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“Are the People ready for trial, Ms. Cooper?” Judge Fleming took off her glasses and pointed them in my direction.

I was slower than usual to get to my feet, stalling for time as I waited for another prosecutor from my office to walk into court with information that would determine my answer.

“Actually, Your Honor, I’d be grateful if you would put this matter over until tomorrow.”

“That wasn’t your attitude yesterday when you were urging me—pushing me, actually—to clear my calendar so we could start jury selection this afternoon.”

“I’m sorry, Judge. Something was brought to my attention this morning and I’m trying to ascertain the truth of the facts before I move the case to trial.” I started the sentence by facing the court but had turned my head to the back of the room, trying to will the door to open.

Gino Moretti could barely suppress a smile, sensing my vulnerability. “We’re ready to proceed, Judge. My client is eager to get on with clearing his good name,” my adversary said. “Alex has twisted her neck so many times this afternoon that I figure she’s either looking over her shoulder for a stalker, or she’s waiting until the guys in

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the press room get wind that she's about to start performing for them.”

“Cut me a break, Gino,” I said, turning my attention back to the bench.

“Coop hates playing to an empty house, Judge.”

Judge Fleming knew that a convicted rapist was in fact stalking me, and had been since his escape from a psych facility months earlier. Raymond Tanner was not actually on my mind in the secure surrounds of her courtroom, but he'd been a tremendous source of anxiety since he had threatened my life in August.

“What did you say about your client's good name?” Fleming asked, replacing her glasses and scrolling through the rap sheet attached to the arraignment papers in her file.

“Just that the sooner he can clear himself of these ridiculous charges—”

Fleming didn't brook nonsense in her courtroom. “Antonio Carlito Estevez. Nice enough name. Going to be pretty hard to clear it, though, Mr. Moretti, no matter what happens with this case. Looks like nine misdemeanor convictions, a murder rap that he beat—”

“He was innocent, Your Honor. He didn't beat anything.”

“A conviction for manslaughter and—”

“That was a YO, Judge.”

“The fact that he was a youthful offender doesn't change much, Moretti. Just meant he wasn't a predicate felon when a jury found him guilty of second-degree assault four years ago. It explains why he did such a short stint for such a serious crime.”

Antonio Estevez gave Janet Fleming his iciest stare. But she met it head-on and returned it with an equally frigid gaze. It was a look I had seen many times on the face of this former Legal Aid attorney who'd been appointed to the bench a decade earlier. She was tougher on perps than most judges who'd come up as assistant district attorneys.

“Can we bring the panel in, Your Honor?” Moretti asked.

“Have you and Ms. Cooper exhausted the possibility of a plea for Mr. Estevez?”

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"The only offer is a plea to the charge," I said.

The top count of the indictment was Sex Trafficking, a crime—added to the New York State Penal Law less than a decade ago—with a maximum penalty of twenty-five years, the same level of punishment as first-degree rape.

"You like the cold, Mr. Estevez?" Fleming asked, waving her right hand at the stenographer, telling her to go off the record and stop recording the proceedings.

"You don't have to answer that," Moretti said, catching the move.

"'Scuse me?" Estevez cocked his head and smiled at the judge.

"I see you're born in the Dominican Republic, moved to Miami, which is where you served time."

"Yes, ma'am."

Gino Moretti leaned over and whispered into his client's ear. Estevez brushed him away.

"Dannemora's where you're going to end up, if Ms. Cooper is right," Fleming said. "Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora—not that they correct many of the guys I send there."

"Let's have this on the record, Judge," Moretti said, rising to his feet and tapping his pen on the old oak counsel table.

Janet Fleming shook her head at the stenographer. "I'm just trying to make progress before the jury panel gets here, Gino. Trying to talk plea. Get a disposition."

"Not happening, I promise you. Ms. Cooper's got her holier-than-thou posture going on."

Fleming leaned in and talked straight at Estevez. "They don't call that prison Siberia for nothing, Antonio. Rubs right up against the Canadian border. I get a chill just thinking about you being holed up there till you're fifty years old."

"I'm glad you're thinking about me, Judge, is all I got to say," the defendant said, almost leering at her. "I didn't do nothing wrong."

"Can we please—?" The conversation was going in a bad direction.

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“Stay seated, Ms. Cooper,” Fleming said, holding her arm out toward me. “Clinton is full up with guys who didn’t do nothing wrong, Antonio. It’s a helluva lot warmer in Shawangunk. They have special classes for men like you.”

The prison in Shawangunk was one of the few with a sex offender program, but Estevez—who was also charged with physical assault—had refused all plea discussions that involved accepting sex offender status, and I wasn’t caving to anything less.

“What you know about men like me?” Estevez asked, jabbing his finger in the air, toward the judge. The smile disappeared and a hint of his temper was about to boil to the surface.

Gino Moretti grabbed his client’s arm and flattened it on counsel table.

“Ms. Cooper says you abuse women,” Fleming went on, flipping through the eight-count indictment. “She says you take pimping to a new level.”

