

ONE

“Back from the dead, are you Ms. Cooper?” the judge bellowed from the bench as I let the courtroom door close behind me.

I forced a smile and walked to the front row, taking a seat next to Helen Wyler, one of the young lawyers in the Sex Crimes Prosecution Unit.

“What’s the matter?” Judge Corliss asked. “Cat got your tongue?”

There were only twenty people in the large room. There was the law secretary assigned to Corliss, who was sitting beside him, scribbling notes in her log; the clerk, who was at his desk to the left, pretending to fumble with the day’s calendar; the stenographer, who had rested his hands at his side when Corliss started to yell; a defense attorney sitting at counsel table, looking over his shoulder and laughing at me; and the defendant himself—on trial for first-degree rape—fixated on the pretty face of the young law secretary who was working with the judge. The others, except for the jury and my colleague, Helen, had probably been corralled by the defense attorney to pretend to be family members interested in the outcome of the trial.

I raised my hands to my sides, palms up, and just shrugged at Corliss.

“Looks like I lose my bet, Alexandra,” the judge said, standing up on his raised platform and pulling back his black gown—hands on his hips—expecting everyone would admire his fit torso and his bespoke shirt with monogrammed cuffs. “You’re going to cost me fifty bucks.”

“I’m so sorry, Alex,” Helen said, leaning closer to me as she whispered. “I didn’t want to bother you on your second day back in the office, but Corliss is totally trying to steamroll over me and I don’t have the experience to stand up to him.”

“Pay attention to me,” Corliss said to me. “Not your sidekick. Ms. Wyler will get it right one

of these days, with or without your help.”

Now the defendant’s family was engaged, too, trying to figure out who I was and why the judge was spending time and energy on me.

“Fifty large, Alexandra. I bet three of the other judges in the lunchroom you’d never set foot in this building again.”

I poked Helen in the side so that she would get to her feet and address Corliss from her proper place, within the well of the courtroom.

She stood and pushed through the low wooden gate, taking her place at counsel table.

“May I have ten minutes with Ms. Cooper?” she asked.

The defendant—a serial rapist who specialized in attacking teenagers—put his head in his hands and groaned.

“You can have ten, Ms. Wyler,” Corliss said, “so long as I get fifteen.”

“The witness room is empty, Your Honor,” Helen said. “We’ll just go in there.”

“I’m first,” Corliss said. He motioned to me with his forefinger, telling me to approach him so we could have a private conversation. “And you’ll stay right where you are, Ms. Wyler.”

I ignored his summons and walked to the prosecution table, which was stacked high with trial folders and papers. Helen stepped back briskly, as though moving away from an out-of-control car coming in her direction.

“Why the silent treatment, Alexandra?” Corliss asked, taking his seat again.

I turned to the stenographer who had recorded the testimony at several of my trials. “Lenny, let’s go on the record, please.”

“Who’s giving the orders in here? Somebody make you a judge while I wasn’t looking?” Corliss asked. “Lenny, why don’t you go help yourself to a cup of coffee?”

When Lenny stood up to leave the room, I turned my back to the bench and started to retrace my steps.

“Whoa, whoa!” Corliss said. “Let’s slow this down, Alexandra.”

Raymond Santiago looked up, leaning over past his lawyer to check out the minor commotion. His right hand moved instinctively to his groin, where he seemed to like to keep it most of the time, when he wasn't stalking his victims. What Santiago's lawyer referred to as his client's hypersexuality was likely to be on constant display for the jury.

I swiveled again. "I'm happy to talk to you, Your Honor," I said. "I want everything we say to be on the record. That's why I didn't answer when you first called out to me."

"Stick around, Lenny," Judge Corliss said, motioning to the stenographer to sit. "Ms. Cooper wants on the record, we'll give her on the record. Like I was saying, she's just back from—"

"I wasn't dead, Your Honor," I said, smiling at him. "Sorry to disappoint, but I wasn't even on life support."

