

CLERK

Pilot - "Break on Second Street"

by

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TEASER

EXT. U.S. SUPREME COURT - DAY

A bright sun casts long shadows across the marble steps of the U.S. Supreme Court. The imposing columns loom overhead, commanding both reverence and awe.

VANESSA MUÑOZ (20s) stands at the base of the steps, her petite frame dwarfed by the structure's grandeur. Her eyes, wide, curious, linger on the etched words above: "Equal Justice Under Law." A faint smile pulls at her lips.

She adjusts the strap of the leather bag slung over her shoulder, then begins her ascent, each step steady, deliberate.

INT. SCOTUS CHAMBER - DAY

A cavernous chamber. Its architecture a marriage of power and restraint. Sunlight streams through towering windows, illuminating the nine empty chairs behind the dais.

Vanessa steps through the heavy doors, pausing just inside. She takes a sharp breath, her eyes scanning the grandeur.

She moves quietly, almost reverently, down the aisle. At the front of the room, LAW CLERKS sit in hushed anticipation.

The SCOTUS LIAISON (30s) stands before them sharply dressed with an effortless air of flamboyant charm, exuding confidence and authority.

He glances up mid-sentence, notices Vanessa slipping into her designated seat. His smile falters. His brow tightens. A flicker of disapproval - a silent rebuke.

LIAISON

As I was saying, each of you were
handpicked by the Justices
themselves.

His hand sweeps out dramatically, inviting their attention.

LIAISON

Look around you. The thirty six of
you represent the best legal minds
our universities have to offer.
Top of your class. The crème de la
crème.

The clerks sit straighter, their expressions teetering between pride and dread.

The Liaison begins to pace, his footsteps a deliberate rhythm that echoes through the chamber. His voice drops just slightly, his tone coiled with intent.

LIAISON

You won't just be clerking. You'll be diving into the trenches of the nation's most pivotal legal battles. The cases you touch – the research you conduct, the memos you draft – could shape the course of history.

He stops abruptly, pivoting on his heel to face them. The room seems to hold its breath.

LIAISON

But...

His smile disappears, replaced by something sharper, colder.

LIAISON

There's a catch.

INT. SCOTUS - HALLWAY - DAY

The quiet hum of power. The hallway is lined with offices, each door marked by an understated brass nameplate.

LIAISON (V.O.)

Everything you hear, everything you see, every word you speak inside these walls...

Vanessa sits alone on a bench, stiff-backed, her portfolio clutched in her lap like a lifeline. Her eyes flicker to the office door across from her: ASSOCIATE JUSTICE CLAIRE HANSON.

LIAISON (V.O.)

(pausing, letting the gravity sink in)

...must never leave them.

The hallway stretches into silence. A clock ticks faintly in the distance, each second dragging slower than the last.

Vanessa's gaze flickers to the shadows under the door.

Suddenly, MUFFLED SHOUTING erupts from behind the closed door. A woman's voice.

The sound of something HEAVY hitting the wall. A muffled CRASH follows, the vibration rippling through the floor.

Vanessa's lips part slightly. She freezes.

INT. JUSTICE CLAIRE HANSON'S OFFICE - DAY

SECRETARY LAURA DIAZ (40s) sits at her desk just outside the office door, every line of her body taut, like a wire ready to snap. She jabs at the buttons on her desk phone with trembling fingers.

SECRETARY DIAZ
(into phone)
You need to get up here.

She listens.

SECRETARY DIAZ
(into phone)
Yes, it's her. I don't know.
Hurry.

INT. SCOTUS HALLWAY - DAY

The marbled corridor is eerily quiet, save for the faint squeak of wheels. Vanessa steps back as OFFICER LES MONROE (30s), stoic, built like a linebacker, pushes a stretcher out of the Justice's office.

On it lies CLAIRE HANSON (60s), frail but resolute even in unconsciousness, her wrists restrained, her face unnervingly still.

Vanessa's breath hitches. She moves to follow, her voice low, almost cautious.

VANESSA
Is she okay?

OFFICER MONROE
(pauses, assessing her)
Who are you?

VANESSA
Her clerk.

Monroe's expression tightens, unreadable. Without another word, he resumes pushing the stretcher down the long, polished hallway. TWO SECURITY AGENTS, clad in suits with subtle earpieces, flank the stretcher like shadows.

Vanessa hesitates, then trails behind at a distance.

Ahead, OFFICER DAN RIVERA (20s), earnest, fresh-faced, swipes his badge at a control panel beside a sleek elevator. A light above the doors blinks "PRIVATE."

OFFICER MONROE
(to Rivera, low)
She won't wake up for a while.

OFFICER RIVERA
We taking her home?

OFFICER MONROE
(quiet, but firm)
Not this time.

The elevator doors slide open with a muted chime. Monroe guides the stretcher inside, Rivera following close behind.

Vanessa steps forward instinctively but freezes as Monroe glances back, his gaze sharp, a silent warning. The doors close before she can ask anything more.

EXT. SCOTUS - DAY

Vanessa emerges into the crisp daylight, heels clicking against the concrete steps. The grandeur of the Supreme Court looms behind her.

Below, at the base of the steps, A FLEET OF BLACK SUVs idles, engines rumbling. Red and blue lights pulse behind their grilles.

Vanessa stops, watching as the SUVs peel out from the underground garage, one by one, their windows darkened, their presence deliberate.

She steps closer to the edge of the sidewalk, her fingers twitching at her sides.

The convoy turns left onto SECOND STREET, speeding away.

Vanessa lingers, her jaw tight, her eyes fixed on the receding vehicles until they vanish into the bustling D.C. traffic.

Her phone buzzes in her pocket. She doesn't move to answer it.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

INT. DR. SUE BRIGHTON'S OFFICE - DAY

The office radiates a soft professionalism. Shelves brim with psychiatry and medical tomes. The décor whispers calm, but there's an undertone of precision – a space curated to disarm and dissect.

DR. SUE BRIGHTON (mid-40s), poised, exact, sits with a leather-bound notepad in hand. Her posture is ruler-straight, her measured tone both inviting and unyielding.

Across from her, Claire, carries herself with an almost regal edge. Her confident exterior wavers only slightly as her eyes flit across the room, cataloging her surroundings like evidence at a trial.

Sue studies Claire – clinical but not unkind.

DR. BRIGHTON

Your Honor --

CLAIRE

(quick, cutting)

Claire. This isn't a courtroom.

DR. BRIGHTON

(softly corrects)

Claire. Do you know why you're here?

Claire's lips tighten, her eyes narrowing in distrust.

CLAIRE

I wasn't exactly given a choice.

DR. BRIGHTON

You weren't. But humor me – what's the last thing you remember from this morning?

Claire exhales sharply, impatient.

CLAIRE

Look, I have an important case to prepare for. Is this going to take long?

Sue offers a faint smile, unmoved by the deflection.

DR. BRIGHTON

We'll see. Let's start simple.

Sue flips through her notes, the faint rustle of paper filling the space.

DR. BRIGHTON
You're sixty-seven.

CLAIRE
Is that a crime?

DR. BRIGHTON
You've been on the Supreme Court
for a decade.

Claire's eyebrow arches, as if she doesn't like where this is going.

CLAIRE
Is there a point to this resume
recital?

DR. BRIGHTON
(smoothly)
In your office this morning... Who
were you talking to?

