

Guiltless

written by

David Dubczak

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www.DavidDWriter.com
david@conjunctionmedia.com

EXT. LIGHTFOOT RANCH - MORNING

Prescott, Arizona. The horse breeding ranch of weary and jaded DAMIAN LIGHTFOOT (40's, Native American, Male) has clearly seen better days. Some of the buildings are run-down, the door on the garage is stuck open, and a few horses roam the pen.

INT. LIGHTFOOT RANCH HOUSE - MORNING

Having just overslept, DAMIAN shuffles into the kitchen. Unfazed by the mess, he grabs a dirty glass from the sink, rinses it out, fills it with water, and then flips on the TV. The morning news is on the TV while Damian pours himself breakfast.

Damian sees a message on his answering machine. He plays it. It's from his son, JOHN (Male, Late teens)

JOHN

Hey, Dad. Uh... just wanted to let you know Mom's got us at the Best Western by the airport in Phoenix. I don't know... case you need us, or something. Bye.

He eats his cereal. A story catches his attention.

ANCHOR

County Commissioner Dean Wildman was found dead, early this morning, by morning patrols in the Prescott National Forest. For more on this story, we go to Erin Banks, who is on site. Erin?

He stops eating.

EXT. PRESCOTT POLICE STATION - DAY

We hear the voice of reporter ERIN BANKS (female, 30's), as DAMIAN drives up to the Prescott Police Station.

ERIN

(V.O.)

The morning patrol of the Prescott National Forest made a gruesome discovery, early this morning, when they found the lifeless body of Yavapai County Commissioner Dean Wildman hanging by a noose from a tree.

(MORE)

ERIN (CONT'D)

The sheriff's department is investigating, but thus far have no leads. A press conference has been scheduled for 1pm local time today at Prescott City Hall...

Her voice tapers off as Damian walks into the police station.

INT. PRESCOTT POLICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

DAMIAN enters the Police Station and is greeted by the OFFICER ON DUTY.

OFFICER

Help you?

DAMIAN

Is there a detective I can speak to?

OFFICER

'bout what?

DAMIAN

My name's Damian Lightfoot.

OFFICER

Yeah?

DAMIAN

I killed Dean Wildman.

Jolted to action, Officer picks up the phone.

INT. COURTHOUSE - DAY

Prosecutor BETH HEARTER (40s) leans on an elbow crutch behind her desk. Across from her, NEVEAH, younger, distraught, and fidgety, clutches her restaurant nametag, mascara smudged.

Beth rubs a case file, regret flickering, then glances at a stack of "HEARTER for DISTRICT ATTORNEY" signs on the floor.

NEVEAH

How can you just drop the charges when he's guilty?

BETH

Hung jury. I can retry the case, but without new evidence, we won't get a new outcome.

NEVEAH
 (holding back tears)
 He's already back on our street. My
 daughter won't sleep in her own
 bed.

In the doorway, buttoned-up boyscout District Attorney JAMES MARTIN (40's, Male) gets Beth's attention and motions toward his office. Beth sees and acknowledges, shuffling past her desk.

NEVEAH (CONT'D)
 Who does he have to hurt for you to
 get new evidence?

Beth grips her crutch. She wants to say "I'm sorry," but can't.

BETH
 I wish there were more I could do.
 I do everything I can, and then we
 listen to the jury.

NEVEAH
 So what do I do?

BETH
 (yelling behind her)
 You can sue him in civil court.

Beth exits to the nearly empty office marked "James Martin, Assistant District Attorney." She pauses as an ASSISTANT carries out a box, then turns into the suite next door.

BETH (CONT'D)
 (Grimace)
 Right.

INT. JAMES' OFFICE. CONTINUOUS

Beth trails the assistant into James's new office, where he quickly shelves binders. A WORKMAN unveils the fresh door tag: *James Martin, District Attorney.*

In the waiting area, AMY WILDMAN and her young daughter LILLA (8) rise as James enters with Beth.

