

Sequestered

by Angeline Barrett

The room is silent. A room full of twelve people and yet, it is silent. Eleven of the twelve heads are down, mulling over the details for what feels like the hundredth time. I don't need to - going through the facts again isn't going to change my mind. It's an extraordinarily dull room. The eggshell walls, peeling at the bottom edges, in serious need of a repaint, compliment the chipped stark white doorframes. Who knew there were that many bland shades? A small tear on the corner of my motley beige office chair exposes the discoloured yellow foam inside. The foam is a kind of comfort. I find myself picking at it before I can stop, just like when I was a child. I chose this chair on day one, and it will be mine until we leave this room and never return.

"Right!" Calls an imposing voice - our elected foreman. "That's fifteen minutes up. Has everyone come to a decision?"

There's a murmur of agreement and nodding of heads as we all hand our ballots over to Sheppard, or Shep, as he said we should call him, then silence as Shep reads them out.

"Guilty, guilty, guilty... not guilty."

Sighs of frustration fill the room.

"Why can't that bull-headed person understand they are preventing justice?"

That's Helen, grey-haired and stubborn, sitting two chairs down. "Yeah," agrees Eli, who sits next to Helen, "just look at the evidence and let us get out of here."

Defeated again. They are begging me to argue back, but that's not going to happen. I have too much respect for the victim. Studying Eli, I note the differences between us, trying to understand his voting motives. He sits next to Helen every day, looking to her for guidance. Jokes made during discussions of murder details, 'three-point shots' with trash. Juvenile silliness, Helen would call it. I'm close enough in age to recognise his behaviour for what it is - disrespectful. He's twenty-two, not twelve. He needs those four extra years to mature.

"Ok everyone, let's examine the case details once more. Perhaps we can come to a unanimous conclusion this time."

Shep folds the twelve ballots and puts them neatly aside. Helen and Eli drastically roll their eyes towards me. I'm the only one left disagreeing with the group. Nobody will come out and say it, but everyone knows. Most of them caved after the first few days. We started strong - seven guilty, five not guilty. Then four not guilty; then

three. Yesterday, it was Brynn and me against the rest. They got to her - Helen, Eli and, to a lesser extent, Shep. I don't blame her, though - I don't blame any of them. Being in this room day after day fighting strong opposing opinions. It's not their fault they gave in.

5 pm - we are free to grab some dinner and head back to our rooms. Just as I reach the door, I hear Shep.

"Gunner? Can I pull you aside for a moment?"

I let my hand slide off the silver door handle to freedom.

"I've started to become a little concerned about you."

Shep is sitting on the edge of the large round laminate table. He's the kind of man you automatically respect. Ex-military take charge demeanor. It's reassuring. You can't help but trust him. His voice has notes of genuine concern - a typical southern gentleman - but it's the hint of frustration that has me on edge.

"Now, I don't want you to take offence at what I'm about to ask, you hear? But you're not voting not guilty just because you don't wanna change your mind, now are you?"

"What? No." I'm hurt by the question. *Is that how I'm coming across? Do they all believe I'm just stubborn?*

Shep stands up and begins to organise the table for the next day.

"I just don't want your pride getting in the way of justice," he says, not even looking at me, "not wanting to admit you're wrong and all."

Disappointing Shep feels similar to that of a son disappointing a proud father. "Shep, I would never let pride or anything else influence my vote. My decision is based on my belief and the lack of evidence."

Shep forces a smile. I'll admit, mentioning the lack of evidence was a bit of a dig. His foremost reason for voting guilty is the "undeniable and overwhelming evidence," as he puts it, but to me, circumstantial evidence isn't overwhelming. There is no way I'm going to send someone to prison for twenty-five to life based on circumstantial evidence alone.

"Alrighty then," he says in an overly cheerful voice, "I'm just trying to look out for you, Gunner."

Being part of a jury is hard. Details of murder are replayed over and over during deliberation. Horrific photos of little five-year-old Ella left bloodied and bruised forever burned into your mind. Discussions of the autopsy report and how an adult could possibly strangle a little girl. Sitting through hours of testimonies and closing arguments. The details you hope to forget are the most important ones to remember. I expected disagreements over certain pieces of evidence, but not to be the only one left believing the defendant was innocent and having to fight to be heard.

I wake up, ready to stand my ground. You can do this, I tell my reflection, trying to smooth down the last few hairs sticking up at the back as if it will make me more convincing. Just stay strong and get your point across. I give myself a final nod of approval before making my way to the room in which I have spent the last five days.