A flicker. Claire's rigid exterior cracks, if only slightly. Her expression softens, her eyes becoming distant.

CLAIRE
Janine. My clerk.

Sue leans forward, sensing the shift.

DR. BRIGHTON
She makes you smile. Why?

Claire hesitates, caught off-guard by the intimacy of the question.

CLAIRE
She's... remarkable.

DR. BRIGHTON
Remarkable how?

Claire's eyes light up, the sharpness in her tone replaced by something gentler.

CLAIRE
Look at her life - everything she's
overcome. Orphaned as a child,
shuffled through foster care, and
yet...

(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
she graduated from Harvard at the
top of her class. She's brilliant.
Resilient.

Sue nods slowly, her gaze steady.

DR. BRIGHTON
How often do you talk to her?

The question lands awkwardly. Claire stiffens, her defenses snapping back into place.

CLAIRE
I don't see how that's relevant.

DR. BRIGHTON
It's relevant because...

Sue sets her notepad aside, choosing her next words carefully.

DR. BRIGHTON
Because she's you, Claire.

Claire freezes. The air between them feels electric, charged.

DR. BRIGHTON
Janine isn't real. She's your
middle name - Janine. And the life
you just described? That's your
life.

Claire's expression collapses - confusion, denial, something raw flickers across her face. For a moment, she looks utterly lost, a woman untethered from the reality she thought she knew.

CLAIRE
(quietly, almost to
herself)
That's... not possible.

Sue doesn't press. She waits, watching the realization ripple through Claire like a stone dropped into still water.

INT. DC METRO STATION - DAY

The hum of the city fades into a mechanical symphony of screeching brakes, clattering turnstiles, and the soft whoosh of air pushed by incoming trains. Commuters weaves through the underground labyrinth, their faces blank with routine.

Vanessa descends the escalator. She clutches the strap of her bag like a lifeline. Her face is drawn – eyes clouded, lips pressed tight. Something weighs on her.

She steps off the escalator, her movements automatic as she joins the river of bodies flowing toward the platforms.

SECRETARY DIAZ (V.O.)
I'm sorry your first day turned out
the way it did.

Vanessa slows, the memory sinking its teeth into her. She hesitates by a column, her polished exterior faltering.

VANESSA (V.O.)
Is she going to be okay? I heard –

She shakes her head as if trying to banish the thought, but it clings to her.

SECRETARY DIAZ (V.O.)
It's not the first time. Go home.
Let's see how tomorrow unfolds.

A faint rumble grows louder. The platform shudders slightly. Vanessa's eyes lift toward the dark tunnel just as the train emerges, its headlights cutting through the gloom like twin knives.

The train screeches to a halt. Doors slide open, spilling people out and swallowing others in. Vanessa hesitates for half a second, then boards.

INT. METRO TRAIN - DAY

Vanessa grabs a pole as the train lurches forward. Around her, heads are bent over phones, eyes glazed over. She doesn't look at her phone. She doesn't look at anything.

VANESSA (V.O.)
I wanted to thank her for picking
me.

Her reflection stares back at her in the glass, distorted by the streaked grime of the window.

VANESSA (V.O.)
And to tell her how similar we...
that I was orphaned too.

The tunnel outside rushes by, flickering light and shadow across her face.

BEGIN FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

INT. SENIOR PARTNER'S OFFICE - DAY (2010)

An imposing office, a blend of classic power and modern opulence. Dark oak shelves groan with pristine legal tomes. A palpable tension lingers between the two men.

SENIOR PARTNER (mid-60s), sharp-eyed, exuding gravitas, leans back in his leather chair. His gaze is fixed on ANTHONY MUÑOZ (40s), whose crisp suit fails to mask the unease in his rigid posture.

The Senior Partner's frown deepens, an expression heavy with disappointment and a hint of restrained anger.

ANTHONY

Would you believe me if I told you otherwise?

SENIOR PARTNER

We're lawyers, Anthony.
Emasculating the truth is what we do.

He leans forward, elbows resting on the desk, his steely gaze drilling into Anthony.

SENIOR PARTNER

Do you think people in the office will believe you?

Anthony hesitates. His eyes dart briefly to the framed degrees on the wall, as if searching for some invisible script to guide him.

SENIOR PARTNER

You've done good work here.
Brilliant, even. But this... what she's accused you of...

Anthony meets his gaze, unflinching now, the storm in his expression giving way to quiet resolve.

SENIOR PARTNER

Disbarment is the least of your worries.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

The modest apartment feels lived-in but sparse, with stacks of books lining the walls. The muffled hum of city traffic seeps through a cracked window.

Vanessa (10) sits cross-legged on the worn sofa, scribbling furiously into a notebook. Her brow furrows in concentration. Across from her, Anthony leans forward, animated, his hand slicing the air like a lecturer driving home a point.

ANTHONY

The burden of proof for a criminal case is...?

VANESSA

(quickly)

Beyond a reasonable doubt.

ANTHONY

And for a civil case?

VANESSA

More likely than not.

ANTHONY

That's my girl. Now, let's say Johnny's at the store when something valuable goes missing. Is he guilty?

VANESSA

No. That's circumstantial.

ANTHONY

Good. But here's the trick: the jury might still think he's guilty.

Vanessa pauses, her pencil hovering over the page.

VANESSA

Why?

ANTHONY

(leaning closer)

Because proving you didn't do something is almost impossible.

Vanessa nods, jotting this down. Anthony watches her with pride, but there's a shadow behind his smile.

ANTHONY

Now, what happens if the whole case comes down to "he said, she said"?

Vanessa's pencil taps against her notebook.

VANESSA

It's... who they believe more?

ANTHONY

Exactly. And that's when you attack their character. Doesn't matter if Johnny's innocent – once his name's dragged through the mud, no one will see him the same again.

Vanessa hesitates, absorbing this. There's a weight to Anthony's words she doesn't fully understand, but it lingers.

VANESSA

Dad, slow down.

Anthony glances over to Vanessa, perched on a chair, her legs swinging.

ANTHONY

Okay, okay. Let's call it a day.

He places a quick kiss on her head.

ANTHONY

You're going to be great.

Vanessa grins, but Anthony's gaze drifts to the window. His smile falters. Outside, flashing blue and red lights reflect against the glass.

ANTHONY

I'll be right back.

Vanessa looks up, puzzled, as Anthony heads to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

A LOUD KNOCK echoes through the apartment, sharp and commanding.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.)

Boston PD! Open up!

Vanessa freezes, her notebook slipping from her lap.

VANESSA

(small voice)

Dad?

The knocking turns into POUNDING.

POLICE OFFICER (O.S.)
We have a warrant for your arrest!
Open the door!

Vanessa bolts upright just as the door bursts open. Two POLICE OFFICERS, guns drawn, sweep into the apartment.

POLICE OFFICER
(to Vanessa)
Where's your father?

Vanessa stammers, wide-eyed.

A SINGLE GUNSHOT echoes from the bedroom.

The officers exchange a look before rushing toward the bedroom. Vanessa clutches the back of the sofa, shaking violently.

The bedroom door flies open. From the living room, Vanessa can see Anthony's legs sprawled on the floor. Blood pools, dark and vivid, under the bed frame.

Vanessa's breath catches in her throat. Her eyes lock on his motionless feet as tears streak down her cheeks.

LATER

The apartment is eerily quiet. The flashing lights outside have vanished, leaving only the faint hum of the city.

