

*When a small-town graduate goes missing from her urban college, her girlfriends step up to find their friend. Of course, the small-town folk are not at fault, are they? Legal Grounds unpacks a mystery of #MeToo and #ChurchToo. Small communities and families and faith friends are relied upon as safe havens. Are they safe? The question.*

## **LEGAL GROUNDS**

by Ava Aaronson

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The background of the cover is a painting in a style reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's 'Café Terrace at Night'. It depicts a narrow street in Paris at night. On the left, a yellow building with a balcony and a red awning over a cafe terrace is visible. Several small round tables and chairs are set up on the terrace, with some figures seated. The street is cobblestone and reflects the light. In the distance, other buildings and figures are visible. The sky is a deep blue, filled with numerous white stars and a crescent moon. The overall mood is romantic and atmospheric.

# LEGAL GROUNDS

**AVA AARONSON**

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Cover: *Café Terrace at Night* is an 1888 oil painting by Vincent van Gogh, in the public domain.

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## **TRIGGER OR CONTENT WARNING:**

This novel includes graphic descriptions of and extensive discussion of abuse, incest, torture, and personally-inflicted violence as experienced by a child and a young person.

There are also graphic descriptions of and extensive discussion of self-harming behavior including suicide, self-inflicted injuries, and eating disorders.

There are depictions, including lengthy and psychologically realistic ones, of the mental state of someone suffering abuse and then contemplating and engaging in self-harming.

There are instances of forced deprivation and disregard for personal autonomy.

Some of the abuse is done in the name of God and with the reinforcement of certain passages from the Bible. At times, clergy that are informed do not intervene.

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## Chapter One

### Legal Latté

Friday, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 5 a.m., Stella texted Ellie: On my way; offer coffee to client. Thx.

What began as a hushed tête-à-tête in a café back office ended in deadly open aggression on the front terrace. The morning opener intern was the first to note the oddity of one particular early morning engagement. Interns, of course, are the ones at the bottom doing the grunt work and taking it all in like a fly on the wall. They appear to know everything about everyone that goes on in their place of training and low wages. No one seems to notice that they are there, and yet interns see and hear everything.

About a month later, likewise, it was the café closer intern that called in the law to clean up the battle aftermath on the front terrace. When it all came down, that intern gave testimony as to what had actually happened. He, too, was so small in the scheme of things that the warring parties went at each other with neither blush nor reserve. He similarly was the shy mouse working behind the counter in the mellow eventide who witnessed the disturbance. The intern could recount every detail; however, no one had noticed that he was present when chaos ignited.

It was not a question of the interns being uninformed or of a low brain capacity. They were actually scholars: local college students studying business. Their career study paths required them to take training at a small business for low pay and school credit. In addition to being smart and homegrown, they were observant and intimately familiar with small town life and the

concerned parties. Their job, however, was to focus on and learn how to run a successful small business from the ground up. Unfortunately, this particular chain of events was not about success; it was a question of survival.

In the beginning, it had been another classic Friday morning with the regulars streaming in at the 5 a.m. opening of Legal Grounds Café, craving coffee for their morning runs to work. There were the cabbies and independent drivers headed to airports, delivering riders for their flights at the end of the week. Truckers swung in from the highways. Early shifters picked up coffee and eggs on an English muffin, a yogurt parfait, a chocolate croissant, a cinnamon scone, or a blueberry muffin.

The wafting aromas of hot coffee and steamed buns evoked warm ambience contrasting with the pristine look of the café's clean shine. Spotless windows and sparkling table tops reflected early morning lights and shadows, natural and powered. Fall flowers in planters on the front terrace glistened with dew. The freshly hosed terrace slate walkways were as spick-and-span as a doorstep entry to a home in Holland. Out front, the café terrace tables were accented with brightly colored overhead umbrellas. The top of a cedar pergola floated high above, producing a balance of both light and shade throughout the popular open-air seating area.

The week had been normal, save for one elusive detail noted by the intern. Otherwise, matters were routine. The town was complacent. All was quiet on the central plains just west of Chicago and beyond the Illinois border. On the Mighty Mississippi, a tiny town balanced for dear life on the edge of the river bank on the Iowa side. So tiny it felt at times like it



would plunge into the river below, sailing quietly away southward, traveling through the Delta and disappearing into the sparkling azure of the Caribbean Gulf.

Like the other lovely Iowa towns along the Western banks of the Mississippi River in Iowa, Sunnyside was an old town, river towns being the oldest in the state. Sunnyside liked to think of itself as a Wild West town. Really it was full of farmers and displaced city folk who wanted a decent place to raise their kids and get out of the rat race of the cities on the urban southern shores of the Great Lake Michigan. The farmers liked the soil on the prairie and the kinship in town, the small churches that dated back to the settlers, and the superior education in solid school systems - both public and private - with sports, fine arts, and new technology. For them, the normalcy was that they ran into the same people and had pretty much the same conversations every day at the same places in their town. The displaced city folk just wanted peace and quiet and the fact that they had figured out a way to escape urban crime and city streets, landing in the Sunnyside haven of sanity, serenity, and safety.

