GIDEON JUSTICE
Justice Was Never Blind
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Gideon Justice: Justice Was Never Blind
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Chapter One: Dawn of Discovery

She found him at dawn.

Until now, she had worked alone.

She could judge the world. She could punish it. She could enter it whenever she wished, but she could never make a life there.

Changing it required something she did not possess.

Someone who lived in it.

The field lay at the edge of a forgotten road, where the land gave up pretending it belonged to anyone. Mud and water clung together in uneven patches. The crops nearby had grown thin and tired, bending under their own weight. Birds had already learned not to land there.

The child had been left in the open, skin mottled purple-gray where it wasn't crusted with dried blood.

Swaddled once, poorly, in cloth that had not held. The fabric was stiff with damp and decay, torn in places by small mouths and relentless teeth. The rats scattered when the light shifted. Insects lifted reluctantly, offended at the interruption.

The child did not cry. There was little moisture left in his body.

Tiny fingernails torn to the quick, evidence of his desperate clawing at the earth. The hollow beneath his ribs pulsed with each shallow breath, a metronome counting down the hours he had fought alone against rain, wind, and the hunger of creatures that had no concept of mercy. The body had not surrendered yet, but it had stopped expecting mercy.

Lady Justice stood over him, barefoot in the mud. The blindfold hung loose around her neck, as if sight was

something she chose to use only when necessary. She rarely let her feet touch the ground, but in this instance it was necessary.

She did not recoil.

She did not hurry.

She knelt.

The scales did not appear in her hand.
The sword also remained absent.

This was not judgment.

She had not come to decide his fate.
She had come to measure his worth.

The child's eyes opened briefly — unfocused, already learning the discipline of not looking too long at anything that might hurt or leave. There was no recognition in them. No plea. Just awareness.

Lady Justice touched the ground beside him, fingers pressing into the wet soil. The earth accepted her weight without protest. It always did.

She did not heal him.

Not yet.

Healing would have been mercy.

This was selection.

"You were left to die," she said, not unkindly.

The child did not respond.

He knew nothing of guilt. Nothing of innocence. Only pain, hunger, and the need for warmth.

Whatever he would become, he had not become it yet.

She gathered him into her arms.

Her bloodstained white robe enveloped the child's tiny form. Beneath its folds, the ragged edges of his wounds drew together. The bites along his legs sealed, leaving smooth skin where flesh had been torn away.

Warmth returned to his limbs. His chest rose with a full breath, then another.

He would never remember her lifting him. He could not know what she had changed.

The rats did not return.

The insects dispersed fully now, their work interrupted permanently.

Lady Justice rose and looked once more at the field.

By nightfall, she had carried him to a farmhouse far from the nearest town. The couple who lived there worked a small holding, growing enough to feed themselves and selling what remained. She placed the child in the woman’s arms.

“His name is Gideon.”

The woman drew back the robe to look at him. Her husband stood beside her, his hand resting against the child’s back.

“He will need milk,” the woman said.

Lady Justice stayed until he was fed.

She returned the following morning, and every day afterward.

The farmers raised him. He learned to walk across their kitchen floor, to carry water without spilling it, to tend animals that depended on him. He learned that a poor harvest meant smaller meals and that work continued when someone was tired or grieving.

He knew the sound of someone calling him home.

Lady Justice came to teach him other things.

He learned hunger in a season when the harvest failed. He watched the woman put food on his plate before serving herself, and learned to leave some in the pot.

Lady Justice taught him to watch before acting, to listen before deciding. When he offered an answer too quickly, she asked what he had missed.

His injuries never lasted. Cuts closed without scars. Bruises faded before the farmers could account for them.

But he grew as other children grew.

As a boy, he asked her why she had taken him.

“You had nothing left with which to fight,” she said. “Except that you had not finished fighting.”

“Did you know I would live?”

“No,” she said. “But you seemed unwilling to consider anything else.”

At thirteen, she took him to Rome.

The farmer’s wife had taught him to clean a wound and draw its edges together with a needle. He attempted to stitch his own hand once. But, by the time he tied the knot, the skin had healed around the thread.

In Rome, Lady Justice brought him beneath the Colosseum.

“Your wounds close,” she told him. “Theirs will need help.”

She left him beside a basin of water, a bundle of clean linen, and a man holding his belly together.

Above the stone arches, the crowd roared.

Gideon knelt beside the man and threaded his needle.

Others followed. Men carried from the arena on stretchers, men leaning on one another, men who collapsed before they reached him. He learned which wounds he could close and which he could only cover. He learned to keep working when someone begged him to stop.

In time, the wounded knew to ask for him.

“The seamstress,” they called him.

He stitched torn flesh with steady hands while men screamed in the arena above and others waited beside him, watching the needle.

Good men.
Bad men.
Strong men.
Broken men.

They all bled the same.

One night, as he worked by torchlight, a young gladiator asked him a question.

“Why do they cheer when we die?”

Gideon finished the stitch and tied the knot.

“They don’t know you.”

“Would they stop if they did?”

Gideon looked at him. The boy was scarcely older than he was.

“I don’t know.”

That night, he lay awake beneath the arena. He thought of the field Lady Justice had described. The rats. The child he could not remember being.

He had done nothing to deserve being left in the field. Nothing to earn being taken from it.

Perhaps she had brought him here to learn that help did not have to be earned.

Chapter Two: The Killing

Three nights before the Griffin hearing.

The bartender noticed him the moment he walked in.

So did the woman three stools down. Dark hair fell over one shoulder of her cream silk blouse. She had the kind of beauty that usually made men lose their place in a conversation.

This time, she lost hers.

The man wore a dark suit that fit cleanly across broad shoulders. Tall, dark-haired, with a face the bartender would have expected on a screen rather than in his doorway. He paused just inside, letting his eyes adjust.

The bar sat on a quiet Boston corner, the kind of place where the same six people came every night and pretended they hadn't aged since college. Televisions hummed over the counter. A hockey game played to an audience that wasn't watching.

The man crossed to the empty end of the bar. He seemed unaware of the woman following him with her eyes.

The bartender suspected he was used to it.

He sat.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

"Water," the man said. "No ice."

He offered neither apology nor explanation.

The bartender poured the glass and slid it over. The man nodded once in thanks. No smile. No small talk.

Up close, he looked to be in his early forties. His features had a classical sharpness.

Roman, the bartender thought, though he couldn't say why.

Then their eyes met, and he forgot the next thing he had intended to say.

His eyes possessed neither warmth nor cruelty. What bothered the bartender was their patience. Most people glanced away after a moment. This man seemed content to wait until the bartender did.

“You in town on business?” the bartender asked.

The man considered the question.

“Always,” he said.

He finished the water in a single motion, set the glass down with quiet precision, and stood.

“Keep the change,” he said, leaving cash beside the empty glass.

The bartender looked at the money, then back at the door as it closed behind him.

He’d served thousands of men—lawyers, cops, criminals, politicians.

But that one…

That one didn’t look like he came from any particular place.

He looked like he’d been there before the place existed.

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Outside, the air was cold enough to sharpen the edges of the city.

Gideon Justice walked three blocks without looking back. His footsteps were steady, unhurried, the rhythm of a man who knew exactly where he was going and exactly what waited for him there.

The streetlights along Commonwealth Avenue cast long pools of yellow light across the pavement. Cars moved in slow, cautious lines. Apartment windows glowed above him like rows of quiet witnesses.

Adam Schecter had worked beside Gideon for more than forty years.

Two weeks earlier, he had been murdered outside the courthouse, minutes after leaving a hearing.

By the time Gideon reached the scene, the area was cordoned off. Schecter’s body lay beneath a sheet. Blood had collected in a seam between the paving stones. A woman on the courthouse steps was crying into her telephone.

Gideon learned the sequence afterward. The man had approached Schecter from behind and driven a narrow blade into his back. As Schecter fell, the killer fired twice into his head.

Then he walked away.

Witnesses described a white man, just over six feet tall, muscular, wearing dark tactical clothing and black boots.

It gave Gideon somewhere to start.

A contact inside the intelligence community supplied a name and photograph: Cael Vorrin. Surveillance placed him outside the courthouse before Schecter’s death. A payment routed through Bancroft’s company connected the assassin to the man who had hired him.

Bancroft had been Schecter’s own client. Facing decades in prison for fraud, he had accepted a plea agreement that reduced his sentence to ten years. Schecter had saved him years. Bancroft believed he should have saved him all of them.

Gideon had supplied the surveillance and payment records to District Attorney Cloonan’s office. The investigation was proceeding.

He had decided not to wait.

Using a false name and the promise of another job, he arranged to meet Vorrin on Commonwealth Avenue.

Lady Justice had given no order.

He had not asked for one.

The median strip of Commonwealth Avenue stretched between rows of brick brownstones, its trees and benches lit at intervals by streetlights. Offices occupied some of the buildings. Apartments filled the upper floors.

Even at this hour, someone was walking a dog. A couple crossed toward the next intersection. Lights burned behind windows overlooking the grass.

Gideon had chosen the place knowing he would be seen.

He waited beneath a streetlight, hands loose at his sides. For a man expecting to discuss a killing, the public setting might offer reassurance.

Footsteps approached.

Gideon recognized Vorrin before he reached the streetlight.

“Greg?” the man asked quietly.

Gideon nodded.

Vorrin stepped closer.

Gideon wanted to feel the blow land.

He drove his fist into the man’s stomach. Vorrin doubled over, breath escaping in a sharp gasp.

The familiar calm settled over Gideon. For two weeks he had studied photographs, traced payments, and waited.

Now the man was within reach.

Vorrin straightened into the attack. Three quick punches caught Gideon across the face, the last turning his head.

His vision darkened at the edges. He tasted blood.

For a moment, he enjoyed the pain.

Then his sight cleared. The split inside his cheek sealed, and he stepped forward.

Vorrin saw the blood on Gideon’s mouth. Saw him smile.

His hand darted toward his waistband.

“None of that.”

Gideon caught Vorrin’s wrist, pulled the pistol free, and threw it onto the grass.

Vorrin stepped back and raised his fists. His eyes flicked toward the gun.

Gideon moved between him and it.

They circled beneath the streetlight.

Vorrin dropped low and lunged for his legs. Gideon drove them back, forcing the assassin’s weight onto his hands. Before Vorrin could rise, Gideon caught his right wrist and hauled the arm behind him.

Vorrin struggled to get one foot beneath himself.

Gideon kicked it out and forced him onto both knees. He bent the captured hand back.

Bone snapped.

Vorrin screamed.

Gideon held the ruined hand against the man’s back and leaned close to his ear.

“Adam Schecter.”

Vorrin stopped struggling.

“I was paid,” he said. “It wasn’t personal.”

Gideon tightened his grip.

“It is now.”

Vorrin began to shake.

Gideon released the broken hand and seized a fistful of hair, pulling his head back.

Then he drove his fist into the base of the skull.

Vorrin went slack. Gideon held him for a moment before letting the body fall onto the grass.

Blood marked his cuff. He drew it beneath his jacket sleeve.

He stood over the man and waited for his own breathing to steady.

Schecter was still dead.

He had known this would change nothing. He had wanted it anyway.

Lady Justice would be watching.

Tonight, he had not acted at her command.

A muffled shriek broke the silence.

Across the street, two college students stood frozen, arms wrapped around each other. When they realized Gideon was looking at them, they ran.

Windows lit briefly, then went dark.

Gideon turned toward the firm's building across the street. Figures stood behind the glass. One stepped back as he looked up.

Jessica stayed.

She stood naked at her floor-to-ceiling window, close enough to the glass that he could see her clearly. She made no move to cover herself.

Her gaze dropped to Vorrin's body, then returned to Gideon. Her lips parted. She placed a palm against the window and leaned closer.

He knew how she watched him in meetings, waiting for him to qualify an instruction, impose a limit.

There was no impatience in her now.

She had watched him kill a man. Now she smiled.

Her approval unsettled him.

A siren sounded several blocks away. It might have nothing to do with him. He had no reason to wait and find out.

He looked along the avenue. The students were gone. Someone stood in a doorway with a phone raised.

He had chosen the place. He would have to answer for what happened here.

Gideon pulled his jacket straight and crossed toward the firm’s entrance.

When he looked up again, Jessica was still at the window.

Chapter Three: The Office

Gideon had almost reached the firm’s entrance when he saw Alex across the avenue, waiting inside Mitchell Automotive.

The garage occupied a narrow frontage beneath a battered red-and-white sign. Through its open door, Gideon could see cracked concrete, racks of wrenches, and Alex holding a tablet.

Behind him, a police cruiser stopped beside the median. An officer got out and hurried toward Vorrin.

Gideon crossed the avenue.

Alex stepped back to let him in. Sweat had darkened his shirt collar, and athletic tape covered two swollen knuckles.

“You’re getting too old to spar with men half your age,” Gideon said.

“Tell them to stop challenging me.”

Aleksander—Alex—was fifty-eight and had served Gideon for twenty-five years. He had been a soccer prodigy in Belarus before a military career took him to Israel and its LOTAR counterterrorism training. Gray now showed at his temples. His hands were still quick.

Gideon had known gladiators, pirates, and Vikings. Alex would have held his own among them. His mother had noticed it too.

Lady Justice called him her second son.

Alex glanced past Gideon. A second cruiser pulled up. Across the grass, the first officer crouched beside the body.

“You could have picked somewhere farther from home.”

“It’s a public street. He thought he was safe.”

“There are public streets farther from home.”

Alex closed the garage door before Gideon could answer. Red and blue light flickered beneath it.

To anyone passing, Mitchell's was a mechanic's shop that had stayed open late. Behind stacks of tire rims stood a reinforced steel door. Alex unlocked it, revealing a small lift. The machinery carried them down to a passage running beneath Commonwealth Avenue.

The garage was a later addition to the headquarters. A tunnel connected the two buildings beneath the avenue, giving Gideon a discreet alternative to the front door.

In 1852, Gideon commissioned Arthur Gilman to design his headquarters, supplying the money and political influence to secure the site and get it built. Italian craftsmen brought Gilman's design to life in tan sandstone and crimson brick. Six chimneys rose above the roofline. Ironwork framed entrances cut from heavy New Hampshire granite.

From the street, the building still looked much as it had when the craftsmen left. The windows had changed. The greater alterations lay beneath it.

When the Sumner Tunnel engineers finished their work in the 1930s, Gideon offered several of them another commission. This one appeared in no municipal record. Boston's water table made the excavation expensive. The engineers' silence made it more so.

Three underground levels took shape beneath the firm. Vehicles, training rooms, and a firing range occupied U1. Medical suites, operations rooms, and a library filled U2. The vault, archives, and primary armory lay below them on U3.

Among the archives lay a folded burial cloth his mother had left in his keeping centuries earlier. It remained here between her visits, ordinary fabric until she laid her hand upon it.

Ahead, Alex pressed his thumb against a reader. The elevator doors opened.

They descended to U1.

The air grew colder when the doors parted. Ventilation fans hummed behind concrete walls. From the firing range came two muffled shots, a pause, then three more.

Alex checked the time on his tablet.

“Someone else who should be in bed,” he said.

The vehicle bay smelled of rubber and gun oil. A mechanic worked beneath the raised hood of an Escalade. Beyond him, matching black vehicles stood in marked spaces, their armored windows reflecting the overhead lights.

An operator nodded to Gideon. Another checked a medical bag laid open across a rear seat.

Alex led him toward the third Escalade, flexing his taped hand as they walked.

For twenty-five years, he had waited for Gideon in doorways, outside courtrooms, beside vehicles in places neither of them discussed afterward. Gideon had watched the gray reach his hair. Lately, he had noticed Alex working the stiffness from his fingers after a long night.

One day, if Alex lived long enough, Gideon would have to help him into the car.

“Send Cloonan the unedited recordings,” Gideon said. “All angles. Include the footage before Vorrin arrived.”

Alex brought up the feeds. One showed Gideon waiting beneath the streetlight. On another, Vorrin approached from the corner.

On the screen, Gideon stepped forward and drove his fist into Vorrin’s stomach.

Alex sent the files.

“The gun is still on the grass,” he said.

“They’ll find it.”

“And the person filming from the doorway?”

“I saw him.”

Alex lowered the tablet.

Gideon took out his phone.

District Attorney William “Billy” Cloonan answered on the fourth ring.

“Someone had better be dead.”

“Cael Vorrin. Commonwealth Avenue.”

A rustle of bedding. Then silence.

“What have you done?”

“Vorrin killed Schecter. You have the payment records and courthouse surveillance. Alex just sent you tonight’s recordings.”

“Are you still there?”

“I’m inside.”

“Stay available.”

Gideon heard Billy moving, then the tapping of keys.

“The man was a CIA asset,” Gideon said. “Ninth Silence designation. Bancroft hired him privately.”

“You told my office that already.”

“And he was still walking around Boston.”

“We were investigating him.”

“I know.”

Billy said nothing for several seconds.

Then: “You hit him first.”

“Keep watching.”

Gideon stood beside the Escalade. Alex lowered the tablet to his side.

“He reaches for a firearm,” Gideon said.

“I see it.”

Another silence.

“You took it away.”

“Yes.”

“Gideon.”

He waited.

“You had his gun. You had him on his knees. Then you killed him.”

Gideon looked at the blood on his cuff.

“He murdered Adam for a fee.”

“I heard you.”

“Bancroft would have paid him again. Or someone else would.”

“That doesn’t answer what I just said.”

“No one is going to mourn him, Billy.”

“That isn’t the test.”

“You have people waiting for your office to help them. Tell me who benefits from spending a year prosecuting the man who stopped him.”

“Don’t ask me to make that decision while I’m watching you kill him.”

Alex looked up.

Billy continued. “The police will investigate. I’ll have the recordings reviewed. Don’t mistake this conversation for clearance.”

“Ask Langley what he was doing here.”

“If they have something relevant, they can tell the investigators.”

“They won’t want the attention.”

“Neither should you.”

Gideon said nothing.

“Keep your phone on,” Billy said, and ended the call.

Gideon slipped it into his coat.

Alex was watching him.

“The people at Langley will probably send me a fruit basket,” Gideon said.

Chapter Four: Lady Justice

Gideon left Alex in the vehicle bay and took the elevator to his private office.

Behind the desk stood a giant wingback leather chair with ornate mahogany bear-claw armrests. The desk and chair had been gifts from Oliver Wolcott, in thanks for Gideon's help with the Declaration of Independence paperwork. He still used both.

He slept upright in that chair for a few hours each day, waking at the slightest approach. To his associates, he appeared to work around the clock. If they managed twenty hours and still thought they were falling short, he saw little reason to correct the impression.

Wolcott had been a good friend. Less celebrated than Hancock, Adams, Franklin, or Jefferson, but respected enough to help Gideon gather the men who would sign. They had not all wanted the same country. Some could have preferred a smaller one of their own. Getting them into a room had been easier than getting them to agree.

Gideon glanced toward the bottles behind the bar. There were three Macallan 65s. None had been opened.

His last drink had been on December 16, 1773, during a three-day rum-punch bender. He had slipped aboard a ship carrying British East India Company tea, blown holes in the hull, and begun dumping the Chinese tea into Boston Harbor. His mother had been furious.

"The fate of the world is relying on your sound judgment and guidance."

He could still hear her saying it. She had scolded him like a child, and he had given her reason. He had not

touched liquor since. A few years later, when he sat with Wolcott and the others, he had been grateful for a clear head.

He closed the office door. The air began to change.

Lady Justice's arrival was inevitable. Gideon had killed a man in public, within sight of their own windows. She expected greater discretion.

Her beauty invited trust. What followed often made trust irrelevant. She understood fear, grief, and the desperate bargains people offered when they knew they were about to die. None of it troubled her once she had passed judgment. What humans called compassion, she often regarded as a failure of resolve.

Gideon had watched her kill without anger and speak gently to those she intended to destroy.

Though not of her flesh, he had become hers two millennia ago. Every day since, without fail, she had acknowledged him as "son"—a word that sounded both tender and terrible in her voice.

Her presence reached Gideon before she took form.

Sweetness filled the air—hypnotic, achingly familiar, something he had known since childhood but could never name. Then the scent changed. Fresh blood. Beneath it, the putrid decay of old carnage.

Her eyes appeared first, luminous azure suspended in the air.

The rest of her gathered around them.

