

Chapter 1: The Case That Started It

Daniel Cross had been a lawyer for twelve years, and in that time he had learned to recognize the particular weight of a case before he understood any of its facts. It showed up in how many boxes arrived from the client, in how early the partner in charge started copying him on emails sent at midnight, in the size of the conference room they booked for the kickoff meeting. The Solvix matter announced itself that way. Four bankers' boxes of documents on a Monday. A partner, Ruth Abernathy, who normally delegated everything, sitting in on every call. A conference room with a name — the Lakeview Room — instead of just a number.

Solvix Pharmaceuticals made a blood-thinning medication that, according to the complaint filed against it, had caused internal bleeding in several hundred patients who were never adequately warned of the risk. The company denied this. Daniel's job, as second

chair under Ruth, was to help build that denial into something an arbitration panel would believe. The hearing was set for ten weeks out. Ten weeks to review a decade of internal safety memos, prep six witnesses, and construct an argument sturdy enough to survive cross-examination by opposing counsel, who had a reputation for finding the one email nobody remembered writing.

He liked this kind of work, if he was honest with himself. There was a clean logic to litigation that appealed to him — a problem with a deadline and a defined shape, unlike most of life. He had built a career on being the person who stayed calm when a case got hard, who read one more document than anyone thought necessary, who didn't need eight hours of sleep to function because he had never really needed eight hours of sleep. In law school he'd pulled all-nighters and felt fine the next day. In his twenties he'd worked nights and weekends through two trials and a bar exam and come out the other side more or less intact. He was

thirty-eight now, and nothing about his body had sent him a memo that this might be changing.

The first month of the Solvix matter was simply hard, in the ordinary way hard cases are hard. Daniel arrived at the office before seven and left after nine most nights. He ate dinner at his desk more often than at his kitchen table. He and his wife, Elena, a high school biology teacher who had her own demanding schedule of lesson plans and lab prep, fell into the kind of marriage two exhausted professionals share during a bad stretch — brief, affectionate check-ins by text, a late dinner together maybe twice a week, a shared understanding that this would not last forever, because nothing at a law firm technically lasts forever, even when it feels like it will.

Their dog, Scout, a scruffy mutt they'd adopted four years earlier from a shelter two blocks from their old apartment, took the brunt of the schedule change with the most visible confusion. Scout was used to a nine o'clock

walk, rain or shine, the three of them or just Daniel, down to the little park by the river and back. During the second week of the Solvix matter, Daniel missed four of those walks in a row, and on the fifth night, when he finally came home at ten-fifteen, Scout was sitting by the door with his leash already in Elena's hand, looking at Daniel with an expression that managed to be both patient and faintly accusing.

"He's been doing that since eight-thirty," Elena said. "Sitting there. I think he can tell time now."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said, and meant it, and took the leash, and walked the dog around the block in the dark because it was better than nothing, and told himself this was temporary.

He believed that, mostly. He had been through hard cases before. He knew the shape of them: an intense middle stretch, a brutal final two weeks before the hearing or the trial, and then a kind of controlled collapse

afterward, where he'd sleep ten hours a night for a week and feel human again. That was the deal he had made with this career, years ago, half-consciously, the way people make deals with demanding jobs. Intensity now, recovery later. It had worked before.

What he did not yet know — what nobody tells you on the front end of a hard stretch, because nobody can predict it in advance — was that this time, something in his body was going to respond differently. Not because the Solvix matter was uniquely brutal. He had handled worse. But because of some combination of the accumulated hours, the accumulated years, the particular way stress was sitting in him that spring, a switch was about to flip that had never flipped before. And once it flipped, no amount of *this is temporary* was going to flip it back on its own.

It started on a Tuesday in the fourth week, with nothing more dramatic than a thought that arrived while he was reviewing a batch of internal Solvix emails at his desk, close to