



A Man Called Mother

SARA LOOKED AT THE WATER STAIN ON THE wall and imagined it was an island. She wasn't sure if that was because it actually looked like one or just because she so desperately wished she were in some tropical paradise far from Brooklyn and this tiny room on the eighth floor of Kings County Family Court.

She sat across the table from her public defender, a massive man in a rumpled suit named Randall Stubbs. His bulky frame hunched over as he scanned her file.

"This doesn't look good," he muttered, because stating the obvious was apparently something they taught in law school. "You're lucky they've made such a generous offer."

"They have?" Sara asked, surprised. "What is it?"

He looked up from the file and said, "You plead guilty to all charges and get thirty months in juvenile detention."

Two and a half years in juvie didn't sound generous to Sara, but it probably wasn't much worse than her last few foster homes. She was tough for a twelve-year-old. She could handle it.

"And, of course," he added, "you won't be allowed near a computer."

This, however, was unacceptable.

"For how long?"

"For the duration of your sentence. Maybe longer as a condition of your release. That'll be up to the judge."

"But all I did was . . ."

"What?" he interrupted. "Hack into the computer network for the entire juvenile justice system of New York City? Is that what you were going to say? Because that's not what I'd call an 'all I did' situation."

"I know, but I was only trying to . . ."

"It doesn't matter what you were trying to do," he said.

"All that matters is what you did. You're lucky you're twelve. If you were thirteen they probably

would've bumped you up to a higher court to make an example out of you."

The weight of this hit her hard and for the first time she regretted her actions. Not because they were against the law. Legal or not, she had no doubt she'd done the right thing. But she'd never considered that she could be banished from the one corner of the world that made sense to her.

The only time Sara felt at home was when she was sitting at a computer keyboard.

"I'll never hack again," she said. "I promise."

"Oh, you promise?" he responded sarcastically. "Maybe you can cross your heart and hope to die once we get in court. I'm sure that'll fix everything."

Sara struggled when it came to controlling her anger, a diagnosis confirmed by multiple counselors and at least two school psychologists. Still, she tried to keep cool as she looked at the man who was supposed to be helping her.

She couldn't risk angering him, because he was her only hope for a positive outcome. So she took a deep breath and counted to ten, a tip from one of those counselors whose name she'd long since forgotten.

"If I can't use a computer," she said, barely masking her desperation, "then I can't do the one

thing I'm good at. The thing that makes me special."

"Yeah, well, you should've thought of that before you . . ."

She probably would've lost her temper right then and there if the door hadn't suddenly flown open and into the room stepped a man who was in every way the opposite of her attorney.

He was tall and thin with a thatch of unruly black hair. His suit was impeccable. His tie matched his pocket square. And, he spoke with a British accent.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said politely. "But I believe you're in my seat."

"You've got the wrong room," grumbled Stubbs. "Now if you don't mind, I'm having a conference with my client."

"Except, according to this Substitution of Counsel form, she's my client," the other man replied as he showed Stubbs a piece of paper. This brought an instant smile to Sara's face.

Stubbs eyed the man. "That doesn't make any sense. She can't afford a fancy lawyer like you. She doesn't have any money."

"Of course she doesn't have any money. She's twelve. Twelve-year-olds don't have money. They have bicycles and rucksacks. This one, however, also happens to have an attorney. This paper says I've

been retained to represent Ms. Sara Maria Martinez." He turned to her and smiled. "Is that you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Brilliant. That means I'm in the right place."

"Who retained you?" asked the public defender.

"An interested party," said the man. "Beyond that, it's not your concern. So if you'll please leave, Sara and I have much to talk about. We're due before a judge shortly."

Stubbs mumbled to himself as he shoveled his papers into his briefcase. "I'm going to check this out."

"There's a lovely lady named Valerie who can help you," said the British man. "She's with the clerk of the court on the seventh floor."

"I know where she is," Stubbs snapped as he squeezed past the man into the hallway. He started to say something else, but instead just made a frustrated noise and stormed off.

Once Stubbs was gone, the new attorney closed the door and sat across from Sara. "I've never seen that before," he marveled. "He literally left the room in a huff."

She had no idea who might have hired an attorney for her, but she was certainly happy with the change. "I've never seen it either."

