

## CHAPTER 1

Ivy Collins had been going to the Wake County Courthouse every day for six months, yet the deputies still made her show her bar card before admitting her to the “Attorneys Only” line through security. At first, she attributed this to her youthful appearance. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, with that frightened, fresh-out-of-law-school expression, Ivy was used to people not taking her seriously. But the husky deputy eying her ID that morning had checked her in at least twenty times before and ogled her ass enough that he could probably describe its every contour in his sleep. So, she was pretty sure this was just part of the hazing—the numerous ways defense attorneys were treated like the visiting team inside the courthouse.

Virtually everything, from the Justice Center’s towering hard-block exterior to its inconvenient downtown location, surrounded by a maze of one-way streets with scarce parking, to the imperious judges seated high on mahogany benches, down to the beefy, gun-toting men who checked the bags—all of it felt designed to make the experience as intimidating as possible.

“I really am a lawyer, scout’s honor,” Ivy said, holding up two fingers.

The deputy sneered as he handed back her credentials and fired a thumb over his shoulder.

*I bet prosecutors never have to deal with this crap.* Ivy knew they, the assistant district attorneys, practically owned the courthouse. They got reserved parking in an underground garage, were issued key fobs to unlock private entrances that bypassed security altogether, worked out of cozy offices nestled in the building’s secret alcoves, and were on a first name basis with every judge and member of the courthouse staff. Even the youngest ADAs quickly became

masters of the local bureaucracy. Plus, they got to basically set the court's calendars and, in many ways, were more in charge of "the system" than even the judges themselves.

It was massively unfair.

Before law school, Ivy had been a fairly serious athlete, a five-seven point guard with a wicked crossover and decent jumper, so she was no stranger to competition or hostile environments. But she had never dealt with a home court advantage like this. Nor had she ever faced an opponent as fierce as the one she was set to meet that morning, the Hatchet Lady herself, ADA Eliza Wells.

Ivy slipped through the metal detector without a ding and retrieved her bag from the conveyor belt, looking back just in time to catch the deputy, once again, checking out her posterior.

*Maybe tomorrow I should walk in backwards, so he'll recognize me. Might speed things up.*

As for that morning, however, Ivy was running late. She hustled across the ground floor, serpentineing through *pro se* defendants meandering toward traffic court, then managed to squeeze into an over-full elevator just as the doors closed. Twenty people were mashed into a space built for ten, and it was a sweltering North Carolina morning outside, which meant various levels of BO swirling together into a kind of rotten stew—an unfortunate circumstance, considering Ivy was on for the long haul, headed all the way to the tenth floor.

She eyed the lighted numbers as they stopped at *every* level. Each time the elevator stopped, the crowded conditions required an awkward, time-consuming shuffle to allow those pushed into the back to exit before newcomers came on board. It wasn't until the doors closed on

the ninth floor that Ivy was finally alone, the sole rider ascending to the Superior Court, where the major felonies were handled.

The doors opened onto a faded tile hallway. Ivy took a deep breath of the rarified air. To that point in her brief legal career, she'd worked exclusively down in District Court, mostly pleading out misdemeanors. This would be her first foray into the big time, wielding the court-appointed case file she'd been handed that morning by her boss, Lester "the Truth" Williams, who'd assured her that the step up was nothing to worry about.

"Shoot, girl, it's all the same." Lester was a Black man in his fifties and a graduate of NC Central, an acclaimed HBCU in Durham, though the Truth liked to say his real degree came from the school of hard knocks. That morning he had been wearing one of his tailored three-piece suits, this one olive-green, and was settling into a leather office chair while snipping the end of his morning cigar with a finger guillotine, when he said, "Superior Court, District Court, it's no different, Ivy. Remember, your job's really not to fight with the prosecutor. Just find out what kind of deal they're offering and go sell it to the client. The case pleads, we get our paltry fee, the state gets their conviction, and the client gets a reduced sentence. Everybody's happy." Lester mimed washing his hands.

"But what if she's innocent?" Ivy asked.

The question caught Lester in mid-puff and launched him into a prolonged coughing fit as he laughed hysterically. "Oh, that's a good one," Lester said once he'd caught his breath. "*Innocent.*" He rested his cigar in a glass ashtray on the corner of his desk and gave Ivy one of those looks she despised—the grizzled veteran having to explain once again how the world worked to his little White-girl associate. "Listen, Ivy, I've been doing this a long time, okay?

And one thing I can tell you, without hesitation, is everybody's guilty. Everybody. Hell, we're all guilty of something."

Ivy knew she was in no position to argue. Though she didn't consider herself naive, she was inexperienced and undoubtedly privileged. That was part of the reason she'd taken the job with Lester in the first place. She had something to prove and knew there was a lot she could learn from a legit street lawyer like "the Truth," as Lester often referred to himself in the third person.

Ivy flipped open the file and started to read until Lester stopped her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow your roll there, Nancy Drew. We don't have time for all that. Need you to get on down to the courthouse pronto. Cesar wrote down everything you need to know, right here."

Cesar was Lester's paralegal/translator who hustled up most of the firm's Latino clients. His unmistakable chicken scratch filled a post-it note on the folder's outside cover:

*Defendant—Sonia Cabrera, 22*  
*Felony child abuse*  
*Victim—Hugo (son), 8.*

"What's the hurry?" Ivy asked. She didn't like the idea of heading downtown on her first felony without having at least read the file.

