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Silent Verdict

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Introduction

Evie Hart did not plan to be a hometown hero again—she planned to be home long enough to bury her past. The rental car's heater rasped and blew the scent of old cigarettes at her as she rolled up to Saint Bartholomew's, a stone church planted like a stubborn verdict on the hill above the river. The town below had not changed since she left: the same brick courthouse with its clock that ran five minutes fast, the same diner windows fogged with grease and gossip, the same newspaper offices where her brother Jonah chased truth with a camera and a notebook. She had come for a funeral. Someone else's, and also—she suspected—some version of her own.

Inside, the sanctuary glowed with winter light and polished wood. Lilies crowded the aisle, their sweetness almost obscene in the cold. Judge Roland Pierce's portrait, framed in black, rested on an easel beneath the pulpit. He was the kind of man small towns built courthouses around: stern jaw, precise hair, a steady gaze that made lawyers measure every word. Evie had argued in front of him once, years ago, in a case that kept her awake every night for months; he had listened harder than most judges did, which was half of justice and the half you couldn't teach. The choir murmured the first hymn. Evie stood in the back, coat still on, and held herself like a witness who didn't want to be sworn.

Her father should have been there. He had stood oaths in that courthouse longer than anyone, first as a bailiff, then as the quiet custodian who fixed things no one else noticed were broken. Now an oxygen machine hummed by his recliner a few blocks away, and Evie carried the keys to his house and the guilt of not being there sooner. Jonah slipped in beside her, breathless, scarf trailing. He tapped her arm without looking at her and nodded toward the front pew, where the District Attorney, Lila Monroe, sat with her hands folded. Lila's posture was unassailable, the posture of a woman who had taught Evie how to make an opening argument sing. Lila didn't look back, but Evie could feel the heat of her presence like a lamp turned toward a subject.

When Lila rose to speak, the sanctuary quieted on command. "Judge Pierce believed in the law," she said, voice clear, tailored for microphones even if the church didn't have any. "He believed in the dignity of the process, in fairness delivered without fear or favor. His loss is a wound to this community and to the very idea of justice." She paused, letting the words settle like snow. "We will seek answers. We will not rest." The elegance of it made Evie's teeth ache. It sounded like grief. It also sounded like a press release.

On the way out, the town's familiar faces broke into clusters of sympathy and speculation. Evie heard her name as an undertone the way you hear a train through

the walls of a hotel: unexpected, a rumble you cannot stop. She kept her eyes on the exit and almost made it before she caught a sentence that changed the oxygen in the room. "They found him there," a man in a county jacket said. "At the judge's house. Marcus Hale. With the weapon in his bag." He wasn't whispering. People never whispered the important parts.

Evie stopped. Marcus. A public defender whose tenacity had been a small legend when she was still doing arraignments and learning which judges liked their rules interpreted and which liked them obeyed. Loyal to his clients beyond reason; slow to anger, quick to show up for anyone who needed help moving, needed a ride, needed a courthouse map. She pictured his serious eyes behind thick glasses, the careful way he'd listened when she ran a training on appellate preservation. She had shared coffee with him twice, traded emails about an expert once. Not a friend, not a stranger. The rumor rolled through the crowd like a bad wind: blood on his shirt, a call to 911 that he didn't make, a poker or a wrench, let the details smudge themselves into guilt. A woman in a wool hat lifted her phone to snap a photo of Lila near the casket and said, "Open-and-shut. It's always the angry ones."

Evie felt the muscle in her jaw tighten. There was no such thing as open-and-shut when the defendant was a public defender and the dead man was a judge who controlled the gears of a county's law. There were optics. There were narratives. There were careers being weighed against the facts. "You heard it?" Jonah said, eyes bright and anxious, the way they got when a story slid into his hands on its own. "They picked him up at Pierce's place before dawn. I've got sources saying he was disoriented. They're already feeding the press he was obsessed with Pierce's rulings."

"You don't print that," Evie said automatically, and the old rhythm between them clicked into place—the younger brother who wanted to publish first, the older sister who remembered how words could be a cudgel as easily as a shield.