Jake and Stella Peltier, the coffee shop owners were no different. Their story of being high profile attorneys that left the big city for the small town, however, took a different twist in that they established their law practice with his and her law offices at the back of a coffee shop. Their two work quarters faced each other beyond the dining room. A hallway ran down the middle between them that led to the café back door. Stella had the south side office with south facing windows that brought in sunlight year-round and cool breezes when the weather was temperate and pleasant. Jake had the north office with windows looking out to the innards of the rest of the Wild

Mustang Corral, where they were located. The couple knew it would take time to establish their law practices as newcomer lawyers in a close-knit small town, so they came up with the idea to establish the coffee shop and put their legal services in the back, calling it, Legal Grounds Café.

To enhance their growth as a legal office and their place in the community as a café, Jake and Stella Peltier were active in the Sunnyside Chamber of Commerce. Often, the café hosted Chamber or church or club meetings. Because the café business was limited to breakfast, lunch, and after school, evenings were open for non-profits to use their space. Community was the name of the game for the two lawyers. It was why they came to Sunnyside from Chicago. Sunnyside was small and quaint yet business-rich. It was not backward. It was connected to the land, family friendly, promising-for-raising-children, and most of all, a highly polite and cultured society.

The coffee shop with the law offices meant there was some overlap of customers during the day, which was intentional and good for business. Folks came in, had coffee and got things done. Legal Grounds, with free wi-fi, was for working activities, or a place to stop on the way to engagements, or a place for a break on the way back from wherever they were coming from. For some patrons, such as the Twelve-steppers, it was a place to stop in for a cup of Joe, instead of sitting at a bar with a beer, before heading home. There were customers who scheduled their appointments at the café for signatures, sales, or new hires. They would sign papers with their realtor, converse with their broker, or just meet a new friend and then move on to do dinner with the new friend at Cowboy Jack's Supper Club, if the chemistry was right.

Sunnyside romantic dinners, partying in the evenings and late-night drinks occurred at Cowboy Jack's, which anchored the other end of the horseshoe-shaped Corral mall. This worked well for business and kept the Corral's eating establishments from competing. Cowboy Jack's was good for saloon lunches, supper club dinners, and live music with dancing into the night. Monday through Saturday, Jack's opened for lunch, barely, as they were the only one in the Corral with a bar for adult drinks. Then Jack's went all out for dinner with bands playing and couples swinging on the parquet floor, particularly on the weekends, into the wee hours. It was the place to be seen and it got a little rowdy at times. Jack's was where the action was in town. Most of the town gossip took place at Jack's amidst drinking, darts, dancing, dining, mixing, mingling, and a mish mash of social entanglements. It was a real live (as opposed to virtual) web. Proprietors Jack and Sara knew everybody, and at times, everybody's business, through no intention of their own.

Jack and Sara owned the Wild Mustang Corral and Jack thought of himself as a cowboy, his wife a cowgirl. Yes, they owned horses on their out-of-town hobby ranch, strictly for play. Their eldest daughter, Stella (Jake's wife), was now grown, educated and becoming established at Legal Grounds, in their very own Wild Mustang mall. Their youngest daughter, Madeira, was yet in graduate school. Now enjoying a couple of grandchildren, Jack and Sara were still solid as a couple and reliable as business people, well-loved and admired in Sunnyside. Jack and Sara were not religious, but they felt Sunday off was good for business and for family life.

For quieter family dinners, the Corral choice was a restaurant with a large central dining room and several banquet rooms, Sven and Wong's. They were located more toward the middle

of the Corral mall. Dave Swenson and Lily Wong were a couple with now away-at-college kids. Sven and Wong offered Asian stir-fry with Scandinavian desserts for business lunches, family dinners, and weekend celebrations. The couple had combined standard Asian entrees and delicious Scandinavian desserts on their menu. They felt they had the best of both East and West to create a uniquely American cuisine. In addition, small plates included Asian savory baozi (meat-stuffed buns) and the opposite or Scandinavian sweet pastries. Western style sandwiches and Asian noodle soups were popular at lunch. Dinners included stir-fry and casseroles. However, the most popular way to experience Sven and Wong's was to order Asian stir-fry main courses family style, and end with the Scandinavian pies and pastries. Best of both. Yum.

Sven and Wong's Restaurant is where Jake and Stella as well as everyone else in the county, went for family birthdays, athletic team banquets, and church club gatherings. There was also take-out that was reasonable and delicious six days a week (closed on Mondays). The food was not truly Asian, and the desserts were not fancy French, however, for Sunnyside, Sven and Wong's provided a predictable destination for singles, couples, and families that didn't want to cook at home, and desired a quiet and peaceful lunch or dinner setting with friendly staff, but minus banter and fanfare. Minus alcohol, too.

