

ATLANTA  JUSTICE
BOOK TWO

LONE WITNESS

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CHAPTER ONE

Guilty. That's the only possible verdict. Ladies and gentleman of the jury, Felix Sanders, the CEO of Banton Corporation, has been embezzling for five years." Sophie Dawson took a deep breath, then continued her closing argument. She made eye contact with each of the twelve members of the jury who would decide the fate of the crooked CEO.

"Throughout the past week, you've heard testimony not only from other employees of Banton Corporation, but from our forensic accounting experts. Those experts testified that there is no doubt that Mr. Sanders was funneling money from the accounts of Banton investors into his personal slush fund that sits in a Swiss bank account." If she lost this case, then she deserved to be fired. The evidence against Sanders was rock solid. It was rare to have a case this bulletproof.

"The defense would have you believe that every single one of these transactions was made in clerical error, but now that you've heard and seen all of the evidence, I submit to you that there is no way that conclusion could ever be reached. Let me remind you that we're talking about hundreds of transactions over a five-year period. The defense's position asks you to suspend all logic and enter a fantasyland that doesn't exist. While

the prosecution has the burden of proof, we have clearly met that requirement with these facts.”

This was one of Sophie’s first major jury trials since she’d joined the White Collar Crime Unit of the Fulton County District Attorney’s office. Moving from the general trial division into the White Collar division had been a promotion, but financial crimes weren’t quite as exciting as murder. And the victims in this particular case weren’t individual consumers but other wealthy hedge fund types. They still deserved justice, though, because their money had been stolen from them. What Sanders had done was a crime, and she was doing her job as a prosecutor.

Sophie walked the jury through the remaining pieces of evidence. Then it was time for the defense to give their closing argument. Sanders had hired a big shot defense attorney from Peters & Gomez, but even a superstar high-priced lawyer wasn’t going to save him from a conviction. Sophie zoned out a little as the attorney droned on and on, trying to poke holes in her case. She thought it was a strategic miscalculation on his part to be so long-winded. The jury had been sitting there all week. They would be ready to start their deliberations and be done with this. But she wasn’t a defense attorney and had no desire to ever be one. If that was the strategy he wanted to employ, then who was she to second-guess him?

When her opposing counsel finally sat down, the judge provided the jury with instructions, and the jurors were excused for their deliberations. Now all Sophie could do was wait. It could be minutes, hours, or days before the jury came back with a verdict, although she hoped it would be quick. If it took too long, she’d start to get worried.

She started packing up her stuff as her opposing counsel, John Gomez, walked over to her. Sanders was probably paying Gomez, a founding partner at the firm, over a thousand dollars an hour. A ridiculous sum for legal fees, if you asked her.

“Ms. Dawson, that was a very impressive closing argument.” John smoothed his tailored navy suit jacket.

“Thank you.” Sophie guessed John was probably in his fifties, and his short dark hair was slightly graying at the temples. She wasn’t sure why he was talking to her. She was just one of many Fulton County prosecutors, and he was one of the heaviest hitters in the legal community. Being a founding partner of one of the most prestigious law firms in town was a big deal to most people. But his power and clout didn’t impress her that much. She was more moved by other attributes.

John took a step toward her. “You have a great presence, even if you are a bit rough around the edges.”

“Excuse me?” This wasn’t the first time she had received unsolicited comments about her courtroom performance from her opposing counsel. Being a relatively young female with a baby face and blond hair, she was constantly trying to prove herself.

“It was a compliment. So much so, that I’d love for you to consider making a lateral move over to our firm. I’m sure I could at least triple your current salary, and we can always use top talent with real trial experience. Tested trial lawyers aren’t easy to come by.” His dark eyes studied her.

What he didn’t realize was that she hadn’t become a lawyer for the money. She didn’t even need to work, because she had a more-than-substantial trust fund set up by her father. She was a prosecutor because she loved it. “I appreciate your kind offer, Mr. Gomez.”

“Please, call me John.” He gave her a million-dollar smile.