JAMES
 This is Dean Wildman's wife Amy,
 and their daughter Lilla. Amy, this
 is Assistant DA Beth Hearter.

Beth shakes Amy's hand.

BETH
I'm so sorry for your loss.

LILLA
(to Beth)
Mom said she voted for you.

AMY
(embarrassed)
Lilla!

LILLA
She said you were more trustworthy.

AMY
Lilla! I'm sorry.

Beth shares an awkward glance.

JAMES
(brushing it off)
That's why she's the one who'll be
seeing your husband's case through
to the end.

AMY
Thank you. If there's anything you
need from us, just call.

BETH
Likewise. Again, I'm so sorry.

James' SECRETARY interrupts.

SECRETARY
I'm sorry, Mr. Martin, you have a
meeting with the mayor shortly.

JAMES
(to Amy)
Right. We better get to this then.
You two can chat more in a moment.

He leads Beth into his still-unpacked office, save for one
item: a nameplate on the desk that says "James Martin -
District Attorney." He drinks from a cup of coffee. Beth
picks up the nameplate.

BETH
Did you have this commissioned when
you were still in law school?

JAMES

So, like I said, I'm assigning you a case.

BETH

Because I ran against you?

JAMES

You wanna shut the door?

BETH

Because I ran against you, you're trying to be vindictive the only way you can legally get away with it.

JAMES

Not this again. Shut the damn door.

BETH

You know why I lost the election? Not because you're better. You're just more likable.

JAMES

(Smiling)

What can I say? Be more likable.

BETH

Oh, yeah?

Beth grabs his coffee mug and splashes it all over him.

BETH (CONT'D)

Be more likable? I'm the cripple. And that's the way it'll always be.

JAMES

Oww! Hot!

BETH

You're assigning me an easy case to waste my time out of spite for running for District Attorney against you!

JAMES

The only thing I have to spite you for is ruining my shirt.

BETH

I'll run against you again next time, and I'll win!

JAMES
(Unexpectedly subdued)
Yeah?

Beth's thoughts reset. She looks at James, calmly sitting with a full mug and no spilled coffee. She imagined that whole conversation.

JAMES (CONT'D)
Yeah? Beth?

BETH
Hmm? Sorry, I was, um...

JAMES
Well, there were a few evidentiary and paperwork issues, and I know you'll handle it with ease. It's open and shut, I just need you to tie it up.

BETH
You need a conviction?

JAMES
We need it done right.

Beth glances back at Amy and Lilla.

BETH
Where's the file?

James hands her a file.

JAMES
Ever heard of C.T.E?

BETH
Like all the old football players?

CUT TO:

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - EARLIER

DAMIAN is sitting handcuffed to a table, across from DETECTIVE DAN GLADSTONE (Male, 40's). JAMES narrates.

JAMES
(v.o.)
This guy comes in, wants to speak to a detective. Says he killed Dean Wildman.

GLADSTONE

How'd you get Wildman up the tree,
Mr. Lightfoot?

DAMIAN

I think I chased him on horseback
for a bit, then I roped him, and
then I dragged him to the nearest
tree and used my horse to pull him
up.

GLADSTONE

How'd you know he would be there?

DAMIAN

I think he started at my house.
Rode up, and we argued over
somethin'.

GLADSTONE

You think?

JAMES

(v.o.)

But there were a few problems with
his confession. He had the means.

Damian's dialogue cuts from different parts of his interview.

DAMIAN

...Rope...
...Horse...
...I was a rodeo cowboy...
...I know how to rope and drag
someone...

JAMES

(v.o.)

He had the motive.

DAMIAN

He was trying to condemn my ranch
and it drove my wife away.
Gainscorp wanted my land. Wildman
wanted to condemn my land. Everyone
wanted my land and it was too much
so she left.

BETH

(v.o.)

What were the problems?

GLADSTONE

You keep saying...

DAMIAN
 (Cut from different
 segments again)
 I think -
 I think -
 I think -
 I think that's when I stopped my
 horse and strung him up.