Vanessa sits on the sofa, clutching one of Anthony's battered law books to her chest. Her small hands grip it tightly, as though it might anchor her to the moment.

Across from her, LYDIA (40s), a child protective services worker, sits cautiously, her hands folded in her lap. She speaks gently, but there's a practiced tone to her words.

LYDIA
Vanessa?

Vanessa doesn't look up.

LYDIA
I'm Lydia. I'm here to make sure
you're okay, sweetheart.

Vanessa finally raises her head. Her red, puffy eyes land on Lydia.

LYDIA

I know your mom passed a few years ago. I'm so sorry you've been through so much.

Vanessa hugs the book tighter.

LYDIA

We're going to find you a safe place to stay. Just for a little while, until we figure out something more permanent.

Vanessa's lip trembles, but she doesn't say anything. Lydia moves closer, speaking softly.

LYDIA

Do you have any family we can call? An aunt, maybe?

Vanessa shakes her head, her voice barely audible.

VANESSA

It was just me and Dad.

INT. FOSTER HOME - DAY

A drab living room, overly tidy, as if rarely used for living. The low hum of a distant vacuum seeps in from another room.

Vanessa, slight, guarded, sits curled into a worn armchair. Her schoolbooks and half-filled worksheets are scattered on the coffee table, but she isn't working - she's staring out the window, absently chewing her thumbnail.

The faint sound of footsteps draws her back. She straightens, her defenses snapping into place.

FOSTER MOTHER (40s), tired, plain, emotionally accessible as a brick wall, steps into the room. She speaks without warmth or ceremony.

FOSTER MOTHER

Vanessa.

Vanessa turns slowly, her face a mix of suspicion and resignation.

FOSTER MOTHER

There's someone here to see you.

Before Vanessa can ask who, a MAN steps into the doorway. He's tall, dressed in a crisp suit that looks out of place in the shabby room. This is the PROSECUTOR (40s), prematurely grey, with tired eyes.

FOSTER MOTHER
 (to Prosecutor, flat)
 I'll be in the kitchen if you need
 me.

She disappears without another glance, the vacuum starting up again a moment later, muffling any sense of privacy.

The Prosecutor steps inside the room but keeps his distance. His movements are deliberate, almost cautious, as if afraid he might spook her.

PROSECUTOR
 Hi, Vanessa. I'm James Harper. I
 was the prosecutor in your father's
 case.

INT. PRISON - VISITORS AREA - DAY

The room feels oppressive, painted in dull greys and greens. The low hum of fluorescent lights buzzes overhead, a steady reminder of where they are. Vanessa, small but carrying herself with a forced resolve, stands beside the prosecutor.

A few feet away, separated by a thick pane of scratched glass, AMANDA WILKES (30s) sits slouched in her chair, tousled hair, sharp cheekbones. She lazily taps a cigarette against the edge of an ashtray.

PROSECUTOR
 (to Vanessa)
 Go ahead. I'll be right here.

Vanessa hesitates, then slowly sits in the plastic chair across from Amanda. The glass between them feels like a wall, but Amanda's gaze pierces straight through it.

Amanda takes a long drag from her cigarette, exhaling smoke that curls upward.

AMANDA
 (mocking, casual)
 Who are you?

Vanessa's fingers curl into fists on her lap, but she keeps her voice steady, even as it trembles at the edges.

VANESSA

Why did you lie about my dad?

Amanda's smirk widens, a slow, sinister curve of her lips. She leans forward slightly, resting her elbow on the table, the cigarette dangling between her fingers.

AMANDA

Is that what he told you?

She tilts her chin toward the Prosecutor, flicking ash in his direction as if dismissing him entirely.

Vanessa doesn't flinch. Her voice hardens.

VANESSA

My dad killed himself because of you.

Amanda leans back in her chair, taking another drag. Her movements are slow, deliberate, like she's savoring the moment.

AMANDA

I didn't pull the trigger.

VANESSA

Why did you lie?

Amanda meets her gaze for a moment, then shrugs, the motion dismissive. She leans back, exhaling smoke toward the ceiling.

AMANDA

People believe what they want to believe.

The words hang in the air, thick with cruelty. Vanessa waits, her fists trembling in her lap. The silence stretches, unbearable. Finally, she shifts in her chair, starting to rise.

VANESSA

(suddenly)

What's your name?

Vanessa pauses, unsure.

VANESSA

Vanessa.

Amanda's eyes narrow slightly, as if committing the name to memory.

AMANDA

I don't know what to tell you,
Vanessa.

VANESSA

The prosecutor says you've done
this to other men.

Amanda's face doesn't move, but there's a flicker in her eyes
— just a fraction of a second where her mask cracks.

VANESSA

You never even did it with him, did
you?

Amanda exhales slowly, as if bored, and leans back in her
chair.

AMANDA

The public defender says I'll be
out of here on appeal.

She flashes a grin, sharp, cold.

LADY

Great court system, right?

Something inside Vanessa snaps. She lunges forward, slamming
her fist against the glass with a loud THUMP.

CLOSE ON: VANESSA'S FACE

Her face contorts with fury, the skin around her eyes
tightening as a scowl twists her features. Her breath fogs
the glass, her reflection warped by the smudges and
scratches.

END FLASHBACK SEQUENCE.

INT. METRO TRAIN - PRESENT DAY

The train rattles along the tracks, the world outside a blur
of motion and light. Vanessa stares out the window, her face
unreadable but heavy with thought.

CLOSE ON: VANESSA'S REFLECTION IN THE GLASS

Her reflection stares back at her, faint, distorted, the
memory of Amanda's smirk still lingering in her mind.

The train begins to slow, the hum of the engine softening as
it pulls into a station. Vanessa straightens slightly, her
eyes focusing on the platform outside.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

A posh restaurant exudes an air of exclusivity – crisp tablecloths, gleaming silverware, murmured conversations. Patrons in tailored suits and designer watches barely glance at each other, their focus on lucrative deals.

RILEY JONES (30s) strides in, his mocha skin unblemished, his tailored suit fitting like it was custom-made for swagger. His confidence feels earned – yet there's something coiled under his charm, like he's used to walking tightropes.

At a corner table sits KEN DOVER (50s), a man whose presence could crush a room. His salt-and-pepper hair is razor sharp, his three-piece suit immaculate. His gaze, flat and assessing, is a silent warning: No bullshit.

Ken cuts into his steak, not even glancing up as Riley approaches.

Riley hesitates just a moment before sliding into the chair opposite him.

RILEY

Thanks for inviting me, Mr. Dover.

Ken takes his time chewing. He finally looks up, eyes cutting like a scalpel.

KEN

I'm having steak. You're here to explain why I shouldn't fire you.

Riley's smile falters. He adjusts his cufflinks, masking the unease creeping in.

Ken picks up his bourbon, swirling it lazily in the glass.

KEN

You know what separates the hunters from the hunted in this town?

RILEY

(lightly)
A good tailor?

Ken doesn't laugh. Instead, he points at his plate with the knife.

KEN

Meat. Real meat. It puts steel in your spine, fire in your gut – hell, even your balls get bigger.

(MORE)

KEN (CONT'D)

And trust me, Jones, in this business, big balls are currency.

Riley sits up straighter, bristling slightly.

RILEY

With all due respect, sir, I've handled high-stakes cases before.

