

ATLANTA  JUSTICE
BOOK ONE

DEADLY PROOF

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CHAPTER ONE

You can't call that a settlement offer." Kate Sullivan looked directly into the dark eyes of her opposing counsel, who represented a medical device company. Jerry had just made partner and thought he could play hardball, but she wasn't going to let him get the upper hand. "You and I both know that amount will never cut it. Come back to me when you have a number I can work with." She closed her laptop and shoved it in her bag.

"C'mon, Kate. Fifty grand is a good starting point," Jerry said.

"We're done here. Call me when you're actually ready to negotiate." She stood up and walked out of the conference room before Jerry could say anything else. He wasn't taking her client's claims seriously, so she wasn't going to waste any more time playing games. He'd come to his senses soon enough. This case shouldn't go to trial, and he knew it.

Making the quick drive from downtown to Midtown Atlanta, weaving through the usual traffic, she parked in her reserved spot in the garage under a tall office building. The large office tower was home of the world-class plaintiff's firm Warren McGee.

She spent more time at her office than she did at her own home, but that was by choice. Representing innocent victims was her calling.

When she walked out of the elevator and onto the twenty-third floor, her assistant, Beth Russo, greeted her warmly.

“How did it go?” Beth asked. Her fifty-five-year-old assistant had been working at the law firm for decades and knew the ins and outs of each case and every schedule. Kate would be lost without her.

“Still no settlement, but they’ll cave eventually. They don’t actually want to try this case.”

“I hope so, because you need to get it off your docket and give your full attention to the Mason Pharmaceutical litigation. You deserve to be running that case.”

Kate laughed. “Let me get on the steering committee first, Beth. Then I’ll apply for lead counsel.”

“Exactly. You’re due in court in three hours for the hearing on the steering committee, and you’ve got calls piled up.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Beth. I’ll work through them.” Calls meant business, and business was what kept her in good standing as a partner at the firm.

In the privacy of her own office, Kate stared out the large window that gave her a fantastic view of Stone Mountain in the distance. She’d earned this corner office by working hard, but she wanted more. Her goal was to be managing partner one day, and this litigation was huge.

Thousands of cases had been filed across the country against Mason Pharmaceutical Corporation, known as MPC. She was responsible for a large chunk of them, representing victims who had taken MPC’s migraine drug and had died or been injured. She needed a spot on the exclusive committee of plaintiffs’ lawyers that would dictate the entire direction of the case.

Her phone rang, but she let it go, knowing Beth would an-

swer it. She had started flipping through her emails when Beth hurried into her office with a frown pulling at her lips.

“Kate, sorry to bother you, but there’s a call I think you have to take.”

“Who is it?”

Beth’s brown eyes narrowed. “She won’t give me her name, but she said she has information regarding the MPC case.”

Once the litigation hit the news and the firms started advertising to find clients who had taken the dangerous drug, there was a constant stream of inquiries to be fielded. The firm couldn’t turn them down without hearing the person out first.

“Why don’t you have one of the associates take it?”

Beth shook her head. “She says she’ll only talk to you.”

Kate was listed as lead counsel on hundreds of the complaints, so it made sense that this person would want to talk to her. “Okay, put her through.” She waited for her line to light up red, then picked up the phone. “This is Kate Sullivan.”

“I have some critical information for you, but I can’t speak over the phone,” a woman said, her words rushed and breathless. “Is there a place we can meet?”

Kate needed more before she dropped everything to go on what might be a wild goose chase. “And you are?”

“I don’t want to say right now.” Her voice was hushed.

“You can come down to my office, and we can talk here.”

“No, no. That won’t work,” the woman said. “It’s too risky. Your office is the last place I can be seen.”

“Ma’am, as you can imagine, I have a lot on my plate right now. So it would be helpful if I had some idea of what this is all about.”

“I have information you’re going to need,” the caller whispered. “Things related to your case. Things I know because of my job.”

That got Kate’s attention. “Are you an employee of Mason Pharmaceutical Corporation?”

“I told you, I can’t have this conversation over the phone.”

Kate’s heartbeat sped up at the strain in the woman’s voice. “All right. There’s a coffee shop in Colony Square on Peachtree and Fourteenth. Can you meet me there?”

“Yes. See you in ten minutes.”

Kate hung up, and her mind went into overdrive. If this woman was truly an employee of MPC, then this meeting could be huge. MPC had corporate offices in multiple states, but the company headquarters and largest office was in Atlanta.

It was likely this woman was a disgruntled employee or that she was unstable. But something about her voice tugged at Kate. Her curiosity and desire to be thorough led her to take the meeting.

She made the short walk from her office across the street and down a block to Colony Square, which housed restaurants and shops catering to the Midtown Atlanta community. It was lunchtime, and there were plenty of people out taking breaks in the warm Georgia sunshine. Since it was June, the humidity made the air thick and sticky, but it was better than being locked inside a stuffy office all day.

As Kate stepped into the coffee shop, she looked for someone who could potentially be her tipster. Not seeing anyone promising, she took a seat at the table in the back corner and waited.

After a few minutes, a woman who was probably in her mid-forties took the seat across from her. She had brown hair cut in a no-nonsense bob and wore simple wire-frame glasses that only partially obscured her bloodshot eyes.

“You’re Kate Sullivan?” the woman asked in a low voice. Then she turned and looked over her shoulder. Nervous—and paranoid.

“Yes. And you are?”

“Ellie Proctor.”

“Nice to meet you, Ellie. Why don’t you explain to me what this is all about.”

“I’m scared,” Ellie said as she clenched her pale hands together in front of her.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. You’re safe with me.”

“No, you don’t understand.”