Most of my fellow jurors are already in their seats. The chair I have claimed as my own is free. My hand automatically finds its way to the comfort foam inside the corner seat as Brynn slides into the chair next to me.

"I overheard Helen arguing with Shep after breakfast this morning," she whispers. "She was saying he needs to find a way to either get you kicked off the jury or change your mind."

There are rules against discussing anything regarding the case outside of deliberation; we all know that. Of course, that's why Helen went to Shep instead of Eli. She would use Shep being foreman as a loophole if anyone complained.

"What did Shep say?" I ask.

"Well, he told her to calm down, and everyone has a right to their own opinion, but..."

"But what?"

Brynn shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "But that justice for Ella will be served."

"I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it," Brynn adds quickly, reassuring herself as much as me.

"Yeah," I respond, "nothing to worry about."

"Good morning, everyone. I hope we can come to an agreement today."

I refuse to acknowledge Shep. He's watching me while I focus my attention on the discussion those timid jurors three and four are having. Their flimsy attempt to bring up the absence of DNA at the scene is repeated almost daily, only to be shut down by Helen, or Eli, or Helen and Eli. Today, however, Shep steps in.

"What's your take on this, Gunner?"

"Who cares what he thinks." Helen can't help butting in. "We wouldn't be in this position if the murderer wasn't a woman."

Shep raises his palm to Helen, quieting her.

"Now, we all know there is no DNA and only one fingerprint from Lacey at the scene despite her being Ella's nanny. The next logical step is to look at the stack of non-forensic evidence and come to a conclusion. Most of y'all have done that. I'd like to hear from Gunner."

Shep is calling me out, challenging me. This is my final chance to change their minds, get them to see the truth.

“Well, Shep, I don’t believe there is a ‘stack of non-forensic evidence’, as you say. Let’s start with the one big piece missing from your theory. Where’s the motive?”

Helen is fidgeting in her seat, desperate to speak. Shep beats her to it.

“Gunner,” the word comes out as a sigh. “We’ve been over this. The prosecutors presented a clear and well thought out motive. Lacey did not want to care for Ella anymore, but she needed the money. Lacey became abusive. Ella was going to tell her parents. Lacey couldn’t allow that to happen.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Witnesses said she was a great nanny and loved Ella.”

“Lacey’s witnesses claimed she loved Ella but there are conflicting statements from the prosecution.”

“Those people were discredited by Lacey’s lawyers though,” I say.

“Lacey’s attorneys attempted to discredit them. I do not believe they were entirely successful, however,” Shep replies as calmly as ever.

“But they were seen at the park just hours before Ella went missing. I have it written down right here, ‘Ella was playing on the swings as Lacey pushed her. Both were seen laughing’. Why would they be laughing and having fun if Lacey was planning on murdering Ella later? Why would she kill her? It’s irrational.” I’m proud of my reasoning. That would convince me.

“Jealousy!” Shouts Helen, unable to hold her tongue any longer.

Shep opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again and sits back.

“Why would a nineteen-year-old be jealous of a five-year-old?” I ask, massaging my brow in frustration.

“Because Ella had everything Lacey never did as a child. The jealousy built up.”

Like Shep, my mouth opens to speak, but no words come out. When did Helen think up a new motive? Eli must be involved. Or maybe it’s his idea. Eli’s thoughts - Helen’s words. How those two made it through jury selection, I’ll never know.

“Think about it. Ella was an adorable, bubbly five-year-old who lived in a great big house in an affluent neighbourhood with two happily married parents. She was taken on vacations, had all the most popular toys and went to the best private school in the State. Everything a child could want, a picturesque life. On the contrary, Lacey grew up in and out of foster homes. She never had the stability Ella did, and she started to resent Ella for that.”

The strength of Helen’s new theory is surprising. If prosecutors had heard it, they could have run with it. A jealous nanny with an unfortunate childhood taking her frustrations out on the pre-schooler she cared for. The headlines would have been epic – Bitter nanny strangles girl (5) without warning. I don’t buy it.

“So, we should start believing any random theory we think of now?” I ask.

“Only the ones that make sense.”

“None of these make sense!”

“The motive doesn’t even matter. All that matters are the signs pointing to Lacey.”

