

AN INNOCENT CLIENT

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Chapter One

April 12
7:00 a.m.

It was my fortieth birthday, and the first thing I had to do was deal with Johnny Wayne Neal. The forensic psychiatrist I'd hired to examine him said Johnny Wayne was a narcissist, a pathological liar, and a sociopath, and those were his good qualities. He called Johnny Wayne an "irredeemable monster." I'd asked the shrink not to write any of that down. I didn't want the district attorney to see it. Monster or not, Johnny Wayne was still my client.

Johnny Wayne Neal had hired two of his thug buddies to murder his beautiful, heavily insured young wife. She woke up at 3:00 a.m. on a Wednesday morning about a year ago to find two strangers standing over her bed. The men clumsily and brutally stabbed her to death while Johnny Wayne's three-year-old son, who'd been sleeping with his mother that night, crawled beneath the bed and listened to the sounds of his mother dying.

It took the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation and the Johnson City Police Department less than a week to figure out who was responsible for the murder. Johnny Wayne was arrested and charged with both first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit first-degree murder, and because of the heinous nature of the crime, the state of Tennessee was seeking the death penalty. A heartless judge appointed me to defend him. The hourly rate was a hundred bucks, about the same as a small-time prostitute's.

The prosecutor had offered to take the death penalty off the table if Johnny Wayne would plead guilty to first-degree murder and agree to go to prison for the rest of his life. When I told Johnny Wayne about the offer a week ago, he'd reluctantly agreed. We were supposed to be in court at 9:00 a.m. so Johnny Wayne could enter his plea. I was at the jail to make sure he hadn't changed his mind.

Fifteen minutes after I sat down in the attorney's room, Johnny Wayne, in a sharply creased, unwrinkled orange jumpsuit, was escorted in. He was handcuffed, waist-chained, and shackled around the ankles.

"I wanted to make sure you're still willing to take this deal before we go to court," I said as soon as the uniformed escort stepped out and Johnny Wayne awkwardly made his way into the chair. "Once you enter the plea, there's no turning back."

Johnny Wayne stared at the tabletop. His hair was the color of baled straw, wispy and perfectly combed. He was much smaller than me, well under six feet, thin and pale. His face and arms were covered with tiny pinkish freckles. He started tapping his fingers on the table, and I noticed that his nails looked recently manicured. He smelled of shampoo.

"How do you manage to stay so well groomed in this place?" I said. "Every time I see you, you look like you just came out of a salon."

He rolled his eyes. They were a pale green, sometimes flecked with red, depending on angle and light. They were closely set and the left eye had a tendency to wander. It

made looking him in the eye uncomfortable. I never quite knew where to focus.

“The fact that I’m incarcerated doesn’t require me to live like an animal,” he said.

“I’m able to procure certain services.”

“You mean a barber?”

“I have a barber, one of the inmates, who comes to my cell once a week. He trims my beard and shampoos and cuts my hair.”

“Does he give you a manicure, too?” I glanced at his fingernails.

“I do that myself.”

“Who does your laundry? All my other clients look like they sleep in their jail uniforms.”

I could tell the questions were irritating him, so I kept on.

“My laundry is done along with everyone else’s,” he said. “I simply purchase commissary products for an individual who treats my laundry with special care.” His speech was a tinny, nasal tenor, his diction perfect. I imagined shoving a turd into his mouth, just so he’d mispronounce a word.

“Why are you so interested in my personal hygiene?” Johnny Wayne said. “Does it offend you?”

“Nah,” I said, “I was just curious.”

His disdain for me was palpable. With each visit I could sense it growing like metastasizing cancer, but I didn’t care. I disliked him as intensely as he disliked me.

He’d lied to me dozens of times. He’d run me and my investigator all over east Tennessee following false leads and locating bogus witnesses. He whined constantly.

“So now that we have those incredibly important matters out of the way,” Johnny Wayne said, “explain this *deal*, as you so eloquently put it, one more time.”

“It’s simple,” I said. “A moron could understand it.”

“Are you insinuating that I’m a moron?”

“Of course not. The deal is you plead guilty to first-degree murder. You agree to a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. You give up your right to appeal. In exchange, you get to live. No needle for Johnny Wayne. That’s it, sweet and simple.”

He snorted. “Doesn’t sound like much of a deal to me.”

“Depends on your point of view.”

“Meaning?”

“It depends on whether you want to spend the rest of your life in the general prison population where you can at least get a blow job once in a while or spend the next fifteen years in isolation on death row, then die by lethal injection.”

“But I’m innocent.”

“Of course you are. Unfortunately, the evidence says otherwise.”

“All circumstantial. Or lies.”

“What about the cell phone records that match exactly with the statements Clive and Derek gave the police? The calls they say you made to check on them while they were on their way up here to kill Laura, and while they were on their way back.”

The muscles in his jaw tightened. Johnny Wayne didn’t like discussing facts.

“What about the four separate life insurance policies you took out on Laura over the past eighteen months? Three hundred and fifty grand, Johnny Wayne.”

“Lots of people over-insure their spouses.”

“Explain why Derek and Clive would say you hired them to kill Laura and promised

to give them ten percent of the insurance money.”

“They’re trying to save themselves.”

“If you didn’t hire them, why’d they do it? They didn’t even know her.”