Lester sighed like he was getting annoyed with always having to explain everything. "We need to find out what the offer is before the prosecutor starts a trial this morning that the court administrator says is expected to last three weeks. I know this Eliza Wells. She's no joke. All focus. If you don't catch her before she gets rolling on whatever poor schmuck she's about to put away, then it could be a month before we get to talk to her. Meanwhile our client's cooling her heels in the county jail."

Ivy checked her watch. It was already nine thirty and Superior Court started at ten. Now she understood why Lester was pushing her to move. She'd really have to run if she was going to catch Eliza before her trial got going. Ivy stuffed the file in her leather bag and started for the door before asking, "Suppose they don't offer a deal. What then?"

"Trust me," Lester told her, "The last thing the state wants is the time and expense and uncertainty of a trial when they can get a nice and easy guilty plea. There's always a deal. Always."

\*\*\*

Those words echoed in Ivy's head as she slipped into the back of courtroom 10-C and immediately realized she was too late. Eliza Wells was already in the midst of her opening statement for this other case she was handling, laying out the particulars of a crime to a jury of twelve. Ivy thought for a second about heading back to the office to let Lester know she'd missed her shot, but she quickly became entranced by Eliza's delivery.

The prosecutor was a humorless-looking woman in her sixties with gray hair pulled back tight. She wore little to no makeup and a long shapeless black dress accessorized only by a single strand of pearls. Yet every eye was on her as she strutted back and forth, commanding the courtroom, stalking the jury like a predator cat. For half an hour, Ivy watched as Eliza hammered away, utilizing no notes at all, every fact, every picayune detail not only committed to memory but absolutely mastered. Eliza drove them like nails into the defendant's coffin.

"By the end of this trial," she said in summation, "you will have *no choice*, but to find the defendant *guilty*." Eliza fired a vicious point at the defendant that sent chills down Ivy's spine. It was like a laser beam of judgment shooting from the tip of the prosecutor's finger. Guilt was an absolute certainty. Even without hearing the other side of the case, Ivy could feel it from Eliza's

conviction, a righteous indignation that was palpable. Ivy saw it in the eyes of the jury as well. They were already nodding along, ready to hang the son of a bitch.

*Jesus, this lady's good.*

“Thank you, Madam Prosecutor,” the judge said. “Why don’t we take a brief ten-minute recess, before the defense gives their opening statement.”

After that, there was some shuffling as people headed for the restrooms. It stirred Ivy from her reverie. She realized this was an opportunity to try and talk to Eliza about her new case. If she could muster the courage.

The prosecutor was making her way down the aisle toward Ivy, not giving her long to gin up her nerve. Ivy cleared her throat and opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. Eliza passed by and was about to exit the courtroom when Ivy timidly managed to say, “Excuse me, Ms. Wells?”

Eliza stopped, turned, and looked Ivy up and down, no doubt pegging her for a young wannabe lawyer in her short skirt and form-fitting blazer, both courtesy of Ralph Lauren. The prosecutor’s expression morphed from a natural sneer—what Ivy would classify as “resting bitch face”—into something decidedly less pleasant, as though Eliza had just discovered a wad of gum stuck to her shoe.

“Yes?”

Ivy cleared her throat and tried to use her big-girl voice. “I’m Ivy Collins. I’m...uh...handling the Cabrerra case.”

Eliza’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling, searching a mental filing system for the name, among what must have been hundreds of cases.

“Cabrerra, yes,” Eliza said finally. “I’m familiar with it.”

Ivy nervously dug into her bag for the folder that had been sent over from the Public Defender's Office. "I'm sorry to bother you during trial. It's just that I was wondering what kind of plea the state was offering."

Eliza looked at Ivy like that was the stupidest thing she had ever heard. "Have you read the file?"

Ivy swallowed hard. "Um...just had time to skim it," she said, lying. "Our firm was assigned the case this morning, from the court appointed list."

The mention of "the list" brought a look of disapproval. It meant the defendant was indigent and, because the Public Defender's Office was grossly underfunded and overworked, the case had been farmed out to a local private attorney at way below their normal market rate. Many lawyers viewed such appointments as akin to indentured servitude. Thus, a court-appointed firm had an inherent economic motivation to assign the case to their least experienced lawyer, and to give it the least amount of attention possible, regardless of the case's complexity.

"I suppose you haven't seen the video then?" Eliza asked.

"There's a video?"

"DVD," Eliza droned. "Back of the file."

Ivy flipped the folder over and, sure enough, taped to the inside cover was a shiny silver disk.

"Look, I really don't have time to discuss this right now. If you'll excuse me," Eliza said, "I'd like to use the bathroom before we start back up."

The prosecutor headed again for the door, but Ivy called after her, hating how desperate she sounded. "I just need to know what the plea deal is."

Eliza turned, shaking her head defiantly. “Uh-uh. Nope. Not on this one. No reduction. No deal.”

Ivy assumed at first that this was just more hazing, like the deputy downstairs. But the prosecutor remained stone faced.

“I don’t understand,” Ivy said.

Eliza huffed. “Just watch the video. Trust me, you’ll understand.”