"I'm not printing anything." He dug his phone out and flicked through notifications. "But look." He showed her a headline that had sprouted on a regional outlet's site: DEFENDER TURNED DEFENDANT: HALE'S HISTORY OF COURTROOM OUTBURSTS. They had already scraped his disciplinary record for that one time he'd raised his voice when a cop lied, already lifted a photo that made him look like he was scowling when he'd simply been squinting in sun. Underneath the headline was a paragraph Evie recognized from a DA's talking points: a community reeling, the DA's office pledging to pursue justice, the suspect in custody.

Her heartbeat found an old cadence she hadn't missed: the prelitigation thrum, the way her mind started placing facts in a grid, noticing the seams. A suspect at the scene, yes—because someone wanted him found there, because he went to help, because a dozen other hypotheses existed that had nothing to do with murder. A weapon in his bag—why in his bag and not at the scene? A judge whom people

revered—except Evie had heard the murmurs for months about Pierce’s recent sentences in drug cases, about a pattern the defense bar was starting to notice, a new harshness he’d defended from the bench as “deterrence.” It didn’t square with the man who’d once stayed late to hear an emergency motion because a woman would have lost her job otherwise. It did square with whispers Jonah had chased and failed to nail down about the state contracting with a private-prison company for “overflow management” and “rehabilitative services,” a euphemism that hid money like it hid rot.

“I’ve got paperwork,” Jonah said. “Half paperwork. There’s a draft opinion he was supposed to release this week, something that would’ve set aside a slate of sentences and triggered a review of the contracting process. It’s rumor until it isn’t. The opinion disappeared from the docket this morning.”

Evie felt the shift under her feet, the faint teeter you get on black ice before you fall. “Where did you get that?”

“Clerk who owes me. Not saying which one.” He smiled the way he always did when he knew she disapproved but liked that she still asked.

She stepped into the cold and breathed air that felt more honest than anything inside. “Jonah,” she said. “Find out who has custody of Marcus.”

“County. Detective Roman Vega made the arrest.” Jonah tucked his chin into his scarf. “You remember Vega?”

She did. Vega had been a uniform when she left, a man who knew the rules and how to use them. He had a reputation for straight lines—sharp, unbending—but Evie had seen it before: the officers who believed hard in order-erasing nuance when nuance was inconvenient. On the church steps, a tall figure in a dark overcoat turned and caught her looking. Vega’s eyes were tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. He nodded once, the kind of acknowledgement that meant: I know who you are. Do not get in my way. She nodded back, the kind that meant: Try and stop me.

Her father’s house smelled like lemon oil and the faint metallic ring of the oxygen machine. He was awake, TV low, eyes glued to a weather report predicting snow that never quite arrived. “I didn’t want you at that funeral,” he said, not looking away from the screen. “People remember what they want to remember. About you. About me.”

“They can remember what they like,” she said, leaning down to kiss the spot where his stubble had gone soft and gray. “I came because I should have.”

“You came because you can’t help yourself,” he said, which was closer to the truth. “The DA was there?”

"Front row." She glanced at the refrigerator, where a magnet held an old newspaper photo of Jonah with a city councilman. A younger Evie was visible in the background, caught mid-stride with a briefcase, anonymous and in motion. "They've arrested Marcus Hale."

He shifted, winced. "You going to fix that?"

She could have said no. She was here to help him, to manage doctors' appointments, to make sure he ate. She was here to stay off the radar long enough to let the last scandal of her career stop hovering like a hawk over her head: the case with the botched forensic testimony she hadn't caught until it was too late, the innocent man who'd lost six years to the state because she'd believed a lab report that read like scripture and turned out to be gossip. She could have said no and meant it. "I shouldn't," she said.

He nodded, and in that small motion she saw the admission that he didn't want her in the glare but also that he knew better than to pretend she was someone else. "There's chicken in the fridge," he said, which was how he forgave.

The phone on the counter buzzed. Unknown number. Evie answered on instinct and heard the tin-can echo of a call from county facilities. "Ms. Hart?" a woman said, professional boredom laced through her consonants. "This is intake at the sheriff's. You were flagged as a contact on Marcus Hale's emergency sheet."

"I was?" Evie said, even as she imagined it: Marcus going through his protocols, naming a lawyer who wouldn't leave him to warehouse justice, who wouldn't faint at politics. They'd trained defense attorneys together once. He might have written her down because he didn't know who else to trust.

