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The Night Jury

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Introduction

Seattle wears rain like a second skin, every puddle painted with midnight neon. On the late ferry crossing to Bainbridge, even the cars shift quietly under yellow lamplight, their outlines rippling against black water. I sit three rows from the wheelhouse, phone flickering in my lap, the unsent letter to CivicMind's board half-glimpsed in my peripheral vision. "Dear Sirs—" I delete the word. It aches in my teeth, corporate and ancient, in a moment that already feels like standing on a ledge. Outside, the city blurs—light, glass, fog—and somewhere my niece, Lily, is probably memorizing another periodic table just to hold her fear at bay.

I joined CivicMind because I wanted to make things better. I believed—do I still believe?—that technology could coax justice out of gridlock, that a vote cast in the bright glare of day might matter more than one whispered in the dark. We promised transparency; we built something else. Now, on nights like this, my sister's case won't let me sleep. I used to curse the unsolved, the unknown. Now, anonymity has teeth, and it's chewing up anyone who lets their guard drop. Kira calls me Cassandra. The truth is, I've let myself become the lighthouse and the warning both—brilliant, alone, ignored.

Air vibrates with news alerts as the deckhands cinch thick ropes to the mooring bollard. People scroll, hungry for the next outrage. Somewhere in that swarm of consensus a vote is being counted, a verdict tallied on the app we birthed in bright, utopian rooms with coffee flowing and promises rising like steam. The Night Jury's pilot is expanding. Rowan calls it "frictionless court of public opinion." The metrics are through the roof. Underneath the celebration, a different current throbs. Victims' families see hope. Defendants locked in real trials see a shadow jury, as quick to absolve as to crucify. And tonight, trending among the "Legacy Files": my sister's name, her accident, her year-old face staring through a pixelated news frame.

I pull my coat tighter. My mother texted; she's seen it, too. Lily is asking questions again. What does it mean to have so many strangers sift through your life, your pain? Is justice decided by those who know you best—or simply those who sound the loudest online? Maybe this is why I've drafted my resignation half a hundred times in Notes. Maybe this is why I never hit send.

My phone chimes with a new message: Kira wants an interview, "for the record, before things go totally sideways." I can picture her studio—fairy lights, pop-filters, caffeine and conviction. Her voice could carry a city. Once, I thought I wanted the world to hear my truth. Now, every time I speak, the crowd twists it. The line between surveillance and attention blurs. Someone out there has been watching me, too—leaving

comments on the Night Jury's back-end only a few with access should ever see.

The ferry docks. The city recedes behind a lattice of steel and rain, anticipation thrumming under every deliberately chosen footstep. I ball up the letter in my fist, then smooth it out and slide it into my bag. Some things you write to send. Some, to survive. And tonight, I still have a choice—until the city, the crowd, and the Night Jury decide otherwise.

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CHAPTER ONE: The First Verdict

The fluorescent lights of the CivicMind war room hummed, a stark contrast to the rain-slicked night outside. But even here, sequestered in our glass-walled fortress high above Seattle, the city's pulse found its way in, thrumming through the floor, through the very air. On the oversized screen dominating one wall, a bar graph pulsed, green for acquittal, red for conviction. The Night Jury was in session, and the numbers were ticking, converging, making a mockery of everything I believed.

It was the Satterfield case: a high-profile white-collar fraud, weeks of testimony, and a hung jury in the actual courthouse down the street. We'd presented the curated evidence on the Night Jury app—videos, documents, expert testimony—filtered, framed, and fed to the public, hundreds of thousands of them, tapping, swiping, judging. My job as Ethics Officer was to ensure fairness, transparency, and data integrity. It felt like trying to hold back the tide with a sieve.

Rowan Price, our CEO, stood at the front, a predatory smile playing on his lips. "Look at this, Nora," he'd said earlier, gesturing at the rising green bar. "The people have spoken. They see through the noise. They don't need weeks of legalese and biased media. They need data, and a simple choice." His rhetoric was always impeccable, a finely spun web of civic idealism woven around a core of pure, unadulterated ambition. He called it "democratizing justice." I called it a digital coliseum.

