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Palshaw

English IV-6

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Until Proven Guilty

A man sat on the curb on the corner of Fifth and Chelsea looking at the ground between his bent knees, a thin, gray blanket wrapped around his shoulders. It was a typically busy street, and on that day, the crowds were concentrated around the man, leaving the right side of the road empty until an occasional pedestrian used it to walk around the onlookers. The constant hum of people trying to make sense of what they had just witnessed forced the persistent, piercing rhythm of sirens into the background. It was only when the sirens were turned off that the petite woman realized how loud they really were. The excitement of the crowd lasted but ten minutes. Bystanders began to retreat because police lines blocked their view or perhaps because what they saw beyond the yellow caution tape was no longer the nail-biting, on-the-edge-of-your-seat action that it once was. It was the resolution.

There were few clouds that day and the black asphalt was hot, but a police officer extended his arm waving another blanket by the man’s shoulder, tilted his head, and lifted his eyebrows. The man didn’t move his eyes from the ground.

“Can I call someone to come get you?” the officer said lowering his arm and handing the blanket back to the other man in uniform. Ambulances and police cars had started to drive off and only one medic and one officer remained.

The man cleared his throat, opened his mouth, and then cleared it again, ran a shaking hand through what was left of his hair, and let his arm drop back down by his knee, still looking at the ground. “No.”

Turning around, the officer shrugged at the medic, returned to his patrol car, and drove off, the ambulance not far behind, revealing the woman. She wore a black skirt suit and black heels. Her hair was pulled into a tight knot on the top of her head, secured with a pearl clasp that aged her youthful face. A black briefcase lay by her side, the bottom lining up with the hem of her skirt just above her knees. She swallowed and rubbed her lips together, adjusted the already perfect button on her blazer, and walked toward the man.

She had a sort of confidence that seemed feigned like she had taken a class on it and aced it, yet was still just acting. She had fooled the partners at Sherman Boone and countless clients and even herself sometimes. She intended to do the same now.

“Sir?” She stuck out her hand, hunching over to meet the sitting man’s height. “My name is Lori Mills. I’m a lawyer with Sherman Boone and Associates.” She waved her extended arm to get his attention and smiled when he looked at her. “Sir, I’d like to represent you.”

“Represent me?” A crease appeared between the man’s eyebrows, adding to the maze of lines mapping his face.

“Yes, sir. You need a lawyer.”

“I haven’t been arrested.”

The young lawyer lowered her hand and quietly sighed. “I think you will be.”

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*“Lori, listen, you’re bright, you work hard, and jurors love a pretty face and great legs, but if you’re ever gonna make partner, you need this case.” Matthew Douglas knew about high-profile cases, and he knew how to win them. After getting a guilty man acquitted, Douglas made partner, and twenty years later, expected Lori to do the same.*

*“The man hasn’t even been arrested yet.”*

*“Lori, he’s the prime suspect for the murder of his wife, and the lab results come in Monday. He’s gonna get arrested, and you gotta get there before one of the charming pricks from Parker, James, and Rutledge grabs him.”*

*The two sat at the same end of a conference table made for thirty. Douglas at the head and Lori next to him in dark leather chairs. Glass walls stretched fifteen feet on all sides revealing the sparkling blue bay and the skyscrapers beyond. It was a view that distracted every new attorney, and it was used to challenge the concentration of all junior associates.*

*Douglas turned his head to the door and waved in the young intern knocking. She opened the door but didn’t enter.*

*“Please excuse me, but have you seen the news?”*

*Lori pointed the remote at the TV positioned against the glass across from them. A reporter was pushing through a crowd on the corner of Fifth and Chelsea, heading toward a truck on the side of the road and a startled man standing next to it. The bottom of the picture had a running caption reporting that the prime suspect in the Susanna Spencer homicide jumped in front of a truck in an attempted suicide.*

*Douglas looked at Lori whose eyes lingered on the screen before turning to face him.*

*“Looks like this case just got a whole lot more interesting.”*

*Lori grabbed her briefcase, looked at Douglas with raised eyebrows and a slight smile, and followed the intern out the door.*

*“Should I just start calling you partner now?” Douglas yelled as he watched Lori leave.*

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“Ms. Mills, I don’t have money for a lawyer from Sherman whatever-you-said anyway.”

Lori gently placed her briefcase on the sidewalk and sat next to the man. “Mr. Spencer, I would do this pro bono. It wouldn’t cost you a dime.”

The man looked around at the remaining onlookers and reporters, took a breathe, and nodded. “Thank you.”

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“Matt, these lab results didn’t just give the authorities probable cause for an arrest, they’re gonna give the state proof beyond a reasonable doubt,” Lori exhaled letting out an ironic laugh, took the phone off speaker and held it to her ear, “my client’s guilty.”

“What do they have?”

She sighed with exasperation, almost chuckling, “my client’s fingerprints on the murder weapon.”

“When you win an easy case, you get a pat on the back. When you win a case like this, you make partner.”

“Yeah, and how do I win this?”

“You fuck up the prosecution’s case.”

\* \* \*

Lori pulled up to a brick building off of Hatton St. and parked in front. She ran inside holding her briefcase over her head to block the rain.

“Aren’t you a ray of sunshine breaking through these clouds!” A fat man behind a desk in the entry perked up as she entered the building, running his hand across his bald head.