GLADSTONE
 You think?

JAMES
 (v.o.)
 C.T.E.

DAMIAN
 Chronic Traumatic
 Encephalopathy

JAMES (CONT'D)
 (v.o.)
 Chronic Traumatic
 Encephalopathy. The thing ex-
 football players have.

DAMIAN (CONT'D)
 My brain's really messed up. I had
 a lot of hard hits, and sometimes
 now I forget things - like entire
 days - like yesterday. I got no
 memory of yesterday at all.

Gladstone gives a confused and irritated look.

DAMIAN (CONT'D)
 But I know I killed him. There's
 only one person who coulda done it
 that way. It had to have been me.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

BETH
 For a crime he confessed to, but
 has no memory of actually doing.

JAMES
 And that's why I'm assigning you to
 this case. I need someone good who
 can keep this really tight.

Neveah bursts in to the waiting area.

NEVEAH
You are the WORST LAWYER EVER!
ARGH!

She slams her fist on the door frame and hurries out. Lilla looks up at Amy, wide-eyed.

BETH
It's not clear who she voted for.

JAMES
Sorry you lost one case.

BETH
(shrugs)
Hung jury. What'ya gonna do?
(Beat. Contemplates.)
All right. Keep it tight?

JAMES
Right. And Beth? You're better than having to worry about how much people like you.

Beth nods, and exits to the waiting area.

INT. COURTROOM - DAY

The next day, Beth waits at the prosecution table as people shuffle in and out. Damian, handcuffed, sits with guards. His timid, hurried public defender, JEREMY DILLON (30s), meets with him—eyes on his notes, never on Damian.

JEREMY
You're Damian Bigfoot?

DAMIAN
Yeah.

JEREMY
I'm Jeremy Dillon. You cannot afford a lawyer, so I am the public defender assigned to you by Yavapai County. You're planning to plead guilty?

DAMIAN
Yup.

JEREMY
I haven't talked to the D.A.'s office yet, but I'll see what I can do about a deal.

DAMIAN
I don't want no deal.

Jeremy closes his briefcase.

JEREMY
Okay, well then that settles that.
All we have to do today is give
your guilty plea, and then you'll
be sentenced in a few weeks.

Jeremy takes a seat and starts checking emails on his phone.
DAMIAN looks on, but says nothing. After a few moments at the
front tables, the DEPUTY announces:

DEPUTY
All Rise.

Everyone rises.

DEPUTY (CONT'D)
Court is now in session with the
Honorable Judge Linda Foster.

JUDGE FOSTER enters, takes her seat, and nods.

DEPUTY (CONT'D)
You may be seated.

Everyone sits. Deputy hands Foster a file. Foster makes an
act as if it's the first time she's seen it, though she knows
the file well.

FOSTER
Arizona vs. Damian Lightfoot.

Jeremy mouths "Lightfoot" and rolls his eyes, double-checking
his notes as he heads to the defense table, with Damian
escorted by guards.

FOSTER (CONT'D)
Mr. Lightfoot, you're being charged
with Murder in the Second Degree.
Do you know what that means?

DAMIAN
No, Ma'am.

FOSTER
It means a willful and deliberate
murder. It means you didn't plan
it, but you did it on purpose and
deliberately. How do you plea?

DAMIAN

Guilty.

FOSTER

Mr. Lightfoot, I've read your confession. Are you sure?

DAMIAN

Yes, Ma'am.

Beth acts as though she's packing up her stuff. Foster pauses and reviews the file. Jeremy sees nothing amiss, and leads his client to sit.

FOSTER

You're fully convinced of your guilt?

DAMIAN

Yes ma'am.

FOSTER

Well, we're just going to have to be sure.

This takes both lawyers by surprise.

FOSTER (CONT'D)

This court does not accept your guilty plea.

Judge bangs gavel.

BETH

Objection!

FOSTER

(beat)

Yes?

BETH

(beat)

Sorry, I've never objected at an arraignment hearing before.