The Honorable Bud Corliss liked to bully young assistants like Helen Wyler. He would shut down the stenographer and launch verbal arrows at the prosecutors, each one tipped with a poisonous comment about his or her skills. Sometimes, if his target was an attractive young woman, he'd add a remark about her anatomy. Then, if she chose to complain to a superior about the comment, there were no traces of Corliss's bad behavior in the transcript.

"I guess you really dodged a bullet, in the most literal sense," he said, sitting in his high-back leather chair and adjusting his gold cufflinks. "I mean, the night your late lamented boss was shot in the head just a few feet away from you—dodging *that* bullet."

This was a conversation I didn't want to have in front of strangers—no less a perp charged with seventeen counts of rape and aggravated sexual assault.

"Strike that word *lamented*," Corliss said to Lenny, editing his own remarks. "Not everybody got broken up about the forced retirement of Paul Battaglia after a few too many terms in office, did they Alexandra?"

"The district attorney mentored me, Your Honor," I said. "He put me in charge of the Special Victims Bureau a dozen years ago. I had nothing but respect for the man."

"Let me ask you something," he said, leaning forward and putting both elbows on his blotter.

“I have a few questions about what happened that—”

“Judge Corliss, this is neither the time nor place,” I said. “You’ve got jurors waiting for the testimony to resume, my colleague is anxious to complete the People’s case by the end of the week, and the defendant—well . . .”

“What about him?”

“Mr. Santiago probably needs to get some medical attention for that itch in his groin he keeps scratching throughout our conversation,” I said. “This might be a good time to give him a short restroom break and throw him some calamine lotion before I have Ms. Wyler add in a count of masturbating in a public place.”

“Good to know you haven’t lost your sense of humor, Alexandra,” Corliss said, as Santiago’s inexperienced court-appointed lawyer struggled to find grounds for an objection. “Ten-minute break, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s clear the courtroom.”

Court officers handcuffed the prisoner and took him out to the holding pen that serviced the thirteenth floor trial rooms. His family—impervious to my comments—wandered out behind us into the large corridor that ran the entire length of the enormous building.

I sat at counsel table with Helen Wyler. “What do you need?”

“I’ve made a terrible mistake, Alex,” she said. “I don’t think I’ll get my first two victims back here if Corliss declares a mistrial.”

“What have you done?” I asked.

“The fifteen-year-old who testified yesterday—the one who was raped on the rooftop at Taft Houses?” Helen said.

“Yes, I remember.” I knew the case well. Helen had indicted it before my leave had started almost three months earlier—after an incident that was unrelated to the murder of the district attorney.

“On cross this morning, she admitted texting me six or seven times before the trial began,” Helen said, slouching lower in her chair.

“Did she?”

“Yeah. Yeah, she did.”

“But you didn’t turn the texts over to the defense?”

I could see Corliss out of the corner of my eyes, pacing back and forth, trying to catch a fragment of our conversation.

“The texts weren’t significant to the case, Alex,” Helen said to me, stopping to bite her lip. “Graciela was asking if she had to see Santiago in the courtroom and about how terrified she was to be within twenty feet of him. That kind of stuff.”

The perp had grabbed the girl as she got off an elevator to go to her home in the projects, holding a knife to her neck to force her to the roof where he raped her repeatedly for almost two hours.

“That kind of stuff, as you call it,” I said, as calmly as I could, “is still Rosario Material. The defense is entitled to every one of those texts, Helen. You know that as well as I do.”

“They got away from me,” she said. “They were coming in at all hours of the night and somehow they just got away from me.”

“So you didn’t print them out?” I asked. “You didn’t save them?”

“Graceila’s e-mails, yes. The defense has them all. Her texts—well, I just forgot.”

The New York Court of Appeals had mandated the disclosure of all a prosecution witness’s prior recorded statements in a ruling in the Rosario case, many decades ago. Each new form of social media ratcheted up the number of ways a nervous witness could communicate.

“Corliss knows?” I asked.