Long auburn hair floated about her face. Her features were impossibly symmetrical, her porcelain skin untouched by the blood staining her robe. The translucent white fabric shifted as she descended, drawing against a powerful abdomen and muscular thighs before falling loose again.

She stopped just above the floor.

The blindfold rested against her throat. She wore it to weigh guilt. Once judgment had been passed, she preferred to see.

Her right hand held the scales. Blood dripped from one pan. In her left, she carried the sword.

Gideon had seen that blade pass through men, beasts, and things for which men had no names. His mother had never hesitated before any of them.

Now she looked at him, and the corners of her mouth lifted.

“My son.” Her voice was gentle. “The death was warranted. The spectacle was not.”

Gideon met her eyes.

“You acted from anger,” she continued. “You know how easily that becomes carelessness.”

“Cloonan has the recordings.”

“Then he has seen your carelessness.”

“He is having them reviewed.”

She studied him for another moment.

“Jessica has the Griffin hearing in three days.”

“Yes.”

“She will lose.”

Gideon waited.

“Seven children have suffered at his hands,” she said. “He will leave the courthouse a free man.”

“He will hurt another child,” she said. “Jessica will see that he does not.”

Gideon looked at the sword.

“Does she know?”

“You will tell her.”

He lowered his chin.

“As you wish, Mother.”

He had challenged her before. Once, he had stood beside a murderer who had spent years persuading

others—and perhaps himself—that he had changed. Gideon had begun to believe him.

His mother had listened. Then she had driven her sword through the man.

“The serpent may shed its skin, Gideon. Its venom remains.”

She had watched him kneel beside the body.

“Some souls cannot be salvaged. Only stopped.”

He had never forgotten how certain she sounded.

Her approval of Vorrin’s death would do nothing to settle the police investigation. Cloonan still had the recordings. Gideon would have to answer him without his mother speaking for him.

To his mother, innocence demanded protection. Evil required elimination. Gideon lived among the people who refused to fit so neatly into either judgment.

For twenty centuries, he had given her will a human face. The firm bore his name. Its lawyers argued before judges, negotiated settlements, and won cases. Most believed they worked for an unusually powerful attorney. A few knew that Lady Justice was real—and that a court’s decision could be followed by an execution if she ordered it.

Beyond its walls, her likeness stood above courthouse doors and watched from judges’ chambers. People cast her in bronze and carved her in marble. They trusted the blindfold, the scales, the promise of fairness.

They debated the scales. What weighed upon them. Who had tipped them. Whether they had ever balanced at all.

The sword allowed no such argument.

Chapter Five: Jessica

At twelve, Jessica knew the sound of his footsteps well enough to tell when he was coming for her.

She listened for them from the basement floor.

The rope had rubbed her wrists raw. When she moved, its coarse fibers dragged across the broken skin. She had stopped pulling.

Cold seeped through the concrete beneath her bare legs. Somewhere behind the furnace, water dripped against metal.

Upstairs, he moved from one room to another.

She tried to follow him by the sound.

Drip.

Silence.

Drip.

The room smelled of mildew and hot dust. She tasted blood where she had bitten the inside of her cheek.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaked beneath his weight.

Jessica held her breath.

Then the air changed.

Sweetness reached her first—faint and almost comforting, like flowers left too long in a sealed room. It covered the mildew without belonging there. The furnace stopped rattling. The dripping water went silent.

A pale light gathered in the stairwell.

A woman floated above the steps, untouched by the dust and damp. Light clung to her skin. She carried a sword that made no sound, although Jessica could feel its presence in her teeth.

Jessica thought she was an angel.

The rope loosened around Jessica’s wrists.

She drew her hands apart. The knot was still tied.

The woman watched her examine the raw skin.

“Can you stand?”

Jessica nodded, although she wasn’t sure.

“Then stand.”

She pushed herself up against the wall.

“Are you taking me away?”

“No.”

Jessica looked toward the stairs.

“You will leave this room,” the woman said. “But first, you will stop him.”

“How?”

“Look around you.”

Jessica’s eyes moved across the workbench, the furnace, the tools hanging on the wall.

“The screwdriver.”

Jessica reached toward the bench, then stopped.

She looked back at the woman. The sword hung from her left hand, its point just above the floor.

Jessica picked up the screwdriver with her own left hand. She looked down at the short shaft of steel, then back at the blade.

“He will come down for you. Let him come close. When he reaches for you, strike. Do not wait for him to hurt you again.”

“Stay with me.”

“I am here.”

Footsteps crossed the floor above. Jessica backed against the wall, holding the screwdriver beside her leg.

He descended slowly and stopped when he saw her standing.

“What are you doing?”

She said nothing. He came closer, his eyes on her face. He had never needed to look at her hands.

Let him come close.

He reached for her.

Jessica drove the screwdriver into his neck.

A thin, startled cry escaped him. His hand caught her shoulder, then slipped away. Blood ran over his collar and down his chest.

He fell at her feet.

Jessica waited for him to get up.

When he did not, she looked toward the woman.

Later, the people who examined her would ask what she had felt. Her answer troubled them.

Not remorse.

Completion.

They called the angel a delusion.

A psychiatrist explained that her mind had invented someone powerful enough to protect her. Jessica asked how that explained the rope.

He asked another question.

She stopped telling them about the woman.

None of them had been in the basement. None had smelled the sweetness or watched the knot loosen without coming untied.

They wanted to know whether she understood that a man was dead.

She understood. That was why she could sleep.

Her answer brought more questions.

In court, she heard adults discuss her trauma, her rehabilitation, her future. She learned which answers made them exchange glances and which made them write approvingly in their notes.

Look down. Speak softly. Let her voice catch.

When she gave them the frightened child they expected, they began to believe she was getting better.

Jessica let them.

Afterward, she lived with a foster couple in New Hampshire. They gave her a room whose door she could close. They knocked before entering.

A private foundation paid for counseling, clothes, and whatever the placement allowance did not cover. When she needed something, someone had already made arrangements.

The woman from the basement never appeared.

Jessica waited for her anyway.

Before her first year of high school, the foundation that had supported her foster placement arranged a scholarship to Blackwell Academy. Tuition, room, and board were covered.

Jessica saw its full name on the letter.

The Lady Justice Foundation.

She took it to her foster mother.

“Who are they?”

“The people who helped bring you here.”

“Have you met them?”

“Only their representative.”

Jessica looked down at the name again.

When she arrived at Blackwell, students in pressed uniforms hurried between stone buildings, complaining about classes. Nobody asked her what she had felt when the man died.

She kept the letter in her bedside drawer.

She flourished. She already knew how to study a room, recognize what people expected, and give it to them. At Blackwell, she learned how much that could earn her.

Straight A’s. Controlled posture. Perfect diction.

Teachers called her composed.

She learned to argue without raising her voice. To let someone finish speaking before using his own words against him. Winning required patience, and she had plenty.

By college, she intended to become a lawyer.

The Foundation continued paying for her education. Its representatives answered practical questions promptly. Questions about its founder received polite replies that told her nothing.

On her twenty-first birthday, a courier delivered a white box. There was no sender’s name.

A burgundy wax seal held it closed: scales and sword.

Jessica sat down before breaking it.

Inside was a parchment invitation.

The parchment bore a single instruction.

Interview at Gideon Justice Law Firm immediately following law school graduation.

Jessica had not yet applied to law school.

She turned the parchment over. Nothing on the back. No signature, no explanation.

She kept it beside the scholarship letter.

Years later, after graduation, she brought both to Boston.

The firm occupied a sandstone-and-brick building near the Common. Its granite entrance had worn shallow beneath generations of footsteps. She paused outside, looking up at the windows.

Someone inside might finally answer her questions.

She wore a navy pantsuit, her hair pulled back. Before entering, she checked the name above the door.

Gideon Justice.

The receptionist didn’t ask her name.

“Mr. Justice is expecting you.”

She followed an assistant into a glass-walled room. When the door closed, the sounds of the office disappeared.

A thick leather-bound book lay on the mahogany table. Its corners were worn smooth, the binding repaired in several places. Jessica kept her hands in her lap.

The door opened.

Gideon Justice was younger than she had expected. Early forties, perhaps. Tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair and a face that held her attention longer than she intended.

Jessica took out the two letters and placed them beside the book. His eyes went to them.

“You kept them.”

“I thought someone might explain them.”

He sat opposite her.

“That is why you’re here.”

“Who sent them?”

“Before I answer, you need to understand something. You may decline the position. What you learn in this room must remain private.”

“What position?”

“We’ll come to that.”

Jessica studied him, then nodded.

He began with the Foundation. Who it supported. How it had arranged her placement and paid for her education. He knew the names of her foster parents, her teachers, the woman who had helped her choose a college.

Then he spoke of the firm’s beginnings. He described courts that no longer existed and men whose names she knew from books.

At first, she thought he meant his predecessors.

Then she realized he had stopped saying “we.”

Jessica leaned forward.

“The woman in the basement,” Gideon said. “The one you called an angel.”

Her fingers tightened against her knees.

“She is my mother.”

Jessica stared at him.

“Does she remember me?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t she come back?”

“She arranged for people who could give you a home. That was how she chose to remain involved.”

“She could have told me.”

“Yes,” he said. “She could have.”

Jessica waited.

“You need to know what she is.”

“Lady Justice,” he said.

Jessica glanced at the name on the scholarship letter.

“The woman with the scales? Outside courthouses?”

“Yes.”

“She’s real?”

“You’ve met her.”

Jessica studied him.

“I know what I saw. What I don’t know is who you are.”

“Her son. Though she did not give birth to me.”

“How old are you?”

“About two thousand years.”

Jessica leaned back.

“You understand how that sounds.”

“Yes.”

“I saw her. I know what happened in that basement. That doesn’t mean I believe you.”

Gideon took a silver letter opener from the table drawer and slid it toward her. He laid his forearm on the table, palm upward.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you a reason to keep listening.”

He nodded toward the blade.

“Cut me.”

She looked from it to his face.

“You’re serious.”

He waited.

Jessica picked up the letter opener with her left hand. She hesitated, then drew its edge across his forearm.

Blood welled along the cut. Before she could set the blade down, the wound closed.

She caught his arm and turned it toward the light. Her thumb passed over smooth skin.

For several seconds, neither spoke.

“That doesn’t make you two thousand years old.”

“No,” Gideon said. “It doesn’t.”

She kept hold of his arm.

“But I’m listening.”

She released his arm.

“Does everything heal like that?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t age?”

“Not anymore.”

Jessica studied his face.

“How does nobody notice? Judges. Clients. People who’ve worked here for thirty years.”

Gideon drew his sleeve down.

“A judge once asked whether I had argued before him thirty years earlier.”

“Had you?”

“Yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That he must be thinking of my father.”

“And he believed you?”

“He said I looked exactly like him. I thanked him. We went on with the hearing.”

Jessica waited.

“He knew men grew old,” Gideon said. “A son who resembled his father was easier to believe than the alternative.”

“So you become your own son.”

“Sometimes a grandson. I leave before the resemblance becomes a problem. Other people run the office. When I return, there’s a new Gideon Justice.”

“You keep the name.”

“People trust it.”

“How long have you been back in Boston?”

“Twenty years.”

“And nobody has photographs?”

“Some of them hang in this building.”

Jessica glanced toward the door.

“You’re serious.”

“People tell me I look just like my grandfather.”

“And you let them.”

“They’re pleased to have noticed.”

A small smile reached her mouth.

“The people who work closest to you?”

“Some know. A few have stayed with me longer than one identity allows.”

Jessica looked at his arm beneath the cuff.

“All right. What else should I know?”

“The Foundation brought you here because my mother believes you have a place in our work.”

“What work?”

“The law, for most of the people in this building. Something more for a few.”

He rested his hand beside the book.

“We have had centuries to acquire property, invest, and build reserves. Enough to take cases other firms cannot afford. Enough to continue when a client has nothing left to pay us.”

“And the something more?”

“We’ll discuss that before you decide.”

Gideon opened the book. A portrait occupied the first page, its inscription faded beneath the drawing. Beneath the signature, the date was still legible: 1695.

“The first law student admitted to our work in North America.”

Jessica leaned closer.

“You drew this?”

“Yes.”

He turned to a blank page marked with a burgundy ribbon.

“If you join us, I will draw you here. You will sign beneath it.”

“A contract?”

“An oath.”

“What am I promising?”

“Service to the work my mother entrusted to this firm. Until your final breath.”

Jessica withdrew her hand from the table.

“You’re offering me a job I can never leave?”

“You can leave the firm. The oath binds you to my mother’s work for the rest of your life.”

“Even if I no longer agree with her?”

“Yes.”

She looked toward the corridor.

“Does everyone here take it?”

“No. We divide access into three levels.”

“Level One is the attorneys admitted to this work. Most of the firm’s lawyers know nothing of it. Level Two is the people who support our operations—investigators, medical and financial personnel, guards, and drivers. Both levels know who I am and whom we serve. Both make the same lifetime commitment.”

“And Level Three?”

“Everyone outside those operations: our other attorneys, ordinary legal and administrative staff, housekeeping, and building services. They know this is a private practice with unusually demanding security. They know which doors they may open. The restricted rooms are maintained by people from Level Two.”

“What if someone is promoted?”

“They learn the terms and accept them before we show them what lies behind the next door.”

Jessica considered the book again.

“Nobody who knows gets to leave.”

“They can retire from active work. Their duties can change. They remain in our care, and their obligation remains. Taking the oath is a lifetime commitment, Jessica. It does not depend on keeping the same job.”

“Could you dismiss me?”

“From a position. Not from the oath. My mother can reassign the service owed to her. The obligation remains.”

Jessica looked at the blank page.

“So leaving you doesn’t mean leaving her.”

“No.”

Without the woman in the basement, she would never have reached this room. Whatever life she was being asked to give, she had it because of her.

“What would she ask me to do?”

Gideon closed the book.

“Investigate. Establish what happened. Represent people who have no one else.”

“And?”

“When she passes a sentence, carry it out.”

Jessica looked at him.

“Kill someone.”

“Yes.”

“The way she had me kill him.”

“You were protecting yourself. The people she sends you after may never have harmed you.”

She thought of the sword hanging beside the basement stairs.

“And if a court lets them go?”

“Her judgment is independent of the court’s.”

Jessica sat back.

Bound was a word she knew. She had felt it in the raw skin of her wrists.

This time, someone was asking.

“Tell me the rest.”

He explained the investigations, the people who supported them, and the resources available. Then the salary. Seven figures, with housing, transportation, and security provided.

She listened. When he finished, she returned to the part that mattered.

“What happens if I think she’s wrong?”

“You tell her.”

“And if she disagrees?”

“You can challenge her judgment. That does not release you from the oath.”

Jessica watched him.

“Have you ever challenged her?”

“Yes.”

He let the answer stand.

“Some assignments come through governments and intelligence services,” he continued. “Others begin here, when someone dangerous survives the ordinary process. My mother decides which we accept. Payment does not buy a sentence.”

Jessica’s gaze returned to the glass walls.

“People must talk.”

“Locally, they do. A violent man dies. Someone remembers that he crossed this firm. A rumor grows.”

“And you let it?”

“A rumor can frighten someone who would ignore a letter. It does not tell them what you have seen in this room.”

She leaned forward, palms flat against the table.

“I accept.”

Gideon reopened the book to the blank page and studied her.

“Before you sign. Your stepfather—what did you feel when he died?”

She had learned which answer people wanted. For once, she thought the person asking might understand the truth.

“Completion.”

“Not relief?”

“That came afterward. When I understood he couldn’t get up.”

She glanced at the blank page.

“I’ve spent years pretending I wished I hadn’t done it.”

“And do you?”

“No.”

Gideon picked up the pencil.

Jessica sat still while he drew. She watched his eyes move between her face and the page. He worked without speaking, pausing occasionally before adding another line.

When he finished, he turned the book toward her.

The face was hers. He had drawn her looking directly out of the page.

He placed a fountain pen beside it.

Jessica signed her full name and added the date.

For a moment, she kept her fingers against the parchment. She remembered the screwdriver in her left hand and the woman who had stayed when she asked.

This time, she had agreed to stay.

Five years later, Wade Griffin’s case reached the hearing that would determine whether it could proceed to trial.

Jessica knew the evidence against him. She also knew how it had been obtained.

She had prepared her argument. She would stand before the judge and make it.

But she no longer expected the courtroom to settle what mattered.

Whatever the judge decided, Jessica knew another judgment was possible.

She was waiting to hear from Gideon.

Chapter Six: Appetite

The evening before the Griffin hearing, Daniel Mercer closed his briefcase at eight forty-three.

“Your client’s going to spend more trying this than settling it.”

Jessica gathered the commercial lease exhibits into a pile.

“So is yours.”

“Mine enjoys being unreasonable.”

“Then stop charging him by the hour. You’re encouraging him.”

Mercer laughed. They had spent three weeks exchanging proposals and the last ninety minutes discovering that neither client had become more accommodating. The conference room coffee had gone cold.

He was a partner at a small litigation firm across town, forty-one, unmarried, with a loosened tie and a habit of waiting until she finished before disagreeing with everything she said. At their first deposition, he had leaned close to read an exhibit. She remembered the warmth of him, the scent of his skin beneath his cologne, and wanting him closer.

Tonight, with his jacket off, she noticed more. His sleeves stretched across his biceps. When he bent to retrieve his briefcase, she let herself look. Whatever else he neglected, it wasn’t squats.

He straightened, and her gaze lingered below his belt. His trousers left enough of an outline to distract her from everything he had said about the settlement.

When she finally looked up, he was watching her.

He glanced toward the door.

“Are we done?”

“With the lease.”

He looked back at her.

Jessica set the exhibits down.

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

“Not if you’re asking.”

“I am.”

The change in his expression pleased her. He had understood without requiring her to turn it into a joke.

“Dinner?” he asked.

“I’ve eaten.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“No,” she said, letting her eyes travel over him. “I’m still hungry.”

He smiled slowly.

“All right.”

She put the file in a cabinet and locked it.

“Whatever happens after we leave this room, your last offer is still insulting.”

“I’ll tell my client you considered it carefully.”

At reception, Jessica asked security to extend his access to the residential floor.

“Personal guest.”

The guard updated the register and handed him a new pass.

“Enjoy your evening, Ms. Nero.”

“I intend to.”

She took Daniel’s hand and led him toward the elevator.

“Do you always negotiate this late?” he asked.

“Only when opposing counsel needs things explained twice.”

“I understood you the first time.”

This time she laughed.

Inside her apartment, he set his briefcase beside the door. His gaze moved across the windows, the kitchen, the apparatus suspended from the ceiling.

“Do I want to ask?”

“Exercise equipment.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

She took his visitor pass from his lapel and put it beside his briefcase. Then she rested her hand against his chest.

“You’re very agreeable now.”

“We’re off the clock.”

She kissed him. He responded immediately, one hand settling at her waist, the other against her cheek. When she drew back, he let her, waiting close enough that she could feel his breath.

“Still agreeable?”

“Extremely.”

She caught his tie and led him away from the windows.

He stopped her beside the sofa and kissed her again. This time she let him take his time. His briefcase fell onto its side by the door. Neither turned toward the sound.

She discovered that the strength she had admired through his shirt was worth getting him out of it. Her other suspicion proved equally well founded.

They spent the next few hours testing how well they fit together. Jessica liked taking the lead, but when Daniel drew her beneath him, she stayed there willingly. Later, she pushed him back against the pillows and kissed the argument off his mouth.

Between bouts, they lay tangled together, catching their breath. He traced a finger along the firm contours of her abdomen.

“You always this competitive?”

“Are you complaining?”

He pulled her closer.

By the time they finally stopped, the sheets had come loose from three corners of the mattress.

Daniel sat on the edge of her bed looking for his watch.

Jessica lay against the pillows, watching him search beneath a discarded shirt.

“You could stay.”

He looked over his shoulder.

“I thought you had court.”

“I do. In the morning.”

“I didn’t want to assume.”

She held his gaze.

“I’d like you to.”

He found the watch and put it on the bedside table instead of his wrist.

“What time do you get up?”

“Early.”

“How early?”

She lifted the sheet for him.

“You’ll hate it.”

He switched off the lamp.

Jessica settled into the crook of his arm, her cheek against his chest. Their legs tangled beneath the sheet. His hand rested at her waist, and she closed her eyes.

They slept for barely two hours.

At five thirty, he disliked her alarm exactly as much as she had predicted. She kissed him before he could finish complaining.