Ken smirks. He stabs another piece of steak, chewing deliberately as the silence stretches just long enough to sweat it out.

KEN

Tell me something. Why do our clients keep handing us billion-dollar problems?

RILEY

Because we limit their exposure. Protect their bottom line.

KEN

Wrong.

Ken drops his knife, wipes his mouth with a napkin.

KEN

Because we *win*. That degree on your wall? Just paper. You want to stay in this game, you don't play it safe. You slay dragons. And right now, you're fumbling the sword.

The tension between them is taut now, humming. Riley's confidence slips into defense mode.

RILEY

It's a tough case, Mr. Dover. If you look at the arguments -

Ken raises a hand, cutting him off.

KEN

See this steak?

He gestures at the plate, then flicks his eyes up at Riley, holding him in place like a pinned butterfly.

KEN

It's not just steak. Someone in the kitchen cared enough to make it worth the price.

(MORE)

KEN (CONT'D)

The seasoning, the garnish – they sell the sizzle, not just the meat. You? All I'm seeing is the raw, bloody cut. And let me tell you, Jones, it ain't pretty.

Riley clenches his jaw but stays silent.

Ken leans back, sipping his bourbon.

KEN

The Supreme Court doesn't care about tough. Find a way to win or you're done.

RILEY

(quieter)
Done? As in --

KEN

(flat)
Out.

The word lands like a gavel. Riley absorbs the blow, his jaw tightening as he fights to keep his composure.

Ken finishes his bourbon in one smooth motion and stands. He adjusts his cuffs, smooth and controlled, before tossing a few bills onto the table.

KEN

Your move, Jones. Don't make me regret giving you the time of day.

He walks out without another glance. Riley sits there, staring at the half-empty bourbon glass Ken left behind.

INT. RILEY'S APARTMENT - DAY

The apartment exudes quiet sophistication – sleek, upscale furniture with thoughtful feminine touches. The floor-to-ceiling windows showcase a breathtaking view of Washington, D.C., sunlight glinting off the distant monuments.

Riley sits at his desk, sleeves rolled up, tie loosened, pouring over legal briefs. His laptop screen casts a cold blue light on his furrowed face. A glass of red wine sits untouched nearby.

The sound of a key turning in the lock pulls his attention. He glances at the door but doesn't move, his focus still anchored to the files.

Vanessa enters, heels clicking softly against the hardwood. She carries the weight of the day in her posture, her usually composed expression tinged with something raw.

VANESSA
(softly)
Busy?

Riley leans back in his chair, offering a faint, tired smile.

RILEY
Always.

She crosses the room, slipping her arms around him from behind. Her hands rest lightly on his chest. She presses a kiss to his temple, but there's a hesitation in her touch.

Riley glances at his watch.

RILEY
I'm surprised to see you this early.

VANESSA
Me too.

She steps away, reaching for his glass of wine. She takes a small sip, her eyes flickering to the stack of files before settling on the window.

RILEY
How was your first day?

Vanessa lowers the glass, her grip tightening momentarily.

VANESSA
It wasn't.

Riley swivels his chair to face her, his brow furrowing.

RILEY
What do you mean?

Vanessa moves toward the window. Her reflection merges with the city beyond, her posture rigid.

VANESSA
She had to leave.

Riley straightens slightly, his expression sharpening.

RILEY
Hanson?

Vanessa nods, setting the glass on the windowsill.

VANESSA
(halting)
They wheeled her out. She looked...

The weight of her words hangs in the air. Riley's gaze sharpens, his jaw tightening.

RILEY
What happened?

Vanessa turns back to him, clutching the wine glass like a lifeline.

VANESSA
I don't know.

Her voice breaks slightly. She quickly composes herself.

VANESSA
She picked me, Riley. Out of everyone, she picked me. And I didn't even get to tell her how much that meant.

Riley stands, crosses the room, placing his hands gently on her shoulders.

RILEY
You will.

VANESSA
What about you? You're home early.

Riley chuckles, the sound tinged with frustration.

RILEY
Let's just say Ken Dover didn't mince words.

Vanessa arches an eyebrow, the faintest hint of a smile pulling at her lips.

VANESSA
He never does.

Riley puts his arms around her.

RILEY
Are we going to be okay?

Vanessa's gaze locks with his.

VANESSA

Why, because your case is on the docket?

RILEY

Something like that.

They share a quiet moment, the tension easing.

INT. DR. SUE BRIGHTON'S OFFICE - DAY

Claire sits on the edge of the couch, her hands knotted in her lap. Her shoulders hunch as if she's trying to fold in on herself. Across from her, Dr. Sue Brighton watches her with a practiced patience. A clock ticks softly in the background.

Dr. Brighton leans forward slightly, her tone gentle, inviting.

DR. BRIGHTON

Claire. Can you walk me through what happened this morning?

Claire's eyes flicker toward her, then away. She doesn't answer, her focus drifting to the floor as though the weight of the question is too much.

A long beat of silence.

DR. BRIGHTON

...Does today's date mean anything to you?

Claire's breath catches. Her face crumples, like a dam breaking silently inside her. A tear slips down her cheek, followed by another. She swallows hard, barely able to form the words. Her hand tremors worsen.

CLAIRE

It's... It's...

I/E. CAR - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Rain lashes against the windshield in jagged streaks. FRANCIS HANSON (mid-30s), pale, gaunt, sits rigid in the driver's seat. Her hands grip the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles blanch.

In the passenger seat, Claire (10), bright-eyed but anxious, glances at her mother with growing unease. The hum of the car and the rhythmic drum of rain on the roof are the only sounds.

CLAIRE

Mom?

No response. Francis's eyes are fixed on the road ahead, but they're glassy, empty, like she's looking at something far beyond it.

Up ahead, the bridge comes into view, stark against the gray skies. Traffic inches forward, the line of cars crawling like ants across its spine.

CLAIRE

Mom?

Still nothing.

Suddenly, Francis pulls the car to the shoulder with a sharp jerk of the wheel. The screech of tires cuts through the rain.

Before Claire can process what's happening, Francis opens the door and steps out into the drizzle.

CLAIRE

(confused, voice rising)

Mom?

Claire fumbles with the manual window crank, rolling it down just in time to see Francis walking toward the edge of the bridge.

CLAIRE

Mom!

Francis stops at the railing, her hair plastered to her face, water streaming off her coat. She turns, just for a moment, meeting Claire's eyes with a look so distant it might as well come from another world.

Then she turns away and climbs the railing.

CLAIRE

(voice cracking, frantic)

MOM!

Claire stumbles out of the car, her feet slipping on the slick asphalt. Her heart is a drumbeat pounding in her ears as she runs toward the bridge.

CLAIRE

(crying, gasping for
breath)

MOM, STOP!

But she's too late. Francis disappears over the side,
swallowed by the churning mist below.

The world tilts. Claire's legs buckle as she clings to the
railing, staring into the void. Rain smears the scene,
mingling with the tears streaming down her face.

The sound of her own heartbeat is deafening in her ears as
she screams into the storm.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. U.S. SENATOR BO ELLIS'S OFFICE - DAY

The room exudes authority and tradition. Warm, wood-paneled walls are adorned with framed legislation and photos of political victories. The faint hum of power permeates the air.

U.S. SENATOR BO ELLIS (50s), with a weathered charm and the drawl of a Southern preacher, scans a thick binder on his mahogany desk. He looks up as LOBBYIST TUCK JOHNSON (40s), suave, calculating, strides in unannounced.

