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Piper Danes sat in the chambers of the Honorable Cody Wilcox, a judge who was known to strong-arm attorneys into plea deals one or both sides may not want. He worked to get cases out of his courtroom as fast as possible. The rumor was that he had irritable bowel syndrome and couldn't stay on the bench for extended periods.

The trial had been ongoing for five days, and Judge Wilcox grew less pleasant the longer it went on. He sat at his desk popping antacids as Piper checked the clock on her phone and realized she'd been in court for ten hours today.

As guardian ad litem, Piper was there for a different purpose from the prosecutor or defense attorney. She was the appointed guardian for a few of the victims. Under the Victims' Rights Act, the victims had a say in the plea deal and were entitled to an attorney to represent their interests.

Lawrence Shaw sat in a chair before the judge's desk in his Armani suit. His client, Richard Malone—a Harvard graduate who had swindled a group of vulnerable people out of millions—hadn't been brought back in chambers.

In the other chair was the prosecutor, a man in a simple jacket and slacks with a bad haircut who spoke plainly. The simple authenticity had resonated with the jury, and Piper knew Malone was going to be convicted.

The judge and Lawrence exchanged a glance, and she knew what it meant. Lawrence Shaw had a reputation for getting reduced sentences for his clients. The prosecutor and he had agreed on a deal of time served and no prison, but they needed Piper's approval, and so far she hadn't

seen anything to suggest the victims in this case would be satisfied with the plea deal. What she wanted was simple: Malone sells everything he owns to pay back the victims, and then spends five years in prison.

“He can’t do five years,” Lawrence said. “Agree with time served and he’ll pay back all the victims over his lifetime.”

The implicit threat was that if she didn’t back down, the victims wouldn’t get paid.

“I’m sure Mr. Malone can find the means to pay back the victims either way.” She knew it was true because he was accused of defrauding a little over \$7 million, and his home alone was probably worth that.

The judge sighed and looked uncomfortable, like it pained him to sit in a chair.

“Your Honor, he will die in prison! He’s not suited for an environment like that.”

The judge looked to Piper and said, “Ms. Danes, you are the only one in this room who feels this plea deal is against the interests of justice. Is there any way we can get this resolved? The trial is scheduled for another three weeks, and nobody seems to want it to go that long except you.”

She gave a forced smile of courtesy. “I think the victims would disagree with you, Your Honor.”

He looked angered for a moment and then turned to Lawrence as if to say *I tried*.

“Well,” the judge said, “however long this thing goes, we’re done for today. That jury’s about ready to revolt. But I want you to go out into that hall and see if you can resolve this.”

The judge rose with a groan and headed back to the courtroom. Piper, the prosecutor, and Lawrence came out of the judge’s chambers and went back along the clerk’s entrance. Lawrence put his hand on her arm, holding her in place, and began speaking, but stopped when she looked

down to his hand and then politely up to his face. He released her and said, "You're being unreasonable."

"Larry, I don't know how much he's paying you, but I'm sure it's more than adequate to cover the next three weeks of work. Just suck it up and do it."

"But there's no reason for this," he said angrily. "Cases this financially complex go right over a jury's head. You're banking on a conviction and it could easily be an acquittal."

"Then you have nothing to worry about, do you?" she said with a pleasant smile before turning away from him and going back to the courtroom.

The courtroom was massive, paneled wood with tables as old as the building itself. Piper went to a pew behind the prosecution table, and Lawrence joined his two associates at the defense table. Malone winked at her as she sat down. He had been smug the entire trial. He was handsome, and it was a problem, as some of the female jurors would engage with him with subtle smiles and looks. But the trial hadn't been going well for Malone. Victim after victim got up on the stand and tearfully told what he had said and done to get them to turn over their life savings to him.

The bailiff announced Judge Wilcox, who said to bring in the jury, and everybody rose to their feet.

"Be seated," he said. "Ladies and gentlemen, today has been a long one and I apologize, but we had some matters to discuss in private. We'll call it a night for now. Court will reconvene at eight tomorrow morning."

The judge got to his feet, and the bailiff said, "All rise."

Piper stood. Her back ached, her legs hurt, and her cramps felt like they were tearing her insides apart, but she didn't show it.

When the judge was out of earshot, she heard Lawrence speaking to his two associates. She couldn't make out a lot of it, but she did hear "She's on the rag today, boys."