By six, she had escorted him downstairs and watched him leave with his tie folded in his coat pocket. At the door he turned back.

“I’ll send another number.”

“Make it a better one.”

He grinned. She was still smiling when she reached the training floor.

The gym smelled like rubber, sweat, and disinfectant.

Five years of mornings with Alex had taught Jessica to expect a different problem every time she stepped onto the mats. Today he had brought someone she had never fought.

Jessica studied the unfamiliar man while Alex waited beside the mats.

He stood comfortably, his weight balanced, watching her approach.

She wanted to see how quickly he moved.

Alex glanced at her.

“Good morning?”

“So far.”

He indicated the mats.

“We’ll see what we can do about that.”

Alex stood near the center of the mat, arms folded across his chest. He looked like a wall that had learned how to move. Thick shoulders. Heavy forearms. The posture of someone who didn’t need to prove anything.

He watched her assess the specialist, waiting to see whether she would underestimate him.

“You ready?” he asked.

Jessica nodded once and stepped onto the mat without stretching or ceremony, as casually as if she were crossing a street.

Alex gestured toward the larger man beside him.

“Specialist. Former Marine. You’ll start with him.”

The man was easily fifty pounds heavier than her. Thick neck. Cropped hair. The kind of build that came

from years of lifting heavy things and breaking other men.

He gave her a polite nod.

“Ma’am.”

Jessica tilted her head slightly.

“You can just call me Jess,” she said.

A beat.

“You’ll still lose.”

The specialist blinked, unsure whether she was joking.

Alex didn’t smile.

“Begin,” he said.

The specialist moved before Alex finished stepping back.

Jessica saw the right hand coming and shifted outside it, already calculating the counter. She did not see the left shoulder drive forward until it struck her sternum.

The impact lifted her from the mat.

She landed hard enough to force the air from her lungs. For an instant, the ceiling lights blurred into a single white band. Pain spread beneath her ribs—sharp, immediate, and humiliating.

The specialist advanced.

Jessica rolled before his boot reached her, but not quickly enough. It caught her hip and sent her sliding across the mat.

She came to one knee, fighting for breath.

He had allowed her to see the first strike. The right hand had been bait.

She had mistaken predictability for simplicity.

Across the room, Alex said nothing. That was worse than criticism.

The specialist closed the distance, confident now. Jessica felt the tremor beginning in her thigh and the hot pressure gathering beneath her sternum. Her body wanted time. He had no intention of giving it to her.

Good.

She stopped watching his hands.

His weight shifted. His rear heel rose. His hips committed a fraction before the punch began.

This time, she moved late on purpose.

The fist grazed her cheek as she stepped inside. She trapped his arm, drove her forehead into his nose, and felt cartilage yield. When he recoiled, she hooked her foot behind his ankle and used his momentum to put him on the mat.

She followed him down, forearm across his throat.

He struggled once.

Then stopped.

Jessica remained there for half a second longer than necessary, lungs burning, the specialist's blood warm against her cheek. Victory did not feel effortless.

It felt earned.

Alex approached and looked down at her.

"You thought you understood him," he said.

Jessica released the specialist and stood carefully, concealing the pain in her ribs.

"I understand him now."

Alex walked a slow circle around her, studying her posture, her breathing, and the way she held her hands. Jessica reset her stance beneath his inspection.

"Better," he said.

She rolled her shoulders once.

"You're not improvising anymore."

"No."

“The first time I saw you move, you were surviving,” he said. “Now you’re choosing.”

She didn’t respond.

He nodded once.

“That’s the difference.”

He glanced toward the clock.

“You’ve got court this morning.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Be here at five-thirty tomorrow. We’ll run live fire before the city wakes up.”

Jessica grabbed her towel from the bench.

“Understood.”

Alex started toward the door.

“And Jessica?”

She paused.

“You don’t need to prove you can finish.”

He held her gaze a moment longer than necessary.

“I already know.”

Jessica didn’t look away.

“That’ll do.”

She followed him off the mat.

In the locker room, Jessica stopped in front of the mirror.

A bruise had begun to darken along her cheek. Each breath awakened the pain beneath her ribs. She touched the swelling once, turning her face to examine it.

Then she undressed.

She liked the shower hot. She stood beneath the spray until her skin flushed, then worked soap across her shoulders and down her body. Lather clung to the curves of her breasts before the water carried it over her abdomen and thighs. She closed her eyes, letting the heat ease the muscles along her back.

She replayed the moment she had gone down. The strike she had anticipated. The one she had missed.

Next time, she would watch his shoulders.

At twelve, she needed Lady Justice beside her, telling her what to do.

Griffin’s victims were children, too. Thinking of them, she felt the old fear tighten in her stomach—the footsteps overhead, the wait for the door to open.

Today, she would face him in court.

If he walked free, she wanted to be the one who stopped him forever.

She turned beneath the spray and swept her wet hair over one shoulder. Hot water ran down the curve of her back as she slid her fingertips along the tile, remembering the warmth of Daniel’s chest beneath them.

She stepped out and wrapped a towel low around her hips, leaving her flushed skin to cool in the locker-room air.

Chapter Seven: The Court

The defense motion rested on a sleeping child.

Roth’s signed statement said he had heard her screaming.

Her interview said she had been asleep until he broke through the cabin door.

This morning, Jessica would have to answer for the difference.

For the past six months, Jessica had been on loan to District Attorney William Cloonan’s office, formally appointed as a special assistant district attorney. Gideon Justice remained her employer. Inside this courtroom, she represented the Commonwealth.

Cloonan used her for difficult prosecutions that needed an experienced trial lawyer and more preparation than his crowded office could provide. Griffin’s case had become the most consuming of them. Gideon had come to watch the ruling, not to sit at counsel table.

The courtroom was full.

Families occupied the rows behind Jessica. Some had attended every hearing. Others had come because someone told them today mattered.

Wade Griffin sat beside his attorney in a suit that did not fit his shoulders. He kept his hands folded on the table.

Jessica arranged the defense motion, Roth’s signed statement, and the girl’s interview transcript in front of her.

Seven children. Months of work.

Everything now depended on what Roth knew before he opened a door.

Judge Carrier entered.

Everyone rose.

When they sat, she opened the file before her.

“We are here on the defendant’s motion to suppress the evidence recovered from his cabin and to dismiss the pending charges,” Carrier said. “I have reviewed the submissions, including the Commonwealth’s supplemental disclosure filed last night.”

Griffin’s attorney rose.

“Your Honor, Detective Roth had no warrant. His claimed justification for forcing entry was that he heard a child screaming inside. The child herself says she was asleep. She woke when he broke the door.”

He lifted a page from his file.

“That interview was disclosed by the Commonwealth. We attached the relevant transcript to our motion.”

Jessica knew the passage. She had read it until she could hear the girl answering.

“The defense requests exclusion of the evidence obtained through the unlawful entry,” he continued. “Without it, the Commonwealth cannot sustain these charges.”

Carrier turned toward Jessica.

“Ms. Nero?”

She stood.

Roth had spent months monitoring online forums associated with child exploitation. The investigation had led him to Griffin, then to the remote cabin. He had gone there alone, without a warrant.

He had forced the door and found the girl asleep in a locked room. She needed medical attention. He had carried her out.

Afterward, he signed a statement describing what had happened. In it, he said he had heard her screaming before he entered.

Jessica had relied on that account in preparing the prosecution.

Then Griffin's attorney filed the motion.

A sleeping child did not, by itself, prove Roth had heard nothing. But the contradiction required an answer. Yesterday, while preparing her response, Jessica called him into her office.

His signed statement lay beside the defense motion.

She asked him to walk her through the approach again.

Where he had parked. What he had seen. What he had heard.

He described the woods, the cabin, the closed door.

She waited for the screaming.

He did not mention it.

"Did you hear her before you went inside?"

"I was sure he had someone in there."

"Did you hear her?"

Roth looked at the statement on her desk.

"No."

For a moment, Jessica said nothing.

Then she turned the page toward him.

"You signed this."

"I found her, Jessica."

"That isn't what you wrote."

"She was locked in that room. You saw the photographs."

"Yes."

"If I'd waited—"

"You don't get to change what happened before you opened the door because of what you found behind it."

He sat back.

"What happens now?"

She looked at his signature.

The statement would remain in the file. His admission could not erase it. It would expose him to an investigation that could cost him his badge and undermine every case that depended on his word.

If she put him on the stand to repeat the lie, knowing what she knew, the misconduct would become hers as well. Any conviction built on it would be vulnerable. Her license could be at risk.

There was no version in which she could simply leave the statement uncorrected and let the judge rely on it.

“I call Cloonan,” she said. “Then we disclose what you just told me.”

Last night, she had disclosed the false assertion and Roth’s admission to the defense and the court. This morning, the signed statement still lay before her.

The signature had not changed.

What she could do with it had.

Carrier looked toward counsel table.

“The cabin stands a quarter mile from the nearest public access. Detective Roth left the road, crossed the property, and forced entry into the building. There was no pursuit. No request for assistance. No information placing a particular missing child inside.”

“Your Honor, the investigation gave him reason to believe Griffin was involved in ongoing abuse.”

“Reason to investigate him, Ms. Nero. What established an immediate emergency inside that cabin?”

Jessica looked down at the statement.

A child screaming.

The door forced.

A life saved.

The first claim was false. The other two were not enough to save the prosecution.

Carrier waited.

“Does the Commonwealth maintain that Detective Roth heard a child calling for help before entering the cabin?”

Jessica could feel the families behind her.

She knew what they needed her to say.

“No, Your Honor.”

Griffin’s attorney lowered his eyes to his notes.

“The signed statement says otherwise.”

“Detective Roth has admitted that assertion was false. As our disclosure states, the Commonwealth will not offer it as a basis for the entry.”

Jessica set the statement down.

“We will not call him to repeat it.”

The room remained quiet.

Carrier watched her for a moment, then returned to the file.

“Detective Roth found a child who needed help. Getting her to safety mattered. But what he discovered inside cannot supply a justification that did not exist when he entered.”

Behind Jessica, someone began to cry.

“The Commonwealth has established no objectively reasonable basis for believing someone inside required immediate assistance before Detective Roth entered. He had no warrant, no consent, and no other established exception to the warrant requirement.”

Jessica remained standing.

“The child was there.”

“Yes, Ms. Nero.”

“He was right about what Griffin was doing.”

“The discovery was real. It does not make the entry lawful.”

Jessica knew the answer. She had known it before she stood.

Carrier turned a page.

“The evidence obtained inside the cabin supplied the basis for the subsequent warrant. The Commonwealth has not established an independent lawful source for that evidence, or that its discovery was inevitable.”

The judge paused.

“The motion to suppress is allowed. The written order identifies the evidence obtained through the unlawful entry and the searches that followed.”

A woman behind Jessica whispered something.

The judge waited for the room to settle.

“This is a ruling on the admissibility of evidence. It is not a finding that the defendant is innocent.”

Griffin looked toward his attorney.

Jessica sat.

Finding a child confined in Griffin’s cabin should have been the beginning of the prosecution.

Instead, the officers’ observations, the photographs, and the evidence recovered there were listed in an order telling her what she could not present.

The investigation before that door opened had given Roth suspicions. It had not given Jessica a case she could take to a jury.

The girl had never seen her captor’s face. He had kept her blindfolded when he was with her. Her account established what someone had done, but could not identify Griffin. Nor could the other children independently identify him. Without the evidence from the cabin, the Commonwealth could not connect their accounts to the man across the aisle.

Seven children had suffered.

One had come out alive in Roth’s arms.

Jessica would never wish that he had left the child there.

She wished he had given her a way to keep Griffin from leaving here.

Carrier looked toward her.

“Ms. Nero, how does the Commonwealth wish to proceed?”

Jessica stood again.

She took the prepared filing from her case folder.

“Your Honor, in light of the ruling, the Commonwealth cannot proceed on the present evidentiary record. We are filing a nolle prosequi, withdrawing the pending charges. The written reasons accompany the filing.”

The clerk took the document.

Behind her, a chair scraped against the floor.

“No,” someone said.

This time, loudly.

Carrier looked toward the gallery.

“I understand that this is difficult. Please allow the proceeding to conclude.”

Griffin’s attorney rose.

“Your Honor, we ask that Mr. Griffin be discharged from custody on these charges.”

Carrier consulted the clerk, then looked back at counsel.

“If there is no other basis for holding him, he is to be released.”

Jessica watched Griffin close his eyes.

Only briefly.

When he opened them, he looked toward the gallery.

The judge gathered her papers.

“This proceeding is concluded.”

No one behind Jessica moved immediately.

Griffin stood.

His attorney leaned close and spoke into his ear. Griffin nodded, then turned toward the aisle.

As he passed Jessica, his eyes met hers.

She held his gaze.

The court had not declared him innocent.

Her filing had not changed what he had done.

But neither distinction would keep him in custody.

He walked through the courtroom door.

Gideon waited until the families had begun leaving.

Jessica remained at counsel table, looking at Roth's statement.

He approached without speaking.

"He asked what would happen to him," she said.

"What did you tell him?"

"That I had to disclose it."

"He could lose his job."

"Yes."

"I couldn't leave that statement standing as the truth."

"No."

"He thought finding the child would make the rest of it all right."

Gideon pulled out the chair beside her.

"It didn't."

"No."

She closed the file.

For several seconds, they listened to the courtroom empty.

"He saved that child," she said.

"Yes."

"And Griffin gets to walk out."

Gideon sat.

“Can the case be rebuilt?”

“Perhaps. With evidence we don’t have yet.”

“With time?”

Now she turned.

“How much?”

He did not answer quickly enough.

Jessica looked toward the door Griffin had used.

“He knows what we have. He knows what we can’t use. He’s had months to learn exactly where the gaps are.”

“Jessica.”

“Tell me what keeps him from doing it again tonight.”

Gideon lowered his voice.

“Lady Justice has authorized the sentence.”

She became still.

He watched her expression change.

The exhaustion did not disappear. It acquired a direction.

“You know what happens next,” he said.

“Yes.”

“No departure from the operation Alex prepares.”

Jessica slid the file into her bag.

“I’ll finish it.”

She stood before he did.

Two Escalades waited at the rear entrance.

Outside the courthouse, reporters pressed against barricades. Someone shouted Griffin’s name. Someone else shouted Jessica’s.

She walked through the noise without turning. A driver opened the rear door of the first Escalade for her. Gideon continued to the second.

Inside his vehicle, her face appeared on the ceiling monitor.

He raised a finger to his lips before she spoke.

She waited.

Once they were clear of the courthouse, he opened the audio channel.

“War Room Three. Eight tonight,” he said. “Alex is preparing the operation.”

Jessica nodded.

Her files lay beside her on the seat.

This morning, they had contained the case she meant to present.

Tonight, she would be working from a different set of instructions.

Chapter Eight: Voyeur

The Escalades reached Mitchell Automotive shortly after noon.

The overhead door rose, admitting both vehicles onto the hydraulic platform. Street noise disappeared as the door closed behind them. The platform descended to U1, where two guards watched a monitor until the security scan cleared.

Gideon stepped out of the second Escalade. Jessica waited beside the first.

“Anything you need from me before eight?”

“Get some rest,” he said. “Alex will have the briefing ready.”

She nodded and followed him toward the elevator.

War Room Three was one of five underground command centers beneath the headquarters. Jessica had attended briefings there before. Alex would spend the afternoon gathering intelligence, assigning personnel, and accounting for everything that might go wrong.

For the next several hours, her absence would help him more than her impatience.

She pressed two for Gideon and four for herself.

The doors opened on the second floor.

“Eight,” he said as he stepped out.

“I’ll be there.”

Her telephone vibrated before the elevator reached her floor. Mercer had sent a revised settlement figure. Beneath it: I stand by my objection to five thirty.

Jessica smiled. They were no closer to an agreement, but the message was exactly what she needed. She remembered his mouth at her neck and the

comfortable weight of his arm around her afterward. She wanted to see him again.

She read the figure once more, then replied: Objection noted. The offer is still too low.

A second message followed.

The alarm is negotiable.

She forwarded the proposal to the attorney covering her civil matters during the special assignment, then put the telephone away.

For the first time since entering the courthouse, she was smiling without effort.

Her apartment occupied a corner of the penthouse floor. Eighty feet of windows overlooked Commonwealth Avenue, with another forty wrapping around the building.

Winter sunlight reached across the hardwood. Below, people carried shopping bags, walked dogs, and waited at crossings. A delivery truck blocked a lane while its driver argued with someone on the sidewalk.

Jessica set her files on the Irish dining table.

She had no intention of opening them again today.

The apartment held a wide chef's kitchen, a long burgundy leather sofa, and very little that served no purpose. Suspended from two stainless-steel ceiling beams was her inversion harness. A black rope hung beside the ankle straps.

She once told a junior associate that daily inversion improved blood flow to the brain.

"It's the secret to my trial record."

He had lasted three days.

Jessica slipped off her heels and unbuttoned her blouse. She laid it over the sofa, then climbed the rope and secured her ankles.

As she lowered herself, her skirt fell toward her hips. Her hair hung above the floor.

She closed her eyes.

For twenty minutes, she concentrated on breathing. The pressure in her shoulders eased. Her jaw loosened. When the courtroom returned, she let it pass without following it.

Then she pulled herself upright, released the straps, and lowered her feet to the floor.

She was hungry.

That seemed almost offensive after the morning she had endured. It also remained true.

She made a sandwich and ate at the kitchen counter. Halfway through, she realized how tired she was. Daniel had left her barely two hours of sleep, and she had spent the morning pretending that was sufficient.

Her telephone lay beside her plate.

She opened his message again.

The alarm is negotiable.

She typed: You complained less about everything else.

His answer arrived before she finished eating.

I had no other objections.

Jessica laughed softly.

She carried a glass of water into the bedroom and set an alarm for six thirty.

At the window, she paused. Her blouse was already draped over the sofa. She unfastened her skirt and let it fall, then removed her bra and panties with the same unhurried care, aware of the windows across the avenue.

Only then did she draw the curtains. They softened the afternoon rather than shutting it out. Light glowed through the fabric, leaving the room dim and warm, with a narrow seam of sunlight falling across the foot of the bed.

Jessica eased beneath the sheet. The cool cotton settled against her bare skin, following the curve of her hip as she turned onto her side.

The pillow beside hers still held a faint trace of him.

She turned her face toward it, remembering how readily he had come back to bed when she lifted the sheet. No performance. No demand for an explanation. He had simply put his watch down and stayed.

She liked that more than she intended to tell him.

For a while, she let herself remember the rest. Jessica had known plenty of satisfying lovers. Daniel had given her every reason to invite him back.

When she finally slept, it was deeply.

The alarm woke her in darkness.

Jessica reached for the telephone, silenced it, and lay still until the room settled around her.

Six thirty.

There was time.

She drank the water, then rose and pulled back the curtains.

Across Commonwealth Avenue, lamps glowed behind brownstone windows. The delivery truck was gone. Headlights moved between the bare trees.

Her naked reflection stood against the bedroom glass. Across the avenue, anyone looking up could see her just as clearly. She lingered before turning away.

She crossed the spacious bedroom toward the adjoining bathroom. Movement in a window across the avenue caught her eye. Someone stepped closer to the glass, then stopped.

Jessica continued through the open doorway. The bathroom windows extended the view along the avenue, meeting at the corner behind the glass shower enclosure.

She turned on the water and waited for it to run hot.

Across the avenue, the figure remained.

She knew how visible the apartment became after dark. She had chosen the lighting herself.

Steam gathered around the glass as she stepped beneath the spray. She closed her eyes and let the water run over her shoulders.

For several minutes, she allowed herself nothing more demanding than warmth.

When she opened her eyes, the windows had begun to mist. The lights across the avenue blurred behind the steam.

She finished rinsing and turned off the shower.

A towel waited on the rail. She wrapped her hair, then stepped into the apartment, leaving wet footprints across the hardwood.

The figure across the street was still there. Her gaze moved along the other windows. She imagined people standing farther back in their rooms, watching from places the light did not reach.

She looked directly at the figure, then let her gaze travel slowly from window to window, acknowledging even those where she could see no one. Before moving on, she glanced back once—an invitation to follow her through the glass.

Jessica carried a glass of water to the chair beside the bedroom window. She settled into it, tucked one leg beneath her, and opened a book. The towel remained wrapped around her hair.

At seven forty, she would dress.

Until then, the hour belonged to her—and whoever cared to watch.

