my sister and I had made for him.

My sister's room was now a sewing room. Floral wallpaper had been torn down and painted over by modern beige; posters pulled down and carefully rolled up into storage boxes in the garage. Her bed, desk (usually covered in piles of dishes and discarded bags of chips and half-finished cans of Redbull), nightstand, and closet had been emptied out, boxed up or sold in one of the neighborhood's cul de sac rummage sales. Vice president of the HOA, mom would set up the sale every summer and panic for about a week before the event, upping her dose of

generic Valium until she was so unfocused we'd take over our house's folded table, selling old Barbie dolls or videogame cartridges we no longer played for 5 cents or so.

The professor cleared his throat as I burst through the doors, trying to catch my breath.

"Rebecca Harper, sir," I greeted him anxiously, glancing around at the small class spread around the large lecture hall, expanding up towards the end of the dark vaulted room. Near the back row of wooden, church-like pews, lined back to back with long likewise wood desks, were a couple of girls I recognized from classes the previous term.

"Oh, well then," he said, not looking up from an old black binder folded out in one hand, a cup of coffee from the same campus cafe in the other. He marked off something in the binder, likely my name on the attendance roster. I wondered how many students *hadn't* shown yet, or wouldn't, as this was a required course in our major, and yet the lecture hall was nearly empty. Only ten or so students sat around the room, scrolling aimlessly through their phones or nose tucked in small laptops.

I usually looked up professors on online review aggregators before signing up for courses, but I needed to retake this class to graduate so I'd forgone that while registering. I had failed it as a freshman and, though my advisor reminded me over his thick-rimmed spectacles *many* times that it was a prereq to the coveted summer internship I otherwise qualified for, I had avoided signing up for it like a plague. If I aced this course, I could make it into the paid internship program and earn credits into my J.D., once I made it into law school. I'd make some okay money...that'd likely go straight towards my student loans and a couple packages of ramen.

I wondered, in the back of my mind, what in the world his rating might've been on there, since usually, the more popular (read: *easy*) professors tended to fill up quickly, especially if multiple professors were teaching the same tract required course. I wracked my brain, trying to think of who else had been teaching in another section for the course but couldn't think of who it'd been. I'd signed up for Professor Reye's section after registration opened, after a night on the town with the loud girls in the apartment next door, so this was the only option with seats left, although I could've tried to waitlist for another instructor...still, it was too late to

ponder on my poor life decisions, so I nodded quietly at the man and made my way up to the small group of three up at the back of the class. They sat together but weren't close; merely acquaintances that barely knew each other in a graduating class in the thousands.

It wasn't an *easy* school to get into, but the stellar pre-law program attracted applicants from all over the country and, after a decades-long expansion given its attempts to diversify the student body beyond the everyday wannabe-attorney WASP, accepted a good more of them than other similar schools throughout the country. It was easy to get lost in the sea of aspiring law students, making it twice as difficult to make it into the internship I was clawing my way towards.

The internship's academic requirements were rigorous, a GPA of at least 3.8 was necessary to even be considered for it. Although I was probably more suited to advising corporate board rooms on best trade practices or directing students to the correct legal tome in the law library than standing in front of a jury, I lost more sleep studying to make than most of my peers. The party scene was also a big draw to the well-connected rich kids. They didn't need an internship or networking gig to make it into the big-name law schools. Maybe I'd make it into the internship that would secure a spot in the school's sister (not-so-elite but still respectable) law school, but it was a long shot.

CHAPTER TWO

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Dan

The coffee hadn't kicked in yet, so when she kicked her way into the room I barely registered the *slam* that reverberated through the nearly empty lecture hall. A bit of her coffee splashed to the ancient carpeted floor. She was carrying a cup from the same *Latte-MOO Cafe* I'd hastily picked up coffee from that morning. I glanced down at the few spots at her feet, blinked blearily, then marked her as present as she sputtered out her name.

Re...Renee? Rachel? I set my coffee down on the small lecturer's table I'd been leaning on and made a note in the binder to look over the roster later for a similar-sounding name. Likely,

there'd be several students who didn't show up the first hour of the lecture but would trickle in as the minutes ticked by, and some of those wouldn't return the next day.

The other half of the class would sit in for the first week as required for attendance but then wouldn't come back until midterms and finals. That used to bother me more than what was warranted. I took it as a personal affront, as if I wasn't interesting or captivating or, maybe vainly, *handsome* enough for students to sit through the two-hour-long courses I taught at the university. Now I knew differently. When I stood in front of the courtroom, eyes would lift and follow me, captivated as I presented my case. Even though the legal jargon, they paid attention. I made sure they would.

I glanced up and motioned for her to find a seat, as she was hardly late and I'd barely made it on time myself, but she'd already found a group to join in the back of the hall. I wondered if I'd need to project my voice more than I'd wanted to for this stupid undergrad course I'd been talked into teaching at the beginning of the semester. My eyes lingered on her as she climbed up the too-narrow steps to the back of the room, wearing heels that must've been uncomfortable for walking around campus. Finding myself looking at the neatly pleated gray skirt sashay around her calves, wrapped in dark fleece tights, for a little too long, I cleared my throat and searched absently for the coffee that would, hopefully, give me the strength to teach these people way too early in the morning (*why* there are early AM classes for college students I'll never know).

I started into my lecture, covering only the syllabus and expectations for the course. I could see the students' eyes were already glossing over. Mine might have been as well. I hated the first day about as much as my students. It was the most basic classroom etiquette shit. Everyone knew the school's non-discrimination and anti-cheating policies like the back of their hand, especially at this point in their academic careers. Although, in my eyes, they were still kids, most only in their early twenties with a few non-traditional outliers, but didn't need to be treated like they weren't yet adults.

Around this time, when barely half an hour had crawled by, I would loosen my tie and unbutton the top of my collared shirt, as if the room was too hot (and, in this old unrenovated lecture hall, it was) and roll my shoulders back in a half stretch. Half of the room, women and

some men alike, would stir awake. Their line of sight would drop down from my face, or somewhere above my head like the clock that no longer ticked let alone moved, then back up again. The gloss and unabiding boredom in their eyes would be replaced with something like longing or at least minimal interest.

Colleagues often didn't invite their wives or girlfriends to the few office parties that I routinely attended, typically only the socially obligated ones like Christmas cocktails or summer barbeques, and I wasn't so unaware of their reasoning. While I reserved it mostly for the more dramatic moments in court (the rare closing arguments that hold a breathless quiet among observers) a slight Southern drawl would occasionally slip out, initially jarring given my otherwise Oregonian mannerisms, drawing in women like flies to an hours-long riverbank cookout.

I called on one of the students in the back, asking a question on a portion of the syllabus that'd been mentioned earlier, and he froze up, stuttered, then dropped his head to look for the paragraph on the handout I'd passed out earlier. *Re...Richelle??*, who'd been reading over his shoulder while I went over the information raised her hand, glancing back down at the paper as if she doubted the answer she already knew.

I sighed. "Put away your syllabus, please. Put it in your bag or under a book, anywhere you can't see it," I instructed, patience running thin. "This isn't the hard part of class. Promise. You'll need to memorize information faster than this if you want to make it into *any* law school, let alone pass the bar." I glanced back at the woman, her hand still raised.

"I don't want the answer if you'll need to look back at that paper," I reminded her pointedly, as she covered the sheet with the textbook. Half the class, about five students, hadn't purchased the book yet.

"I — I didn't...yes, Professor Reyes," she said, frowning.

"Name?"

A pause. "It's Rebecca, but I go by Becca."

"Okay Rebbeca but goes by Becca, go ahead."