Piper gathered her things into her satchel that she'd gotten as a gift from her grandmother after she'd graduated law school. Lawrence came up to her with the most pleasant voice he could muster and said, "No need to be out in the hall. Why don't we find somewhere for a late dinner and talk about it?"

She pulled the strap of the satchel over her shoulder. "Five years, Larry. Wilcox doesn't want to go against the victims. Malone has to take the deal. It's the only way and we both know it."

She began walking away from him and out of the courtroom. A few of the victims would come to the trial every day, but many of them were infirm and couldn't stay the entire time. One woman, Cleo Bell, always sat in the front. She was dying of leukemia and had to have oxygen. She had told Piper that the money that was stolen from her was for her funeral, so her children wouldn't have to pay for it.

As Piper got to the double doors leading out of the courtroom, Lawrence said behind her, "He'll take it," with a resignation as if he had just accepted a firing squad.

She had to suppress a grin and then turned to him and said, "Get this continued so he can get the money together. I want some of the victims paid first before he enters a plea. Especially Ms. Bell."

Lawrence nodded.

Piper saw Cleo Bell smile at her from the gallery seats, and she smiled back.

Before leaving, Piper looked to Malone at the defense table, who was staring at her with venom. She winked at him and then left the courtroom.

Her beat-up Dodge sat in the far reaches of the parking lot. It was well past nine, and the jury typically had their own parking spaces right next to the building to avoid accidental, or sometimes not so accidental, interactions with any attorneys. Empty parking spaces always gave her a shot of adrenaline, and she reached into her purse and took out her keys and held the largest one between her fingers like a small blade, though she doubted she could hurt someone with it.

The surface roads in Las Vegas were wet from a light rain and empty. It was dark enough that she could see the ever-glowing neon fires emanating from the Strip. She stopped at a fast-food joint and got a sandwich. They'd only been given fifteen minutes for lunch today, and all she had time for was some Tic Tacs. She then drove across town to the home she shared with her grandmother.

Lake Danes was a woman in her sixties who looked older than she was from a lifetime of hard living. She had raised Piper's mother and her two siblings by herself after her husband, Piper's grandfather, passed away from a genetic heart condition.

A twinge of guilt went through Piper as she thought about her grandmother taking Piper in at such a young age: it must've been a relief to see all the kids out of the house and finally have some time to herself, and then she had to adopt her granddaughter and start the process over again.

The home was flat and in front of a golf course, with no fence to separate them. The driveway had her grandmother's old Buick parked on it. Piper got out of her car. The home was always immaculate and smelled like apples from an air freshener that her grandmother had been using for decades.

After ensuring her grandmother was already asleep, Piper retreated to her own room. Overcome with exhaustion, she fell asleep instantly, not even managing to change clothes or brush her teeth.

Piper woke up the next morning with her neck even stiffer than it had been when she had gone to bed.

She got dressed in a gray suit with black pumps before running a brush through her hair. The tangled mess refused to do anything she wanted, so she pulled it back with an elastic instead.

The county's government services were mostly piled into Clark Place, a building meant for middle-of-the-road businesses but that had been bought by the government on the cheap and renovated to hold all the county services.

Piper took the elevators to the third floor and the guardian ad litem's office. It was a hive of activity, the buzz of conversation punctuated by the rhythmic tap of shoes on cheap floors and the rustle of endless paperwork.

Two types of attorneys were visible. Those destined for a weekend chained to their desks sat hunched in their cubicles, wearied by their relentless case files. Others, the lucky ones spared from weekend duty, exuded a lightness, their relief coming out in jokes and laughter.

Some states had contracted attorneys who handled the guardian ad litem duties, but here they had an established office with their own investigators for use on their cases and several paralegals.

Piper was a junior attorney, having been out of law school less than a year.

Tom Williams, her supervisor, who stuck his head out of his office when he heard her, said, "Piper, can we talk really quick?"

“Sure.”

She set her satchel down at the cubicle. The attorneys accurately called the clustered cubicles in the middle of the floor the Lawyer’s Dump because anyone without enough seniority to fight for an office was dumped there. The GAL’s budget was tight, and every penny had to be stretched. Piper didn’t mind. Being a guardian had some advantages that made up for the lack of funding and long hours.