Chapter Nine: The Plan

Jessica entered WR3 at 7:55 p.m.

Alex was already at the command station at the far end of the room, sleeves rolled, eyes fixed on the planning board.

He glanced up when she stepped in and gave a small nod.

She returned it.

If Alex was running the operation, it would be precise.

In their world, Alex was rare: a tactical mind with predatory instincts and the patience to plan three contingencies for every decision. Operations under his command had a reputation for surgical precision. While the rest of the team processed the known variables, Alex was already mapping the unknown ones.

Two photographs dominated the board—Wade Griffin's smug mugshot beside his mother Nancy's driver's license photo. Beneath them, surveillance shots showed their homes: Nancy's modest colonial in Auburndale and Wade's isolated cabin off Route 16 in Medway.

The teams stationed at the courthouse had followed Griffin and his mother to Nancy's house after the hearing. Once they were inside, Alex had redeployed those personnel. One team now watched Nancy's house, another the cabin. The remaining two were available for surveillance handoffs and extraction. Mother and son had stayed inside all afternoon while the media circled outside.

Marnie stood at Alex's left, fingers hovering over the keyboard. Barely five feet tall, she still commanded the room. Twenty years beside Alex had forged an almost telepathic connection between them. A raised eyebrow

could redirect an entire operation. A nod sent her fingers moving before he finished speaking.

Boston hovered between seasons. Dirty snow clung to the shadows. Streets ran with grimy meltwater that wouldn't disappear until spring rain carried it into the harbor.

Alex tapped the board.

"Operation Black Bear launches at 12:12 a.m. if Griffin stays put. If he moves, we pivot. No hesitation."

The plan hinged on one maneuver: draw Wade from his mother's sanctuary back to his isolated cabin.

Alex had mapped the sequence with quiet confidence—the furtive exit, the rideshare summoned from a distance, and the final walk through darkened woods to the cabin.

Jessica studied the board.
"Does he bite?"

Alex allowed himself a thin smile.
"He will."

By eleven, Jessica was on her way to Medway with the field team. Alex and Marnie remained at the command station in WR3, receiving updates from the surveillance crews.

Before midnight, Jessica was in position near the path to the cabin. She confirmed it over the radio, then settled in to wait.

Alex would make the call only after every team was ready.

Griffin

Wade Griffin sank into the loveseat, finally at ease inside the protective walls of his childhood home.

Upstairs, his childhood bedroom remained almost unchanged. A four-post wooden bed stood in the corner. A small rectangular window faced the street. A chairless desk gathered dust. The only recent addition

was a manual treadmill positioned for a clear view of the front yard.

No posters. No clutter. Just a single scented candle atop the dresser. The room's clinical emptiness mirrored the rest of the house—clean, sparse, almost staged.

In the living room, Griffin sat with his back to the bay window, watching a modest television. Behind him, through the wall, his mother Nancy baked and cleaned, quietly celebrating her son's return.

At 12:12 a.m., Alex dialed Griffin's number from WR3. The burner phone's caller ID read: Medway.

Griffin's phone rang with a tinny, old-school tone. He answered without speaking.

Alex adopted a calm Midwestern drawl.
"Mr. Griffin? This is Sergeant Fuery with the Medway Police Department."

Griffin relaxed slightly.
"Yes, I'm here."

"Sir, we've had reports of trespassers on your property. Patrol saw teenagers in your yard. After everything this week, we didn't want to act without your okay."

"I appreciate the heads-up, Sergeant," Griffin said smoothly. "Most folks in town would rather I drop dead. Don't worry—the cabin was cleared during the investigation. Nothing left to steal."

"Understood. If you decide to press charges, I'm on duty until eight in the morning. Just let us know."

"Thanks. I will."

The call ended.

Griffin's expression twisted for a split second—eyes wide, jaw tight—before the polite smile returned. He walked into the kitchen where his mother sat beneath the wall clock.

Nothing left to steal. He had said it so easily.

He had watched officers carry evidence out. He had not watched every minute of their search. A trespasser could find a stain, a mark, something Griffin had forgotten and the police had missed. Today's ruling would not protect evidence discovered tomorrow.

He needed to see the cabin himself.

"I'm stepping out for a bit."

She glanced at the time.
"Out now? With all the media outside?"

He kissed her cheek.
"I just need some air. I can't stay cooped up here forever."

He unlocked the back door and slipped outside. Nancy watched from the doorway as he darted across the yard and disappeared into the evergreen hedge.

He knew the neighborhood by heart. Years of hide-and-seek had mapped every lawn and streetlight. Tonight he wore black jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and calf-high boots.

He crossed yards, then streets, then more yards—five blocks in total—until he reached the alley behind a brick row building on Main Street. A tailor, a butcher, and a barber shop shared the structure.

Griffin opened his rideshare app.

$28.
Six-minute wait.

He debated leaving his hood up, then pushed it back and combed his fingers through his shoulder-length hair.

A gold Chevy Cruze pulled up. Griffin nodded at the driver and slipped into the back seat.

The engine whined softly as they accelerated along Route 16. Twenty-five minutes later, they turned into Medway. The road was unlit, broken by frost-heaved

patches of asphalt. The Cruze bounced slightly, the engine complaining as the driver pushed the throttle.

After two miles, the car turned onto a dark side road. A mile later, the phone beeped: arrived.

The car stopped at the mouth of a long gravel driveway.

“You sure you want to get out here?” the driver asked.

Griffin stepped out.
“Tip’s in the app.”

The Cruze turned around awkwardly and disappeared into the night.

Griffin waited until the taillights vanished. Then he walked back to the main road, turned right, and continued for another half-mile.

The glow of distant houses faded. The darkness thickened.

Between two tall pines, he stopped and aimed his phone’s light downward. A narrow path cut into the underbrush.

He stepped into the woods.

Frost-crusted leaves crunched under his boots. Old snow patches glowed faintly in the darkness. The trees closed around him, tall and silent.

Within seconds, he was swallowed by shadow.

Chapter Ten: The Sentence

The woods were quiet in the way only places without witnesses ever were.

There was no wind, and even the animals had withdrawn. Only the slow settling of branches disturbed the night.

The moon hung high enough to give shape without detail, turning the forest into suggestion rather than certainty.

Jessica waited.

She did not pace. She did not rehearse. Waiting was not anxiety for her—it was alignment. When the moment arrived, her body would move without discussion.

The light appeared first.

A weak, uneven beam cutting between the trees. A cellphone flashlight, careless and impatient, bouncing as its owner walked too quickly for caution.

Wade Griffin moved like a man who believed the world had returned to normal.

His hood was up.
His boots crushed leaves too loudly.
He never looked behind him.

Jessica stepped from behind the tree.

Two silent strides.

The baton arced once.

The strike landed at the base of his skull with a dull, efficient crack. Griffin collapsed instantly, his head snapping forward before the rest of his body folded beneath him.

Jessica froze for half a heartbeat.

Too hard?

She knelt beside him, turning his head gently. The moonlight was faint, but the metallic scent of blood cut through the cold air. Warm vapor rose where it met the frozen ground.

She pressed two fingers to his neck.

A pulse.

Slow, but there.

“Good,” she murmured.

She moved quickly.

From her jacket, she retrieved a length of rope—pre-measured, midpoint marked by her wingspan. She cut it cleanly into two equal lengths. Then she sliced two strips from his blood-soaked hood and tied them together into a gag.

She rolled him onto his back, pinned his shoulders with her knees, and forced the gag into his mouth. His head dropped back with a soft thud.

He would wake tasting his own blood.

She bound his wrists.
Then his ankles.

Each rope left a tail of slack—just enough to secure him to the trees ahead.

Jessica stood, drawing a steady breath. Moonlight spilled through a break in the clouds, illuminating the ground around him. Blood seeped into a patch of snow, turning it black-red.

Alive.
Helpless.

Perfect.

She wrapped the slack rope around her hands and leaned back, using her legs to drag him forward.

He wasn’t heavy—maybe a hundred eighty pounds—but his limp body swung at the end of the rope like a broken marionette. His boots snagged roots and

branches as she pulled him through the narrow corridor of saplings.

His head struck a fallen limb with a dull thud.

A groan escaped his throat.

Still unconscious.

Jessica dragged him a few more feet, then secured his wrists around one slender trunk. She pulled his body taut and tied his ankles to another tree opposite him, stretching him out between them.

When he finally opened his eyes, they were crusted with dirt and leaves. He tugged weakly at the ropes, testing his limits.

There was no give.

Jessica removed her gloves.

She brushed the debris from his face with slow, deliberate strokes. Her fingers slid through his hair, wiping blood from his ear.

For a moment, her touch was almost tender.

Hope, however faint, flickered in his eyes.

She climbed onto him, straddling his pelvis. Griffin groaned beneath her weight. His eyes widened.

Jessica leaned close.

“Look at me,” she whispered. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

He nodded weakly.

“Is this how you imagined our reunion?”

He shook his head.

“You’re bleeding badly,” she said softly. “Shock will set in soon.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper.

“Need me to keep you warm until then?”

He nodded again.

Jessica shifted her weight deliberately, watching his pupils dilate. The illusion held—for exactly as long as she allowed it.

Then she reached for her knife.

A pale glow broke through the trees.

Jessica froze.

Both of them turned toward the light as it drifted between the trunks, descending slowly from the darkness above.

A woman emerged from the glow.

She did not walk.

She descended through the trees, stopping inches above the ground.

The sword hung loosely from her left hand, its pale blade wet with blood. In her right, the scales tilted—unsettled.

Her auburn hair drifted around a face of impossible beauty, untouched by the carnage staining her white robe. Leaves lifted beneath her though the night was windless.

Lady Justice lowered her bare feet to the earth.

Her garments rippled as though submerged in invisible water. Her face was serene, terrible in its certainty.

When she spoke, her voice carried the weight of centuries.

“Jessica,” she said, “this blade has known no master but me. Not Gideon. Not any mortal hand. Until now.”

She turned the sword in her left hand and extended it hilt-first.

Jessica rose slowly.

Her fingers closed around the grip. Lady Justice did not release it immediately. For one suspended moment, immortal and mortal held the blade together.

Then Lady Justice opened her hand.

The weapon felt ancient—folded metal from another age—yet its blade gleamed white, not silver. The hilt remained warm beneath Jessica's palm. It weighed almost nothing, as if made from moonlight instead of steel.

Blood already coated the blade, black-red beneath the moonlight.

Jessica lifted it with both hands.

Griffin's eyes fixed on the sword. He bucked against the ropes as a raw, animal sound tore through the gag.

Jessica swung once.

She expected resistance.

There was none.

The blade passed through his neck so cleanly that, for a heartbeat, his head remained in place.

Then it tipped sideways and dropped into the leaves.

His body went slack, wrists and ankles still tethered to the trees.

The assignment was complete. The hands were her own decision.

She had put the bag in her jacket before leaving headquarters. Alex had ordered no such thing. Neither had Gideon.

She swung again.

The blade severed both wrists and continued through the slender trunk that bound them, passing through bone and wood without hesitation. The upper section leaned, then fell away with a soft creak.

Jessica retrieved the severed hands and slid them into a freezer bag from her jacket.

She turned and offered the sword back, hilt-first, her head bowed.

Lady Justice accepted it with her left hand.

In her right, the scales came level.

“His mother,” Jessica said softly. “Did she know?”

Lady Justice drew the blindfold over her eyes. Jessica watched the scales.

Lady Justice’s fingers tightened around the hilt.

“She suspected.

She feared.

She chose silence.”

The scales shifted.

“A mother’s love can be a refuge. It can also become complicity.”

The scales steadied.

“She lives with what she allowed. That is her sentence.”

Lady Justice lifted the blindfold. Her eyes returned to Jessica, and the decision appeared complete.

Jessica lowered her eyes to the clear bag hanging at her side.

The air shimmered.

Lady Justice rose, dissolving into darkness between the branches.

A muffled ringtone broke the silence.

Jessica looked down and saw a faint blue glow beneath the leaves. She nudged them aside with her boot.

Griffin’s phone.

The screen read: Mom.

Without hesitation, Jessica brought her heel down.

The glass shattered. The ringing stopped.

Silence returned to the woods.

Jessica looked once more at the body. The familiar sense of completion should have followed. This time, it did not arrive cleanly.

She turned and disappeared into the trees. Behind her, Griffin’s body remained bound where she had left it.

The sentence had been carried out.

Chapter Eleven: The Freezer

Jessica backtracked through the woods before breaking into a steady jog.

A mile later, she reached the extraction point. The Escalade waited exactly where it should be, engine idling, headlights off.

She slid into the backseat.

“Nancy Griffin’s address,” she said. “But stop a few blocks short.”

The driver’s eyebrows lifted slightly in the rearview mirror. That wasn’t in Alex’s briefing.

“Alex didn’t authorize that stop,” he said.

“I’m aware.”

He held her gaze in the mirror for a moment, then turned back to the road.

Jessica glanced at her hands. The blood had dried into a dark, rusty crust across her knuckles.

She jotted a quick note, folded it, and slipped on her black gloves.

When the Escalade slowed, she opened the door.

“Circle the block,” she told the driver. “Five minutes.”

The vehicle was a masterpiece of misdirection. The license plates rotated automatically, each set matched to a different electronic registration stored in the tablet inside the glove compartment. Anyone spotting the SUV here would find no connection to the one seen near Griffin’s cabin.

Different plates.
Different car.
At least on paper.

Jessica smiled thinly and disappeared into the dark.

She moved between the houses without sound until she reached Nancy Griffin’s backyard.

A spotlight mounted at the corner of the house threw harsh shadows across the lawn. Through the kitchen window, a television flickered.

Jessica climbed the three steps to the back door.

From inside her jacket, she withdrew a plastic bag. Griffin's severed hands shifted inside with a soft, wet sound. She placed the bag on the stoop beside the folded note.

She stepped back into the yard and picked up a rock roughly the size of a baseball.

Twenty feet from the house, she paused.

One clean throw.

The kitchen window exploded inward. Glass clung to the frame while larger shards crashed across the floor.

Jessica retreated into the shadow of a neighbor's tree, giving herself a clear view of the door.

Inside, the kitchen light snapped on.

Then the porch light.

Nancy Griffin appeared in the doorway, eyes wide, shoulders tight. She spotted the rock near the sink and picked it up.

Her face drained of color.

She moved to the back door and opened it slowly.

Her eyes fell first on the note.

YOU KNEW.

Then the bag.

Understanding hit her all at once. Tears spilled down her cheeks, but the accusation in those two words cut deeper than whatever waited inside the plastic.

Her mind raced.

Had she enabled him?
Could she be charged?
Would they come for her next?

Without hesitation, she grabbed the bag and stepped back into the house, scanning the yard.

She saw nothing.

But Jessica watched everything.

The door closed.
The porch light went out.

Nancy stood in the kitchen, the plastic bag hanging from her left hand.

Inside, the fingers shifted softly against the plastic.

She dialed Roth's number with her right.

If she told him about the hands, he would ask about the note—and what she knew.

He answered on the second ring.

"It's Nancy Griffin," she said. Her voice trembled. "Wade's mother."

"Of course, Ms. Griffin. What can I help you with at this hour?"

"Something's happened to Wade." She swallowed. "I know what you think of him. But he's still my son."

"I understand your concern. What makes you think he's in trouble?"

Nancy stared at the bag. Pale fingers pressed against the plastic like trapped spiders.

"Call it maternal instinct," she said. "He said he was stepping out for air. His phone showed him near the cabin. Now it isn't updating, and he won't answer."

She waited, watching the pale fingers press against the bag.

With the phone pressed to her shoulder, she opened the freezer.

Cold air spilled across her hands.

She dug past a bag of frozen bagels, clearing a space in the back corner. Then she placed the severed hands inside. The pale shapes disappeared into the frost.

She covered them with the bagels.

Then a package of ground beef.

The plastic crinkled loudly in the quiet kitchen.

“Ms. Griffin?” Roth said. “Are you still there?”

Nancy stared into the freezer.

“Just… rearranging things,” she said. “Keeps my mind occupied when I’m anxious.”

“I understand. I’ll have officers check the cabin right away. Try to get some rest tonight. We’ll locate your son.”

Her fingers tightened around the phone.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I’m sure you will.”

She ended the call.

The kitchen light hummed above her.

Nancy Griffin stood motionless, staring at the closed freezer door.

Chapter Twelve: The Correction

Gideon occupied War Room Three alone.

The chamber lay beneath the firm’s foundation, beyond the reach of weather, traffic, and daylight. Its monitors were dark. Ventilation moved cool air through the ceiling with a steady whisper.

He had waited in rooms like this for centuries. Beneath palaces. Behind council chambers. Under cities that no longer existed.

The door opened.

Jessica stepped inside wearing fresh clothes. Her hair was still damp. She had washed carefully, but Gideon caught the faint woodland scent beneath the soap.

“It’s done,” she said.

“Sit.”

She took the chair opposite him.

“Were there complications?”

“No one interrupted the operation.”

He waited.

Jessica rested her hands in her lap.

“Griffin won’t hurt another child.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“It’s the answer that matters.”

Gideon pulled out the chair across from her but remained standing.

“Alex’s operation ended at the extraction point. Your driver reported an additional stop. Alex reported that you refused to account for it.”

Jessica’s expression did not change.

“Nancy Griffin.”

“Why?”

“She needed to know.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Enough.”

Gideon sat.

Above them, associates would still be working. Motions drafted. Contracts reviewed. People paying considerable sums to have their problems reduced to something the law could manage.

Down here, an executioner was deciding how much her employer deserved to hear.

“Did you threaten her?”

“I didn’t touch her.”

Again, she had answered a different question.

He studied her face. She was neither frightened nor defensive. He knew those responses well enough to recognize their absence. Jessica appeared to believe the conversation was unnecessary.

“Griffin was the assignment,” he said. “His mother was not.”

“She helped him hide.”

“Then we establish what she did.”

“She knew.”

“Knowledge has degrees, Jessica. So does responsibility.”

“Not to the children.”

He leaned back.

There it was. The argument he had heard in different languages, across different centuries. A true statement offered as permission to stop asking questions.

“What happened in the woods?”

“I carried out the sentence.”

“How?”

Jessica’s fingers moved once against her knee, then became still.

“He died.”

“Alex prepared a discreet operation. Something the authorities could investigate without finding their way here.”

“They haven’t found their way here.”

“Yet.”

She looked toward the blank monitor behind him.

“You authorized his death.”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t ask me to apologize for it.”

“I’m asking you to account for what you did.”

For a moment, something moved behind her composure. Irritation, perhaps. Or the recollection of something she had no intention of sharing.

Then it was gone.

“He was alive when I reached him,” she said. “He was dead when I left. There were no witnesses who could identify me.”

Gideon let the silence lengthen.

Jessica did not fill it.

“Lady Justice spoke to me before the hearing,” he said.

Her gaze returned to his.

“What did she say?”

“She believes I’ve failed.”

“Because Griffin walked?”

“Because I still believe the courtroom matters after it fails.”

Jessica studied him.

“Does it?”

“The alternative is a sentence no one can challenge.”

“Griffin’s victims couldn’t challenge his.”

“No. They couldn’t.”

His agreement seemed to surprise her more than an argument would have.

Gideon placed his hands flat on the table.

“I know what he was. I authorized the operation. You don’t need to persuade me that children deserved protection.”

“Then what are we discussing?”

“What we become while protecting them.”

Jessica exhaled through her nose.

“He won’t hurt anyone again. That’s what we became tonight.”

“And tomorrow?”

“If there’s another Griffin, we stop him.”

“Another correction.”

“Yes.”

She used the word without hesitation.

His mother’s word.

Gideon had spent centuries trying to make corrections unnecessary. Every rule of evidence, every limit on a ruler’s power, every right that survived a frightened government had been an attempt to give people something better than the judgment of whoever held the weapon.

He had failed often.

He had not failed always.

“I’ve watched courts protect people who would otherwise have disappeared,” he said. “People without money. Without influence. Without anyone willing to avenge them.”

“And I’ve watched courts send them home with the people hurting them.”

“So have I.”

“Then you know why she’s angry.”

He looked at her.

“You sound like her.”

Jessica held his gaze.

“Someone has to.”

The words were spoken quietly. They required no additional force.

Gideon glanced again at her hands.

He had expected anger after the hearing. Relief after the operation. Perhaps the exhaustion that followed doing something a person could never take back.