Lori leaned on his desk and smiled. “I gotta see the Spencer homicide evidence.”

The fat man’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me your representing that murderer, Lori.”

“Innocent until proven guilty, Joe.” She extended her hand and smirked.

The man let out a hearty laugh and handed her a key. “Row D, shelf 78. Don’t go touching anything and getting me fired now!”

The evidence room looked like the libraries Lori studied in at law school, shelved with thousands of bags of items instead of thousand-page books from ceiling to floor. She found the section labeled “SUSANNA SPENCER HOMICIDE.”

Seventeen bags. Seventeen reasons to convict her client were lined up neatly on shelf 78, in clear zipped bags with red seals. She studied them. Checking if she was alone, Lori pulled out a piece of cloth from her coat pocket and wrapped it around her hand. She filed her fingers through each bag looking for anything, for reasonable doubt. At bag eight she stopped and crouched down, eye level with the shelf. She picked it up off the shelf, and examined every inch of it. As she turned over the knife, the tag tied around the blade came into view.

Her lips parted and eyes widened.

Running back down to the front desk, she waved to Joe and left, the door swinging behind her.

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Lori’s apartment was sparse in decorations. She had been there three years and had never really moved in. In the corner of her kitchen was a makeshift office about the size of a walk-in closet, complete with a desk, a chair, and a filing cabinet. Papers laid on top of the cabinet rather than inside. Sitting down at her desk, she pulled out her phone, growing impatient after the first ring.

“It’s not the knife.” She didn’t wait for him to greet her once the ringing ceased.

Douglas didn’t respond, but Lori could hear him taking in air and then releasing, like he was going to.

She had begun walking around her quasi-office and had unbuttoned her coat. “Matt, the knife in evidence isn’t the murder weapon or the murder weapon isn’t what the prosecution says it is or the--”

“Lori, what did you find?” Douglas knew how to stay calm, and he knew how to reason. He was a damn good lawyer.

Lori slipped off her heels, sinking about four and a half inches, curled in her toes then released. “I went to the evidence room. Matt, it’s not the knife that the prosecution says it is. It’s an eight inch blade, model DM076. I’m looking at the papers now. The state’s saying it’s six inches, model DM083.”

“No judge is gonna convict when reasonable doubt is painted all over the weapon. You just won your first murder, partner.”

Lori leaned into the edge of the desk and bit her lip, releasing her hold as she exhaled.“My client’s fingerprints are also painted all over the weapon. Eight inches or six inches, he killed her.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re gonna make the prosecution look like fools. Fucking up the murder weapon? Lori, they can’t prove shit.” He didn’t miss a beat.

“If the prosecution ever finds out, they can amend their papers.”

“Lori, this is the only thing keeping your client from prison.”

“What, so now I go get this murderer off?”

“No, Lori, you go win a case.” He hung up.

She threw her phone across the desk and stood up. She ran her fingers through her hair, shutting her eyes, before walking to the kitchen sink. Her hands pressed onto the side of the sink, elbows making right angles. There was a tree outside of the window above the sink and through the branches, another apartment building, but now, she could see only her reflection and stared for a moment. Her face was as clenched as her body, and when she couldn’t look any longer, she rubbed her eyes with dampened hands, smearing her perfect eyeliner.

“Lori, the hell are you gonna do?” She spoke under her breathe in a mumble, but could hear herself.

Lori was a nickname that her dad had given her a few years ago. More than just a few, actually, it was about twenty-five years ago. Her name was Loretta, but no five-year-old could pull off Loretta. When she was old enough to ask, her dad said it was for when she was older and would need to demand respect, but she could be Lori until then. She thought she’d go back to Loretta when she got accepted to Stanford, and then she thought it’d be when she went to Boston Law, then joined the firm, then had her first trial. She swore she would never say Lori to a judge.

She still wasn’t Loretta. It wasn’t until law school that she wondered why her name needed to *sound* like she deserved respect. Something wasn’t right about relying on a name for that, and she didn’t think she had to. Her appearance was respectable, her career was respectable, *she* was respectable-- until she began withholding information that would convict a murderer, let alone represent one.

She grabbed her phone from the end of the desk again and dialed the number by heart.

“Are we going out to celebrate?” Douglas’s voice was resonate through the phone.

“Take the case.”

“Lori, stop.”

*“Matt, he killed her, and I’m gonna win because they couldn’t keep their fucking evidence straight!”* She was yelling at a phone, spit building up at the corners of her mouth as she filled the apartment with her voice.

“Lori, you need to stop. This is the game.”

“It’s not a fucking game.”

“Murders get representation, too. Innocent until proven guilty, madame lawyer?”

She thought he could almost hear her teeth grinding. Her emotions became a ball in her throat and a million needles were poking at the backs of her eyes. “Take the case. I’m not doing this.”

“Then I suggest you print out some resumés. And don’t you dare tell the prosecution what you know.” His voice was strong, emotionless.

“God knows you could still win even if I do.”

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Lori gripped the steering wheel with both hands, moving one only to swipe away a strand of hair that the wind had blown into her eyes through the four open windows. Her vision was blurred by the agony building up in her eyes. She pulled up to an intersection and stopped. A note laying in the passenger seat read “the knife’s eight inches not six.” Tapping her thumb on the wheel, Lori looked down at the note next to her then looked away before taking a left at the crossroads.