

It could not have taken more than twenty seconds to walk from the back of the court room to the witness stand, but it played out in slow motion to her. She had chosen her pale pink suit carefully – not too long so that she appeared falsely prudish and bitter, but not too short so that she would give a wrong impression. She didn't want to be trying too hard. She just wanted to look natural, like her old self.

Her cheeks were hot, though, and likely flushed by her nervous embarrassment. She tried to walk carefully, noting the shine on the recently waxed tile floor. What would they think if she slipped and fell? Would she appear off-balanced and confused? 'Just be cool,' she thought. 'Everything will be fine.'

Besides an occasional cough, the only sound was the intermittent clicking of her high heels across the floor. They were off-white since it wasn't yet spring. She didn't know why that was important to remember now, but it was. Everything was important – the style of her hair, the color polish on her nails and the bag that she clutched. The latter was empty except for her lipstick, cell phone and a crumbled ball of tissue smeared with the first application of lipstick. She'd gone too far with the light pink and it just made her lips look old and wrinkled. After removing it, she applied a neutral gloss and dropped it in her clutch just in case. She tried in vain to think of something else vital to include. It wasn't only that she couldn't think of anything. She didn't have anything.

Everything was gone - the houses, the cars, the jewelry, the leather handbags, shoes, designer clothes, all of it. Items began to disappear steadily. First, it was a TV and some old exercise equipment; then, a computer, a few expensive paintings and some furs. The housekeepers and cook resigned next. She never swam anymore so it was a while before she noticed the scum in the pool. They had all gone before she'd disgraced herself further.

It had all begun so innocently. She was traveling more than twelve to eighteen months at a time around the country and around the world. It used to sound ridiculous when other performers said they would wake up and not know what state or country they were in. When she began to experience that, it became frightening. She was losing stamina and time. Someone suggested she just needed quality sleep and gave her something to put her out at night. As her addictions progressed, she added one cocktail then several to the mix. There never failed to be someone around who had ‘just what you need.’

Finally, she was feeling good. Then, she began to forget the words to her songs. She would rant about the lights being too bright or the musicians playing off-tempo causing her to lose count. Eventually the music stopped.

She couldn’t afford the upkeep on three homes, so she sold the Texas estate. Desperate to keep up appearances, she remained in L.A., attending all the gala events she could get in to. Instead of being the It girl, she was back to going on calls for even the mediocre movie roles. Then the film roles ended. But long before the residual checks slowed to a crawl, the invitations stopped coming. She had become obnoxious, swollen-faced and pathetic. The only attention she drew was in honor of her DUIs and fashion disasters. Her cosmetic contract was also canceled due to the negative press. She had been dubbed “the queen of perpetual bad taste.”

To settle mounting legal fees, she gave up the tri-level in Brentwood and quietly retreated to her place in North Carolina. The home there didn’t last too long either. She gave it up after two years moving into a condominium. As a recluse, she went back to her birth name. She gave up the bleach jobs and let her hair grow out in its natural sandy brown.

Away from the noise of Hollywood, the mental fog lifted and she tried being a normal person. That’s when she met Dale. He was a regular kind of guy. He jogged in the

neighborhood and helped her with groceries once or twice. He was by no means on the level of any of the men she previously dated. He had a receding hairline and sometimes smelled of garlic, but he was sweet and had a beautiful white smile. He brought the life back into her eyes. Before she knew it, she was in love.

After they got married, things changed drastically just like a scene from one of her old movies. To outsiders, her husband was a model of loving devotion. At home, he was abusive and a closet drunk. She had no family to speak of so he couldn't isolate her from anyone but himself. It was only when she found herself pregnant that she decided she'd had enough. Leaving wasn't easy. Life with him had been the only form of stability she had had in a long time, but the birth of her daughter made her want a peaceful life, too. Those innocent green eyes slightly resembled the pair she'd seen reflected in the mirror many years ago before fast and hard living had destroyed their glow. Like most mothers, she now wanted something better for her little girl.

There was no money left so no inheritance to pass along. She had to start from scratch, finding work in the real world. In this new leading role, she hoped to get back some of the dignity and self-esteem she'd sold along the way. The first step was facing her soon-to-be ex-husband in court.

In his fight for custody, he had dug up her sordid past. Now a simple divorce hearing had become a full-fledged media spectacular. Everyone wanted to see the washed up star make a display of her self one more time, even if only to prove that her life was much worse than their own.

She couldn't falter. She couldn't let drop one bead of sweat. This wasn't a concert. It wasn't a movie role. It was her life and her child's future. She didn't want to split hairs about

who was the better screw-up. She didn't want to destroy him on the stand. She just wanted her daughter.

She knew they would ask about her marriage. For a certainty, they would bring up her former loose living. They would ask about the parties, the drinking and the drugs. They would ask about her glamorous career in film and on stage; then, inquire about her current job cleaning offices. Humiliated but determined, she would answer them all. She would do anything...

She held back the urge to claw her husband with her freshly manicured nails as she passed him by. Her lawyer nodded and smiled as she sat down. 'Don't cross your legs,' she reminded herself. She inhaled deeply to calm her racing heart. Hopefully, the time would move quickly and she could keep it together without fainting or crying. She was focused until somewhere in the courtroom a camera flashed and then another. Subconsciously, she both laughed and gasped in nervous release. People began to whisper. The judge banged his gavel. In an instant, she fell apart.