Instead, she seemed settled.

“What did you feel afterward?”

Jessica considered him for several seconds.

“He was finished.”

“That’s an observation.”

“It was enough.”

He remembered her interview. The basement. The answer she had given when he asked about her stepfather.

Completion.

Tonight, she had chosen another word.

“Did anything happen that wasn’t in Alex’s briefing?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“You should ask Alex about his briefing.”

“I’m asking you about the woods.”

“And I’ve answered.”

“No,” Gideon said. “You’ve told me the outcome.”

Jessica rose.

He had not dismissed her.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Gideon stood as well.

“You work here because I believed you could do more than kill.”

“I do more than kill.”

“I know. You’re an excellent attorney.”

“I was an excellent attorney this morning. Griffin still walked.”

The room seemed smaller than it had when she entered.

Gideon could order another debrief. Separate Jessica from her driver. Examine the movements of every vehicle involved. He could make her account for each minute.

None of it would explain the certainty with which she stood before him.

“Get some rest,” he said.

Jessica walked toward the door, then paused with her hand near the release.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think you failed.”

He looked up.

“I think you expect the law to do something it was never built to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Care.”

The door closed behind her.

Gideon remained standing.

He had known ambitious attorneys, devoted operatives, and people who mistook employment at his firm for admission into a superior species. Jessica was none of those.

She had found something here she recognized.

And tonight, she had withheld something from him.

He switched on the nearest monitor, then switched it off again.

Helen would still be upstairs. Her reading glasses low on her nose, a pencil moving through the ledgers. She would have an ordinary question waiting for him,

something about an account or a signature or whether he had eaten.

He had left her asleep in his bed that morning, one hand beneath his pillow, her hair loose across it. When he bent to kiss her shoulder, she had caught his wrist without opening her eyes.

“Tonight,” she had said. “Before I fall asleep.”

He had promised. Now he checked the time.

He needed an ordinary question.

For the moment, he stayed where he was.

Chapter Thirteen: The Visit

Morning arrived before Gideon had decided what to do about Jessica.

He ended a call outside his penthouse and entered the elevator. The doors were closing when he caught them with one hand.

Samantha and Trish stood in the corridor wearing workout clothes.

“Going down?” Samantha asked.

“That was the intention.”

They stepped inside.

Trish glanced at his suit.

“You’re overdressed for the mats.”

“I’m hoping to correct that.”

“At your age, warming up is important.”

Samantha looked sharply at her.

Gideon pressed Underground One.

“At my age,” he said, “I should have learned to avoid lawyers.”

Trish smiled.

The elevator descended.

He let them leave first, then crossed to the men’s locker room. Wooden benches, stainless shower pillars, teak lockers. Nothing comfortable enough to encourage a prolonged stay.

He changed into loose cotton training pants and left his shoes behind.

The floor was already busy. A Krav Maga class warmed up near the far wall. Several employees occupied the folding chairs beside the mats, pretending to watch the class rather than him.

Gideon began with his breathing.

Then movement.

His muscles loosened. His attention narrowed. For a few minutes, there was only the familiar usefulness of a body doing what he asked.

A facility attendant approached.

“Detective Simon Roth is in reception, sir.”

Gideon stopped.

“Of course he is.”

“Should I tell him you’re unavailable?”

“No. Ask Alex to bring him down.”

He wiped his face with a towel and waited at the edge of the mat.

Roth entered behind Alex. His eyes moved immediately to the weapons displayed along the wall.

Gideon offered his hand.

“What brings you here, Detective?”

Roth’s grip was firm. Gideon matched it without increasing the pressure.

“Wade Griffin was found dead last night.”

“Where?”

“Near his cabin.”

Roth watched for a response.

Gideon gave him none.

“Someone cut off his head,” Roth continued. “Then removed his hands.”

Across the mat, Alex became still.

Gideon noticed.

So did Roth.

“You didn’t know that part?”

“I didn’t know any part,” Gideon said.

“Your attorney prosecuted him for Cloonan.”

“Jessica Nero handled the case.”

“And lost it yesterday.”

“The court suppressed the evidence you obtained.”

Roth’s jaw tightened.

“I carried a child out of that cabin.”

“I know.”

“Griffin would have killed that child if I’d waited.”

“I’m not questioning the rescue.”

“Just the part that made prosecuting him impossible.”

Gideon folded the towel.

“Why are you here?”

“Because Griffin walked out of court, and hours later someone executed him. Your firm has an unusual history with people who walk out of court.”

“Our firm has a long history. You can find almost anything if you choose the right examples.”

Gideon laid the towel on the bench.

“You carried that child out yourself. You know what Griffin was. Why spend another minute on him?”

Roth looked at him. “Because someone killed him.”

“That tells me what happened. It doesn’t tell me whom you’re helping.”

“I don’t need to like the victim.”

“Neither do I. But your department has a budget. You have a finite number of detectives and children you haven’t found yet. How much of that do you spend finding whoever made certain Griffin would never touch another one?”

Behind them, the instructor called for a change of partners. Roth waited until the movement settled.

“You think I wanted to spend this morning working for Wade Griffin?”

“I think someone should ask why you are.”

“His killer went to his mother’s house.”

Gideon kept his expression still.

“A broken window,” Roth said. “She says nothing was taken. She won’t tell me much else. Maybe it’s unrelated. Maybe whoever did this isn’t finished.”

“Then protect her.”

“I’m trying to find out who she needs protection from.”

Roth looked toward the sword display.

“Medical examiner says a blade did it. A large one.”

“You’re in Boston. There are swords in museums, private collections, and half the antique shops worth entering.”

“These look capable.”

“So do yours.”

Roth turned back.

“I’d like them tested.”

Gideon glanced across the training floor.

“Trish.”

She approached, breathing slightly harder from the class.

“Detective Roth is investigating a death involving a bladed weapon,” Gideon said. “He’d like our collection examined.”

Trish looked from Roth to the display.

“Are you requesting consent or presenting a warrant?”

“Requesting cooperation.”

“Then tell us what you want to take, what tests you intend to perform, and which items you believe are relevant. We’ll discuss access with the collection’s custodian.”

“I’d prefer to bring my team this morning.”

“Put the request in writing. We’ll preserve the collection in the meantime.”

Roth gave her a long look.

“You rehearsed that?”

“No,” she said. “But asking the government to explain what it wants is fairly routine here.”

Gideon nodded his thanks. Trish returned to the class.

“You make everything difficult,” Roth said.

“We make people be specific.”

For a moment, Roth looked tired rather than suspicious.

Then he stepped closer.

“There’s something else.”

Gideon waited.

“We recovered blood that didn’t belong to Griffin.”

“From whoever killed him?”

“Possibly. Some of it may be from another source.”

“An animal?”

“That was the first assumption.”

“And?”

“The lab hasn’t identified it.”

“Hasn’t identified a person, or hasn’t identified what it is?”

Roth glanced at Alex.

“What it is.”

The sounds of training continued behind them. A pad taking punches. An instructor correcting someone’s stance.

Gideon concentrated on those ordinary sounds.

“What exactly did the laboratory say?”

“They’re repeating the analysis before they issue a conclusion. The preliminary profile doesn’t fit what they expected.”

“Unexpected results are why laboratories repeat tests.”

“I know.”

“Then let them finish.”

Roth rubbed a hand across his mouth.

“I’ve got a decapitated man, missing hands, and blood my people can’t explain. I’m trying to understand what kind of scene I’m dealing with.”

Gideon unfolded the towel, then folded it again.

“Who found him?”

“Officers checking the property after his mother called.”

“Nancy called?”

“She said his phone location hadn’t moved.”

“Did she go there?”

“Not that she’s told us.”

Gideon remembered Jessica’s additional stop.

She needed to know.

“What did she say when you told her?”

Roth watched him carefully.

“Why?”

“You asked for my insight.”

“She was distressed.”

“Understandably.”

“She was also withholding something. I don’t know what.”

Gideon looked toward Alex.

“We’ll preserve the collection,” he said. “Send your request.”

“That’s it?”

“For now.”

Roth took a card from his pocket and placed it on the bench beside Gideon.

“If Ms. Nero remembers anything unusual about yesterday, I’d appreciate a call.”

“She knows how to reach you.”

“Yes,” Roth said. “She does.”

Alex escorted him out.

Gideon remained beside the bench, staring at the card.

The missing hands belonged to Jessica’s unexplained visit.

The blood belonged to a different problem.

He knew the sword his mother carried. He knew what remained on it when she appeared, the accumulation of judgments she never seemed concerned to wash away.

Had she joined Jessica in the woods?

Had she carried out the sentence herself?

Then he remembered Jessica’s hands, resting so calmly in her lap.

The possibility came slowly, unwelcome enough that his mind tried to reject it before it formed.

Had his mother placed the sword in them?

Alex returned.

“Did she tell you how Griffin died?” Gideon asked.

“She refused the details. I asked about the method, the weapon, the scene, and the stop at Nancy’s. She gave me the outcome. I sent you the incomplete debrief as soon as she left.”

“You debriefed her.”

“She confirmed the kill. The driver confirmed extraction and the stop at Nancy’s. The rest was marked unverified. That was why I sent her to you.”

“And the hands?”

“No.”

Gideon looked toward the weapon display.

“Meet me in my office tonight.”

Alex waited.

“Something happened in those woods,” Gideon said. “She didn’t tell either of us.”

He picked up Roth’s card.
His workout was over.

Chapter Fourteen: The Executioner

By midnight, the law library outside Gideon’s office was empty.

Alex sat at one end of the burgundy leather couch. Gideon stood beside the desk, Roth’s card between his fingers.

“Decapitation,” he said. “Hands removed. An additional stop at Nancy Griffin’s house.”

Alex nodded.

“And blood the laboratory can’t identify.”

“I heard him.”

Gideon laid the card down.

“What else did Jessica tell you?”

“That Griffin was dead. Nothing that answered the questions in the debrief. You received my report before you spoke to her.”

“Everyone keeps giving me that answer.”

“It was the only objective she would confirm. I didn’t certify the operation complete.”

“The objective included keeping this firm out of a murder investigation.”

“Then we need to know what she left behind.”

“And why.”

Alex leaned forward.

“The missing hands worry me more than the method.”

“Why?”

“Because someone took them somewhere.”

Gideon looked at him.

“Nancy.”

“It fits the driver’s report.”

He imagined the delivery. Nancy opening a door. Whatever Jessica had chosen to leave for her.

“An accusation,” Gideon said.

“Or a warning.”

“She said she didn’t touch her.”

“She may consider that restraint.”

Gideon’s hand tightened against the edge of the desk.

He had authorized Griffin’s death. He could not pretend otherwise now that the execution had become inconvenient.

But Jessica had accepted his authorization and then withheld the details, as though his responsibility ended wherever hers began.

“We need her back in here,” he said.

Alex hesitated.

“Before you do that, decide what you’re asking.”

“An honest account.”

“And when she gives you one?”

Gideon said nothing.

Alex understood the silence.

“Are you considering taking her off operations?”

“I’m considering whether she can remain inside this firm if she decides which orders apply to her.”

“That isn’t quite the same question.”

“No.”

The word settled between them.

Alex rested his forearms on his knees.

“Lady Justice has had her eye on Jessica since she was a child.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think we know how closely.”

Gideon turned toward the window.

Across Commonwealth Avenue, a few apartment lights remained on. People reading. People unable to sleep. Lives proceeding without reference to the room behind him.

“Her scholarship,” Alex continued. “The invitation. Your mother brought her here.”

“I hired her.”

“After your mother chose her.”

Gideon looked back.

Alex held his gaze.

“I’m not defending what she did. I’m telling you to understand the arrangement before you change it.”

The sweetness reached them first.

Alex stopped speaking.

Gideon felt the familiar progression: flowers, copper, decay.

Lady Justice appeared above the carpet.

Her sword moved before either man could stand.

The blade swept toward Alex’s face and stopped close enough for him to feel the displaced air.

He did not retreat.

Blood struck his collar. A few droplets landed on the couch beside him.

Lady Justice regarded him with a small smile.

“Careful, Alex.”

Gideon moved away from the desk.

“Mother.”

She lowered the blade.

“That is Wade Griffin’s blood.”

Alex looked down at his sleeve.

Gideon watched the sword.

“You were there.”

“Yes.”

“Did you kill him?”

“No.”

Her answer was immediate.

“Jessica did.”

For a moment, Gideon heard only the ventilation.

“With your sword?”

Lady Justice turned the blade slightly, examining it as though his question had drawn her attention to an ordinary possession.

“With my sword.”

Two thousand years.

She had given him assignments. Instructions. Judgments he had disputed and judgments he had obeyed.

Never that.

He remembered Jessica across the table downstairs, choosing each answer.

He remembered the basement story. The scholarship letter. The invitation that had reached her before she could have known the firm existed.

He had believed those things led to his office.

Now he wondered whether his office had merely been one of the places she needed Jessica to pass through.

“You gave her something you have never given me,” he said.

Lady Justice looked at him without embarrassment.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because she was ready to use it.”

Alex remained seated.

Gideon took another step toward her.

“I have carried out your sentences for centuries.”

“And tonight you are more concerned with a detective than with the children who will live because Griffin died.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Then why are we discussing Jessica as though she is the danger?”

“Because she left evidence. Because she acted beyond the assignment. Because she will bring people into this building who have no idea what they are walking into.”

“She finished what you authorized.”

“And went to his mother afterward.”

Lady Justice’s expression changed slightly.

“She left Nancy alive.”

“What did she leave with her?”

“A reminder.”

Gideon waited for more.

His mother offered none.

Alex spoke carefully.

“We need to account for what the police will find.”

Lady Justice turned toward him.

“You need to remember whose work you are protecting.”

“I do.”

“Then hear me clearly. Neither of you will harm Jessica.”

Gideon’s jaw tightened.

“No one has touched her.”

“You were discussing whether she belongs here.”

“That is my responsibility.”

“Then exercise it wisely.”

Her sword remained loose in her hand. Alex’s collar was darkening where Griffin’s blood had soaked into the fabric.

Gideon looked at it.

“Did you tell her to keep this from me?”

“I did not tell her to keep anything from you.”

“Did you tell her to report it?”

Lady Justice regarded him.

“She did not need your permission to accept what I offered.”

That answer hurt more than he expected.

For centuries, he had been the person who translated her judgments into something the human world could survive. He had believed she understood why that mattered, even when she despised the compromises.

Now she had opened another route.

“Jessica is mortal,” he said.

“For the moment, she is useful.”

“She’s a person.”

“So were you when I found you.”

The room went quiet.

Gideon had no answer he was willing to give in front of Alex.

Lady Justice drifted closer.

“You taught her how this world works,” she said. “You gave her access, resources, discipline. You have done well.”

He looked up.

The praise was worse than the anger.

“What have I prepared her for?”

His mother studied his face.

“To act.”

“She already acts.”

“Then perhaps you should consider what you are trying to teach her now.”

She lifted the sword, not toward either man this time, but enough for the light to travel along its edge.

“I waited through your courts, your settlements, your improvements. Griffin’s children waited too.”

“You know why there are limits.”

“I know who pays for them.”

“Without limits, there is only power.”

Her eyes held his.

“Then use yours.”

The sweetness deepened.

A moment later, she was gone.

Alex remained seated until the last trace of her presence had left the room.

Then he looked down at his sleeve.

“I’ll need a new suit.”

Gideon did not smile.

“Don’t send that one to the cleaners.”

Alex glanced up.

“Roth’s unidentified blood,” Gideon said. “We may have just received a sample.”

Alex looked at the droplets on the leather beside him.

“I’ll have the room secured.”

“Seal the suit and take swabs from the leather,” Gideon said. “Have the medical team examine them. Keep the samples inside the firm.”

He rose, but Gideon stopped him.

“Tomorrow, take Jessica to the Bancroft property.”

“For what?”

“Reconnaissance. Show her the perimeter. Security patterns. No contact.”

Alex waited.

“And afterward?”

“Dinner. Somewhere outside the city.”

“The Pillar House?”

Gideon nodded.

“Closed decades ago.”

“Find somewhere else.”

Alex studied him.

“What do you want me to find out?”

Gideon looked toward the place his mother had occupied.

“Whether she thinks there is anything left for us to teach her.”

“That could make for an uncomfortable dinner.”

“Then don’t interrogate her. Talk to her.”

“About Griffin?”

“About anything else.”

Alex nodded slowly.

“You want to know who she is when she isn’t working.”

“I want her to have the opportunity to be someone who isn’t working.”

At the door, Alex paused.

“She may read the invitation differently.”

“I know.”

“Especially now.”

“Then tell her enough to get her into the car.”

Alex left.

Gideon remained beside the couch.

For the first time, the firm looked different to him. The offices, the training floors, the residences. Everything he had built to carry out his mother’s will.

Everything Jessica had learned inside it.

He had welcomed her into his world.

His mother had been waiting for her.

Jessica’s phone lit beside her on the couch.

Meet me at noon. Bancroft reconnaissance. Dinner afterward. Dress accordingly.

She read the message twice.

Then typed:

I’m not assigned to Bancroft.

Alex’s reply took longer.

Boss wants your input.

Jessica set the phone on her knee.

Bancroft was in prison. The property was a surveillance assignment. There was no reason to send her with Alex unless the reason had little to do with Bancroft.

She thought of Gideon’s questions.

What happened in the woods?

How?

She had expected him to recognize the significance when she told him. She had also expected the questions that would follow.

So she had waited.

Now there was a drive outside the city.

Dinner afterward.

She looked toward the windows, judging the darkness beyond them.

Alex would not make a spectacle of it. He would choose somewhere quiet. He would be courteous until the moment courtesy no longer served a purpose.

Her phone lit again.

I’m not going to kill you.

Jessica stared at the words.

Then a short laugh escaped her.

She picked up the phone.

That improves the invitation.

His answer came almost immediately.

Noon. Out front.

She held the phone for a moment before typing one more message.

I appreciate you, Alex.

She received no answer.

Jessica put the phone down.

In the woods, Lady Justice had held the sword with her for one suspended moment before letting go.

She could still remember the warmth of the hilt.

The weapon had felt right in her hand. That was the part she had not known how to explain to Gideon.

Perhaps it was also the part he would least want to hear.

Chapter Fifteen: Bancroft

At eleven forty, Jessica found Alex in the small kitchen beside the training floor. A plate sat beside his tablet. Half a croissant remained on it.

She put a paper cup beside his hand.

“Black. One sugar.”

Alex looked from the cup to her.

“You remembered.”

“You complain when they get it wrong.”

“I mention it.”

“Everyone hears you mention it.”

She took the chair opposite him and tore a piece from his croissant.

Alex watched her eat it.

“That was my breakfast.”

“It’s almost noon.”

“I started late.”

“You should finish faster.”

He moved the plate between them.

Jessica took another piece, smaller this time. Alex turned his tablet facedown and lifted the coffee. Neither spoke for a while. Beyond the door, someone dropped a weight and swore.

She smiled at the sound. Alex shook his head.

“Third time this week.”

“Same person?”

“Same weight.”

Her laugh surprised him. It surprised her a little too.

Alex drank his coffee without commenting on it. Jessica rested one heel against the chair leg and reached for the last loose flakes on the plate. She did

not feel obliged to fill the quiet or to explain why she had stayed.

When Alex checked his watch, she straightened.

“Bancroft?”

“Bancroft.”

She stood and brushed a crumb from her jacket. Alex collected the empty plate.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“You’re welcome.”

She held the door while he carried it to the sink.

The Escalade idled at the curb, dark glass reflecting the midday traffic.

Alex stood beside the passenger door. He watched the entrance to the firm, then the windows across the avenue, then a delivery van stopped farther down the block.

At noon, Jessica emerged in a dark blue pantsuit and heels.

She paused beside him.

“No shovel?”

“In the back.”

She looked at him.

Alex opened the door.

“For emergencies.”

Jessica smiled despite herself and climbed inside.

He waited until she was seated, closed the door, and walked around to the driver’s side.

They traveled two blocks before she spoke.

“Did he send you to ask about Griffin?”

“He sent me to take you to Bancroft’s property.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“I know.”

Jessica watched his profile.

Alex kept his attention on the traffic.

“Does he know?”

“About the sword? Yes.”

She turned toward the window.

For several seconds, neither spoke.

“What did she tell him?”

“Enough to make this a difficult morning.”

Jessica’s mouth tightened.

“I was going to tell him.”

“When?”