"Now tell me," he said as he popped open the

latches of his briefcase. "Is it true? Did you hack into the computers of the city's juvenile justice system?"

She hesitated to answer.

"You needn't worry. Attorney-client privilege forbids me from telling anyone what you say in here. I just need to know if it's true."

She gave a slight nod. "Yes. It's true."

"Brilliant," he said with a wink. He pulled a small computer from his briefcase and handed it to her. "I need you to do it again."

"Do what again?" she asked.

"Hack into the juvenile justice database," he said. "I need you to make me your attorney of record before Mr. Stubbs gets to the seventh floor and checks for himself."

"You mean you're not my attorney?" she asked.

"Never set foot in a law school," he said conspiratorially. "So, chop-chop. I've got an associate who's going to delay him in the hallway, but she'll only be able to do that for so long."

Sara's head was spinning. She didn't know what to think. "Listen, I don't know who you are, but the court's supposed to assign me a lawyer. A real one."

"And the chap with the mustard stain on his tie is the one it assigned," he replied, shaking his head. "I don't know about you, but I'm not particularly

impressed. Over the last nine years, that same court has assigned you to six foster families and nine schools. It's been one botch job after another with them. What do you say we try something new?"

She looked at him and then the computer. She was tempted, but she was also confused. "I don't think ..."

"What did he say would happen?" he interrupted. "I bet he's already worked out a deal with the prosecutor."

"Two and a half years in juvie and I'm banned from using a computer."

He shook his head. "I can do better than that even without a law degree."

For reasons she didn't fully understand, Sara believed him. Maybe it was wishful thinking. Maybe it was desperation. Either way, she trusted her gut and started typing.

"Excellent," he said. "You probably won't regret this."

"Probably?" She raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you be trying to build up my confidence?"

"Only fools and liars speak with certainty about things beyond their control," he replied. "But I'm optimistic, so I'd rate your chances around . . . eighty-seven percent." Sara smiled and continued typing.

“What kind of computer is this?”

“Bespoke,” he answered.

“I thought I knew all the computer companies, but I’ve never heard of that one.”

“It’s not a company,” he said. “‘Bespoke’ means something has been tailor-made to the specific needs of an individual.”

“Someone made this for you?” He nodded.

“Well, whoever ‘bespoke’ it really knew what they were doing.”

“Wait until you see the massive one,” he said.

“You’re going to love it. That is, if we’re not both behind bars by the end of the day.”

Sara knew computers well but she’d never seen one like this. It was fast and powerful and she quickly shredded through the firewall that was supposed to protect the juvenile justice portal.

“They didn’t even fix the backdoor I used the other day,” she said in disbelief.

“Large institutions move slowly,” he said.

“Hopefully large attorneys do too.”

It took her less than two minutes to reach the database for attorney assignments. She happily deleted the entry for Randall Stubbs and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Excellent question,” he said as he pulled three

passports out of his briefcase. "Which sounds best?"

He read from the first one. "Croydon St. Vincent Marlborough the Third." He gave a sour face. "Seems a bit excessive, don't you think?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"We'll pass on that." He read from the next. "Nigel Honeybuns." This one made him snicker. "Honeybuns? I quite like that." He tucked it into a pocket in his briefcase. "I think I'll save that one for another time."

"We're kind of in a hurry," she reminded him.

"Right, right, here we go," he said, reading from the last one. "Gerald Anderson. That sounds like a proper barrister. Dull. Boring. Imminently forgettable. Which is exactly what we want. That's my name, Gerald Anderson."

He handed her the passport so she could check the spelling as she typed it into the database.

"I just click 'update,'" she said as she finished, "and we're all set."

He flashed a nervous smile and paused to listen. "No alarms." He opened the door and leaned out into the hallway. "No one rushing in to arrest us. Very nice work, Sara."

"Except now I have an attorney who's never gone to law school."

"I've watched a lot of courtroom dramas on the

telly," he said. "I can handle an appearance before a judge."

"Don't you mean, probably," she replied.

He smiled at this.

"Right . . . probably. First, though, I'll need details about the hack."

"I'm sure they're all in there," she said, pointing at the file.

"This only tells me what you did," he replied. "I want to know the reason."