"He asked if you'd come down," the intake worker said. "He also asked for—well, it doesn't matter what he asked for. The DA's office notified us they'll be seeking no bail. He's being held for arraignment tomorrow."

"Has he spoken to anyone?" Evie asked, already moving toward the door because motion made decisions easier.

"Detective Vega attempted an interview. Hale invoked, then recanted, then invoked again. It's messy."

Messy was how innocence got swallowed. "Tell him to invoke and keep invoking," Evie said. "Tell him I'm on my way."

She hung up and found Jonah in the kitchen with his laptop open, his worry tucked

behind a caffeine grin. "You're going," he said, as if she had already told him.

"I'm going." She grabbed her coat. "You'll start with the docket. Find out what vanished and who made it vanish. I want names. And Jonah—" She waited until he looked up. "This one will get loud. Be careful how you hold it."

He nodded, and the fear in his eyes wasn't for himself. "I'll call you when I have something."

On the porch, the cold bit her knuckles and made her feel like a person again. The town had settled back into its routine—mail trucks, salt on the steps of the courthouse, a reporter setting up a standup shot on the corner because daylight was the friend of narratives. Evie paused at the top of the steps and looked at the courthouse dome. Twenty miles of bureaucracy wrapped in marble, and beneath it people who meant it and people who didn't and people who couldn't tell the difference anymore.

She could keep walking. She could go to the grocery store and buy her father oranges he wouldn't eat and sit with him and pretend the past was another country. Or she could step into the river she had spent a decade learning to swim: police reports that didn't add up, motion practice threaded with needles of truth, cross-examinations that had to land exactly right to knock a story loose. She thought of Marcus alone in a concrete room trying not to say anything that could be walked into evidence. She thought of Lila's voice in the church, silk around a blade. She thought of Judge Pierce's portrait, the way his gaze wouldn't meet hers.

Evie took out her phone and dialed the number she hadn't used in years: the clerk's direct line to file a notice of appearance. "This is Evelyn Hart," she said when the clerk answered. Her voice didn't shake. "Put me on for Marcus Hale."

"Ms. Hart," the clerk said. "You sure? You know what this is going to be."

Evie looked down the hill at the town that had made her and then asked her to forget it had. "Yes," she said. "I'm sure." She hung up, slid her keys into her pocket, and started for the car.

By the time she reached the corner, the reporter was finishing a live shot that would run on the late news. The word suspect hung in the air like fog. Evie tightened her scarf and crossed the street against the light. The courthouse clock tolled five minutes fast, as always. She matched its urgency with her own. She had decided. If the system wanted a silent verdict, it would not get one from her. She aimed herself at the jail and didn't look back.

CHAPTER ONE: Holding Cell Truths

The county jail smelled of disinfectant, stale coffee, and the metallic tang of unspoken fear. Evie had spent enough hours in enough holding facilities to recognize the scent of confinement. It clung to the cinder-block walls, seeped into the worn linoleum, and seemed to emanate from the guards themselves, their faces etched with the perpetual vigilance of men and women who stood between order and chaos. She presented her bar card to a bored clerk behind bulletproof glass, her name echoing strangely in the sterile air. "Hart. Evelyn Hart. For Marcus Hale."

The clerk didn't look up from a tattered magazine. "Fill this out." A plastic tray slid forward, holding a clipboard and a pen chained to the counter. The pen had clearly seen better days, its ink faint and unreliable, much like the promise of justice in this place. Evie scribbled her details, noting the official resistance already mounting against her. It was subtle, a delay here, a shrug there, but it was there. She knew what it meant: the DA's office had already leaned on them.

Twenty minutes later, a guard with a paunch and a suspicious glare led her down a narrow corridor, the clanging of distant doors punctuating the silence. The visiting room was small, soundproofed, and painted a dismal beige. A single table, scarred with generations of nervous fidgeting, separated two hard plastic chairs. On the other side of the thick, smudged glass, Marcus Hale was already waiting.