“When I knew what to say.”

“You could have started with what happened.”

“And watched him decide whether I was allowed to accept it?”

Alex glanced at her.

“You’ve been here five years. You know him better than that.”

“I know he wanted an explanation before he wanted to know whether Griffin was dead.”

“He authorized Griffin’s death. He was responsible for what followed.”

“So was I.”

“Yes,” Alex said. “You were.”

She looked back at the road.

The city thinned around them. Storefronts gave way to service yards and warehouses. Alex checked the rearview mirror twice before turning onto a side street.

“Today is reconnaissance,” he said. “We observe the property, identify security patterns, and leave.”

“Understood.”

“No contact.”

“I heard you.”

“No casualties.”

Jessica looked at him.

“That sounded personal.”

“It was.”

Bancroft’s operation occupied a fenced compound with a brick office on the left and a warehouse on the right.

Three white box trucks stood at the loading bays. Razor wire crowned the fence. Two guards walked the perimeter while another pair remained near the entrance.

Inside, expensive cars filled the spaces closest to the office.

Jessica raised the binoculars.

“Someone’s doing well.”

Alex parked across the street with a clear view of the gate.

“Record the vehicles.”

She photographed the lot through the windshield, then enlarged the images on her phone.

“Do we know who’s running it while Bancroft is inside?”

“We have names. We don’t know which one makes the decisions.”

“Could ask.”

“We could also let them show us.”

He opened the surveillance file on the vehicle’s tablet.

Deliveries. Shift changes. Visitor arrivals. An operation gradually becoming understandable through repetition.

Schecter had spent months negotiating Bancroft’s plea. Gideon had trusted him with the case because Schecter knew how to explain an unwelcome outcome without surrendering the client’s confidence.

It had not saved him.

Alex remembered the photograph from the courthouse. Schecter's briefcase lay open beside his body. Papers had scattered into the street.

A guard near the gate turned toward the Escalade.

"Time to move," Alex said.

He drove around the block and parked farther away.

Jessica lowered the binoculars.

"We could get a better angle from the sidewalk."

Alex considered the street. Public access. Several pedestrians. A bus stop beyond the entrance.

He should have remained in the vehicle.

Instead, he shut down the tablet.

"A walk past. Nothing more."

Jessica opened her door.

They approached along the opposite sidewalk, then crossed beyond the entrance.

Alex held his phone at his side. From this angle, he could see part of the warehouse interior when a loading door rose.

A guard noticed him looking.

The man spoke into his collar.

A second guard joined him.

"Keep walking," Alex said quietly.

They had nearly passed the gate when the taller guard called out.

"Looking for something?"

Alex stopped.

Jessica took another step, then turned.

"An address," Alex said.

"What address?"

Alex glanced at the office number.

"This one, apparently."

The guard looked at the phone in his hand.

“Delete whatever you took.”

Alex could have put the phone away.

He could have continued walking.

Instead, he lifted it slightly.

“Public sidewalk.”

The guard moved closer to the narrow pedestrian gate.

“Then use it to go somewhere else.”

Jessica drifted to Alex’s right.

He saw her creating an angle.

He knew what it meant.

“Jess,” he said.

The guard produced a key.

His partner moved beside him, one hand settling near the weapon beneath his jacket.

The gate opened.

“Put the phone away,” the taller man said.

Alex remained where he was.

The second guard stepped through first.

Jessica moved before Alex spoke again.

Her pistol came up beneath the man’s jaw. Her free hand caught his wrist, holding it away from his jacket.

“Leave it there,” she said.

The taller guard stopped with one foot outside the gate.

Alex could still end it.

He could order Jessica back, apologize for nothing, and leave before either guard made the next mistake.

Then the taller man looked at him.

Recognition passed across his face.

“You’re from the law firm.”

Alex thought of Schecter’s papers moving across the pavement.

“Adam Schecter,” he said. “Who arranged it?”

The guard’s eyes shifted toward the office.

There.

Not an answer, but enough to keep Alex standing.

Jessica’s captive swallowed carefully against the barrel.

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Your employer hired someone to kill his attorney,” Alex said. “Who handled the arrangements?”

“Not us.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

The taller guard glanced toward Jessica.

“Listen. I’ve got kids.”

“Then don’t reach for the gun.”

The man raised both hands.

His partner’s breathing had become shallow.

“Outside contractor,” he said. “Management brought him in.”

“Which manager?”

“I don’t know.”

“Name.”

“I never heard it.”

Alex moved closer.

“Where did he come from?”

“Out of state. That’s all I know. We weren’t involved.”

A truck engine started inside the compound.

Jessica glanced toward the sound without moving her pistol.

Alex saw a figure appear behind the office glass.

They had stayed too long.

“Back inside,” he said.

Jessica released the guard’s wrist and stepped away, keeping the weapon trained on him.

Both men retreated through the gate.

The taller one pulled it shut.

Only then did Jessica lower her pistol.

They walked back to the Escalade without speaking.

Alex shut his door and started the engine.

Jessica secured her weapon.

“No dinner,” he said.

She watched him.

“We need to get back.”

“Because of me?”

“Because they recognized us.”

“They recognized you.”

“Yes.”

He pulled into traffic.

Jessica waited until they had left the compound behind.

“You said no contact.”

“I did.”

“Then you asked the questions while I held the gun.”

Alex kept his eyes on the road.

“Yes.”

“So don’t tell Gideon I did this alone.”

“I won’t.”

She leaned back.

His admission seemed to deprive her of an argument she had prepared.

“Did you get what you wanted?” she asked.

“No.”

“They confirmed management hired him.”

“We already believed that.”

“Now we know.”

“We have a frightened guard repeating something he may have heard secondhand. No name. No record. Nothing we can use without going back.”

Jessica looked out the window.

“You wanted to keep asking.”

“Yes.”

“So did I.”

Alex tightened his grip on the wheel.

“That was the problem.”

His phone rang through the vehicle’s secure system.

Marnie.

He answered.

“What’s happening?”

“The office blinds just came down,” she said. “Two people went into the warehouse. Loading activity’s changed.”

“What changed?”

“They pulled one truck away from the dock and brought another in. Our team can’t see what they’re putting inside.”

Alex checked the mirror.

“Keep observing. Don’t approach.”

“Did they make you?”

“Yes.”

Marnie paused.

“Understood.”

The call ended.

Jessica watched the screen go dark.

“They might have done that anyway.”

“They might.”

“You don’t know it’s because of us.”

“No. I know we gave them a reason.”

Alex took the next exit.

For several minutes, only the tires and engine filled the car.

Then he spoke.

“Gideon didn’t send you out today to prove you could handle two guards.”

“What did he want?”

“To spend an afternoon with you that didn’t end with someone dead.”

Jessica looked at him.

“He could have asked.”

“He asked me.”

“To find out whether I’m still human?”

Alex considered his answer.

“To remind you that you’re allowed to be.”

She turned away.

“I didn’t kill those men.”

“No.”

“And neither did you.”

“No.”

“Then perhaps we both passed.”

Alex did not smile.

“Keeping someone alive because they answered quickly enough isn’t the same as deciding they should live.”

Jessica studied him.

“Is that what you were doing?”

He remembered the guard’s glance toward the office.

The opening he had wanted to force wider.

“I don’t know,” he said.

For the first time since they left the firm, Jessica had nothing ready to say.

By the time they reached Boston, Marnie had sent a second update.

The departing truck's registration belonged to a vehicle their team had not previously recorded. The office entrance was now guarded. A planned opportunity to identify the people leaving at shift change had disappeared behind an altered security routine.

Alex forwarded the report to Gideon.

Then he added his own account.

He included the order he had given Jessica.

He included the moment he had stopped walking.

He included the questions he had asked while she held the guard at gunpoint.

Beside him, Jessica watched his fingers move across the screen.

"Am I going to be allowed to read that?"

He handed her the tablet.

She read it slowly.

"You wrote that you escalated it."

"I did."

"I drew the gun."

"And I used it."

Jessica returned the tablet.

Alex sent the report.

He guided the Escalade toward Mitchell Automotive. The garage door rose ahead of them.

"We don't protect anyone by making ourselves sound better afterward," he said.

Jessica looked at the entrance descending into darkness.

"Does Gideon know that?"

Alex drove onto the platform.

“He’s about to find out whether I do.”

Chapter Sixteen: DNA Everywhere

Alex’s report arrived before evening.

A separate message from the medical team confirmed that the blood from Alex’s suit and Gideon’s couch had been secured. Preliminary classification was inconclusive. Further testing was pending. Gideon left that inquiry open.

Jessica had ignored the limits of the Bancroft reconnaissance. Alex had participated in the confrontation that followed. The guards had confirmed that management hired outside talent to kill Schecter, but they had learned little Gideon did not already know.

There had been no dinner.

Gideon read the report twice, then called Alex.

“You were supposed to observe.”

“Yes.”

“You were supposed to keep her out of a confrontation.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I helped create one.”

Gideon leaned back in his chair.

“Why?”

“Because I wanted answers.”

The honesty offered no comfort.

“Then we have the same problem.”

Alex said nothing.

“I’ll speak to both of you tomorrow,” Gideon said.

He ended the call.

Jessica was not the only person in the firm who could justify departing from an order. He had done it himself on Commonwealth Avenue. He had killed Vorrin publicly because Schecter’s death had made patience intolerable.

His mother had approved the death and condemned the spectacle.

Now Jessica had created a spectacle of her own, and his mother had placed a sword in her hand.

Gideon turned toward the monitors on his desk.

A breaking-news banner crossed the first screen.

Michael Bancroft had been found dead in his prison cell.

He opened the report.

The prison was in Gardner. Officials were withholding the cause of death pending notification of family. A lockdown remained in effect. Investigators had been called to the facility.

On the second monitor, a Texas station interrupted its programming.

Eight death-row prisoners had been found dead in the same cell block.

Gideon opened both reports side by side.

Two prisons. Thousands of miles apart.

The first incident had been reported shortly after four. The second followed within minutes.

He checked the firm’s operations log.

Nothing authorized.

Nothing deployed.

No teams in Texas.

He did not need the log to tell him who had been there.

His private line rang.

Detective Roth.

Gideon answered.

“Detective.”

“I need to ask you about Bancroft.”

“I’ve seen the news.”

“Then you know this isn’t a routine prison death.”

“They haven’t released a cause.”

“I’m releasing it to you. Someone cut off his head.”

Gideon kept his eyes on the screen.

“And the Texas prisoners?”

A pause.

“You’ve seen that too.”

“Yes.”

“Same method. All eight.”

The office seemed suddenly quiet around him.

“Why are you calling me?”

“Because the Massachusetts investigators contacted our lab about the Griffin scene. Then Texas contacted them. Now everyone is talking to everyone, and I’ve got information I wish I didn’t have.”

“Go on.”

“We have scene reports and photographs. The laboratories are comparing the blood samples now. No confirmed matches yet.”

“Understood.”

“They found blood on Bancroft that may not be his. They’re comparing it with the samples from Griffin’s scene.”

Gideon’s fingers stopped against the edge of the desk.

Roth continued.

“Texas recovered mixed blood samples too. We’ve asked for comparisons with Griffin, Bancroft, and the unidentified material from the woods.”

The sword.

Griffin’s blood had still been on it when his mother appeared in the office.

Had it carried him into Bancroft’s cell?

Then carried both men into Texas?

“Any witnesses?” Gideon asked.

“None who can explain what happened. The cameras failed at both facilities. One feed recorded a white flash before it went down.”

“What times?”

“Four-oh-eight in Massachusetts. Three-oh-nine local time in Texas—four-oh-nine Eastern. Both feeds are synchronized to the same time service.”

A minute.

His mother had never needed the time human beings required.

Roth exhaled.

“We’ve confirmed you were here. We’re checking other people connected to Bancroft, but I’m not accusing you of traveling halfway across the country in sixty seconds.”

“How reassuring.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Bancroft hired a man to murder his own attorney,” Gideon said. “Now you have investigators in two states, laboratories working late, prison staff on lockdown. What will it cost to give him justice?”

“It’s costing us already.”

“And the people paying for it? What do you tell them they’re getting?”

“An answer about how someone entered a locked prison and killed a man without being stopped.”

“A man who arranged a murder.”

“Yes. I read his file. I also have officers asking whether they’re safe going back on that block.”

Gideon looked at the photographs on his screen. He knew the answer to that question. Roth had no reason to trust it.

Gideon looked away from the monitors.

“What do you want from me, Simon?”

“Something useful.”

“You don’t yet have the comparisons.”

“I know. But these deaths keep landing close to your firm.”

“Bancroft had many enemies.”

“And those cuts?”

Gideon said nothing.

“The same kind of weapon,” Roth said. “That’s what the investigators think. If those blood comparisons come back the way we suspect, whoever killed Griffin used it again. Or handed it to someone who did.”

Gideon pictured the blade between his mother’s hand and Jessica’s.

Roth lowered his voice.

“You understand what I’m dealing with?”

“Yes.”

“The man who hired Schecter’s killer is dead. The man your attorney prosecuted for Cloonan is dead. Now eight prisoners in another state are dead, and the same kind of blade appears to connect all three scenes.”

He paused.

“I don’t know whether your firm is a target, a participant, or the place someone wants me looking. But I’m looking.”

“I would expect you to.”

“Then stop giving me answers that mean nothing.”

The call ended.

Gideon remained with the phone in his hand.

He had intended to deal with Bancroft. He had investigated Schecter's murder, killed the assassin, and begun examining the organization behind him.

His mother had finished the matter without asking.

She had not finished Bancroft's organization. The compound still operated. Somewhere inside it, someone had arranged Schecter's murder and now knew the firm was looking. The departing truck in Marnie's report remained unaccounted for. Gideon marked the investigation to continue.

Bancroft had already been in custody. His conviction had been obtained. His freedom had been taken from him.

Lady Justice had known all of that.

She had killed him anyway.

Gideon set the phone down.

He thought of another room, centuries earlier.

Stone columns. A raised dais. Clerks reading from ledgers while the condemned knelt below them.

The proceedings had been orderly.

That was what he remembered most.

No one shouted. No one questioned the records. Each charge had been entered, reviewed, and accepted. The sentences followed in a voice so practiced that death sounded administrative.

The offenses had different names.

Their purpose was the same.

Disobedience.

A petition against a tax. A religious observance the ruler had forbidden. Words spoken in a marketplace and repeated by someone who wanted favor.

The court had given persecution a procedure.

Lady Justice stood beside Gideon, watching the next prisoner brought forward.

He was a thin man with a torn sleeve. He kept looking toward the gallery, where a woman sat with both hands pressed against her mouth.

“His wife,” Gideon said.

“I know.”

“The appeal is pending.”

“Before whom?”

He did not answer.

The same judge would hear it.

Above them, the judge opened another ledger.

Lady Justice moved toward the dais.

The guards noticed her too late to decide what she was.

“You’re late,” the judge said. He mistook her approach for submission. “The proceedings have begun.”

She looked at the prisoner.

“What did he do?”

The judge frowned.

“The charge has been established.”

“What did he do?”

“He challenged a lawful decree.”

“Did he harm anyone?”

“He encouraged defiance.”

“Did he harm anyone?”

The judge closed the ledger.

“You misunderstand the purpose of this court.”

“No,” she said. “I understand it.”

She drew the blindfold over her eyes. The scales rose in her hand and settled. When she lowered them, Gideon knew whom she had weighed.

Her sword moved once.

The judge’s head struck the stone below his chair.

A clerk dropped his pen. One guard reached for a weapon, then stopped when she turned toward him.

“Release them.”

No one moved.

Lady Justice looked at the ledgers stacked behind the dais.

“A signature does not make an innocent person guilty.”

The first guard lowered his weapon.

Then another.

Gideon stepped forward and took the keys.

That day, they had worked together.

She stopped the judge.

He opened the cells, found the families, and remained after she left. Someone had to replace the officials, preserve the records that mattered, and prevent the next ruler from using the same court in the same way.

He had spent years on what followed a single stroke of her sword.

He did not resent those years.

That had been the work.

Now, in Boston, he looked again at the names coming onto the Texas screen.

Eight men convicted of crimes.

He opened the available summaries. Murders. Victims. Appeals. Sentences that had survived years of review.

Nothing in the first reports suggested that his mother had gone there to free innocent prisoners.

She had gone to kill guilty ones.

There was no contradiction in that purpose. She had always punished the guilty and defended the innocent. Gideon had done both in her service.

The disagreement lay elsewhere.

He believed punishment could include confinement. He believed a lawful system could protect people without killing every person who had harmed them. He had built courts capable of restraining the guilty and governments capable of being restrained themselves.

His mother had tolerated outcomes she did not prefer because he asked her to give those systems time.

She was no longer asking him how much time they needed.

Griffin had escaped prosecution.

Bancroft had not.

The men in Texas were awaiting sentences the state had already imposed.

Her sword had reached all of them.

The distinctions Gideon considered essential had not altered her decision.

He stood and walked to the window.

Across the avenue, traffic moved beneath the streetlights. A woman hurried past carrying a child asleep against her shoulder. Two men argued beside a parked car. A delivery rider waited for the light to change.

For two thousand years, Gideon’s task had been to make a world those people could inhabit without depending on a divine executioner.

His mother’s task had been simpler.

Find the harm.

Judge responsibility.

End it.

He knew the force of her argument. Every person Griffin would never touch again testified to it. So did the prisoners released from that stone hall.

But he also knew what killing could not build.

His mother had once allowed him to do that part.

Now she was acting around him, and Jessica had welcomed the authority he had spent centuries trying to limit.

He returned to his desk and opened the operations log again.

Nine deaths.

No request.

No consultation.

His mother had not changed whom she meant to protect.

She had changed how much she trusted him to protect them.

Gideon closed the file.

Then he opened Jessica’s.

Chapter Seventeen: Helen

The Treasury Suite was nearly silent.

The Treasury Suite lacked the usual machinery of a financial office: crowded desks, junior staff, and the constant hum of conversation. It consisted of a single wide room behind reinforced glass, sealed off from the rest of the firm like a quiet command center.

Every account passed through here.
Every property deed.
Every shell company, trust, and hidden reserve accumulated over two thousand years.

Billions in assets.

Only one person knew where all of it lived.

And that person stayed later than anyone else.

Helen sat alone at the long accounting table, a single lamp casting warm light across the ledgers. Her silver-blonde hair was pinned loosely at the back of her head, soft strands escaping to frame a face that time had refined rather than diminished. The lines at the corners of her eyes only deepened their warmth, giving her a look of constant, knowing amusement.

She was beautiful in the way certain people became after decades of living—elegant posture, deliberate movements, and a calm that made everyone else feel slightly rushed. Her features were fine and symmetrical, her cheekbones still high, her lips naturally curved as though she'd just heard a private joke.

She wore a tailored charcoal dress, simple and perfectly cut, with a thin gold chain at her neck. No flashy jewelry. Nothing that called attention. She didn't need it. When she entered a room, conversations quieted without anyone quite understanding why.

Gideon had once known queens, actresses, revolutionaries, and saints. He had loved some of them.

But Helen was different.

She was the only one who made the world feel small enough to hold in his hands.

Gideon paused at the glass door before entering.

He did this every night.

Not because he needed to—but because for the last thirty years, this had been the closest thing he had to a normal routine.

Helen was sixty-eight now. He had watched those thirty years pass across her face while his own remained unchanged. They had stopped attending public events together when photographs began prompting questions neither could answer honestly. Here, behind the Treasury Suite's glass, he could stand beside her without inventing a history for himself.

The last photograph had been taken at a hospital benefit. Helen had liked her dress. She had liked the picture too, until a woman who had known them for twenty years asked what Gideon used on his skin.

They had laughed. Later, Helen had laid the photograph facedown on the kitchen counter.

"You'll have to start taking someone else."

He had looked up from the clasp of her necklace, which he was trying to undo.

"Will I?"

"Someone who looks your age. Let them take pictures. Let people think what they want."

His fingers stopped against the back of her neck.

"And what would she think?"

Helen watched him in the dark kitchen window.

"I'm trying to be practical. You could have a life outside this building. I wouldn't ask questions."

He freed the clasp and laid the necklace on the counter. Then he turned her toward him.

“Is that what you want?”

She had taken longer to answer than he liked.

“No.”

“Then don’t offer it.”

Since then, he had attended most functions alone. Occasionally a colleague accompanied him. There were photographs, speculation, invitations pressed into his hand. He declined the invitations. People eventually decided he was discreet.

