

Glancing up at the clock located just over her head from where she was seated, Laura Stiley took note that she still had twenty-five minutes before her appointment with the judge. The office of Criminal Court Six was laid out in the same manner as the other court offices in the City-County building. The glass entrance door with COURT 6 in bold black lettering led way to the waist high counter which stretched across the front portion of the office. Across the counter were three secretarial desks: two facing each other in the middle of the room, and one toward the back portion of the office, guarding a wooden door marked CHAMBERS. Laura sat across from the latter desk, watching the two women at the other desks work. One had been busily typing court transcripts since the time Laura arrived fifteen minutes earlier. She noticed the woman's concentration was so focused that she never looked up even when the other woman had escorted Laura to this seat.

The other woman, who had identified herself as Gail the court clerk, and ushered Laura to her seat, took care of the steady flow of traffic that came in to the office seeking assistance with filing paperwork with the court and other questions concerning information about cases. Laura marveled at the efficiency with which the office was run. Even having been familiar with all the paperwork; such as briefs, docket sheets, memorandums, and motions, still she had not yet had first hand experience with the office that processes the paperwork for cases. Gail was adept at her job, handling with ease procedural questions concerning cases, somehow remembering each case without having to look into the files.

The side door across from her opened, revealing the empty bench where the judge had been sitting and hearing cases until a half hour ago. In came an attractive, well-dressed woman in her forties, followed by two men in suits carrying briefcases, still locked in conversation with her.

"You'll need to come back later," stated the woman moving behind the desk and sitting across from Laura.

One of the men sounded adamant. "How much later, Fran?"

"I'll see if the judge can see you in an hour."

"I've got a case downstairs at three-thirty. He's got to see me now."

The smaller man behind him showed a thin-lipped smile.

"He cannot be disturbed. Not even for you, Mr. Walsh."

The smaller man took Walsh by the arm. "Let's go out to the hallway, Harvey. We can discuss it there."

"You know this can't be settled without the judge's OK, Thomas. My client needs this stay of execution."

"You know the judge isn't going to change his mind, Harvey. Come on our in the hall and we'll work something out." The small man led the larger passed the counter and toward the glass door. "There's always Rule 60(b), Harvey. Just tell your client to sit tight and..." The door closed behind them.

The older woman looked across her desk and smiled at Laura.

"Interesting place, isn't it?"

“Quite,” returned Laura with a friendly smile all her own. She had already read the nameplate on the desk and knew this had to be Francis Caldwell, the judge’s private secretary. She glanced down again at the nameplate.

The older woman noticed the glance. “Call me Fran. I never liked the name Francis, but I keep the sign there because it was a gift from Judge Jones. He said it would keep me humble.” She reached over her desk. “You must be Miss Stiley.”

“Laura.” Their hands met, and smiles continued.

“You have the three o’clock with Judge Jones?” she asked, checking the judge’s appointment calendar on her desk.

“Yes,” was the nervous reply.

“Don’t worry,” shared the secretary. “Just between us girls, Judge Jones doesn’t bite. Besides, I went over your resume and transcripts with him, and he was quite impressed.”

“How did Judge Jones get my resume? I did not send him one.”

“All I can tell you is, the judge has been checking into paralegal schools all over the state. Maybe he has a special project he would like you to work on for him.”

“I really don’t think I could be able to help him if I get this other job I’ve applied for.”

“Well, you’ll find out what he needs shortly.”

The phone rang on her desk.

“Judge Jones’ secretary. May I help you?... I’m sorry. The judge is in his chambers and cannot be disturbed. May I have your number?... I’ll have him return your call as soon as possible. You’re welcome.” She replaced the receiver in its cradle.

“Is the judge interviewing another paralegal?”

“Oh, no,” answered the one with the graying hair. “He’s in conference with himself.” She turned to place a sheet of paper in the word processor.

Laura thought on that comment for a moment, squinted her eyes and brought her dark eyebrows closer together, as if her face in this position helped her contemplate better.