The final tally flashed: 82% Acquittal.

A smattering of applause broke out from the junior devs and marketing team, their faces illuminated by the green glow. I felt a cold knot tighten in my stomach. This wasn't just data; it was a man's life, a family's ruin, played out for a crowd hungry for a show. I walked closer to the screen, my eyes scanning the live comment feed scrolling vertically beside the verdict.

"Fraudster walks! Night Jury knows what's up. #PeoplePower"

"Justice served. Satterfield was framed."

"They should have just let the jury convict him. App is rigged."

And then, deeper in the stream, the words began to mutate, to curdle.

"Acquittal is BS. Someone needs to *correct* this."

“The crowd corrects.”

That phrase. I’d heard it before, on Kira’s podcast, in anonymous forums. It was a rallying cry for a certain type of online vigilantism, an almost spiritual belief that the collective, unburdened by procedure, would always find the truth. But what if the truth they found was a fiction of their own making?

I turned to Gavel, our lead moderator, a perpetually frazzled man whose job was to police the wild West of the comment sections. “Are you seeing this?” I pointed to the increasingly vitriolic posts. “They’re moving beyond opinion. This is... threatening.”

Gavel chewed on his lip, his eyes darting between the screen and Rowan, who was now basking in the glow of his team’s success. “It’s just noise, Nora. We have a filter for direct threats. This is passionate dissent. It’s part of the process.”

“Part of the process?” My voice was sharper than I intended. “This is a digital mob. If Satterfield steps out of his house tomorrow, what happens?”

Rowan chose that moment to approach, his smile still fixed. “Trouble in paradise, Nora? The numbers speak for themselves. This is what we built. This is the future.” He clapped me on the shoulder, a gesture that was meant to be reassuring but felt like a proprietary claim.

“The future where a man is acquitted by an anonymous crowd and then... what?” I pulled away from his touch. “What are the consequences of a verdict that has no legal standing? What’s our responsibility when the comments turn from debate to calls for vigilante action?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Hyperbole, Nora. It’s the internet. People say things. They don’t mean them. This app is about engagement, about giving people a voice. Not about—” He paused, searching for the right corporate-speak. “—facilitating real-world, unsanctioned enforcement.”

“Facilitating is exactly what we’re doing,” I countered, my gaze fixed on a chilling new comment: “The Night Jury has spoken. Now, let the real justice begin.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed slightly, but the smile didn’t falter. “Your concern is admirable, Nora. Truly. But we’re disrupting. Disruption creates friction. We anticipated this. It’s a sign we’re having an impact.” He lowered his voice, leaning in conspiratorially. “The board loves impact. And they love the metrics. You should be celebrating.”

Celebrate? The thought was an acid in my throat. I pictured Lily, asleep in her bed, her

small, anxious face. What kind of world were we building for her? One where justice was a popularity contest, and anonymous crowds decided who lived and who died?

I moved away from Rowan, needing air that didn't smell of ambition and cheap coffee. My phone buzzed again. It was Kira, a text this time: *Satterfield acquittal just broke. My DMs are blowing up. This is HUGE for the show. You're on tomorrow, right? Don't chicken out.*

Kira. My best friend since college. The one who cheered my move to CivicMind, who saw the potential in Night Jury, who spun compelling narratives out of chaos. She loved a story, and the Night Jury was providing an endless supply. But I knew her advocacy for transparency could bleed into something more dangerous, a blurring of lines between news and entertainment, between information and instigation.

I looked back at the screen, at the verdant bar graph, at the seething comments. Rowan was already moving on, talking to the marketing lead about the next case file, the next public spectacle. He had no interest in the darkness gathering at the edges.

But I did. I knew that phrase, "The crowd corrects." It wasn't just a catchy slogan. It was a promise, or a threat. And the rain continued to fall, washing the city clean, or so it seemed, while beneath its sheen, something far more sinister was just beginning to stir.

I swallowed, the knot in my stomach hardening into something cold and solid. The first verdict was in. And I had a terrible feeling it was just the beginning.

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