Helen knew how much gossip the arrangement produced. Sometimes it amused her. What hurt was watching him leave for an evening she would once have shared. He had learned to ask whether she wanted him to stay, and to listen carefully to the answer.

Tonight, she had already asked.

Gideon opened the glass door and entered.

Reading glasses rested low on Helen’s nose. She tapped a pencil against a thick ledger as she studied a column of numbers with mild irritation.

She didn’t look up.

“You’re late,” she said.

Gideon closed the door behind him.

“There was a situation.”

Helen’s pencil stopped.

“Your mother?”

Gideon did not answer.

She resumed working. “Then I assume it is ongoing. But the firm still has to remain invisible by morning.”

Gideon stepped closer, glancing at the open ledger.

“What’s the concern?”

She tapped a column of figures with her pencil.

“One of the Balkan trusts just woke up. Three hundred million moved out of Zurich without my authorization.”

Gideon frowned. “Internal transfer?”

“No,” she said. “Someone triggered a legacy clause from 1974. The funds are now sitting in a Singapore holding company that technically belongs to us—but has been dormant for forty years.”

He studied the numbers. “Can you contain it?”

Helen made a small adjustment in the margin, then closed the ledger.

“I already did. By sunrise, it will look like a routine intercompany transfer. No one will question it.”

“Can you bring the funds back?”

Helen shook her head. “The clause permits a reserved signatory to activate the company and appoint a new controller. My authority stops at that account.”

“Who holds the reserved authority?”

“The founding instrument doesn’t use a personal name. It identifies the office by its seal.”

He looked at the impression beside the clause. A sword between uneven scales.

Helen watched him recognize it. “The instrument predates my appointment. Whoever exercised that authority supplied documents the bank accepted. I’m obtaining the full appointment record.”

Gideon nodded. “Thank you.”

She finally looked up at him over her glasses.

“Try not to destabilize any more continents tonight,” she said. “It makes the books messy.”

A faint smile touched his mouth.

“I’ll have it corrected.”

“You always say that,” she replied, circling the line. “And somehow it keeps happening.”

He leaned against the edge of her desk, watching her work.

The truth was simple:

Gideon commanded the firm.

But Helen controlled the empire behind it.

He didn’t know where every account was.
He didn’t know the locations of half the properties or reserves.

And he never asked.

Because for thirty years, Helen had never made a mistake.

And he trusted her more than anyone alive.

Helen closed the ledger and slid it to the side.

“For a man who’s been alive for two thousand years,” she said, “you still manage to make the same mistakes.”

Gideon raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

“Thinking you can fix everything yourself.” She removed her glasses and set them gently on the table. “Empires, courts, people… it’s all the same to you.”

He didn’t answer.

Because she wasn’t wrong.

Helen studied him for a moment, her expression softening. “You look tired.”

“I don’t get tired.”

“Everyone gets tired,” she said. “Some just hide it better.”

She reached across the table and straightened his tie. It was a small gesture, automatic, like she’d done it a hundred times before.

He stood perfectly still while she did it.

For thirty years, he had watched her hands move across ledgers, keys, and contracts. They were not the hands of a warrior or a queen. They were steady,

careful hands—the kind that built things instead of breaking them.

When she finished, she didn't step away immediately.

"Stay a few minutes," she said. "I made tea."

He hesitated, as he always did, calculating time, threats, consequences, wars he was trying to prevent.

Then he nodded.

"Five minutes."

Helen smiled. "You always say that."

"And I always mean it," he replied.

Helen poured the tea into two antique porcelain cups, their thin gold rims catching the lamplight. Steam curled between them, carrying the faint scent of chamomile.

Gideon accepted the cup, his fingers brushing hers for just a moment. Neither of them pulled away immediately.

For a few seconds, the room was silent except for the distant hum of the building above.

Helen looked up at him. "Five minutes," she reminded him.

He set the cup down and leaned closer.

He meant to kiss her gently. Helen put a hand behind his neck and changed his mind.

Her chair moved against his leg as she stood. He caught her at the waist. For a moment, neither made room for the other to speak.

When she drew back, her glasses lay crooked beside the ledger. Gideon reached to straighten them. She caught his hand.

When they separated, Helen's fingertips lingered at his collar before tracing slowly down his chest and over the hard plane of his abdomen. At his belt, she hooked one finger beneath the leather and drew him closer.

Gideon's breath changed—the smallest betrayal.

Helen looked pleased with him.

“You remembered,” she said.

“I made a promise.”

“Then take me upstairs.”

He left the tea untouched.

In the elevator, she reached up and took the pins from her hair. Gideon held out his hand for them. She dropped them into his palm one by one.

“You could help,” she said.

“I’m watching.”

She laughed and let the last of her hair fall.

At his apartment, he put the pins in the little dish beside the door. Her earrings went beside them. There were reading glasses on his bedside table, a half-finished novel beside hers, shoes she had left beneath a chair.

Helen turned her back and lifted her hair from the fastening of her dress.

He opened it slowly. She glanced over her shoulder.

“You used to be quicker at that.”

“You used to complain.”

“About the dresses. You ruined two perfectly good dresses.”

He kissed the bare place beneath her hair. Her next remark went unfinished.

She turned in his arms and began loosening his tie. He let her work until impatience overcame him; then he took her hands, kissed her, and felt her pull him closer by his open collar.

He knew the changes in her body because he had been beside her while they happened. He knew where she liked his mouth, and when familiarity would please her, and when she wanted to surprise him. Tonight she backed him toward the bed before he had finished taking off his shirt.

Later, he reached for the telephone vibrating on the bedside table.

Helen put her hand over his.

“Does someone need saving?”

He checked the name on the screen.

“The building manager.”

“Then someone needs a signature.”

He silenced it and lay back. She settled against him, warm and comfortably heavy, her hand resting on his chest.

After a while, she said, “I miss going dancing with you.”

He looked down at her.

“I know.”

“I don’t miss the speeches. Or pretending to remember everyone’s children. But I liked having you to myself in a room full of people.”

He moved a strand of hair from her cheek.

“We could go away.”

“You have a situation.”

“There will be another one next week.”

She raised herself on one elbow.

“Somewhere nobody knows us?”

“You choose.”

Helen studied him, deciding whether to believe it. Then she leaned across him for the telephone.

“I’m putting that in your calendar.”

He watched her do it. When she had finished, he took the telephone from her hand and set it beyond her reach.

“Now,” she said, “where were we?”

Chapter Eighteen: The Hands

Roth called shortly after eight the next morning.

The laboratories had worked through the night under an expedited request linking the three investigations. The preliminary comparisons found Griffin’s blood on Bancroft, and blood from both men in Texas. The unidentified material appeared at all three scenes. Independent confirmation was still pending.

Gideon listened without offering another explanation. After the call, he opened Jessica’s file.

Nancy Griffin arrived carrying a plastic supermarket bag.

Reception called Gideon at nine seventeen.

“She says she needs to see you personally.”

“What name?”

“Nancy Griffin.”

His hand stopped on the folder in front of him.

Jessica’s photograph looked up from the open file. Beneath it were dates, evaluations, assignments. Five years reduced to the orderly record of a woman he had believed he understood.

“Is she alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ask Alex to bring her to Conference Two.”

He closed the folder.

Nancy stood when Gideon entered.

Her coat was buttoned to her throat. The supermarket bag hung from both hands, its thin plastic stretched around something heavy.

Alex remained beside the door.

“Mrs. Griffin.”

“You were in court.”

“Yes.”

“Behind Jessica Nero.”

“She works here.”

Nancy looked around the room before answering.

“I know.”

Conference Two occupied an interior corner of the third floor. Its mahogany table had been brought from an older building, the surface restored so carefully that the marks beneath the polish looked intentional. The chairs were upholstered in dark leather. A brass clock stood on a shelf between books nobody brought there to read.

Beyond the glass walls, associates passed carrying folders and coffee. One stopped to speak to another. Nancy could see the woman’s mouth moving.

She could hear nothing.

Alex touched a recessed control beside the door.

The glass clouded from the edges inward. The people outside dissolved into pale shapes, then vanished behind a soft gray opacity.

Nancy turned toward him.

“Why did you do that?”

“Privacy.”

The door settled into its frame. Nancy felt a slight pressure in her ears.

The room had been built to contain conversations worth fortunes. Its doubled glass, sealed door, and isolated walls kept voices from reaching the corridor. No camera watched the table. No microphone recorded what people admitted there.

Gideon indicated a chair.

“Please.”

She sat at the far end, keeping the bag on her lap.

He took the chair opposite her.

“What can I do for you?”

Nancy studied his face.

He had expected anger. He found exhaustion instead: skin drawn tightly beneath her eyes, a mouth that seemed to have forgotten its ordinary resting shape.

“I want your attorney here.”

“Jessica?”

“Yes.”

“What is this concerning?”

Nancy looked at Alex, then back at Gideon.

“I know who you people are.”

Gideon waited.

“People talk about this firm. Men who hurt people. Men who get away with it. Then something happens to them, and someone says your name.”

“What do you believe happened?”

“Your attorney watched my son walk out of that courtroom. That night, someone left his hands at my house.”

“Did you see who came?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t know it was Jessica.”

“I suspect her. I want to hear what she says when she sees what I brought.”

Nancy lifted the bag onto the table.

Alex moved forward.

“Mrs. Griffin, before you—”

She pulled the handles apart.

Inside lay a second bag, clear plastic filmed with condensation.

A palm pressed against it.

Gideon leaned forward before he could stop himself.

Two hands.

The fingers had curled slightly. One thumbnail bore a dark crescent. The ends of the wrists were pale and unnaturally clean.

Nancy watched him recognize them.

“My son.”

Alex’s face changed. Only briefly, but Gideon saw it.

He had not known either.

“Where did you get these?”

“On my back steps.”

“When?”

“The night he died.”

She took a folded card from her pocket and opened it on the table.

YOU KNEW.

Gideon remembered Jessica sitting across from him after the operation.

She needed to know.

I didn’t touch her.

He had allowed those answers to stand.

Nancy pushed the card toward him.

“I want her to explain this.”

Alex looked at Gideon.

“Bring her.”

While they waited, Nancy removed her gloves.

Her fingers were red. A split crossed one knuckle, and she pressed her thumb against it as if the small discomfort helped her remain in the chair.

“I kept them in the freezer,” she said.

Gideon looked at the bag.

“I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Did you tell Detective Roth?”

“No.”

“Why?”

She glanced at the opaque wall.

“Someone came to my house carrying pieces of my son. They knew which door I used. They knew I would be there.”

Gideon said nothing.

“I thought if I told him, they would come back.”

“Then why come here?”

Nancy lowered her eyes.

“Because I’ve been afraid in my own house every night since.”

Her voice grew firmer.

“And because I wanted to see whether she could look at me.”

Alex returned with a shallow metal tray. He placed it beneath the bag without asking Nancy to relinquish it.

Then the door opened again.

Jessica stepped inside.

Her gaze passed over Gideon, Alex, Nancy.

It stopped on the tray.

For a moment she stood perfectly still.

Gideon watched her look around the room.

He remembered her younger face across that same mahogany table. The ancient book between them. Her eyes following the cut she had made in his forearm.

She had entered that room to learn what he was.

Now he waited to learn what she had become.

Nancy rose.

“There.”

She pointed at Jessica.

“Ask her whether she knows.”

Jessica looked at Gideon.

“Would you like me to answer?”

“Yes.”

“I left them.”

Nancy’s hand tightened on the chair.

“And my son?”

Jessica held her gaze.

“I killed him.”

Nancy sat down abruptly.

The chair legs scraped the floor. She looked toward Gideon, waiting for him to contradict what she had heard.

He did not.

For several seconds, the clock was the loudest thing in the room.

Then she said, “You wanted me to find them.”

“Yes.”

“You wanted me frightened.”

“I wanted you to understand.”

Nancy gave a short laugh that ended before it became a sound of amusement.

“Well, I understand. I brought them back.”

Jessica remained standing.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

Nancy’s eyes lifted.

“You sent these to my house.”

She pointed at the tray.

“Now you’re angry because I brought them to yours.”

Alex shut the door.

“Sit down, Jessica,” Gideon said.

She took the chair nearest him.

“Why the hands?”

“You know what he used them for.”

“And his mother?”

Jessica looked down the table.

“She knew.”

Nancy’s lips parted.

Gideon turned the card facedown.

“We will discuss what you did first.”

“That is what I did.”

“You left them at her home without telling me.”

“You authorized Griffin.”

“I authorized his death.”

Jessica’s eyes sharpened.

Nancy looked between them.

The last hope she had brought into the building disappeared.

Gideon saw it happen.

Until that moment, she had believed there might be someone senior enough to condemn Jessica. An employer embarrassed by an employee. A lawyer who could summon the police.

Now she knew he had sent her.

“You ordered it.”

“Yes.”

Nancy drew the bag closer.

“Then I came to the right person.”

Gideon made himself remain seated.

“What happened to your son—”

“Don’t explain him to me.”

Her voice broke, and she swallowed against it.

“I knew him before any of you.”

She took an envelope from her coat. Inside was a school photograph, its corners softened by handling.

Wade at eight.

The boy wore a shirt too tight at the collar. His hair had been combed flat except for a stubborn patch above one ear. His smile looked obedient.

Nancy laid the photograph beside the tray.

“His father hurt him.”

Jessica looked at the picture this time. At the flattened hair. The tight collar. The careful smile.

She knew that smile. Give the adults something acceptable to look at. Keep the rest out of sight.

Her fingers closed around the edge of the chair. She loosened them before anyone noticed.

“For years,” Nancy said. “He wasn’t born doing what he did.”

“No,” Gideon said.

“He was a child.”

“Yes.”

She touched the photograph with one finger.

“I used to know how to make him laugh.”

Gideon looked at the two hands beside it.

The boy and the man occupied the table together. Nothing Nancy said could make one erase the other.

“What happened to him was not his fault,” he said.

Nancy nodded, too quickly.

“But the children he hurt were not responsible for it.”

Her face closed.

“I know.”

Jessica started to speak, then looked at the photograph again.

For a moment, she could see only the boy. She wished Nancy had kept the picture in her coat.

She drew a breath. When she looked up, her voice was quieter.

“What happened to him was wrong.”

She remembered her mother brushing the tangles from her hair, holding each strand above the knot so it wouldn't pull. Jessica had kept that memory. Keeping it had never made sense of the basement.

"I know what it's like to have a mother without the courage to protect her own kid," she said. "I used to tell myself mine was frightened. Sometimes I still do. But I was twelve. I was frightened too."

Nancy held her gaze.

Jessica waited until she could make herself ask the next question.

"Did you know while he was hurting them?"

Nancy turned toward her.

"I didn't come here for another trial."

"You never had the first."

"Jessica."

She looked at Gideon.

He held her gaze until she sat back.

Nancy gathered the photograph, then put it down again.

"I'm going to tell Roth."

Alex's eyes moved to Gideon.

Nancy saw the glance.

"Yes," she said. "I know what that means."

Gideon felt the consequences assembling around them: Nancy's statement, the hands, Jessica's admission, his own.

He had lived long enough to recognize the beginning of a collapse.

He had also lived long enough to know when he had helped build it.

"Before you do anything," he said, "we need to talk."

Nancy stood.

"I've been talking."

The sweetness arrived while she was pulling on her first glove.

Nancy wrinkled her nose.

For a moment she thought of flowers left too long in a vase.

Jessica rose.

Alex’s hand stopped against the back of his chair.

Gideon looked past Nancy.

She noticed all three of them watching something behind her.

“What?”

Nobody answered.

Nancy turned.

A woman stood between her chair and the gray glass.

No door had opened.

Her white robe hung in heavy folds. Dark blood marked the fabric near one hip. Auburn hair rested over her shoulders, untouched by movement or air.

Then Nancy looked down.

The hem floated above the polished wood floor.

So did the woman’s feet.

Nancy stepped backward and struck the table.

The tray rattled.

The sword in the woman’s hand was longer than Nancy’s arm. Its edge caught the light, but the old stains along the steel remained dark.

Nancy looked toward the door.

It was closed.

She looked at Alex, expecting him to reach for a weapon, to react as any man would react to a stranger carrying a sword.

He did neither.

Jessica lowered her head slightly.

Gideon stood.

“Mother.”

Nancy stared at him.

The word made the room more frightening than the sword.

“You know her.”

Gideon moved toward Nancy.

“Stay beside me.”

Lady Justice looked at the hands.

Then at Jessica.

“You brought them here.”

“Nancy did.”

Her gaze shifted.

Nancy felt it settle upon her with a physical weight.

“You were permitted to live.”

Nancy tried to speak.

Her throat would not cooperate.

Gideon stopped between them.

“You sentenced her.”

“Yes.”

“To live with what she allowed.”

“And she has continued to choose.”

“She brought back what Jessica left at her house.”

“She concealed it.”

“Because we frightened her.”

Lady Justice looked at him.

Nancy had pressed herself against the table. She could feel the edge digging into the back of her thighs.

The woman’s face was beautiful. That made it worse. Nancy searched it for anger, excitement, anything that might tell her how to plead.

She found attention.

Complete and undivided.

“I’m going to the police,” Nancy said.

Her voice sounded smaller than she intended.

Lady Justice moved.

Gideon stepped into her path.

“No.”

His mother stopped.

“She knows what this office is.”

“She knows what we did to her.”

“She intends to destroy what you have built.”

Gideon glanced back.

Nancy was trembling so badly that the photograph shifted against the table beneath her hand.

“You knew what she had done when you spared her,” he said. “What you know now is that she can hurt us.”

Lady Justice’s fingers tightened around the hilt.

“Do you believe her silence made her innocent?”

“No.”

“Then you understand her judgment.”

“I understood the judgment you already gave her.”

Gideon looked at the blindfold resting against her throat. She had not covered her eyes. She had not raised the scales.

“You haven’t weighed her again.”

“I know what she is.”

“You knew it in the woods. What changed is that she can expose us.”

“She has rejected it.”

Gideon stared at his mother.

“By coming here?”

“By seeking protection for what she allowed.”

Nancy shook her head.

“I came for answers.”

Lady Justice did not look at her.

Gideon did.

That difference frightened him.

Jessica came around the table.

“I wanted her dead the same night,” she said.

Nancy’s fingers slipped off the photograph.

“Your mother told me to leave her alone.”

“And you did,” Gideon said.

“Yes.”

“But you decided the sentence needed something more.”

Jessica looked at the tray.

“She needed to see him.”

“Now she has. Now she is here.”

“She was always responsible for what she knew.”

“And you are responsible for what you did.”

Jessica’s jaw tightened.

“You are angry because she came to your office.”

“I am angry because you created this confrontation and now expect her to die for it.”

“I expected her to remember the children.”

Nancy made a choking sound.

Jessica turned toward her.

“Did you?”

“Enough,” Gideon said.

Jessica faced him.

“You stood behind me in that courtroom. You heard the judge. You heard what we couldn’t use.”

“Yes.”

“You sent me after him.”

“Yes.”

“And now you want to act as though I brought violence into a place that had never known it.”

Alex moved closer.

Gideon felt the words land.

Jessica had earned that accusation. He would not escape it by raising his voice.

“I sent you,” he said. “I will answer for that. You will answer for what you chose afterward.”

“To you?”

The question hung between them.

Lady Justice lifted the sword.

Alex stepped in front of Gideon.

It happened so quickly that Nancy barely saw him cross the space.

One moment he stood near Jessica. The next his back was against Gideon’s chest, his face toward the blade.

“Alex.”

He did not move.

Lady Justice looked down at him.

“He will survive.”

“I know.”

“Then stand aside.”

“No.”

The sword’s point touched Alex’s shirt.

Lady Justice pressed it farther.

The cloth yielded. A small red stain spread around the steel.

Alex’s breath caught.

He did not move.

Gideon put his hand on Alex’s shoulder.

For twenty-five years, Alex had placed himself between Gideon and danger. His body knew the task even when his mind knew it could accomplish nothing.

Nancy stared at the blood spreading across his shirt.

He was afraid. She could see the effort it took to keep his breathing steady.

He stayed.

“Mother,” Gideon said. “Lower it.”

Lady Justice watched Alex for another moment.

Then the point withdrew.

Gideon moved him aside.

“This woman leaves alive.”

Nancy looked at him.

For the first time since Jessica had entered, she allowed herself to believe something he said.