(beat, gathering thoughts)

He's confessed! I- it seems like even Mr. Dillon wants to object!

FOSTER

That's what concerns me. Under Arizona Rule 17 D, I can reject the plea if it doesn't align with the facts of the case, and I can reject it if I find it doesn't serve the interest of justice.

BETH

Your Honor, with all due respect... he confessed!

FOSTER

...while testifying to memory loss.
(shoots an angry look at Dillon)

He has a right to have the claims of the confession independently corroborated, and I don't need to accept any plea until that has taken place.

Miss Hearter, prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he is guilty. Mister Dillon, make sure she does. I'll give you three months before pretrial motions. Court is adjourned.

Beth and Jeremy exchange looks.

INT. COURTHOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Beth exits the courtroom in a hurry, nearly stumbling over her crutch and shuffling papers in a folder. She hurries over to the police bullpen.

James comes running out of his office.

BETH

I need a detective!

JAMES

Beth!

Beth hastily combs through her folder, searching for a name.

BETH

(shouting)
Detective Houk, preferably, if he's here!

JAMES

Beth!

A young OFFICER comes running.

OFFICER

Yes, miss?

BETH

Miss? How long have you been out of the academy? Three days?

OFFICER

I-

James finally catches up.

JAMES

The judge didn't accept the plea?

BETH

(pointing at folder)

This guy. Detective Houk. Find him and tell him I need him up here. Go!

Beth drops her crutch with the intensity she's shoving the folder in the officer's face. He tries to pick up the crutch. Beth steps on it.

BETH (CONT'D)

Leave it.

OFFICER

And who should I say is looking?

NEVEAH walks by again, being led in handcuffs by another OFFICER.

NEVEAH

THE WORST LAWYER EVER!

BETH

(to Officer)

If he's in the building, he comes straight here.

Officer scurries off. James tries to pick up Beth's crutch.

BETH (CONT'D)

Don't help me.

She picks it up herself.

JAMES
Let's go to my office.

They turn to James' office, Beth furiously limping along.

JAMES (CONT'D)
The judge didn't accept the guilty plea?

BETH
I objected.

JAMES
Well, at least you objected.

BETH
You're pissed at me?

JAMES
(sighs)
No.
(beat)
Is there any precedent for a judge rejecting a guilty plea?

BETH
I'd have to look. Is there anything else about this case you're not telling me?

JAMES
(throws up his arms)
He confessed. Talk to the detective.

From the hallway, DETECTIVE KYLE HOUK (Male, 30's, disheveled), stands in the middle of the hall, shouting.

KYLE
Hello? I was told to meet someone in *this spot*. That it was very-

BETH
(Interrupting, waving with crutch)
Detective. In here.
(to James, sarcasm)
I may need more of a rundown on the evidentiary and paperwork issues.

Kyle enters.

KYLE
You beckoned?

Beth shoves the file at him.

BETH
This was you?

Kyle takes a moment to flip through and study the file.

JAMES
I'm gonna shut the door.

James shuffles around them to shut the door. Kyle keeps studying the folder.

KYLE
He confessed. Tell me he pled guilty.

BETH
Well, he tried.

KYLE
What does that mean?

INT. COURTHOUSE - POLICE BULLPEN - CONTINUOUS

From the police bullpen, several officers turn their heads at the muffled sound of Kyle shouting from James' office.

KYLE
WHAT DO YOU MEAN THE JUDGE DIDN'T
ACCEPT IT?

Kyle bursts out of James' office and stomps through the bullpen.

KYLE (CONT'D)
Holloway, Peretti, come with me. We
got a crime scene to secure.

INT./EXT. BEST WESTERN HOTEL - A FEW DAYS LATER

Kyle and Beth arrive in the hotel parking lot. The hotel has a few floors, all with outdoor access.

BETH
I don't suppose you had a warrant
to listen to his voicemail?

KYLE
I wasn't looking for evidence. You
go to the desk and get her room.

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