LOBBYIST TUCK

Senator.

SENATOR ELLIS

(eyeing him over his
glasses)

Well, if it ain't the devil
himself.

Tuck grins, unfazed, perches on the edge of a chair without waiting for an invitation.

LOBBYIST TUCK

Your staff really ought to tighten
security.

SENATOR ELLIS

Ain't no lock you can't pick, Tuck.
But if you're here to sell snake
oil, I'm fresh out of buyers.

Ellis leans back, his fingers drumming a rhythm on the desk.

LOBBYIST TUCK

No sales pitch today, Senator. Just
a friendly tip-off.

SENATOR ELLIS

Friendly, huh? Must be my birthday.

Ellis gestures for him to continue, but his posture remains skeptical.

LOBBYIST TUCK

Justice Hanson might not be long
for the bench.

Ellis stiffens ever so slightly. He sets his coffee down with deliberate care.

SENATOR ELLIS
You shootin' blanks or real
bullets? Hanson's tougher than a
two-dollar steak.

LOBBYIST TUCK
And twice as unpredictable. But
dementia doesn't care how tough you
are.

A pause. Tuck studies Ellis, gauging the reaction. Ellis
leans forward, his voice quieter but sharp.

SENATOR ELLIS
You better have more than rumors.

LOBBYIST TUCK
(a sly smirk)
A little bird in security whispered
she had an episode - had to be
carried out on a stretcher.

Ellis's eyes narrow. The room feels heavier, the air charged.

SENATOR ELLIS
This ain't the first time you've
come bearing tall tales, Tuck. I'm
not about to bite without seeing
the bait.

LOBBYIST TUCK
Wouldn't expect you to. But if I
were you, I'd poke around and start
asking the right questions.

Ellis leans back, the faintest smile tugging at the corner of
his mouth.

SENATOR ELLIS
You enjoy stirring the pot, don't
you?

LOBBYIST TUCK
(grinning)
Only when the stew is good.

Ellis lets out a low chuckle, but his eyes remain thoughtful,
calculating.

INT. DR. SUE BRIGHTON'S OFFICE - DAY

The late afternoon sun streams through the sheer curtains,
tracing soft, golden patterns on the walls.

BRIGETTE JACKSON (60s), mocha-skinned with a composed warmth, sits beside Claire. Dr. Sue Brighton, poised with a disarming calm, sits across from them, her leather-bound notebook resting on her lap.

DR. BRIGHTON
Hallucinations are common with Lewy
Body dementia.

BRIGETTE
And this morning? The mirror?

Sue tilts her head slightly, her voice softening like the hush before a storm.

DR. BRIGHTON
That's... psychosis.

CLAIRE
(snickering, with a sharp
edge)
So that's it. I'm officially off my
rocker.

Her laugh cuts through the room like a splinter. Brigette shifts uneasily, places a reassuring hand on Claire's knee.

BRIGETTE
(firm, but gentle)
Claire.

Claire brushes her off, her movements brittle, almost defiant.

CLAIRE
What? Let's call it what it is.
She's saying I'm losing my mind.

Sue leans forward slightly, the weight of her gaze unwavering, yet there's no harshness in it.

DR. BRIGHTON
I know this isn't easy to hear. But
it's important to understand this
is just the beginning.

Claire's anger gives way to something raw – fear, vulnerability, the weight of an uncertain future.

Brigette, unable to hold back any longer, places her hand on Claire's knee. This time, it lands.

BRIGETTE

(quietly, almost pleading)
Why don't we go somewhere? Just us.
Spend some time away. It is summer
recess.

CLAIRE

You know me. It's never recess.

Claire's gaze drifts to the window, her eyes unfocused, as if chasing thoughts too distant to catch. The filtered sunlight paints her face in shifting patches of warmth and shadow. The silence stretches – not awkward, but heavy.

INT. SCOTUS HALLWAY - DAY

The marble hallway is a cathedral of quiet authority. Natural light spills through high arched windows, catching motes of dust in the air. Claire strides down the corridor with deliberate, clipped steps.

Ahead, outside her office, Vanessa and three other LAW CLERKS sit waiting on a sleek bench. Each radiates a mix of nervous energy and carefully curated professionalism.

Claire's steps slow slightly as her gaze lands on the clerks. Her eyes flick over them, measuring, cataloging. When her gaze meets Vanessa's, it lingers for just a heartbeat longer.

CLAIRE

You've been waiting. Good. Learn to
get comfortable with it. The law
waits for no one, but the Court
demands patience.

INT. CLAIRE HANSON'S OFFICE - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

The room is both austere and intimidating. Heavy mahogany shelves line the walls, groaning with law books. Sunlight filters through tall windows, casting long shadows across the conference table.

Claire stands at the head of the table, her presence commanding despite a slight tremor in her hand, which she hides by gripping a sleek fountain pen. Her eyes scan the room with a penetrating intensity.

CLAIRE

Congratulations on joining my
chambers. Let's not mince words –
this isn't just an honor, it's a
crucible.

A pause. Her words linger in the air like a challenge.

CLAIRE

The opinions that leave this office will ripple through generations. That weight isn't mine to carry alone. It's yours now, too. If you're not up for it, the door's right there.

The clerks shift uncomfortably but say nothing. Claire's eyes land on Vanessa for a beat longer than the others, a flicker of recognition crossing her face.

CLAIRE

Your job isn't to impress me. It's to argue with me. Ruthlessly. If you think I'm wrong, prove it. But don't waste my time with half-baked rebuttals. Understood?

The clerks nod. Vanessa's nod is slightly slower, her gaze steady. Claire notices, her lips curving into something between a smirk and a grimace.

VANESSA

(quietly)

Understood, Your Honor.

Claire's face softens imperceptibly, but the moment is fleeting. She taps her pen against the table once, sharp and decisive.

CLAIRE

Good. Because I don't have patience for sycophants – or, apparently, interruptions.

She gestures subtly toward the corner of the room where an ornate clock ticks loudly. The subtext is clear: control the noise, control the room.

CLAIRE

(adding, almost casually)

As for yesterday – if you've heard rumors, discard them. What happened is irrelevant to your work here. Focus on what matters. Nothing else.

Vanessa's gaze shifts briefly to the window, where the marble pillars of the Supreme Court stand resolute against the D.C. skyline. Claire catches the glance, follows it.

CLAIRE

This court stands because it endures. And so will I.

The room falls silent. The clerks exchange uneasy glances. Vanessa shifts her focus back to Claire, studying her with a quiet intensity.

CLAIRE

Now, assignments.

LATER

The clerks gather their things and leave. Vanessa lingers, her gaze catching on the faint tremble in Claire's hand as she gathers her papers. Claire notices, raises an eyebrow but says nothing.

VANESSA

I just wanted to say thank you for picking me.

CLAIRE

You can thank me by doing good work.

INT. SCOTUS - LAW CLERKS' LOUNGE - NIGHT

The SCOTUS clerks' lounge is a mix of worn leather chairs and sleek desks cluttered with legal briefs. A corkboard on the wall showcases photos of Justices, pinned memos, and a calendar crammed with deadlines.

Vanessa leans over a table, her sleeves rolled up, hair slightly mussed from hours of debate. Before her, a whiteboard is crammed with case names, timelines, tangled legal arguments.