He looked smaller than she remembered, his usual crisp shirts replaced by a county-issued jumpsuit that swallowed his frame. His thick glasses were slightly askew, and his usually meticulous hair was rumpled, as if he'd been running his hands through it in frustration. Dark smudges bruised the skin under his eyes, and a cut, half-healed, ran along his jawline. It gave him an uncharacteristic vulnerability. Evie felt a familiar tug, the instinct to protect the defenseless, even when the defenseless was a fellow attorney.

She picked up the phone receiver on her side of the glass. Marcus mirrored her. His voice, when it came through, was a low rumble, laced with a weariness she hadn't ever heard from him. "Evie. Thank you for coming."

"Marcus," she said, her voice steady despite the adrenaline starting to hum beneath her skin. "What happened?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, a sigh escaping. "I don't know. Not really. It's... hazy." He opened his eyes, and they were wide, bloodshot, full of a raw confusion. "I was at the judge's house. I remember going there. We had a meeting scheduled.

Something important. Then... it's a blur. I woke up on his floor, dizzy. Head throbbing. Pierce was... he was gone."

"Gone how?" Evie asked, her legal mind already parsing his words. *Gone* could mean anything.

"Dead," he said, the word flat, without inflection. "I saw... the blood. I panicked. I just... I didn't know what to do." He gestured vaguely with his free hand. "Then the sirens. And Vega."

"Detective Vega was already there?" Evie pressed. The speed of the arrest was bothering her. Not enough time for chaos, only for planned precision.

"He seemed to be," Marcus confirmed, rubbing his temples. "Or he arrived almost immediately after I... became aware. They found me there, yeah. Blood on my clothes. My bag. They said the weapon was inside it."

"Do you remember putting it there?" Evie asked. This was critical.

He shook his head, a gesture of profound despair. "No. I don't. I don't remember anything like that. I remember getting to his house, ringing the bell, then... flashes. A pain in my head. A smell. Something acrid. Then waking up to a nightmare."

Evie leaned closer to the glass. "Marcus, did you kill Judge Pierce?"

His gaze met hers, clear and unwavering now. "No, Evie. I swear to you, I didn't. I respected him. He was a good man, for all his recent... peculiarities."

Peculiarities. The word resonated with Jonah's vague rumors about the judge's change in sentencing. "What peculiarities?"

Marcus hesitated. "Nothing concrete. Just... a shift. In some of his rulings. Harshness where there used to be discernment. Especially in cases tied to certain... contracts." He looked away, then back, a flicker of fear in his eyes. "This is going to sound crazy, but I think he was going to expose something. That's why I was there. He called me. Said he had information. Something that went beyond mere judicial discretion. He wanted my help, as a public defender, to understand the implications for defendants."

"Information about what?" Evie's pen hovered over her notepad.

"He didn't say specifically over the phone. Just that it was 'institutional' and 'corrupting.' He sounded... scared. That's not like Judge Pierce." Marcus's voice dropped. "He said to come alone, and to be discreet. Said he'd leave the door unlocked if he was in a hurry."

Evie frowned. "Unlocked? That's not like Judge Pierce either. He was a stickler for security." This was another thread to pull.

"Exactly," Marcus said, a hint of his old logical self returning. "Which made me wonder. But he was insistent. Said it was urgent. That he couldn't risk a formal meeting that might be noticed."

"And you went alone?"

"Yes. I pulled up, saw his light on, walked right in. The front door was ajar, actually, not just unlocked. I called out, didn't hear anything. Then I remember seeing something, or someone... I don't know. It's like a puzzle piece is missing from my brain. Then the headache hit, and I was on the floor."

"The DA's office is seeking no bail," Evie informed him, watching his reaction. "They're pushing a narrative that you were obsessed with his rulings, that you had a vendetta."

A bitter laugh escaped him. "A vendetta? I fight for my clients, Evie. Not against judges. They're twisting my advocacy into psychosis. They'll try to paint me as some unstable crusader. Lila Monroe won't miss a beat with that."

Lila. Her former mentor, now his prosecutor. The thought was a cold knot in Evie's stomach. "Did you give Detective Vega a statement?"

