

According to the peaceful townfolk of Lochton, Illinois, Benjamin Poe was the most hated and feared man to ever live. He'd spent the last four years in a maximum-security prison, knowing lethal injection was his only way out and rightfully so. Despite dozens of inquiries, the motive behind his murderous act remained unknown, until a cocksure advocate took up his case, determined to uncover his story.

After stepping through the security doors at the Lochton Correctional Institute, Pierce Beaudoin hooked a finger under his buttoned-down collar to loosen it from his sweaty neck. He waited to be cleared at the understaffed security desk before being escorted through the visitor's area to a private conference room. It boasted cold concrete walls for privacy and a Plexiglas barrier to prevent contraband from changing hands, and to protect attorneys from their belligerent clients.

Beaudoin sat down and extracted a manila file from his black briefcase, laying it on the counter. After pulling a pen from his inside coat pocket, he reviewed his notes as he patiently waited for his reticent client to arrive. Poe was the former captain of a crew of firefighters at Lochton Fire District #1. He had been held by the state for extradition for the last four years, during which time his wife had filed for divorce and every known acquaintance and blood relation had distanced themselves. Normally, a homicide investigation would run for upwards of two years, but there were too many questions and very few answers regarding the case of Benjamin Poe's murdered son.

The clunk and scraping of withdrawing bolts preceded his client who was escorted by a corrections officer. He directed his prisoner to sit and secured his leg restraints to something on

the floor. Poe quietly sat, staring at his hand, his fingers interlaced on the counter. Although he was in his early fifties, he looked much older. His eyes were tired and framed with wrinkles. His gray hair was slicked back, accentuating his receding hairline. But even in his prison uniform he was tidy and well-groomed. His orange jumpsuit was clean and undershirt was crisp white. He was freshly shaven and his fingers, slender and feminine, were manicured and evenly trimmed.

Despite his orderly appearance, this was a murderer—a man who had committed the ultimate crime. With his verdict read, the judicial stage had been set. His execution was slated for the first of October, less than four months from now. This is why Beaudoin took the case. He loved the idea of a challenge. Obtaining an appeal for this highly publicized client, as unlikely as it seemed, would bring credibility and noteworthy clients to his struggling practice.

After the officer exited the room, Beaudoin put the phone to his ear and patiently waited for Poe to do the same.

“Good morning, Ben,” Beaudoin said.

“Morning, Counselor.” Poe’s full lips pressed into a thin line.

“I’m glad you agreed to speak with me today. It’s been a while since our last session.”

“Too long,” Poe replied dryly.

“Are you aware of our situation?”

“Of course, I’m aware,” Poe snapped. “The date is approaching fast and we’re running out of options.”

Beaudoin sighed. “It would seem so. But I haven’t given up hope just yet. We can still try for an insanity plea, although I know how you feel about that.” He paused a moment to study

Poe's tired eyes. "I've seen it work even this late in sentencing. If there's one chance to keep you alive, Ben, then we need to—"

"Counselor, it's over. You and I both know that. I'm done fighting. If I plead insanity, they'll send me away to the State hospital...and I don't want to spend what time I have left in that place. But I don't want to go home either. There's nothing left for me there." He leaned forward, resting his elbow the counter. "I know I'm not crazy, and I understand the seriousness of it. But I swear to you it was never my intention to kill him." He paused. "Not Gabriel. Not my son."

"Can I be frank with you, Ben?"

He nodded.

"Any ordinary case would have resolved itself by now, but as you're very well aware, this is far from ordinary. Your son's blood was found on your clothes. The same caliber revolver found in your possession matched his wounds, and you never denied firing it. Yet you continue to claim your innocence. Which begs the question..." Beaudoin paused briefly, choosing his words carefully. "If you didn't kill your son, as you'd like me to believe, then who did?"

Poe tipped his head to the side. "I never claimed he was killed by someone else, Mr. Beaudoin. If you read the transcripts, my story has never changed. Not one iota." The crease between Poe's eyebrows deepened. "I was the one who pulled the trigger. I was the one who fired all six shots. My son Gabriel died by my hand, but like I said, it was never my intention to kill him. The six rounds I fired were meant for someone else."

Beaudoin slapped his hand on the counter. "Right! That's what you said before. Someone else was there. But who, Mr. Poe?" He paused, exasperated. "And why? Because you

refuse to admit your guilt. You refuse to take responsibility for your actions. Yet here I am...trying my best to keep you alive.”

Poe sighed. “I’ve accepted my fate, Mr. Beaudoin. I don’t expect any favors, but after everything you’ve done for me, you deserve to hear it all. The whole truth. I’ve never shared this with anyone because no one would ever believe me. But there’s no point now in keeping it a secret any longer. I just want to leave this world knowing I held nothing back.”

Beaudoin shook his head. “And you wait until now to share this?”

“I know, but I swear the story I’m about to tell you is the God’s honest truth.”

Beaudoin could see his own reflection in the Plexiglas barrier and it looked as shocked as he felt. He shrugged and said, “Very well then, you’ve got my full attention, Mr. Poe.”

“You’ll think I’m crazy. That much is certain. You might even demand that I plead insanity after you hear my explanation. But all I ask from you is to hear me out. Nothing more. Then you decide if the devil was there...or if he’s sitting in this room right now.”

Beaudoin eyed Poe, trying to decide if this bit of storytelling was worth his time. He tugged on his shirt sleeve and glanced down at his watch. It was 10:58AM and he had more than forty minutes to spare before his next meeting. So, what did he have to lose, aside from his patience? Blowing out an exaggerated breath, he answered, “Okay, I’m listening.”

Poe shifted on his seat and appeared to be collecting his thoughts. Or maybe he was formulating his story.

Then he began.

“It happened two weeks before Christmas. The fire at College Inn. Do you remember that?”

Beaudoin nodded and waited for him to continue.

“It was the night that everything was destroyed, including my life. You see, Mr. Beaudoin, up until then, I was a good Christian man, a loving father. I made an honest living. I provided a comfortable life for my family. I did everything by the book...everything that was expected of me.” Poe rubbed his eyes and before he pulled his hands away, he continued, “I didn’t know until that night that the world is full of monsters. Monsters with dark souls and claws, waiting for the chance to tear you apart.”