ALEX LIU (late 20s, pragmatic, cynical) and KAYLA WHITFIELD (early 30s, polished, ambitious) sit nearby, legal pads in hand, their brows furrowed. The room hums with tension, the weight of an impending Supreme Court case palpable.

VANESSA

(interrupting Alex's explanation)

No, you're missing the underlying issue here. The question isn't just whether Johnson v. Ohio applies - it's about the scope of judicial deference.

(MORE)

VANESSA (CONT'D)

If we concede too much latitude, we're paving the way for regulatory overreach that could swallow the principle of state sovereignty.

ALEX

That's a slippery slope argument. Courts have managed to balance deference before. Why can't they now?

VANESSA

Because this case redefines the balance. Look at the precedent – Chevron. What happens if the Court narrows the doctrine here? Every administrative agency in the country will start second-guessing itself, and that uncertainty trickles down to the economy.

Kayla flips through her notes, visibly annoyed but intrigued.

KAYLA

(regarding Vanessa)

So, what's your answer? Let federal agencies run unchecked? Sounds like a political nightmare.

Vanessa smirks, a fire flickering in her eyes.

VANESSA

I'm saying the doctrine isn't the problem. It's the context. If we tie this case too closely to Chevron, the Justices lose sight of what's actually at stake: whether Congress intended for this kind of agency discretion in the first place. This isn't about politics – it's statutory interpretation.

Alex leans back, his pen tapping the table as he watches Vanessa.

ALEX

So, your solution is what? Convince Justice Hanson to write an opinion threading that needle?

Vanessa glances at him, her confidence unshaken.

VANESSA

Not just Hanson. Justice Perry's in play here. His opinion in Johnson Utilities suggests he's not opposed to reshaping Chevron, but only if the statutory text supports it. We need to frame our argument as textualist-friendly. Appeal to his philosophy, not just the liberal bloc.

The room goes silent for a beat. Kayla sets her notepad down, her expression unreadable.

KAYLA

I hate to admit it, but you might be onto something.

VANESSA

Might? Come on, Whitfield. You know I'm right.

ALEX

(softly)

You've got guts, Muñoz. Let's hope it pays off.

Vanessa picks up her coffee mug, draining the cold remnants.

VANESSA

It will. And if it doesn't, well... we'll deal with that bridge when it collapses.

She turns back to the whiteboard, her focus razor-sharp as the clerks exchange glances. Though exhausted, there's a spark of admiration in their eyes.

ALEX

(to Vanessa)

You writing it up?

KAYLA

No guts, no glory, right?

VANESSA

Sure.

INT. SCOTUS LIBRARY - NIGHT

The SCOTUS Library emanates solemn grandeur. Floor-to-ceiling shelves brim with bound legal volumes, their spines muted under dim amber lights. The clock's hands tick softly, landing on 9:15 PM.

Vanessa sits at a study table, her posture taut with focus. The bluish glow of her laptop flickers against her face, highlighting the sharp lines of concentration.

Her typing falters. A faint rhythm – footsteps in the hallway. Vanessa freezes, then pushes her chair back with quiet resolve. Her shoes whisper against the polished floor as she ventures toward the sound.

INT. CLAIRE HANSON'S OFFICE - NIGHT

The office feels alive with gravitas: mahogany bookcases loom like silent sentinels, the weight of centuries of law pressing against the space.

Papers lie across her desk in curated chaos. Beside them, a single photograph – a younger Claire shaking hands with a U.S. President – radiates understated triumph.

Claire stands motionless before the shelves, her fingers brushing spines like old friends. Her gaze shifts to the framed quote on her desk.

CLOSE ON: FRAMED QUOTE

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Claire's hand trembles as it hovers above the frame.

The door creaks. Vanessa stands hesitantly in the doorway, her silhouette framed by the golden light of the hallway.

VANESSA
Justice Hanson?

Claire blinks, confusion rippling across her face.

CLAIRE
(softly, as though to
herself)
Where... where am I?

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. CLAIRE HANSON'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Claire exhales shakily, her hand brushing against the desk for balance.

CLAIRE
Who are you?

VANESSA
Vanessa Muñoz, your new clerk.

Claire tilts her head, her gaze narrowing as she tries to anchor herself in the moment

CLAIRE
Vanessa...

VANESSA
How about we sit down?

Claire hesitates but follows Vanessa's lead. The two move to the plush leather couch near the window. Vanessa perches on the edge of an armchair, poised yet uncertain.

Before she can speak again, the door bursts open. Brigette strides in, her face a mix of relief and alarm.

BRIGETTE
(to Claire)
Thank God. You didn't come home - I was about to call the marshals.

Claire's confusion hardens into something more guarded.

CLAIRE
I'm not sure what happened.

Brigette kneels in front of Claire, clasping her trembling hands.

BRIGETTE
It's okay. Let's get you home.

Vanessa watches quietly, absorbing the tender familiarity between the two women.

VANESSA
(softly)
Do you need help?

Brigette looks over her shoulder, a polite but weary smile.

BRIGETTE

I've got her.

She helps Claire to her feet. As they move to the door, Officer Monroe and his security detail appear.

Claire pauses in the doorway, turning to Vanessa with a flicker of lucidity.

CLAIRE

Vanessa.

Vanessa steps forward, hopeful.

CLAIRE

I'll see you tomorrow.

Her voice carries a quiet authority, tinged with the Claire Hanson of old. Brigette leads her away, leaving Vanessa standing alone in the office.

Vanessa's gaze shifts to the framed quote on the desk. The weight of the night lingers as she reads it again, her resolve hardening.

CLOSE ON: FRAMED QUOTE

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

The National Mall stirs awake under the soft light of dawn. The Capitol's dome gleams, reflected faintly in the still waters of the Reflecting Pool. Joggers trace its edge.

INT. RILEY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sunlight filters through half-drawn blinds, painting slanted lines across Riley's peaceful face. The room is meticulously organized, save for the note Vanessa places delicately on the nightstand.

CLOSE ON: NOTE

"Getting coffee. Back soon. - V"

EXT. RILEY'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Vanessa exits the front door, letting it click softly behind her. She descends the pristine stone steps with deliberate quiet.

Her pace falters when she spots Brigette, poised beside an unmarked SUV with gleaming government plates. Beside her, Officer Monroe, broad-shouldered, alert, stands like a sentry.

Brigette raises a coffee cup in greeting, her smile polite.

BRIGETTE

(to Vanessa)

Can I buy you some coffee?

VANESSA

(guarded, glancing at
Monroe)

How did you...

BRIGETTE

(smiling, cutting her off)

You work for a Supreme Court
Justice.

Monroe moves to open the SUV's door. The gesture is silent but commanding, urging her to follow.

I/E. UNMARKED SUV - DAY

The car's interior is dark leather, understated but luxurious. Vanessa slides in beside Brigette, her movements deliberate.

VANESSA

So, this isn't just about coffee,
is it?

Brigette sips her drink, taking her time to answer.

BRIGETTE

Everything's about something.
Especially here.

Vanessa watches her, waiting.

BRIGETTE

(softly)

Claire's going to need people she
can trust. Real trust.

VANESSA

(quietly)

And you think that's me?

Brigette turns, her gaze sharp but not unkind.

BRIGETTE
You wouldn't be here otherwise.

EXT. METROPOLITAN CLUB - DAY

A four-story building stands like a monument to history. Its weathered stone facade exudes old-world elegance. A flag with the Metropolitan Club's emblem waves softly in the breeze, proclaiming wealth and exclusivity.