"I tried. He kept pushing me. Asking if I blacked out, asking if I was taking any medication, if I'd been under stress. When I said I couldn't remember clearly, he started talking about diminished capacity, about how it would look if I was incoherent. He made it sound like admitting confusion would be an admission of guilt. I invoked. Then he got aggressive, kept asking 'what about the victim, Mr. Hale?' and I... I might have tried to explain. Then I invoked again." He ran a hand through his hair again. "It's a blur, Evie. All of it."

"Don't say another word to anyone without me present, Marcus," Evie commanded, her voice firm. "Not a correctional officer, not a chaplain, not another inmate. No one. Understand?"

He nodded grimly. "I understand. I really appreciate this, Evie. I know... I know your history here."

The unspoken implication hung in the air: her past professional failure, the specter of the innocent man she'd failed to save. "My history isn't relevant to your case," she said, though she knew it was, profoundly. It was the driving force behind every decision she made now. "What about the weapon? Can you describe it?"

"Just... a blunt object," Marcus said, visibly struggling. "Dark. Heavy. I didn't touch it, I swear. Not knowingly. I just saw the... mess. And him."

Evie noted his distress. It wasn't the cunning of a killer, but the genuine bewilderment of a man caught in a waking nightmare. Still, the evidence against him was damning on its face. Found at the scene, weapon in his bag, a hazy memory. This was exactly the kind of circumstantial case a prosecutor like Lila Monroe could spin into a tight, airtight narrative of guilt.

"Okay, Marcus," Evie said, closing her notepad. "For now, you need to stay strong. I'll be back with a plan. We'll fight the bail, and we'll start digging. This isn't over."

As the guard reappeared to escort Marcus away, Evie watched him disappear down the corridor, the fluorescent lights reflecting off the polished floor. The image of the cut on his jaw, the dark circles under his eyes, and the sheer, unadulterated fear in his gaze solidified her resolve. Marcus Hale wasn't a killer. Not the Marcus she knew. And if he wasn't, then someone else was. Someone had framed him. And that meant someone was trying to keep a secret hidden, a secret that Judge Roland Pierce had been about to reveal. The "peculiarities" Marcus mentioned, the "institutional corruption" the judge was investigating—it all pointed to something far larger than a personal vendetta.

She walked out of the jail into the late afternoon chill, the air crisp and biting. The courthouse clock still read five minutes fast. She needed to verify the judge's meeting log, check surveillance footage, and get a copy of the police report. Her first stop: the clerk's office, to officially file her notice of appearance and request discovery. The process would be slow, deliberately so, she suspected. But Evie Hart knew how to navigate bureaucracy. She knew how to push. And the image of Marcus Hale's terrified eyes was all the fuel she needed.

The setting sun cast long shadows across the town square, painting the familiar buildings in shades of orange and purple. Evie pulled out her phone and dialed Jonah's number. "I've spoken to Marcus," she said without preamble. "He claims he was called to the judge's house, and the door was ajar. Says he blacked out. And he didn't put the weapon in his bag."

"Blacked out? That's not going to fly with Lila," Jonah replied, his voice tinny through the phone. "She'll make it sound like a convenient amnesia."

"I know. But it's what he says. And he also said the judge was looking into something 'institutional' and 'corrupting,' something about contracts. He thinks Pierce was scared."

A pause from Jonah. "Scared? Judge Pierce?" He sounded genuinely surprised. "That's a new one. I'm at the paper now. I managed to get ahold of a partial copy of a meeting log for the courthouse. Not Pierce's personal log, but the general one. There are some curious omissions for the day of the murder. And a strange entry for an unscheduled maintenance visit in the early hours."

"Maintenance? What kind of maintenance?" Evie asked, her mind already racing through the possibilities.

"It just says 'Server Room Access - Vendor.' No company name, no specific person. Just a blank line where there should be details."

Evie felt a jolt. "Server room? That's where the security footage is stored, isn't it?"

"Bingo," Jonah said, and she could almost hear his grin. "Could be nothing, could be everything. But I found something else. A preliminary incident report from the sheriff's office. It lists the time the 911 call came in, and the time Vega arrived. And there's a discrepancy."

"A discrepancy?" Evie felt a fresh surge of unease. "How big?"

"Big enough to matter," Jonah said, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "The 911 call came from the judge's landline, flagged as 'unknown male, distressed.' But the log shows Vega arrived ten minutes *before* that call was even placed."

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