“But I just started this new role in the White Collar Crime Unit, and I really enjoy my work. I can’t imagine making the move to private practice.” In fact, it was something she’d never consider, but she thought it better to keep her explanations simple and to the point. There was no use in explaining her entire background and career goals.

John nodded. “I understand. But if you change your mind,

you know how to get in touch with me. My door is always open for you.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “And I’d love to take you to dinner sometime and discuss it further.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, she took a step back, putting a little distance between them. “Like I said, thank you, but I’m not interested. And I’m sorry, but I need to run. I have to handle a few other matters.”

“Of course. We’ll see how long the jury takes, but it might be next week before we get a decision.”

“Let’s hope not,” she muttered.

He smiled at her again, showing his perfectly polished white teeth, and walked away. She let out a breath. *Well, that was awkward.* Maybe she had misread his signals, but it seemed like he was more interested in her as a woman than as a lawyer. That was also a common response she got from her male colleagues.

Couldn’t they just respect her for the work she put in and not always be angling for something else from her? No wonder she still hadn’t found Mr. Right, despite her persistent search. She shook off the encounter and headed back to her office to finish up a few other things.

Her caseload was heavy, but not nearly like it had been in the general trial division. She’d been in the courtroom almost every single day for the past seven years, learning the ropes as an assistant district attorney. Now, as a senior ADA, she had a chance to distinguish herself from the crowd.

Once she was settled back in her office, she pulled out her latest case file. She’d just started her investigation into a matter involving Southern Investment Bank, known as SIB. The bank was headquartered in Atlanta, and according to the file, numerous complaints had been lodged against a top senior manager named Glen Shelton.

This was the type of case she could really sink her teeth into. Unlike the trial she had just completed, the victims here were people who truly couldn’t afford to be cheated. Shelton was ac-

cused of stealing from his clients and charging exorbitant fees on every transaction, in a way that was not clear to the clients that they were being charged at all, much less for what. The complaints were lodged by small businesses and individuals who had used Shelton for personal and small business loans.

These people had trusted Shelton with their finances, sometimes their life savings or their entire business, and now it was gone. Poof! All because of one man's greedy appetite.

There were still a ton of holes to fill in the investigation, but she was definitely ready to tackle this new file. And now that her caseload wasn't as crazy, she'd be able to devote large chunks of her time to this case. A burst of adrenaline coursed through her body just thinking about it. If what she was reading about Shelton was true, he needed to be held accountable for his criminal acts.

It would be a delicate endeavor, though. She'd been around long enough to understand that a case like this could get political. *Very political*. SIB was one of the most respected companies in Atlanta and had tons of influential local connections. The CEO of SIB was one of the most powerful women in the city.

At this point, Sophie wasn't looking to go after SIB as a corporation. Her target was merely one of its employees. Hopefully, that would mean she'd get the full cooperation of the company from the top down, but she wasn't holding her breath. Any type of criminal investigation was bound to make the executives at SIB nervous, and she couldn't blame them for that. But she had a job to do and planned not to let SIB's prestige and sterling reputation hold her back.

Sophie was still settling into her new office. It was marginally bigger than her old one, but still nothing fancy. She chuckled, thinking about her two best friends, who worked at big law firms. They had huge offices in high-rises with plush furniture, views of the Midtown skyline or Stone Mountain, and all the amenities in the world, and here she sat in a stuffy box on the

third floor with a tiny window and a view of the parking garage. The office was filled with one lonely file cabinet, a desk, and three basic office chairs. No amenities here, unless you brought them in yourself. Such was the life of a public servant, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

She looked at the clock and realized that time had gotten away from her. That was the story of her life. Many a night she left the office late.

No word yet from the jury, so it would definitely be next week, unless they opted to work over the weekend—which was unlikely, unless they were super close to reaching a verdict. She should just go home.

Once she got to her car and pushed the start button, her stomach started to rumble, and she realized she hadn't eaten anything since that morning. An intense craving for junk food hit her, so she decided to drive to the gas station she frequented for chips and candy bars. At least a healthy dose of salt and sugar would satisfy her cravings. She parked in front of the Quick-Stop and could already taste the mix of salty chips and chocolate. If she was going for junk food, she might as well make it good.