A DOORMAN in a sharply pressed uniform steps forward as a black SUV glides to the curb. The door opens with the muted precision of power well-practiced.

INT. METROPOLITAN CLUB - LOBBY - DAY

The lobby is a cathedral to privilege. Polished marble floors gleam under an ornate chandelier. The murmur of voices is barely audible over the faint clink of silver spoons on porcelain cups.

Brigette strides in with the confidence of someone who belongs, Vanessa a step behind her, taking it all in. The club's RECEPTIONIST, perfectly groomed and impossibly polite, greets them with a warm nod.

RECEPTIONIST
Good morning, Ms. Jackson.

BRIGETTE
Good morning, Jason.

The receptionist gestures to Vanessa with practiced precision, producing a silver tray lined with velvet.

RECEPTIONIST
(to Vanessa)
Good morning, ma'am. If you
wouldn't mind turning off your
phone and leaving it with us.

Vanessa hesitates, her gaze flicking to Brigette, who gives her an almost imperceptible nod. She places her phone onto the tray, its screen going dark like a door quietly closing.

Senator Bo Ellis crosses the lobby with the air of a man who shapes policy over lunch.

SENATOR ELLIS
Brigette.

BRIGETTE

Senator.

Their exchange is brief, but there's a weight to it, the subtle acknowledgment of power shared – or perhaps contested.

RECEPTIONIST

Thank you. Enjoy your breakfast.

INT. METROPOLITAN CLUB - PRIVATE DINING ROOM - DAY

The room is intimate, wrapped in rich mahogany and custom craftsmanship. A single table occupies the space, set with precision. Heavy drapes filter the sunlight into a soft glow.

A WAITER pours coffee into their cups, his movements fluid, rehearsed.

VANESSA

Thank you.

WAITER

You're welcome, ma'am.

He retreats, leaving Brigitte and Vanessa in a silence that is both comfortable and expectant. Brigitte takes a sip, her eyes studying Vanessa over the rim of her cup.

BRIGETTE

So, tell me about yourself.

Vanessa meets her gaze evenly.

VANESSA

I'm sure you already know. Orphan.
Worked hard to get here.

Brigette tilts her head slightly, unimpressed by the deflection.

BRIGETTE

Why a law clerk? You could've
cashed in on that Harvard degree
ten times over.

Vanessa exhales, the weight of Brigitte's attention forcing her to recalibrate. Clichés won't suffice.

VANESSA

I want to know what it's like to be
a Supreme Court Justice.

Brigette raises an eyebrow, intrigued.

BRIGETTE

Why?

VANESSA

Because I want to be one.

The blunt honesty lands with a quiet power. Brigette sets her cup down, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

BRIGETTE

Thank you for your honesty. I can see why Claire chose you. You remind her of herself at your age.

For a moment, Brigette's composure falters. Her voice softens.

BRIGETTE

Claire is...

Vanessa leans forward slightly, her tone gentler now.

VANESSA

I know.

Brigette nods, her emotions held in check but visible in the tight set of her jaw.

BRIGETTE

It's getting worse. And I can't always be there to protect her.

She reaches across the table, placing her hand lightly over Vanessa's.

BRIGETTE

I need you to watch over her when I'm not there.

VANESSA

Of course.

BRIGETTE

Why don't you join us for dinner on Saturday?

Vanessa hesitates, then nods, a faint smile touching her lips.

VANESSA

I'd like that.

Brigette leans back slightly, her tone casual, but her words land with precision.

BRIGETTE
Riley won't be able to join us,
though.

Vanessa's smile fades, her gaze sharpening.

VANESSA
You know about Riley?

BRIGETTE
Claire's chambers leave little room
for secrets.

Brigette pauses, studying Vanessa's reaction before adding.

BRIGETTE
Especially when it involves a case
she'll be ruling on.

INT. METROPOLITAN CLUB - PRIVATE DINING ROOM - DAY

The room exudes understated opulence. Warm wood paneling absorbs the afternoon light filtering through tall, draped windows. A single table, immaculate and intimidating, commands the space.

Senator Ellis leans back in his chair, all Southern charm masking steel resolve. Across from him, SCOTUS POLICE CHIEF FRANK OLSON (60s), burly, weathered, leans forward with the posture of a man ready to shut down nonsense before it starts.

SENATOR ELLIS
How often do you rotate the
officers assigned to the justices?

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
Every two years. Standard practice.

Ellis swirls the coffee in his cup, a deliberate motion, as though weighing his next words.

SENATOR ELLIS
Justice Hanson's team. Are they up
for rotation?

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
She prefers to keep them on.
Stability, you know. Why?

Ellis leans forward slightly, his tone dropping to a conspiratorial level.

SENATOR ELLIS
Word is, she's slipping. Dementia.

Olson's eyes narrow, his shoulders squaring like a boxer answering a bell.

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
You fishing for dirt or asking me
to plant some?

Ellis doesn't flinch.

SENATOR ELLIS
I'm asking if I can trust your team
to notice what matters.

Ellis lets the implication hang in the air.

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
Nice try. My officers are sworn to
protect, not gossip.

Ellis's gaze hardens, his charm retreating like a tide.

SENATOR ELLIS
We both know that oath has wiggle
room.

Olson rises, his chair scraping against the hardwood.

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
Not with me, it doesn't.

He turns to leave, but Ellis's voice stops him cold.

SENATOR ELLIS
Frank, you owe me.

Olson freezes, his back stiffening before he turns, his expression unreadable.

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
Pulling that card, huh?

Ellis shrugs, casual but pointed.

SENATOR ELLIS
If I have to.

Olson's jaw clenches before he nods, curt, resigned.

POLICE CHIEF OLSON
We're even now.

He exits without another word.

A beat. Ellis sips his coffee, his eyes flicking to the door as it swings open again.

CHIEF JUSTICE KYLE DONNER (60s) strides in like he owns the room. His towering frame and razor-sharp presence make the Senator seem almost small by comparison.

SENATOR ELLIS
Chief Justice.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
Senator.

He doesn't sit, his posture rigid, commanding.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
So, what did you want to talk
about?

Donner doesn't sit. Instead, he looms, hands clasped loosely behind his back, as if holding court. The silence thickens, the tension between them pulsing like a heartbeat.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

INT. METROPOLITAN CLUB - PRIVATE ROOM - DAY

Chief Justice Donner, impatient, gets to the point.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
Let's skip the preamble. What's on
your mind?

SENATOR ELLIS
Claire Hanson. She's become a
liability.

Donner's jaw tightens imperceptibly, but he doesn't
interrupt.

SENATOR ELLIS
Sure, she can recuse herself here
and there, but eventually that slot
machine will be empty.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
What are you asking me to do?

SENATOR ELLIS
If the Court's integrity is your
priority, it's time to consider
alternatives. Early retirement
would allow her to leave with
dignity.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
Dignity? That's what you call this
little ambush?

Ellis leans forward, his tone sharpening.

SENATOR ELLIS
You want me to spell it out? She's
losing it, Kyle. You and I both
know it. The whispers won't stop,
and sooner or later, they'll echo
where they shouldn't.

Donner steps closer, the imposing weight of him forcing Ellis
to lean back.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
Don't insult me by pretending it's
about the Court. What are you
asking, exactly?