“I’m on the record now, Your Honor,” I said, standing up to address the court. “What *I* say has no relevance. Those are the charges against Mr. Estevez. I get your point, Judge. I’ll move the case to trial.”

“She don’t know shit about me,” Estevez said, now focusing his anger on me as the court officers moved closer to surround him. “I got a wife, I got a baby—”

“No more, Antonio,” Moretti said to him. “Keep your mouth shut.”

“You just wait and see if that bitch who ran her mouth shows up to testify. She took back everything she said about me. The lady DA knows that.”

Janet Fleming stuck her glasses on top of her head. “So you’re stalling this operation till you figure out whether you’ve got a witness or not, Ms. Cooper? Any truth to that rumor?”

It wasn’t unusual for victims who’d been threatened by a perp to change their minds about their willingness to testify in open court by the time the case came to trial. Tiffany Glover had texted me

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three days ago that she no longer wanted to cooperate, but just yesterday Mercer Wallace—a detective from the Special Victims Squad and one of my closest friends—found her and brought her to my office.

“Ms. Glover will be here when we need her.”

“Perhaps she recanted her recantation, Judge,” Moretti said, one hand on his client’s shoulder, snickering at me across the aisle.

“Which will make your cross even more devastating than I’ve been prepping for,” I said to Moretti, not loud enough for the judge to hear. “The threats didn’t work, Gino. Just FYI.”

“What did you say, Ms. Cooper?” Fleming cupped her hand to her ear.

“I apologize, Your Honor. I had forgotten to tell Gino something I wanted him to know before we got started.”

My adversary and I went back a long way together. I was sure he was aware that Estevez had sent threats to his former girlfriend through someone who had visited him at Rikers Island, but I didn’t want to burn Moretti by putting that on the record.

“Did I hear the word *threat*?” Fleming asked.

“Ms. Cooper couldn’t help herself, Judge,” Moretti said. “She’s been threatening to have her favorite detectives break my legs if I show her up in the courtroom. Looks like I’m in for the big hurt. That’s all that was.”

Fleming’s scowl suggested she didn’t believe Moretti. “Do you want to move the case, Ms. Cooper?”

“The People are ready for trial,” I said.

“The defense is ready.”

Fleming nodded to the captain of the court officers. “I’ve got a panel of a hundred and fifty prospective jurors waiting in the hallway. Any other housekeeping before I bring them in?”

Gino Moretti and I both shook our heads.

I settled into my chair, resisting the opportunity to turn and look over the dozens of citizens who had responded to their jury summons. There would be no more than ten or so in business

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clothes, another thirty in casual dress, and the majority wearing gear so sloppy and threadbare—and often so odorous—that it appeared court proceedings had lost all the dignity in which they had been cloaked for centuries.

Moretti had turned his chair almost a hundred eighty degrees, less for the purpose of sizing up the jury pool than for trying to charm them with a welcoming grin, a cheesy suggestion that he wouldn't be seated next to anyone except an innocent man.

“Nothing to eat or drink in the courtroom,” the captain called out from the railing behind me. “Except for water. All newspapers and materials must be put away. Turn off your cell phones and devices. No e-mailing, calling, or texting. Take your seats, please.”

Moretti stood up and positioned himself behind Antonio Estevez, using the moment to give him a friendly pat on the back, leaning to whisper into his ear. The faked intimacy would feed jurors the idea that my adversary really liked his client—touched him and talked to him and shared a secret from the rest of us. He'd probably just told the experienced criminal to keep his mouth shut from this moment on and resist the temptation to do anything stupid in front of the people who would decide his fate.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Janet Fleming. I'm a justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, presiding in Part 53 of the criminal term.”

The judge rose, circled her chair, and leaned on its high leather back as she addressed the prospective jurors. She compensated for her short stature by wearing stiletto heels, which got everyone's attention whenever she walked on the elevated wooden platform that held the bench. Fleming pulled back one side of her black robe—placing her hand on her hip—to make sure the group saw the colorful dress that clung to the outline of her body.

I glanced at my watch. Almost three o'clock and I'd had no word from anyone in my office. Fleming was going to steamroll forward with selection. Jeopardy would not attach until the twelfth juror was sworn in, but that could happen by noon tomorrow.

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I zoned out on the judge's introductory remarks and came back to the case at hand only when she told the group that her clerk would now read the names of prospective jurors to take their seats in the jury box.

The clerk cranked the handle of the metal cylinder on the corner of her desk. The stub of each summons had been placed inside, and all were mixed together as they rolled over and over again. She let go of the handle, reached in, and removed a piece of paper, calling the name of the first individual and following it with thirteen others—which filled even the seats allotted for two alternates.

The usual commotion ensued. Those who had just settled into the long pews and heard their names announced picked up their backpacks and tote bags and scuttled past their neighbors to get to the center aisle and head for the jury box.

A middle-aged woman carrying four shopping bags and dressed for anything but success tried to detour away from the path set by the court officers to approach the bench. One of them put his arm out to stop her.

“But I have to tell the judge something.”

“I'll take you in turn, madam,” Fleming called out in her sternest voice. She liked to keep tight control of her courtroom.

