

CHAPTER

1

“This isn’t right,” Angelica Welles muttered. She stared down, transfixed, indifferent to the tourists jostling to nudge her out of the way.

Her face bunched up in a dark knot. “This isn’t right.”

“I’m going to need to ask you to move along, ma’am,” said Kimberly, the pert blonde docent whose tour group was queued up to Angelica’s left along the display case.

Angelica stayed put, rigid as a post.

“I’m sorry, but everybody gets a turn, and we need to—Are you OK, ma’am?”

Angelica silently pointed straight ahead. Kimberly leaned in to see what was distressing her so much. Angelica tapped a certain spot on the glass.

“Yes, it’s—” Kimberly leaned in closer. “It’s—” She swept her hair back over her ear. “No, you see, it’s—”

She went white. “Oh my God.”

Kimberly wheeled around and ran out.

She ran straight to the office of the first curator she could find and flung the door open. This wasn’t done. Docents do not disturb curators, and they certainly don’t barge right in through a closed door to interrupt a meeting.

“I beg your pardon!” the curator snapped. “What do—?”

“You gotta come to the rotunda right now. Right now!”

“If you would like to make an appoint—”

“Now!” Kimberly heard an unfamiliar voice coming out of her. Oh, she was going to get fired for this.

He stared speechless. National Archives senior curator R. Gregory Pendleton, PhD, did not handle heart attacks. He did not handle unruly patrons. And he jolly well didn’t take orders from anyone wearing a docent badge. But with a look of curious alarm, he followed her out the door.

“This better be good.”

CHAPTER

2

“I’m all through for today.” Angelica’s mom appeared at her side. “Ready to go home?”

Angelica just gave her mom's abdomen a distraught look, tapped the glass, and said, "It's not right." At the same moment Kimberly fairly shoved a dapper, fiftyish little man up against the display case and tapped the same spot.

"Article 5!" Kimberly said. "Read it!"

"Young lady, I have read Article 5," he said. "I hope you did not drag me here just to—"

"No, I mean read it here." The docent tapped the glass again. "There."

Angelica's mom and Dr. Pendleton each put on reading glasses and nearly bumped heads poring over the same bit of calligraphy.

"The Congress, whenever two thirds—" he read out loud. "Yes, the amendment article. What is your point?"

"Keep reading," Kimberly said.

He let out a deep, impatient sigh and glared at her.

Angelica's mom yelped.

Pendleton gave her a dour look, then resumed reading, whispering as he went. He stopped whispering. He adjusted his glasses, bent down farther, and read it again, silently this time.

He straightened up and stared blankly ahead. His face quickly evolved from irritation to worry to panic. Yet his voice remained professional, steady, solid ice.

"Who else has seen this?" he asked.

"I think just us," Kimberly said. "I came for you as soon as she showed it to me." She glanced at Angelica.

Pendleton turned to the nearest tourists and announced, "I am terribly sorry, but we are going to have to close the rotunda. A technical issue has arisen. Please exit the way you entered. We should reopen in an hour or so. We are very sorry."

He turned to Kimberly, Angelica, and her mom. "You three stay." He then repeated his announcement to the room, walking around the ornate marble floor with his arms outstretched to herd everyone out. He ordered the security guards to go stand outside the iron gate.

Once everyone else had left and the guards had locked the gate behind them, Pendleton returned to the display case, took a deep breath, and read Article 5 yet again. Dazed, he turned to the three women.

"Who are you? Who are any of you? And what are you doing here?"

CHAPTER

3

“I’m Dr. Phyllis Welles. Professor of history at Johns Hopkins. I was doing some research in the vault. This is my daughter, Angelica.”

“Most times I go with my mom to the vault to find a new book,” Angelica, 21, said in her usual loud monotone, looking at the curator’s feet. “But today I decided to see the documents in the rotunda. The National Archives rotunda has the originals of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Magna Carta.”

“I am aware of our holdings,” Pendleton sneered. “My question is—”

But Angelica was no longer listening. She had turned back to the display case as though he weren’t even there.

Flummoxed by the snub, he just looked back and forth between mother and daughter. He couldn’t help noticing that Angelica had inherited her mom’s good looks, particularly her striking hazel eyes. But, unlike her mom, she had made no effort to enhance her looks. No makeup. No jewelry. No styling of her straight, shoulder-length brown hair. Shapeless coat.

More puzzling was that Angelica showed zero interest in him as the official in charge at this critical moment.

After a few seconds, Pendleton said to her, “You are the one who noticed this?”

Angelica didn’t reply, so Kimberly said yes.

“How did you come to—? Why did you—?”

“She’s a very good reader,” her mom said.

Protective understatement.



The word *savant* was not used in the Welles household. Angelica just had her ways, and that was that. Like many other savants, she had been diagnosed in childhood as autistic, in her case mildly. She had never smiled, gotten a joke, looked anyone in the eye, or made a friend. She usually seemed preoccupied elsewhere. She rarely looked at faces. She didn’t respond to social cues like body language, smiles, or tone of voice.

Or authority.

So, at the moment, only Angelica was looking at the centerpiece of the National Archives’ rotunda, the original handwritten and signed U.S. Constitution. Its ink had turned brownish, and the lighting in its display case was dim, but the writing was still legible to the rare soul who made the effort to read it.

Angelica was one of those rare souls.

She couldn't help it, really. She had—as did every other savant—one ability that was narrow, deep, and uncanny. In her case, that ability was hyperlexia, a sliver of genius for reading. She might ignore what you said, but she could parrot back a month later whatever you wrote. She was reading at a seventh-grade level when she was three.

And like every other savant, she had extraordinary attention to detail and a phenomenal memory—but only within her narrow fixation. Hers was American history. It's just what was available to her as the daughter of a history professor. Ever since Angelica was five, Dr. Welles would often bring home three or four new books, only to find them a few days later precisely stacked under Angelica's bed.

Unbidden, Angelica could then itemize any discrepancies between them and other books.



So, unlike the million visitors a year who shuffled along the Constitution's display case noting only *We the People* at the beginning and the famous signatures at the end—Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, and the rest—Angelica spent an hour carefully working her way through all four parchments. While tourists jostled around her and moved on, she planted herself squarely in front of the first parchment, then the second, then the third, then the fourth.

She had read the Constitution probably a dozen times in various books and memorized it years earlier. But here she was seeing the handwritten original in person for the first time.

And today, something on the fourth parchment stopped her dead.

The handwritten Article 5 didn't read as Angelica had memorized it. It was supposed to be one long sentence. But here, it was three separate sentences. That made no sense. She had never seen the middle sentence before. It's not the kind of thing she would have forgotten.

It was not the kind of thing anybody would have forgotten.

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