But once she got into the store and started walking the aisles, she couldn't make a decision. Maybe she should try to be healthy and only get one snack, then try to have a proper dinner. She looked at her watch. It was ten o'clock. Too late for a real dinner anyway.

She walked to the back of the store to pick up a flavored tea. As she opened the refrigerator door, debating between raspberry or extra sweet, a sudden commotion began at the front of the store. She turned around and sucked in a breath.

A man was pointing a gun at the cashier, and they were yelling at each other. Her first instinct was to run toward the fight and try to stop a disaster from happening, but she was only halfway up the aisle when a shot rang out. Instinctively, she hit the floor, covering her head, and slid behind one of the

popcorn displays. She'd taken active shooter training as part of her job and knew that the best course of action was to try to stay out of sight. She peered around the display, trying to keep most of her body hidden.

The shooter turned around, and she got a good look at his face. He appeared young to her, maybe in his upper teens. He didn't seem to notice her as he sprinted out of the gas station with his gun still drawn.

As soon as he was out the door, she sprang to her feet and ran to the front counter. The cashier lay on the ground in a large pool of blood. Squatting down beside him, she checked for a pulse. Nothing. He was dead.

She heard another round of gunshots and looked outside. The shooter had opened fire on his way out of the store. He was heading toward a midsize gray SUV, but there was another car on the left side of it. One person was on the driver's side, crouched down with her hands over her head, but the person on the passenger side was totally exposed and in the shooter's direct line of fire.

Sophie heard herself scream a warning, but it was too late.

The man fired and hit the woman standing closest to his SUV. Then he jumped into his car and sped away.

Sophie mentally took down his license plate as she rushed outside to check on the victim. The other woman was standing over her friend, crying hysterically.

"It's going to be okay," Sophie said, trying to calm her down. "Call 911 right now."

The woman nodded as tears rolled down her reddened cheeks, and pulled out her cell phone.

Sophie turned her attention to the woman lying on the ground, surrounded by large amounts of blood. Now that Sophie got a good look at the victim, she realized that the petite brunette looked barely older than a teenager. She'd suffered a gunshot wound to the head.

Sophie didn't even have to check for a pulse to tell her what she already knew. This young woman was dead. The head shot had probably killed her on impact.

Dear Lord, so much death. Please help me. Don't let me fall apart right now.

There was nothing she could do for this woman now, so she took the phone away from the woman's friend, who was standing nearby, shaking in shock. Sophie started talking to the 911 operator and gave him the license plate number. The shooter would probably dump the car ASAP, so they only had a small window to try to track him down by the plates.

Sophie wrapped her arm around the woman who had lost her friend. "You're safe. No one is going to hurt you now."

The woman didn't reply, just continued to sob. Soon the blaring sound of sirens filled the air. Sophie was no stranger to crime scenes. In fact, she'd been at more than she could even begin to count. But this was different. Tonight she was not here as a prosecutor, but as a witness.

Thankfully, she recognized one of the two officers who got out of their vehicle. Officer Carlos Wall's dark eyes widened when he saw her.

"Sophie," he said. "How did you get here so fast?" Then his eyes focused on her hands and beige suit jacket, which were streaked with bright red blood. "Sophie? What happened?"

"I was here getting a snack, Carlos. I saw everything." She could hear her voice starting to crack, but she had to stay strong and make sure they had the information they needed. This was no time to get emotional. She had to push through and focus.

Carlos muttered something under his breath and then turned to his partner, who was standing beside him. "This is one of ours," he said. "An ADA."

She didn't correct him about her title and promotion. Now wasn't the time.

“Sophie Dawson, this is Officer Peter Gray,” Carlos said. Then he looked at Peter. “You should take Sophie’s statement.”

“There’s another body inside,” she said quietly. “He killed two people.”

“Then that makes you a witness to a double homicide,” Carlos said.