“But I don't want to say what I'm going to say to you in public,” the woman whined.

“I'll give you the opportunity to talk to us privately. Do as we tell you for now.”

The woman reluctantly trudged to the box and took her seat in the number eight position.

Fleming began her general jury instructions. She introduced Gino and me, directing each of us to stand and spin around so that everyone in the room could see us.

She told them that the indictment contained eight counts, but that it was just a piece of paper, and that the defendant's innocence was presumed at this point.

I could hear juror number eight murmur to the group, “Where

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there's smoke, there's fire. That's what an indictment means." I assumed that she was on a mission to get herself excused and knew exactly which buttons to push.

"The top count with which Mr. Estevez is charged," Fleming continued, "is Section 230.34 of the Penal Law: Sex Trafficking."

Prospective juror number eight gasped audibly and slumped down in her seat. "Oh, my God. I knew he looked like a pervert. He oughta get the chair."

This time, Gino Moretti heard her.

"Judge Fleming, I'd like to approach the bench with Ms. Cooper."

He reached there before I could push back and get to my feet.

"What is it with you, Moretti?" the judge asked, cupping her hand over her mouth so the jurors couldn't hear her.

"You've got a whack job in the box and she's going to poison the well if you don't remove her right now," he said. "Didn't you hear her?"

He repeated the second statement she made and I filled in the first.

Fleming slammed her gavel on the desktop. "The lady in the number eight seat, you're excused."

"Who, me? But I want to see you, Your Honor. I want to tell you what my issue is."

"Just follow the court officer. Before you wind up with a bigger problem than you think you have now. And zip your mouth while you're on your way out."

Fleming took the summons stub from the clerk, looked at the name, and ordered her to have the woman removed from all future service.

"You ladies and gentlemen in the audience, raise your hand if you heard anything that woman said," the judge said.

Not one hand went up.

"Those of you in the jury box," she said, waving her glasses back and forth over the two rows of stunned spectators who had been within earshot of the woman, "you're all excused with my gratitude. See you in six years."

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Before they could gather their belongings and follow the crazy lady out of the room, the heavy doors creaked open again.

"You caught a break, Alex," Fleming said to me. "Did you coach her? Is she part of your stalling-for-time routine?"

"Beyond my doing, Your Honor, but I like her thinking."

"Well, speak of the devil," Moretti said. "Detective Michael Chapman, Manhattan North Homicide. We got a body I don't know about?"

I spun around and saw Mike standing at the back of the large room. He was holding the door open for the exiting line of prospective jurors.

"Speak of what?" Fleming asked.

"I told you Alex had detectives lined up to break my legs. Seems not to be an idle threat if she's got Chapman on board."

"Did your man Estevez kill somebody?" the judge said to Moretti as she motioned to Mike to approach the bench.

"Chapman has nothing to do with this case," I said. "I have no idea why he's here."

"Don't get flustered, Alex," Moretti said to me. "I think we all have a good idea why he's here, or haven't you heard, Judge Fleming?"

"Can we take a break, Your Honor?" I asked. "I can assure you it's nothing personal."

"Ten-minute recess, ladies and gentlemen. You're not to leave this room, but you're free to check your messages and talk among yourselves," Fleming said. Then she snapped at the captain as she stepped down from the bench. "Make Mr. Estevez comfortable in his office."

The fact that any defendant on trial was a prisoner at Rikers Island was supposed to be withheld from the jury. They dressed in civilian clothes, and but for being escorted back to the holding pen behind the courtroom surrounded by four armed men, most jurors would have to guess the fact that Estevez was actually incarcerated.

"Let's see what Chapman's got," Fleming said. "We'll go to my robing room."

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“Don’t you have a *disrobing* room for them?” Moretti asked.

I walked ahead of Fleming and Moretti, into the short hallway that connected her office to the courtroom. Mike caught up with us, offering apologies to the judge, greeting Moretti and me, and closing the door behind him.

“Sorry to break up your trial, Judge. Commissioner Scully asked me to come over to deliver the news to Ms. Cooper face-to-face. Let you know there’ll be a passel of reporters swarming around her when she leaves your courtroom.”

“I have no intention of letting her leave till the close of business, Mr. Chapman. Now, what’s the story?”

My heart was racing. I couldn’t make a connection between Mike and this defendant. I couldn’t think of a reason for Mike to interrupt the middle of my working day, especially since our relationship had now become an intimate one. I was embarrassed by his presence.

“Bad news first. We had an attempted murder early this morning. Rape and stabbing of a teenager in Riverside Park. Likely to die when I got the call, but she seems to be coming around.”

“You’re not getting Ms. Cooper on this one,” Fleming said.

“Not a problem,” I said, avoiding eye contact with both Mike Chapman and the judge. “He’s not here for me. I had a call on this case at nine A.M., before I knew there was anyone in custody, and assigned it to Marissa Bourges.”

Bourges was one of the best lawyers in my unit.

“The commissioner wanted me to deliver good news for a change, and make a plan with the judge about the media. We nailed the bastard who did the girl in the park an hour ago, Coop. It’s Raymond Tanner. You’re out of harm’s way.”