Tom liked to say “The only difference between us and other attorneys is that judges *occasionally* listen to what we say.”

As the section chief over the junior GALs, Tom had a reputation for making people learn by throwing them in the fire. Piper herself, on her first day, was given a ward who was involved in a complex insurance fraud case with over twenty thousand pages of documents she would have to read. She didn’t know it at the time, but it was a test to see how she would handle it, because it would be impossible to read that many pages in time. Piper bribed the interns at the GAL’s office with beer to read all the documents after their normal shifts and write small one- or two-sentence summaries of the main points. From then on, Tom left her alone to do her job.

Tom’s office was a picture of how to randomly throw things into a small space and have them land in a somewhat workable order. Boxes of files were stacked against the walls, and the bookshelves were overflowing with law books covered in so much dust she guessed he hadn’t opened them for decades.

“You look exhausted,” he said.

“I am.”

She sat across from him, and he put one of his loafers up on the desk, pushing back a little and tilting his chair.

“You want some coffee?”

“I’m good, thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” he said as he took a drink out of a pale-blue mug. “So I got something and your name came up. Do you know much about Allen Bishop?”

Piper knew the name from as far back as her undergraduate classes in childhood development. Dr. Bishop had changed juvenile criminal justice theory with daring research where he lived with gangs in the inner cities of Chicago and documented their daily lives, eventually publishing his doctoral dissertation on how to improve the handling of children in the criminal justice system.

His theory was simple but powerful: When kids are labeled as “criminals” at a young age, they start to believe it themselves. It’s like they look in a mirror, and all they can see is the “bad kid” label that’s been put on them. Each crime they commit, each punishment they get, makes them believe in that label even more. If you want to stop future crime, he said, make sure that kids don’t feel like criminals.

This idea caused a big stir in the legal world. Some people thought it was a game changer, while others thought it was too simple. But everyone agreed that it made them think about how the criminal justice system was failing these kids, turning them into the very criminals it was trying to prevent.

“I remember his studies from several classes, yeah.”

Tom nodded. “It changed juvenile procedure. Started making people think about how kids are different from adults. My undergrad was in sociology, and there was an entire course devoted to him.”

She waited patiently for him to speak, hoping he would get to the point.

“Anyway, there’s a new federal grant to test some of Bishop’s theories. He thinks that everyone in the juvenile system—the guardian ad litem, juvenile court judge, police, the social workers and probation officers—all working together from the beginning of the case with the child produces better outcomes and less recidivism. Kind of pie in the sky if you ask me, but the government certainly wastes money on stupider things.”

Tom ran his hand over his desk, wiping away a large swath of dust from the top.

“They’re going to try the grant out with Judge Dawson. Know her?”

“No.”

“You haven’t heard anything about her?”

“I don’t listen to gossip.”

He nodded. “I’ll just tell you then. She’s smart,” he said, taking a sip out of his mug like he was drinking a fine wine. “Like crazy smart. She got her medical degree and a JD jointly and was like a surgeon or something. I guess career change and then boom, becomes a judge. Don’t you hate people like that?”

“Completely.”

“Me too.” He drank down more coffee. “She has some odd rumors floating around, though.”

“Like what?”

“Oh no, I’m not spreading rumors about a judge. You go ask the judge’s clerks like everybody else.”

She grinned. “Not to be rude, but I have a lot to do, Tom. What is this about?”

“The judge wants a GAL for the grant. She called me personally and asked, and when a judge asks you for a favor, you do it. I think with your education and background you’d be a great fit. Cara would be good, too, if you don’t want it.”

“I’m pretty swamped right now. I’m not sure I should put anything else on my plate.”

“I’ll spread your stuff around. This would be full time for a few months, I would guess. I dunno, if you want some diversity on your CV or something, this would be a good opportunity.”

“I’ll need to think about it.”

“Don’t think too long.”

She nodded and rose to leave.

“She might’ve killed her husband,” Tom said before she was out of earshot.

“She what?”

“That’s the gossip that your delicate ears refuse to listen to. Her husband committed suicide, but the rumor is it wasn’t, if you know what I mean.”

She nodded, unsure what exactly to say to that. “Just let me check my cases and I’ll let you know.”

“You do that. But don’t take too long. She wants someone by Monday morning.”