Turning back and seeing the puzzled face, Fran chuckled. “I suppose I should explain. No one disturbs the judge for approximately half an hour after he leaves the courtroom. The judge uses this time to evaluate his decisions for that day.”

“I sat in on the court today. He seems like a very strong personality.”

“Oh, it took me years to get used to his dichotomy. Out there he’s the mean ol’ judge who’s always fighting for truth, justice, and the American way. In here, Believe it or not, he’s a real person, and very likable.”

“My Court Procedure professor at the institute said that Judge Jones is the best judge the city has had in a long time.” She glanced back up at the clock which now read 2:49.

“The judge’s record stands for itself. In fifteen years he’s only been overturned two times by a higher court, and for a criminal judge, that’s even more amazing.”

Laura remembered her father having joked that all judges were “criminal judges”.

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Sitting behind the large oak desk piled with the files of the cases that had just been decided, Judge Randall Patrick Jones continued his stare out of the window of his fifth floor office. Having gone through the cases for that day, he thought of how angered Harvey Walsh had looked when he had overruled his objection when the prosecutor

motioned the court to not grant a stay of execution. In certain cases he would grant the stay, so the person could remain out of jail during the appeal process, but in the case of a bureaucrat just found guilty of extorting money from city funds, the judge could not justify a man being free and using some of the money he extorted to pay Attorney Walsh to appeal for him.

The judge made a point of evaluation each case after it was over, making sure every “t” was crossed. This he had done for thirteen of his fifteen years on the bench, ever since the Kimble case was overturned by the State Supreme Court.

Jones had sentenced Kimble to the death penalty thirteen years ago. Kimble was his first rape-homicide case. Being a young judge, the defense attorney opted to have Jones hear the case instead of having a jury trial. He would never forget Kimble’s smile; almost a confident smile, knowing his lawyer would get him off.

Kimble, the habitual criminal, who not only raped and murdered a twenty-two year old woman, but also drowned her one-year-old son and three-year-old daughter by holding them by the feet upside down in the water. The judge nearly came out of his chair when Kimble testified that he “didn’t wanna leave no witnesses.” Immediately, Judge Jones called a recess, retired to his chambers, and stared out this same window for almost an hour. His thoughts thirteen years ago turned to his wife Nancy, then thirty-five and the mother of three little ones. What would he have done had Kimble chosen to force his way into their family car and drive Nancy to that same setting described in the trial.

The entire courtroom burst into applause when he read the sentence of death by electric chair. The victim’s husband and parents sobbed uncontrollably, and the media lifted Jones to a widespread popularity throughout the state.

But Kimble was overturned. The technicality that at times lets the guilty go free was Judge Jones’ fault. The defense attorney had actually placed Jones on trial instead of Kimble. He actually used Jones’ attitude and comments during the trial as the appealable issue. “Kimble did not receive a fair trial,” stated the Supreme Court decision. “The judge was biased.”

His philosophy of judging cases had changed after that decision. Although all of his fellow judges practiced their own definition of fairness, still there were basically two kinds of judges: those who leaned toward the reformation of the guilty, and those who leaned toward making restitution for the victim and the victim’s family.

The Kimble case had made Jones the latter. The next time a case like that came before him, he made sure a calm and cool judge sat behind the bench. He became the first judge in the state in almost ten years to sentence a man to the electric chair and actually have the man die that way. In a time when top prison officials were lobbying the state legislature for either life imprisonment or lethal injection, Judge Jones stood for giving them the chair.

The judge’s thoughts erased as the intercom light on his phone caught his eye.

“Judge, your three o’clock appointment is here to see you.”

“How long have you been trying to get me, Fran?”

“Only a few minutes. I’m sorry to interrupt you.”

“No, no. I’m glad you did. Bring Miss Stiley in, please.”

Both phones were hung up, and the door soon opened as Fran and Laura entered. Judge Jones stood up courteously, came from behind his desk, and shook hands with the young brunette.

“Laura, this is Judge Jones. Judge, this is Laura Stiley.”