"The lawyer, you know, the one who actually went to law school, said it didn't matter why I did it."

"It may not matter to him. It might not even matter to the judge. But it matters very much to me."

She thought about her answer for a moment, trying to come up with the most straightforward way to tell it. She didn't want to get upset. She hated showing emotions in front of anyone. "My most recent foster parents . . ."

"Leonard and Deborah Clark?"

"Yeah, them," she said with a sneer. "They like to take in more kids than they have room for because the state pays them by the kid. More kids mean more money, whether they spend it on us or not. No one really checks that. We were crammed into bedrooms that were too small. Rather than give everyone a

meal, they put food in the middle of the table, so it looked like there was more than there was. They called it 'family style,' which is a joke because they treated us like anything but a family.

"A new kid named Gabriel came about a month ago. He was scared. Sad. Lonely. Everything you'd expect from a five-year-old. He liked me because we were the only Hispanic kids in the house."

"You spoke Spanish to him?"

"Sometimes," she said. "Until they made us stop. Mr. Clark told me, 'You're in America now, so speaking English is something you're going to have to get used to.'"

The lawyer shook his head. "And what did you say to that?"

"I pointed out that Puerto Rico was already part of America, that I'd spent almost my entire life in Brooklyn, and that if he really wanted to speak English well, he shouldn't end sentences with prepositions."

The man laughed. "Cheeky."

"I'm not exactly sure what 'cheeky' means, but his cheeks turned red, so I guess so," she replied.

"Did you get in trouble?" he asked.

She nodded, the humor of the moment gone. "I could handle his punishment, though. It was Gabriel

who couldn't."

"Why was Gabriel punished?"

She paused and saw him studying her expression. He wanted to watch her eyes as she spoke.

"One night he wet his bed," she answered, "and to punish him they locked him in the hall closet. I could hear him crying. They didn't care. They would've let him cry all night. So, I got up and let him out."

"And then what happened?" he asked.

"Then they locked me in the closet with him. Told me I had to learn my place. So, I picked the lock from the inside and let us both out."

She was on the verge of tears so she stopped for a moment.

"And then?" he prodded.

"They locked us outside on the roof. They left us there all night. It was cold. It was terrifying. The next morning, I went to school, got a pass to the computer lab, and started working. First I hacked the juvenile justice database to see how many kids had been sent to the Clarks. Then I hacked their bank accounts to show how much money they were taking in and where they were actually spending it."

"You're not being charged with hacking the bank," he said, flipping through some pages.

She grinned. "Yeah, they dropped their complaint."

I'm pretty sure they don't want the world to find out that a twelve-year-old girl beat their security system."

"Nice," he said. "I might be able to use that later. What'd you do with this information once you'd gotten it?"

"I sent everything to my social worker," she said. "And you know how stupid I am? When I saw the police coming up to the house, I thought they were going to arrest the two of them. For about forty-five seconds I was happy."

"But they arrested you instead?"

She nodded. "The Clarks even had the other kids line up on the porch so they would see me being led out of the house in handcuffs." She closed her eyes tight, determined not to let a single tear fall. "They said, 'This is what happens to criminals.'"

He'd actually heard the story the night before, through a listening device. But he liked hearing stories twice. He wanted to see if they changed. That was always a good indicator of how truthful they were. Besides, seeing her face as she recalled it told him everything he needed to know.

"That's a good reason," he said. "I can work with that. I can make this a lot better."

"Don't you mean, probably?" she asked.

He smiled warmly. "No, I'm certain I can. But I'll

need you to do something difficult. Something the reports in this file say you're completely incapable of."

"What's that?" she asked.

"I need you to trust me," he said. "No matter what I say or do, I need you to trust me."

"How can I trust you?" she asked. "I don't even know your name."

"Sure you do. It's Nigel Honeybuns. It's Gerald Anderson. Sometimes it's even Croydon St. Vincent Marlborough the Third. It all depends on the situation," he said with a shrug. "But my friends and colleagues, and I do hope that's a group you'll soon consider yourself to be a part of, they all call me Mother."

For the first time since she'd been arrested, Sara laughed.

"Mother?" That's an unusual name for a man."

"True," he said smiling at her. "But I'm an unusual man, wouldn't you say?"