In addition to the three restaurants, the Wild Mustang Corral had a sprinkling of small businesses in the semicircle. From the middle rose a singular tower, an office building with the Sunnyside Chamber of Commerce President occupying the penthouse or top floor of the six stories. The tower's other floors had various professional offices, and some spaces open for leasing and entrepreneurship.

Yes, the week had been normal at the Corral, save one hovering detail noted and eventually mentioned by the intern. On this particular Friday morning, manager Ellie, the lawyer owners' right hand in the café, had let herself and the intern in at 4:30 a.m. so they could open at 5 a.m. Once open, Ellie became occupied with the prep work for the day in their open kitchen behind the long serving counter at the front of the cafe. She also backed up Travis who ran the front counter and drive-through as barista. Travis kept an eye out for the steady coming and going of work-bound customers rushing in for their regular orders. In the traffic, Travis noted glamour appear and disappear. It was one of the Sunnyside High School Cheer Squad girls, rushing in the front door but slipping to the back offices in a desperate hurry. Quickly, she disappeared.

There was no real reason to observe this, but in an outpost where things are pretty much routine, Travis noticed. What made this Friday different, and the whole week different, was that each day at opening, a different lovely young lady from the Cheer Squad had slipped in and rushed to the back, but without a word.

By Friday, Travis knew the girls were going to see Stella, the lady lawyer owner. Usually, neither lawyer was in at five, when Ellie and Travis opened. On an ordinary day, Jake, the husband lawyer and partner, would show up at about eight for normal business hours. Stella would be getting their two children off to the local elementary school and come in even later. However, different this week, each day, Stella had entered quietly through the back door and gone into her back office for an appointment shortly after they opened, obviously having set a schedule with the Cheer Squad members ahead of time.

Why would five attractive and accomplished high school girls need lawyers? They had their whole lives ahead of them; it was obvious that they were not writing their wills. They were not ending marriages and needing divorce proceedings. They were not buying real estate with contracts to consider. They were not involved in a business. What kind of trouble or proceedings were their concern?

“Is anyone back there?” Travis turned around and asked Ellie as he poured another tall cup of coffee for a cabbie.

“Stella texted me to watch for her early client. I saw her car is parked at the back when I took out trash, so I assume she is in her office,” Ellie assured the intern.

Travis raised his eyebrows with curiosity. So, what was coming down in Sunnyside and why would students be seeking an attorney? What was up at Sunnyside High School?

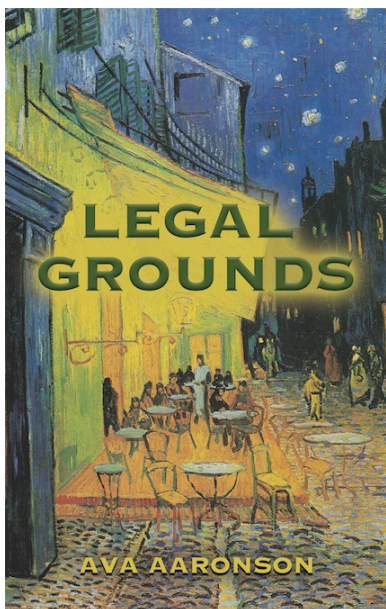
“Just checking,” Travis replied and refilled the dark roast machine with grounds to run another batch of coffee. “This is day five with a fifth girl, Allison, running in to see Stella for an early morning appointment. Usually Jake shows up first for their clients while Stella gets their kids to school. And, as a rule, there is neither lawyer here for clients at the 5 a.m. opening.”

Travis counted on his fingers, “Monday, it was Ashley. Tuesday, Claire. Wednesday, Megan showed up. Yesterday, I saw Emily rush back there, and now today, it’s Allison. I know this group. They are all seniors, and they cheer for the football team. You’ll see them at the game tonight, Ellie. Something is up,” Travis commented.

“The legal stuff is none of our business,” Ellie ended the conversation and focused on putting out pastries and sandwiches in the display case.

Both the intern Travis and the manager Ellie knew the legal affairs were none of their business, however, they observed this unusual legal crusade and wondered. They proceeded to think their own thoughts and keep it to themselves.

In truth, Ellie was also curious, and even more so than Travis. Ellie and her husband Bob had a daughter, their only child, at the high school. She made a brain note to check in later with her high school daughter about what was going on with the Cheer Squad and a lawyer - for five different girls - five star senior athletic and accomplished college preppies, the best of the best in the county. She decided to ask Cecile at home in the afternoon when her daughter returned from Robotics Club after school. Cecile was more techie than cheery, but in the small student body at Sunnyside, certainly she would know something. Her daughter might have the inside scoop of what was up with the Cheer Squad at Sunnyside High School – that required a lawyer.



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