

CHAPTER ONE

The Call

Elena Ashworth was cross-examining a witness when her phone began to buzz against her hip for the third time in ten minutes.

She ignored it. In the Rivergate County courthouse, on a Tuesday morning in October, she was standing in front of a jury trying to save a nineteen-year-old named Corey Danfield from eight years in prison for a robbery he almost certainly hadn't committed alone, and phones did not matter more than that. Not usually.

"Officer Reyes," she said, "you testified that you found my client three blocks from the store. Isn't it true you never actually saw him inside?"

The officer on the stand shifted. "That's correct."

"And the two other men who ran from the scene—the ones with the security footage clearly on their faces—were never apprehended."

"No, ma'am."

Elena let the silence sit the way her father had taught her, all those years ago, back when he still talked to her about the law like it was something worth loving. *Let the jury feel it*, he used to say. *Don't fill the quiet. The quiet is doing your work for you.*

She was two questions from finishing when the courtroom door opened and her supervisor,

Marion Cho, stepped in. Marion never interrupted a trial. In six years at the Public Defender's office, Elena had seen her do it exactly once, when a colleague's father had a heart attack.

Marion's face told her this was worse.

"Your Honor," Elena said, "may I have a brief recess?"

Judge Petrosky, a heavyset man with reading glasses perched low on his nose, glanced between Elena and Marion and seemed to understand, in the way that people who have spent decades around bad news understand, that something had already happened. "Ten minutes," he said.

In the hallway, Marion took both of Elena's hands, which was somehow worse than anything she could have said.

"It's your dad," Marion said. "Elena, I'm so sorry. It's your dad."

The floor of the Rivergate County Courthouse was gray marble, veined with black, polished so often over the decades that it had begun to dish in the places where a hundred years of lawyers had walked the same seven feet between the elevator and the doors. Elena would remember, later, staring down at that marble while Marion talked, the way the light came through the tall windows and made a bright rectangle on the floor, and how she had thought, absurdly, that she needed to tell Corey Danfield's mother that the trial would have to wait.

"He's dead," Elena said. It wasn't a question. She was testing the words in her mouth to see if they fit anything true.

"They found him this morning. Elena, look at me. Do you want someone to drive you?"

She didn't remember answering. She remembered the elevator, and the parking garage, and gripping the wheel of her car so hard in the ten minutes it took to cross the city that her knuckles ached for the rest of the day.

Her father lived—had lived, she corrected herself, and felt something in her chest fold in on itself at the correction—in the same house on Larch Street where Elena had grown up, a square brick colonial with green shutters that needed painting and a garden her mother had planted thirty years ago and that her father had never once weeded, only watered, faithfully, every summer evening of his widowhood, as if tending what she'd left behind was its own kind of prayer.

There were two patrol cars in the driveway when Elena arrived, and a third unmarked sedan, and a young officer standing at the base of the porch steps who put a hand up when she tried to walk past him.

"Ma'am, I need you to stay back."

"I'm his daughter." Her voice came out steadier than she felt. "Elena Ashworth. That's my father's house."

Something moved behind the officer's eyes—recognition, maybe, or pity, or both. Judge

Elias Ashworth was not a man whose name failed to land in this city. Twenty-two years on the bench. Chief Judge of the Superior Court for the last nine of them. The kind of judge whose photograph hung in the lobby of the courthouse Elena had just walked out of, jaw set, robe black, gavel resting under one folded hand like a promise.

“Detective Calloway is inside,” the officer said. “I’ll let him know you’re here.”

She waited on the porch her father had built a new railing for two summers ago, insisting on doing it himself though he was sixty-eight years old and Elena had begged him to hire someone, and she watched through the screen door as men in blue nitrile gloves moved through the front hall of the house she had learned to walk in.

The detective who came to the door was tall, gray at the temples, with the tired, watchful face of a man who had delivered this kind of news to a hundred other people and had never found a way to make it easier. He introduced himself as Ray Calloway, Rivergate PD Homicide, and something in the word *homicide*, spoken so plainly, made Elena’s stomach drop even though she would later realize it was standard department procedure to send Homicide to any sudden, unattended death, regardless of cause.

“Ms. Ashworth. I’m very sorry for your loss.” He held the screen door for her but didn’t step back to let her in. “I have to ask you to wait

just a little longer before you go inside. We're still processing the scene."

"What happened to him?"

Calloway's eyes did something complicated—a brief flatness, quickly smoothed over, the look of a man deciding how much truth a stranger could carry on a doorstep. "It looks like your father took his own life, Ms. Ashworth. I'm sorry. There'll be an autopsy, that's routine, but the preliminary—"

"No."

The word came out of her before she'd decided to say it.

"Ms. Ashworth—"

"You didn't know him." She heard how it sounded, how every family says this, how every detective in America has heard some version of *you didn't know him* from someone standing exactly where she was standing. She said it anyway. "My father did not own a gun. He hated them. He wouldn't even let my mother keep one in the house when we lived out past the county line, and there were coyotes."

"There's a firearm registered to him. Purchased eleven months ago."

That stopped her. Eleven months. She tried to think of anything from the last eleven months—a phone call gone strange, a visit where he'd seemed distracted, a Christmas where he'd hugged her half a second too long—and came up only with ordinary things. Sunday dinners. A