“Get your coat,” Gideon told her.

Nancy was already wearing it.

He saw that, but the ordinary instruction had steadied her. She gathered her gloves and reached for the photograph.

“Leave the hands.”

“No.”

She pulled the tray toward herself.

“They’re his.”

Gideon nodded.

“All right.”

He turned toward the door.

His mother caught his forearm.

The grip was almost gentle.

He tried to move.

Nothing yielded.

“Release me.”

Jessica stood across the table.

Lady Justice extended the sword toward her.

“Carry out the sentence,” she told Jessica.

Gideon heard no uncertainty in the instruction. His mother had supplied an order where he had demanded a judgment.

“Mother.”

Jessica accepted it.

Nancy stopped gathering her things.

Alex moved toward Jessica.

“Look at me.”

She did.

“Put it on the table.”

Her eyes shifted to Gideon.

He pulled against his mother’s hand. His cuff tore at the seam. The muscle in his forearm hardened, but her fingers remained where they were.

“Jessica,” he said. “You will not touch her.”

Nancy began backing away.

There was nowhere useful to go.

The gray glass stretched behind her. The door stood beyond Gideon and the woman holding him.

Jessica lifted the clear bag from the tray.

Nancy shook her head.

“Please.”

Jessica placed it in her hands.

Nancy accepted it instinctively.

The same instinct that had made her lift the bag from her back steps. That had made her find space in the freezer. That had brought her there.

She could not drop what remained of her son.

Alex reached for Jessica’s wrist.

Lady Justice turned toward him.

He stopped when the blade shifted near Nancy’s throat.

Jessica looked at Gideon.

He saw her waiting for him to understand.

“Don’t,” he said.

There was no doubt she heard.

Nancy looked down at the hands.

The sword moved.

Blood struck the gray glass behind her.

Lady Justice released him.

Gideon crossed the room before Nancy’s body had finished settling.

He knelt beside her.

Her coat had opened. One glove lay beneath her elbow. The bag remained caught between her hands and the wood floor.

He reached for her, then stopped.

Across the table, Jessica stood holding the sword.

Her breathing was steady.

Gideon looked up.

For years he had wondered what she might do if his judgment and his mother’s ever separated.

Now Nancy lay between the answer and him.

Jessica met his eyes.

She did not look away.

Chapter Nineteen: The Burial Cloth

Alex moved first.

He crossed to the door, engaged the privacy lock, and touched the recessed control beside it. A small indicator changed from white to amber.

Then he took off his jacket.

Gideon watched him kneel beside Nancy and cover her face.

Alex adjusted the fabric once.

“The room stays closed,” he said.

Jessica still held the sword.

Alex stood and looked at her.

“On the table.”

She glanced toward Lady Justice.

“Let her put it down.”

Lady Justice inclined her head.

Jessica laid the blade across the mahogany.

Blood had collected beneath Nancy’s shoulder. A narrow line followed the seam between two floorboards. On the opaque glass behind her, the spray had begun to run.

Gideon knelt beside her.

Her coat had fallen open. One glove lay beneath her elbow. The bag containing Wade’s hands remained caught against her fingers.

He remembered telling her to get her coat.

She had already been wearing it.

She had understood what he meant anyway. Gathered her things. Prepared to follow him.

Believed him.

A faint voice came from beside her coat.

“Nancy?”

Alex bent toward it.

Nancy’s telephone lay facedown near the table leg. He picked it up.

Then he stopped.

The call was connected.

Roth’s name filled the screen. Beneath it, the seconds continued to count.

“Nancy. Are you there?”

Alex looked at Gideon.

Neither spoke.

“Nancy, who’s with you?”

Jessica moved closer.

Alex held up his free hand.

Roth’s voice became firmer.

“I heard you. Tell me where you are.”

Gideon stared at the telephone.

While he had been arguing, while he had been promising to protect her, Nancy had found another person to ask.

“Nancy?”

Alex ended the call.

The silence that followed felt different.

He laid the telephone on the table, its screen still lit.

“How long?” Gideon asked.

“Long enough.”

“What did he hear?”

Alex looked toward Nancy.

“We don’t know.”

Jessica glanced at Lady Justice.

Her expression had not changed.

The telephone began to vibrate.

Roth.

Alex watched it until the screen went dark.

Then he turned to Gideon.

“I’ll get the cloth.”

Gideon looked up.

For a moment, he did not understand.

Then his eyes moved toward his mother.

She watched them without speaking.

“The archives,” Alex said. “You showed me where it was.”

Gideon rose slowly.

He had not seen the cloth unfolded in centuries.

“Yes.”

Alex left.

Jessica stood beside the table.

Without the sword in her hands, she looked almost as she had on the morning of Griffin’s hearing. Dark suit. Hair secured. A woman prepared to walk into court and make an argument nobody else had found.

Her eyes kept returning to Nancy’s telephone.

Gideon looked from her to the body.

“Would you have let her leave?” Jessica asked.

“Yes.”

“And when she went to Roth?”

“She reached him anyway.”

Jessica said nothing.

“You put everyone here at risk when you left those hands.”

“She deserved to know what happened to him.”

“You wanted to punish her.”

“Yes,” Jessica said. “Your mother spared her. That didn’t mean she deserved peace.”

Gideon stepped closer.

“You frightened her into coming here. Then you treated her arrival as another reason to kill her.”

“She knew what Wade was doing.”

“My mother knew that when she spared her.”

Lady Justice’s gaze shifted toward him.

Jessica noticed.

“She was permitted to live with what she allowed.”

“And you decided that wasn’t enough.”

“I wanted her to understand.”

“She understood well enough to come here.”

Jessica’s jaw tightened.

“You authorized Griffin.”

“Yes.”

“You sent me into those woods.”

“Yes.”

“And now you speak as though I brought violence into an office that had never known it.”

Gideon looked at the sword.

She had earned that accusation.

“I sent you,” he said. “I brought you into this work. I bear responsibility for that.”

Jessica waited.

“But I did not send you to torment his mother.”

“She deserved it.”

“You disobeyed me.”

“Your mother ordered me to kill her.”

“I ordered you to stop.”

Jessica held his gaze.

“And I obeyed her.”

There it was. If his orders conflicted with his mother’s, Jessica would choose Lady Justice.

The telephone vibrated again.

Nobody reached for it.

Alex returned carrying a long wooden case.

Its dark surface had been rubbed smooth by handling. The brass catches were newer than the wood. A worn seal remained impressed beside one of them: a sword between two uneven scales.

He placed the case on the table, clear of the blade.

“The lower archive,” he said. “Behind the Roman collection.”

Gideon nodded.

Alex opened the catches.

Inside lay a folded length of fabric.

It had once been white.

Age had softened it to the color of old bone. Dark stains marked the outer folds, some brown, others so deep they appeared black. Along one edge, a narrow border of gold thread had survived almost intact.

Jessica moved closer.

Alex lifted the cloth.

It unfolded farther than the case seemed capable of holding.

The fabric was heavy, but it made almost no sound.

Jessica looked at Lady Justice’s robe.

Then back at the cloth.

The weave was the same.

The same close threads. The same peculiar weight in the folds. Even the dried blood appeared to have entered the fibers in the same way.

At the center, gold thread formed a pair of scales beneath the point of a descending sword.

“What is it?” Jessica asked.

“A burial cloth,” Gideon said.

He watched Alex spread it beside Nancy.

A memory returned with the smell of the fabric.

A stone chamber. Smoke pressing beneath a door. His mother standing over bodies he had been unable to save.

Constantinople.

He had not thought of that room in years.

The last time he had watched her use the cloth, men had been burning outside the walls.

“You kept it,” he said.

Lady Justice looked at him.

“You kept everything.”

She had told him what the cloth could not do. It could take a body and the fresh blood spilled in the same encounter, together with the possessions laid inside its folds. It could not heal a wound, erase a witness’s memory, or recall an account already carried beyond the room. The blood of older judgments would remain.

He looked at Nancy. His mother had refused to conceal the deaths of the condemned before. Their remains were consequences she expected the world to confront.

“You left Griffin for the police,” he said. “And Bancroft. Why hide her?”

Lady Justice looked at the cloth.

“You wished this house to survive.”

He looked toward the telephone. Roth had already heard something. Even she could not make the room innocent.

Alex knelt beside Nancy.

He freed the bag from her fingers with care, then placed it against her coat. He gathered her gloves, the supermarket bag, and the card Jessica had left at her home.

The photograph lay beneath the table.

He retrieved it last.

Wade at eight.

Alex looked at the boy for a moment before placing the photograph beside Nancy.

Then he took her telephone from the table.

Gideon watched him.

The screen lit once more in Alex's hand.

Roth was still trying.

Alex waited until it went dark, then placed it beside Nancy.

He lifted his jacket from her face and began drawing the burial cloth over her.

Gideon caught its edge.

Alex stopped.

Nancy's face remained visible.

She looked smaller now. The force with which she had entered the office had vanished. Her mouth was slightly open, as though she still had something to say.

Gideon had watched death take thousands of faces.

He had never learned to mistake its familiarity for ease.

"She came here because she was afraid," he said.

Jessica remained beside the table.

"She came because she thought you could protect her."

Gideon looked at her.

"I told her I would."

Lady Justice moved toward them.

"You cannot preserve every life placed before you."

"I could have preserved this one."

His mother's gaze settled on Nancy.

For a moment, Gideon wondered whether she would answer.

She did not.

He released the cloth.

Alex covered Nancy’s face.

The stained fabric settled over her coat, her legs, the bag at her side.

Lady Justice knelt.

Gideon had rarely seen her do that.

The gold symbol lay above Nancy’s chest. His mother placed her palm upon it.

The sweetness deepened.

Alex drew back.

The cloth tightened across the shape beneath it.

Then it began to settle.

Nancy’s shoulder disappeared first.

There was no movement of her body beneath the fabric. No shifting, no dragging. The raised shape simply diminished, as though the space it occupied were being quietly withdrawn.

The folds above her knees sank.

The bag flattened.

Jessica took a step back.

Gideon remembered the stone chamber.

He remembered asking where the bodies had gone.

His mother had never told him.

The cloth lay flat against the floor.

Then the blood moved.

A dark line withdrew from between the floorboards. The pool beneath the cloth narrowed along its exposed edge.

On the glass, the descending streaks stopped.

Slowly, impossibly, they began to climb.

They gathered into the marks from which they had run. Those marks thinned, broke apart, and vanished.

A drop beneath the table disappeared.

The damp stain on Alex’s shirt faded.

Even the small red trace at the edge of his fingernail was gone.

Jessica watched the sword.

The fresh blood withdrew from the steel, leaving the older stains untouched.

Lady Justice lifted her hand.

The sweetness receded.

Alex raised one corner of the cloth.

Beneath it lay clean wood.

Nancy was gone.

Her belongings were gone.

Wade’s hands were gone.

The telephone was gone.

But somewhere outside the building, Roth was waiting for Nancy to answer.

Alex folded the cloth.

The gold scales disappeared inside the first fold. The old blood remained.

He placed it in the case and closed the catches.

Jessica looked at the glass.

“How far does it reach?”

Gideon turned toward her.

She looked back at him.

“It removed the blood from Alex.”

“It won’t remove what Roth heard,” Alex said.

Jessica fell silent.

Alex lifted the case.

“I’ll return it.”

When he had gone, Lady Justice moved toward the table.

“The matter is concluded.”

Gideon looked at the clean floor.

“Roth doesn’t think so.”

His mother said nothing.

Jessica remained standing beside the chair where she had sat.

Five years earlier, she had occupied that same place while Gideon showed her a wound closing in his forearm.

He had offered her knowledge, employment, protection.

Then he had drawn her portrait in the ancient book and bound her to them for life.

He remembered how readily she had accepted.

“Sit down,” he said.

Jessica looked at him.

“Are we doing this again?”

“Sit.”

She lowered herself into the chair.

Lady Justice stood behind her.

Gideon took his old place opposite them.

“You will not carry out another assignment for this firm.”

Jessica rested her hands on the table.

“Until when?”

“Until we settle whether we can still work together.”

“You know what I did.”

“I need to know what you will do next time.”

“If your mother gives me an order?”

“If I tell you to stop.”

Jessica glanced toward Lady Justice.

Gideon waited until she looked back at him.

“You can continue working here,” he said. “But there has to be an understanding.”

She waited.

“No person becomes a target because they threaten the firm. You do not create a confrontation and then use it to justify an execution. And when I tell you to stop, you stop.”

“And if she tells me to continue?”

“You cannot obey us both when we disagree.”

“Then perhaps you should agree.”

Gideon looked at his mother.

She remained behind Jessica’s chair.

Jessica leaned forward.

“You killed Vorrin in the street.”

“Yes.”

“You brought his blood back here.”

“Yes.”

“Did anyone give you permission?”

“No.”

“You give yourself room to be wrong. You give me rules.”

He looked toward the clean glass.

“I was wrong to believe my example was enough.”

“You regret Nancy.”

“I regret that she believed me.”

Jessica’s lips parted.

For the first time, she had no immediate answer.

Alex returned without the case.

He shut the door and remained beside it.

Gideon kept his eyes on Jessica.

“I need your answer.”

“What happens when a court fails again?”

“We decide what must be done.”

“You decide.”

“I am responsible for what happens in this office.”

“And she is responsible for justice.”

Lady Justice rested a hand on Jessica’s chair.

Jessica looked up at her.

When she turned back, her expression had settled.

“If I believed someone deserved to die, and your mother agreed, I would not let your fear of what followed protect them.”

Alex lowered his eyes.

Gideon sat very still.

He had wanted an argument he could resolve.

Jessica had given him an answer.

“You will not work in this office again,” he said.

Jessica held his gaze.

“You told me I was bound until my final breath.”

“You are,” Lady Justice said.

Gideon turned toward her.

“Then what happens to her?”

“She works for me.”

Jessica looked up.

His mother’s hand remained on the chair.

Gideon rose slowly.

“She already believed she did.”

“Now there will be no confusion.”

He looked from his mother to Jessica.

There was no surprise in Lady Justice’s expression. No hesitation about where Jessica would go or what would become of her.

“How long have you intended this?”

“You have made your decision.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No,” she said. “It is not.”

Gideon stood at the end of the table.

“My staff will not carry out her assignments. She will not have access to our files, our facilities, or our operations.”

“Agreed,” Lady Justice said.

The speed of the answer unsettled him.

He looked at Jessica.

“You will not approach anyone here for help without speaking to me.”

Jessica started to answer.

Lady Justice’s fingers tightened slightly against the chair.

“She understands.”

Jessica looked up at her.

Then she nodded.

Alex came forward.

“I’ll arrange for your personal belongings to be delivered. Your access will be closed today.”

Jessica looked at him.

“You’ve already decided.”

“I know what needs to be done.”

“My apartment?”

“Belongs to the firm.”

“My car?”

“The same.”

Gideon watched her absorb it.

For five years, he had arranged her life around his resources. Her home, her transportation, her work, her security.

Her salary and investments could buy another apartment, another car. He could not take those away. What he was withdrawing was her place among them: the people she trusted, the protection she had accepted, and access to the work around which she had built her life.

“Your compensation will be settled,” he said. “You will have time to move.”

Jessica’s eyes shifted toward Lady Justice.

“I’ll make arrangements.”

She did not ask where she would sleep.

Gideon noticed that too.

Jessica stood.

“What did you expect me to do when your mother handed me the sword?”

“Listen when I told you not to use it.”

“And refuse her.”

“Yes.”

“After she saved me.”

The words came more quietly than the others.

For a moment, he saw the child in the basement beneath the woman standing before him.

“I know what she means to you,” he said.

“No. You know what she means to you.”

Lady Justice watched them.

Jessica turned toward Alex.

“You would have let Nancy destroy all of this.”

Alex answered slowly.

“I would have let Gideon make that decision.”

“You would follow him into that.”

“Yes.”

“Even if he was wrong.”

Alex glanced toward the empty floor.

“I know what I saw.”

Jessica held his gaze.

Something in her expression faltered.

She had argued with him, challenged him, fought him on the mats. She had always expected him to stand beside her when the work began.

Now he stood by the door, waiting to escort her out.

Lady Justice moved from behind the chair.

Jessica straightened as she approached.

Gideon stepped toward his mother.

“She remains human.”

Lady Justice looked at him.

“She has to live among human beings. She has to answer for what she does to them.”

“As do you.”

He accepted the words without lowering his eyes.

“Yes.”

His mother picked up the sword.

For a moment, he believed she would offer it to Jessica again.

Instead she lowered it beside her robe.

Jessica moved toward the door.

Alex opened it.

The glass cleared.

The corridor returned.

An associate passed with a stack of folders, glanced inside, and continued walking.

Jessica paused at the threshold.

Behind her lay the room where Gideon had first shown her how quickly his wounds could close.

She looked back.

“Did you ever intend for me to become anything you couldn’t control?”

Gideon answered without taking time to protect himself.

“I intended for you to become someone I could trust.”

Her expression changed.

Then she left.

Lady Justice remained beside the table.

Her feet rose from the floor. The folds of her robe unfurled beneath her, white fabric streaked with old blood. Her auburn hair lifted around her face.

Gideon looked up.

“Mother.”

She ascended without answering.

Gold light spread across the ceiling. For an instant, he saw the sword raised against it, her silhouette towering above him.

Then she passed through.

The light snapped shut. A rush of air scattered the papers on the table.

Gideon stood beneath the unmarked ceiling.

She was gone.

Alex closed the door.

For a while, neither man spoke.

The conference room was immaculate.

Gideon found that harder to endure than the blood.

“Stay close enough to know where she goes.”

Alex nodded.

“Know,” Gideon said. “Not confine.”

“I understand.”

“And Roth?”

“He’ll come looking.”

“Do you think she told him where she was going?”

“Maybe.”

Gideon looked toward the chair Nancy had occupied.

Alex continued.

“He knows something happened to her. We should expect him.”

Gideon nodded.

He had asked Roth whom the investigation would help. Griffin was dead. Bancroft was dead. There had seemed to be better uses for a detective's time.

Now Nancy was gone, and Roth was the person outside this room who would notice.

Gideon still would not spend a public dollar to mourn her son. But he could no longer pretend the inquiry ended with the man it began with.

There would be questions.

The cloth had given them an empty room, not an answer.

He turned back to Alex.

A small hole remained in his shirt beneath the collarbone.

"Let me see."

"It's nothing."

"Alex."

He opened the torn fabric.

The blood was gone.

The wound remained: a narrow puncture, reddened at its edges.

Gideon stared at it.

"You knew she couldn't kill me."

"Yes."

"Then why?"

Alex looked faintly embarrassed.

"I wasn't thinking about whether you would die."

Gideon waited.

"She was going to hurt you."

Gideon gripped Alex's shoulder.

"Don't ever do that again."

Alex gave him a faint smile.

“Don’t ask me to promise that.”

Helen arrived shortly before noon.

Alex admitted her and remained in the room.

She carried a folder.

Her eyes moved from Gideon to Alex’s torn shirt, then to the table.

“What happened?”

Gideon looked at the folder.

“Tell me what you have first.”

Helen did not like the answer.

She put the folder down.

“The Singapore company.”

“The transfer?”

“The three hundred million is still there.”

“Have you identified who controls it?”

Gideon opened the folder.

Helen stood beside him.

“The old authority has been replaced.”

“I have the appointment.”

She turned one page.

Jessica’s name appeared beneath a block of formal language.

Jessica Nero.

The appointment gave her sole authority to direct the company’s accounts and expenditures. The reserved signatory’s seal appeared beneath the authorization. Helen’s name appeared nowhere.

Gideon read it twice.

“When?”

“Effective this morning.”

Alex moved closer.

“Before Nancy arrived?”

Helen nodded.

“The appointment had already been executed.”

Gideon looked toward the ceiling.

His mother had accepted every restriction.

No staff. No files. No access to his operations.

She had known what Jessica would have instead.

Helen watched his face.

“What happened?” she asked again.

Gideon placed his hand on the document.

“My mother took her.”

Helen looked down at Jessica’s name.

Then back at him.

Outside, the firm continued its ordinary morning. Telephones rang. Attorneys walked between offices. Someone laughed near the elevator.

Alex stood beside the door, waiting for Gideon’s next decision.

Gideon stared at the appointment.

Three hundred million dollars.

His mother had allowed Jessica to lose everything he could take away.

She had already given her something larger.

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