“Why? Why? Why are you asking me all these stupid questions? You’re supposed to be my lawyer.”

I should have brought up the audio tape, but I decided to cut him some slack. Clive and Derek, the thugs he hired, had both caved immediately during the interrogation. They confessed and told the police Johnny Wayne had hired them. The police outfitted them with tape recorders and sent them to see Johnny Wayne, who talked freely about the murder and the money. The first time I played the tape for him his face turned an odd shade of aquamarine.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Part of a lawyer’s job is to give his client good advice. And my advice is that the prosecution could bring in a trained monkey and convict you of this murder. The evidence is overwhelming, the murder was especially cruel, and your little boy witnessed it. My advice is that your chances of getting the death penalty are better than excellent.”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he said.

“Maybe not, but she’d be alive if it weren’t for you. The jury will hold you accountable.”

“So I’m supposed to spend the rest of my life in prison for something I didn’t do.”

“You can either accept their offer and plead, or you can go to trial.”

“With a lawyer who thinks I’m guilty.”

“Don’t put this on me. I’ve busted my butt on this case. I’m just giving you an honest opinion as to what I think the outcome will be. You should be thankful. Your mother-and father-in-law don’t believe in the death penalty any more than I do. They think if you’re convicted and sentenced to death, your blood will somehow be on their hands. They’re the ones who talked the district attorney into making this offer.”

“They’re hypocritical fools,” Johnny Wayne said.

I wanted to backhand him. James and Rita Miller, the parents of his murdered, beautiful, innocent young wife, were two of the nicest people I’d ever met. I’d interviewed them as I was preparing for the trial. One of the questions I’d asked was how a nice young lady like Laura had ever become involved with Johnny Wayne. Her father told me Laura had met him while she was attending college at Carson-Newman, a small school in Jefferson City, only sixty miles away. Laura had taken a part-time job at a restaurant where Johnny Wayne was a cook. He was also attending Carson-Newman but he only carried three hours a semester and struggled in class. James and Rita said they had concerns, but Laura fell completely for Johnny Wayne’s con. He was handsome and intelligent and seemed sincere. They never dreamed a monster lurked beneath the facade.

I looked at Johnny Wayne and envisioned my knuckles cracking into his teeth. It was an image I found soothing.

“What’s it going to be?” I said. “I need an answer. We’re supposed to be in court in two hours.”

“I need more time to consider it.”

“No, you don’t. It’s a gift. Take it or leave it.”

His hands went to his nose and he began his obnoxious habit of squeezing his nostrils

together with his thumb and index finger. Squeeze and hold. Release. Squeeze and hold. Release.

After three squeeze-and-holds, he said, "Fuck it. I'll do it. Throw me to the wolves."

"Good decision," I said. "First one you've made in a while."

"Are we done here?"

"I suppose. You in a hurry?"

"I have to take a crap. It's the bologna they serve in this dump." His voice, like his face, was devoid of emotion. He hadn't bothered to ask how his son would be affected. He hadn't mentioned the boy in months.

I got up and pushed the button on the wall to summon the guards. Johnny Wayne remained seated while I leaned on the wall and stared at the ceiling. I didn't want to sit back down. I wanted to be as far away from him as possible. After three or four minutes, I could hear the thump of heavy boots as the guards made their way down the hallway towards the door.

"Hey, Dillard," Johnny Wayne said suddenly.

"What?"

"Everybody thinks she was such a saint. She was a stupid bitch. All she had to do was give me a divorce on my terms, which weren't that complicated. She brought this on herself."

"Don't say another word," I said. The vision of flying teeth was acquiring details.

The door clanged and the guards pushed their way through and gathered him up. One of them, a skin-headed, thick-necked youngster, looked me up and down.

"You only do criminal defense, ain't that right?" he said.

"That's right."

"Then I reckon you'll be glad to know that an old lady called into dispatch a little while ago and reported that her cat found a human pecker out near the lake. A body'll probably turn up soon."

"A pecker? Do you mean a penis?"

"Penis to you. Pecker to me."

"So?"

"Thought you'd like to know. A dead body means business for you, don't it? Sort of like an undertaker."

He winked at his partner and they shared a laugh. Even Johnny Wayne smiled. After they left, I stayed on the wall for a few minutes, their laughter and Johnny Wayne's vulgar confession replaying in my head. The rattle of the chains faded as they led him away.

My head started to pound and my stomach tightened as I made my way back through the labyrinth of steel and concrete. I was sick of defending the Johnny Wayne Neals of this world, and I was sick of being mocked and laughed at by assholes like the two guards. The only thing that eased the feeling of nausea was the knowledge that I was quitting the profession. In less than a year, I wouldn't have to deal with the Johnny Waynes of the world.

As I made my way towards the entrance, I tried to tell myself to take it easy. *Don't let it get to you. You did your job.* I forced myself to think about something more pleasant. My birthday. Celebrating with Caroline and the kids, the most important and beautiful things in my life. Chocolate cake. What would I wish for this year?

It came to me as I stepped out the front door into the rain, and the thought made me smile. I'd always been a dreamer, a hopeless romantic, and I'd always wasted my birthday wishes on impossible ideals like peace in the Middle East or an end to poverty and hunger or my favorite, a justice system that actually dispensed a little justice. This year, I would keep it simple and selfish.
Before I gave up the practice of law, I wanted one – just *one* – innocent client.

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