“There’s no evidence! One fingerprint and no DNA from the person spending all her time with Ella. No witnesses. No reason why Lacey would kill this girl she seemed to love. How are none of you seeing this? Someone else killed Ella.”

“If she was such a great nanny, then why is Ella dead, and why did the police charge Lacey?”

I turn to the faces around me. Can’t they hear how ridiculous Helen sounds? I’ve read about this kind of thing happening before. Police oversights and juries convicting innocent people. No one in this room wants to admit they’re making the same mistake, but they’re are. They’ve got the wrong person.

“Are you serious?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Gunner. I am more than serious. That beautiful little girl didn’t deserve to have her life cut short by that envious monster.”

“Lacey isn’t a monster. She didn’t do this.”

“Bro wants to bang a murderer,” laughs the voice next to Helen.

Balancing his chair on its hind legs, Eli focuses on his latest trash ball creation as it flies ever higher into the air with each throw. My hand slams down on the table. The trash ball tumbles to the ground.

“What’s wrong with you?” My voice is louder than I expected.

“Hey, man, I get it. She’s hot, but she’s also a kid killer.”

My chair falls backwards as I jump up, ready to pounce across the table.

“Let’s all calm down,” Shep says.

“All? So now you want to be part of this conversation, Shep? Where were you five seconds ago when....”

“I understand your frustration, Gunner.”

“... Eli was being a dick....”

“That’s no reason to be acting like this.”

“... but you blame me.”

“Sit... down.”

It was not a suggestion. I pick up my chair and throw myself onto the seat. The calm control of Shep’s voice only powers my frustration. I know I’m acting like a child; I hate it, but I can’t stop.

“Now, Gunner, I can’t have you behaving like this, disrupting the room, putting other jurors in jeopardy.”

“Yeah, like I’m the only one being disruptive.” *Oh god, I’m starting to sound like Eli.*

“If I hear one more outburst from you,” he says, raising his voice to cover mine, “I will have no choice but to have you removed from this jury.”

“What? You can’t do that. You can’t kick me off because I disagree with you.”

“I can do what is best for the rest of the jury. This is why you all elected me as foreman.”

This is not how today was supposed to go. I had it planned. Convince everyone Lacey is innocent. We all vote not guilty. Lacey goes free, and the police find Ella’s actual killer. Ella gets justice, her family get closure, and the right person is convicted. How did this all go wrong?

“Are you all just going to accept this?”

I frantically look from person to person, pleading with their stern faces and ashamed downcast eyes.

“You two know I’m right,” I shout at jurors three and four, “don’t let them win. Fight for what you believe in.”

They don’t respond.

The last ounce of hysterical hope I have spills out to the chair next to me.

“I know you disagree with them. Come on, Brynn.”

“We don’t know what really happened, Gunner,” she mumbles. “We’ll never know. All we can do is guess, and the guess that Lacey killed Ella is the best we’ve got.”

The smirk on Shep’s face is unmistakable. He wanted this. He planned to let Helen and Eli push me to this point, and I fell for it. *I’m an idiot.*

The room full of twelve people once again falls silent as Shep calls for a vote. My pen hovers above the word ‘guilty’ written across my piece of paper. I need to write ‘not’, but my hand won’t move.

We walk back into the courtroom the same way we left, single file. It looks more significant than it did during the trial. The exquisite walnut wood gives the room a mysterious feel, like we’re in an exclusive country club. A front for the many lives destroyed by black robes and a gavel. Extravagance is used as a distraction.

“Has the jury reached a unanimous decision?” The judge’s voice bounces around the room.

Shep stands and states in his most professional tone. “We have your Honour.”

“Will the defendant please rise? In the case against Miss Lacey Carrillo, on the count of first-degree murder of Ella Saunders. How do you find?”

“We the jury find the defendant... guilty.”

I knew the verdict was coming, yet each word is like a ton of bricks placed upon my shoulders. I feel for the foam in the corner tear and realise I'm sitting in a different chair. Bile rises in my stomach. I'm frozen as the world continues around me. Crying from the families of Lacey and Ella is muffled as I blink away my own tears.

Looking up for the first time since Shep read those finalising words, I glance at Lacey, my eyes connecting with hers. Shame and guilt instantly hit me as I unknowingly whisper. “I'm sorry.”

My gaze stays locked on Lacey as she is escorted away to serve a sentence we handed her. A sentence she shouldn't be serving while Ella's real killer is free.

I've failed her; I've failed them both.