“Yes, because of her answers on cross,” Helen said. “He’s threatening to strike all of Graciela’s testimony. Maybe even declare a mistrial. I’m screwed if he does that. She’ll never go through this again.”

“How much time has he given you?”

“Until tomorrow morning,” Helen said, avoiding eye contact with me and lifting her head to

stare at the light fixtures on the ceiling. “But that won’t help because they don’t exist. I deleted them.”

“Have you tried TARU?” I asked, putting my hand on hers, which was on top of a pile of her notes. “They’re wizards.”

The NYPD’s Technical Assistance Response Unit was a small elite force of detectives responsible for all investigative tech support and the most complex computer forensics.

Helen shook her head. “I was too embarrassed to tell the SVU detectives last night. I just assume it’s a lost cause once I hit delete. I’ve never worked a matter with TARU.”

“Focus on your case,” I said, standing up. “Where’s your phone?”

“Top desk drawer.”

“It won’t be there when you get downstairs, but you’ll have it back tonight,” I said. “These TARU guys can retrieve stuff that’s gone off into the Twilight Zone. Nothing ever gets fatally lost in the ether. Tell Corliss you’ll have what he wants by morning.”

“Shouldn’t I ask for an adjournment?”

“Call your next witness, Helen,” I said. “Raymond Santiago has preyed on young girls for the last time. Just don’t let Corliss beat you down along the way.”

I stepped away from her and waved to Corliss. “Thanks for giving me the time.”

“Now I get my fifteen with you,” he said, tucking his thumbs into the front of his leather belt, the sides of his robe pushed back, and striding down the three steps from his bench to walk to his robing room. “C’mon, Alexandra.”

Helen Wyler was on her feet, apologizing to me for putting me in the judge’s scope.

“It’s okay. But don’t you ever do what I’m about to do,” I said. “The man’s a pig. Don’t let him bully you into being alone with him.”

“But you—”

“I had my first felony trial in front of Corliss, a dozen years ago,” I said. “My entire team were guys—really good guys. You’ve met them all. My knees used to wobble when he demanded that I

come into his robing room to discuss a plea deal or a procedural issue. So my pals swore that if I ever walked out with any of the judge's dandruff on my suit, they'd know I'd been too close to him and they'd take him down."

Helen laughed.

"Thanks for your concern," I said, "but at this stage in our relationship, Corliss doesn't have any real interest in me—and he certainly lacks the balls to take me on."

I followed him into the small cubicle behind the courtroom. There was a wooden chair and desk and two more chairs for visitors. Bud Corliss was staring out the window, looking down at the traffic on Centre Street.

"You've had a rough autumn," he said, his back to me. "First the kidnapping, and then the shock of witnessing Battaglia's murder."

"I'm back on my feet, Judge. It was a pretty miserable couple of months," I said. "And I didn't mean to be rude when I came into your courtroom, but I just wasn't ready to throw this all out in front of Santiago and his crew."

I was being polite now, more for Helen Wyler's sake—and the salvation of her case—than my own.

"You ready for the grind?"

"You know I love it. My friends and family have been great, and my shrink is amazingly solid. Nobody seemed to like me when I was whining and needy, so I might as well do the one thing I know how to do."

Bud Corliss turned around to face me, half sitting on the radiator cover below the windowsill. "You think they got the right guys? I mean, Battaglia's killers?"

"I do." I had been involved in that investigation up to my eyeballs.

"There were so many rumors floating around," Corliss said.

"Most of them were groundless and stupid, but you know how that goes."

Some of them even had *me* as a conspirator in Battaglia's murder.

“Then there’s all the gossip about you running to take his place.”

“That’s just what it is, Judge. Gossip,” I said, laughing with him. “You’ve known me a long time. Do you think I have the temperament for politics?”

“You’d be easier on the eyes than that mean old bastard you worked for,” Corliss said, tiptoeing toward the line that he had crossed so many times before, as he looked me up and down, from the ankles to the crown of my head. “And your perfume smells a lot better than his foul, cheap cigars.”

