

Awaiting Judgment

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“What are we doing here?” I ask my little sister Mona, 18, short, a firecracker in a gold dress and red hair. “We don’t belong here.”

Not herself, Mona answers with a forced smile, “She’s our sister, Paul. We’re here for her.” Textbook.

We sit together on a hardwood, ass-flattening bench just outside the courtroom, waiting as witnesses for the defense on the last day of custody hearings before all state buildings close for Christmas. “Needs us? No. This whole thing is wrapped up. No way they’re taking that kid away from her.” Our conversation fades into nervous silence. We tick in broken rhythm. She taps her toes, hard-sole shoes clicking stone floors. I pat my slacks above the knee and nod my head. She grabs my forearm to stop the beat. I flick her thigh to still her feet, then cross my arms, pressing creases and worry lines into my black sport coat.

Juvenile Court hides under the shadow of a 65,000 seat pro-football stadium. How Nashville. In the lobby, there’s a Christmas tree attempting to be secular. No angel on top, just a large bow of gold ribbon, the untied ends trailing through branches. Unwed mothers and deadbeat dads ignore the tree as they struggle through security, their purses and backpacks searched, their shoes removed, shuffling to their appointed courtrooms.

Jerking up, I cross to a pillar and lean against it. Peeking through thin windows with metallic crosshatching, I see Laurel, our oldest sister, leaning forward in her chair. Instead of a witness stand, there’s an office chair before a small table situated below and in front of the bench; it faces sideways so Laurel must crane up to the side to answer the judge’s questions. I shift to the left and see her bald, stocky lawyer, almost hearing his slow rolling southern drawl as he lobs softballs. Laurel smiles and nods, smacking them out of the park.

“Paul, do you have your testimony memorized? I’ve been running over mine in my head. We should be in there any minute.”

“She’s got this, Mona. Don’t stress.”

The doors fly open to the right of our courtroom and a woman in a green holiday sweater comes out with a clipboard calling, “Sophia Brown. Sophia Brown.” No one comes. “Sophia Brown?” No one. She marks a note in her clipboard and mutters to herself, “Somebody’s going to jail,” before returning to the courtroom.

We’re fidgeting again, biting nails and lips.

People pass us in the hall. Most are inappropriately dressed. I watch with sharp eyes, placing and categorizing them, mostly rednecks and gutter trash in tennis shoes and sweatshirts. On a bench along the opposite wall sits a young black man discussing a ruling with his lawyer. I wonder if the judge knew what his Michael Jordan road jersey and designer sneakers cost him. Did it factor into the ruling?

I check my watch and glance through the window. Laurel’s curly hair bobs as she answers the prosecutor’s questions. Dressed in a power suit, the woman’s flipping wrists and pointed fingers accuse, accuse, accuse. We’ve been waiting over an hour now.

A stubby woman, her hair glued into place, harrumphs past us to the heavy steel and glass doors. A tall man in impossibly long jeans chases after her, calling, “Rita! Rita!”

She turns when he catches her shoulder, tears in her eyes, “Not here,” she says looking around, at everyone in the hall, at my sister and I. “Not around these people.”

We are these people.

Another hour gone and it’s dusk. Blue-gray twilight adds to the gloom of the hall, hides facial features, nervous ticks and tear trails. There’s no concealing my pacing.

I stop to see inside the courtroom. The prosecutor won’t rest. Her wrists have slowed and stop occasionally at her hips. Laurel is exhausted. She hasn’t slept. Her make-up made it to midday, but in the waning light of the pre-solstice afternoon, the pressure of the courtroom, fatigue is showing in the redness of her eyelids. I’m sweating. She must be sweating. For a moment, she balls her fists and looks upward in memory or prayer; I can’t tell which. We make eye contact. I smile.

Her lips press together. She shakes her head. She drops her eyes.

I recognize that look and sink back into my seat.

“How’s it going in there?” Mona asks.

My lips press together. I shake my head. I drop my eyes.