“Delighted to meet you, Miss Stiley. Please have a seat.” The judge motioned to the chairs on the far side of his desk. “Fran, would you stay, please?”

The secretary closed the door and sat in the other seat facing the judge, who resumed his position behind his desk. Instinctively, she caught the “I know it’s here somewhere” look as he fished through a stack of file folders on the left side of his desk. Leaning forward, she lifted three more folders until L. M. STILEY appeared at the top of one of them.

“Around here, Fran does the filing, and I do the piling,” he explained. “Actually, she runs things; I just get the credit.”

Laura had already determined that she liked Judge Jones. He seemed to her to be human and humble; not quite the perfectionist label the judge seemed to have earned over the years, going along with Fran’s dichotomy explanation. She evaluated his appearance earlier in the courtroom: The gray hair styled to a conservative flawlessness, mysterious blue-gray eyes which seemed to keep a person’s gaze focused there, and finely chiseled facial features which reminded her of an actor she once saw play John Kennedy in a movie.

The Judge increased her fatherly image as he placed reading glasses on his face as he read the resume in front of him.

“Miss Stiley,” he said looking up, “I’ve had several conversations with a few of your professors at the institute, primarily Professor Gladden. He calls you the best paralegal he has ever trained.” Laura’s eyes seemed to sparkle at this revelation. “Tom Gladden and I go back a long way. He’s probably the best legal researcher I know. He says that potentially, you are better than him at legal research. Something about your never quitting until proving your point. He feels you would perfectly fill the need I have for a researcher on my staff.”

Laura’s mind raced for an explanation as she absorbed the compliments. Lower court judges’ staffs consist of clerks and secretaries. The Prosecutor’s staff does whatever research a judge needs.

“I... I don’t understand.”

The Judge continued. “What I am going to say goes no farther than this office for now. Agreed?”

Both ladies nodded as a knowing smile formed on the secretary’s lips.

“Miss Stiley, Fran tomorrow morning, Justice Sallenger will announce his retirement from the State Supreme Court. The Governor will announce me as his replacement. First, I need a fresh researcher to help me prepare for the hearings that will convene a few days from now. If you decide to help me, and everything works out, then I would like you to consider being on my staff at the State House.”

Laura’s heart beat loudly inside her chest. To be on the staff of a Supreme Court Justice was not even in her realm of thinking a few minutes ago.

“I don’t know what to say...”

“I think I know what you’re thinking. Miss Stiley. Of all the attorneys and legal assistants around who would jump at the chance to work for a Justice of the Indiana Supreme Court, why would I want a new paralegal graduate?”

“Well, that, for starters...”

“Four reasons. One, your research skills speak for themselves. Two, Professor Gladden’s recommendation. Three, I need someone with an analytical mind who does not think like a lawyer, and can evaluate the research I need done with an honest and open mind. And four, you father, Paul.”

Hearing her late father’s name mentioned brought new questions to her mind. “You knew my Dad?”

“We were study partners in law school. He dropped out after his third year to take over his father’s business when he died. I kept in touch with him until his death a few years back. Then I saw his name on your resume.”

“But, I don’t understand...,” her voice trailed off.

“Paul always talked about his bright young daughter, and how he was going to make her the best researcher law has ever had. And now Tom Gladden says that he has. Besides, Paul was stubborn. He made me study twice as long as I normally would have, just to prove him wrong. Professor Gladden says you’re the same way. I don’t need a ‘yes man’, or in this case a ‘yes woman’.”

“If there’s one thing Dad is remembered for, it’s his stubbornness.”

“If there’s one thing Paul’s daughter will be remembered for at the Heritage Paralegal Institute, it’s her stubbornness.”

A blush arose on Laura’s cheeks.

“That’s what I need, Miss Stiley, Laura. I need someone who will challenge me to do my best. Do you want to have time to think I over?”

“No...I believe this is what I am supposed to do.”

“Fine. Now here’s what I want you to start researching for me.” The Judge reached across the desk and handed Laura an empty, expandable file folder entitled SUPREME COURT JUSTICE RESEARCH.