I took a step toward the door. “I’ll miss the cigars, actually. That smell wafting my way always gave me ninety seconds’ warning that Battaglia was coming to my office to needle me about something.”

“There was also talk about you and that detective—Mike Chapman—eloping to the Vineyard together.”

“Eloping?” I said, reaching for the door handle. “That’s one I hadn’t heard. Way too many rumors for me in one day. Be good to Helen Wyler, Judge. She’s well on her way to becoming an outstanding trial lawyer.”

“About rumors, Alex,” Corliss said, walking toward me and pressing his hand against the door to keep it closed, “you’re going to hear something about Janet and me, and I’d just like to know you’re in my corner.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, and my expression gave that away.

“So word hasn’t reached you yet?” he asked.

Bud Corliss was better known for his infidelities than for the legal reasoning in his opinions. His wife, Janet, had inherited a substantial sum of money from her father and added to it with a successful career as an interior designer sought after by Manhattan hipsters and bicoastal movie stars.

“Which word would that be?”

Corliss had carried on a two-year affair with one of the women in my office that had prompted

Battaglia to move her to the Appeals Bureau, to avoid the conflict of trying cases in front of her lover. The DA had used just about every favor owed to him to keep the entanglement off Page Six of the *New York Post*.

“Janet’s unstable. I’ve tried to get help—”

“Look, Judge,” I said, “this conversation is making me terrifically uncomfortable. I’d like you to take your hand off the door so I can quietly go on my way.”

“A drink, then? One night this week?”

“That’s not in the cards,” I said, shaking my head. “Not happening. I don’t know Janet well, but I’m not stepping in the middle of whatever you’ve got going on.”

Bud Corliss removed his hand from the door. “This stays between us, Alex, because I might need your help, your advice.”

“I’m listening.”

“Janet told her best friend something,” Corliss said. “She was desperate, I guess, and you know what these times are like.”

“Her best friend writes speeches for the senator, doesn’t she?” I asked.

“Yes, and that’s the friend who’s encouraging her to go public.”

“What—with the fact that you’ve been unfaithful again?” I said. “I’d hardly call it breaking news.”

Bud Corliss had both hands on his hips. I could see the gold cufflinks and Patek Philippe watch that Janet had given to him, catching the sunlight that beamed through the dirty window of the robing room.

“That’s all in her imagination, Alex,” he said. “Janet has cried wolf so many times that even her friends don’t believe her.”

I turned the knob and tugged on the heavy oak door. “When you’re ready for my help—and to tell me the truth—give me a call.”

“I’ll make it quick, then,” Corliss said, his jaw tightening as he spoke the words. “Janet’s

claiming I hit her.”

I spun around to face him, with barely a foot separating us.

“You hit your wife, Judge? And you’re coming to *me* for help?”

“You know the reasons women claim this kind of thing,” he said. “You know how people exaggerate when a marriage seems headed for the rocks.”

“Did you hit her?” I asked, pushing against the door with my shoulder and backing into the dark, narrow hallway that led to the public corridor. “Because that’s really all I need to know. And if the answer is yes, Bud, then you’d better get yourself a lawyer and not a prosecutorial stooge to try to hide behind.”

“You’re talking to me like I’m a common criminal, Alex,” the judge said, holding his arms out to his sides in apparent disbelief. “Harvard College, graduate degree from Oxford, Columbia Law School—law review, in fact. I left a partnership at Dewey to come on the bench. I’m not some street thug you can threaten with a prosecution.”

“Wife beaters come in every shape and size, Judge,” I said. “Too bad you live in Bronx County, because it’s out of my jurisdiction. Is that where you threw the punch?”

“I didn’t punch—”

But I wasn’t in the mood for mealy mouthed excuses, so I cut off Corliss at his first hint of a denial. “After three months away, there’d be nothing like a domestic violence case to whet my appetite for a guilty verdict.”