Was this lady a conspiracy theorist? Kate had no idea what she was dealing with. “Just take it one step at a time. Do you work for MPC?”

“Yes.”

“And what is your job there?” Kate felt like she was conducting a deposition, trying to get information out of a witness.

“I’m one of the senior R&D scientists.” Ellie shivered, but the coffee shop’s air conditioning was barely functioning.

Kate pressed on. “What do you work on?”

“A variety of testing and product development for different drugs.”

“And you think you know something about Celix? The drug involved in my cases.”

Ellie nodded. “Yeah. I did my research. I went onto the law firm websites and read all the information about the litigation.”

“And what do you think?”

“It’s so much bigger than what you and the other lawyers around the country are saying about Celix.”

Now Ellie had Kate’s undivided attention. “How so?” Celix caused brain tumors, so she wasn’t sure how much bigger this could get.

Ellie looked down. Her brown eyes not making contact.

“Listen, Ellie, I can’t help you if I don’t know what the facts are.” She needed to be patient. This woman seemed like she might go off the ledge at any minute.

“You need to dig deeper.” Ellie wrapped her arms tightly

around herself as she shook. “A lot deeper, but you have to be careful.”

“The case is just starting, but I’m always very thorough.”

As Ellie’s eyes darted back and forth, Kate began to wonder if Ellie was strung out on something. The red eyes, the shivering, the paranoia. Did this woman even work for MPC?

“The lawsuits say that MPC should have known through its testing that brain tumors were a potential side effect, but . . .”

“What?”

“I’ve already said too much out in the open like this, but you need to go beyond Celix. This is bigger than Celix. You have to look at other MPC drugs. Get your hands on all of the testing records for Celix and the emails about the test results. I can’t provide them to you. My computer has highly restrictive security protocols. I’m hoping you’ll be able to get them through your case, but I know some of the documents have already been shredded or deleted. I don’t even know what’s left on our servers. I think this goes up to the highest levels of the company.” Ellie glanced furtively around, then leaned over the table and whispered, “I know it sounds crazy, but I’m taking a risk even coming here to meet you.”

Kate looked around, and no one in the coffee shop seemed even remotely interested in what they were talking about. But even given how weird this all seemed, she couldn’t just push it under the rug and walk away. “How about we set up a time and place to meet? Your choice. Somewhere you’re comfortable talking openly with me, so I can gather more facts.”

Ellie let out a long sigh. “Thank you. I think that’s for the best. I thought I might be able to talk here, but it just doesn’t feel right. Can we meet the day after tomorrow at 7:00 p.m. at the entrance of Piedmont Park?”

“Sure. I’ll be there.”

Ellie reached across the table and gripped Kate’s hand.

“Whatever you do, you can’t bring my name into this. I’m coming to you because it’s the right thing to do. I can’t sleep at night with all of this on my conscience.” She took a deep breath.

“I’ll be discreet.” Kate didn’t want to jeopardize Ellie’s livelihood, but she definitely had to get to the bottom of this.

“I have to get back to work before my lunch break ends.”

“Can I get your contact information?”

“Yes. This is my business card. I’ll put my personal cell on the back.” Ellie took a pen out of her small navy purse and, with a wobbly hand, wrote down her number. Then she scratched through her work contact information. “Please don’t ever contact me at work.”

“You did the right thing by coming to me, Ellie. I’m going to figure out what’s going on here.”



A few hours later, Kate returned to the office after the steering committee application hearing in front of the magistrate judge. The cases against MPC had been consolidated into a multidistrict litigation called an MDL. And that meant the judge was going to pick the plaintiffs’ steering committee—known as the PSC in the legal world.

There wasn’t room on the committee for all fifty attorneys who’d applied, and most of her competition was male. But she didn’t want to be put on the PSC because of her gender. She wanted to get a spot because she was highly qualified and would be an asset. All she could do now was wait to hear the judge’s choices for the committee.

Her phone rang, and she looked down. She instantly recognized the number as Ethan Black, her longtime friend who also happened to be opposing counsel in the MPC case.

“Hey, Ethan,” she said.

“I hear you did well in your application hearing today.”

“Word travels fast, doesn’t it? I just got back to my office. Did you guys have spies planted in the courtroom or something?”

“I’d much rather it be you on the steering committee than someone else.”

“Just because we’ve been friends since law school doesn’t mean I’m going to go easy on you.” They’d met during their first year at the University of Georgia and quickly become close.

“Yeah, but in contrast to most of the crazy plaintiffs’ lawyers I have to put up with on a daily basis, you have the ability to act rationally. It’s probably because you started on the right side of things before you switched over to the dark side.”

She laughed. “You’re the one on the dark side, Ethan. Don’t forget, I lived in your world for three years. You’re defending a pharmaceutical company directly responsible for thousands of deaths.”

“That’s a baseless allegation,” he shot back.

“No, it’s a fact.” Why was she fighting this now? It wouldn’t matter.

“The fact is that MPC’s drugs are lifesaving. You’re forgetting how much good their drugs do. The innovation MPC has attained is unmatched.”

“One good drug or a hundred good drugs doesn’t outweigh all the bad they’ve done by putting Celix on the market if they knew it had life-threatening side effects.” She tapped her pen on her legal pad, starting to lose patience. “But I know we aren’t going to agree on any of this. It’s just like the old days on the mock trial team. Do I have to remind you who was on the winning side then?”

He laughed loudly. “You always find a way to fit that into conversation. Want to grab dinner and catch up? I promise we won’t talk about this case.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m slammed right now. Can I get a rain check?”

“Of course. And we’ll be seeing a lot of each other very soon.”

After she hung up, she closed her eyes for a moment and asked God to give her the strength to get through this litigation. It was going to be her toughest yet.