Ellis's smirk returns, colder this time.

SENATOR ELLIS
 Explain the benefits of bowing out
 gracefully. She's given enough.
 Remind her there's more to life
 than the Supreme Court.

Donner's glare hardens into steel.

CHIEF JUSTICE DONNER
 And if she doesn't take your
 "advice"?

Ellis's eyes glint with calculated menace. He lifts his cup,
 taking a slow sip before answering.

SENATOR ELLIS
 Even ducks know when it's huntin'
 season.

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE - DAY

An elegant, welcoming home with touches of warmth and
 personality.

Brigette looks out the window, her gaze falling on Claire,
 seated on the back patio. Claire's posture - slightly slumped
 - suggests she's lost in thought. The wind gently stirs the
 leaves.

Brigette opens the French doors, stepping into the -

BACK PATIO

The sunlight is softened by overhanging trees. Claire stares
 at a glass of water on the table, her hand idly brushing its
 rim.

Brigette approaches quietly, resting a hand on Claire's
 shoulder. Claire doesn't flinch but acknowledges her presence
 with the faintest of sighs.

BRIGETTE
 (softly)
 Couldn't let you brood alone.

Claire tilts her head slightly, a weak smile breaking
 through.

CLAIRE
 Remember when we first met?

Brigette sits beside her, her eyes crinkling with affection.

BRIGETTE
You were dating that football
player. What was his name?

CLAIRE
(chuckles)
Some jock. He couldn't even tie his
cleats.

BRIGETTE
But he introduced us.

CLAIRE
He grabbed his crotch when I told
him I was going off with you.

They share a soft laugh, the kind steeped in nostalgia.

CLAIRE
(back to pensive)
I was a mess then. Lost.

Claire turns to look at Brigette, her expression naked, raw.

CLAIRE
It was you. You made all this
possible.

Brigette looks startled by the intensity in Claire's voice. Claire reaches out, cupping Brigette's face with trembling fingers.

CLAIRE
You're my north star, Brigette.
Without you...

Her voice falters. Brigette takes Claire's hand, pressing it firmly.

BRIGETTE
(steady)
I'm not going anywhere.

CLAIRE
But one day -

BRIGETTE
(interrupting)
I'll still know who you are.

The reassurance settles over them like a fragile shield. For a moment, the only sound is the rustling of the wind.

Claire pulls Brigette's hand into her lap, holding on tightly as though anchoring herself

EXT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE - VEGETABLE GARDEN - DAY

The modest garden hums with life, a patchwork of thriving vegetables. Bees float lazily among blossoming herbs. Claire crouches beside a tomato plant, gently cradling a tomato in her hand.

CLAIRE
Not quite ready.

Behind her, the gate clicks softly. Brigette steps into view, the sunlight catching in her hair. She pauses, watching Claire for a moment, then strides closer.

BRIGETTE
You've always had a knack for
knowing when to wait.

Claire glances over her shoulder, the corner of her mouth quirking into a faint smile.

CLAIRE
Patience has its limits.

Brigette kneels beside her, running her fingers over a sprig of rosemary.

BRIGETTE
Speaking of patience, I invited one
of your clerks to dinner on
Saturday.

Claire straightens, the tomato still in her hand. She tilts her head toward Brigette, her brow furrowing.

CLAIRE
You know I wait until the end of
the term for that.

BRIGETTE
(smiling)
She reminds me of you.

CLAIRE
Which one?

BRIGETTE
Vanessa.

Claire sets the tomato down carefully, her movements deliberate.

CLAIRE
How'd you meet her?

Brigette leans back on her heels, brushing dirt from her hands.

BRIGETTE
That doesn't matter.

Brigette rises, wiping her hands on her jeans.

BRIGETTE
I'll make sure there's wine.

As Brigette heads back toward the house, Claire stays kneeling, her eyes lingering on the garden.

INT. KEN DOVER'S OFFICE - DAY

The room is an apex of corporate power. Sleek glass shelves glint in the sunlight spilling from floor-to-ceiling windows that frame a skyline of ambition. The lounge area's plush leather sofa and chairs seem untouched, almost ceremonial.

Ken listens to his two PARTNERS. Across from him, PARTNER LES NEIMAN (30s), sits perched on the edge of his seat like a hawk about to pounce.

PARTNER JACK HAYES (40s), the veteran shark in a sheep's suit, leans back, his casual posture a foil to the sharpness in his eyes.

PARTNER LES NEIMAN
(grinning, savoring the moment)
They're holding on to their nuts right now. Worst case, we settle for twenty mil. Best case? North of fifty.

PARTNER JACK HAYES
(leaning forward, his voice a low warning)
Unless they're baiting you for trial.

Les' smile fades.

PARTNER LES NEIMAN
What are you implying?

PARTNER JACK HAYES
I've read the file. Their position
isn't as weak as you think.

Ken raises a hand, silencing them both without raising his voice.

KEN
(steady, decisive)
Offer the settlement. Give them
seventy-two hours to bite. If they
don't, we'll revisit.

Les nods, his earlier bravado replaced by a glint of calculation.

KEN
(to Les)
Anything else?

PARTNER LES NEIMAN
Other cases are still in discovery.

Jack glances at Ken, his tone shifting.

PARTNER JACK HAYES
And Riley? The CEO's getting
restless. He needs reassurance.

Before Ken can respond, the door creaks open. His SECRETARY, composed but visibly hurried, peeks inside.

SECRETARY
Mr. Dover, Riley's here.

Ken smirks.

KEN
(to his partners)
We'll pick this up later.

Les and Jack rise, exchanging a glance before exiting. Ken gestures to the secretary.

KEN
(to secretary)
Let him in.

MOMENTS LATER

Riley strides in, his tailored suit immaculate but his expression guarded. He carries a folded paper, its edges worn from a day of second-guessing.

Ken, now at his mini-bar, pours himself a bourbon without looking up.

KEN
(half-smiling)
You're not groveling. So either
you've found another job or you've
got something for me.

Riley places the paper on the desk and slides it forward.

RILEY
(reading the room)
It's not a resignation.

Ken finally turns, picking up the paper. He reads in silence, his face impassive. The room grows still, the only sound the faint hum of the city outside.

Ken's lips twitch upward – a rare, genuine smile.

KEN
I don't say this often, Jones, but
I'm impressed.

He sets the paper down, retrieves a second glass, and pours bourbon for Riley.

KEN
I had four of our best dissect this
case. None of them saw what you
did.

He hands Riley the glass and they clink.

RILEY
(letting out a breath)
Guess I can leave the breakup box
in the trunk.

Ken chuckles, then levels a look at Riley.

KEN
Not so fast. You still have to win.

Riley's smile freezes, then falters.

KEN
It's the only thing our clients
care about. I care about.

EXT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE - OUTSIDE PATIO - DAY

The sun casts a warm glow over the backyard. The patio table is set with care – a bounty of food and wine that invites indulgence. A light breeze stirs the edges of a linen tablecloth.

Clair, Brigitte, and Vanessa sit around the table. Their laughter mingles with the soft rustle of leaves, creating an atmosphere of intimate camaraderie.

BRIGETTE

(to Vanessa)

How's the wine?

VANESSA

Lovely. Thanks.

CLAIRE

Brigette wanted to become a sommelier once. Even flew to France to chase the dream.

VANESSA

(to Brigitte, curious)

Why didn't you?

BRIGETTE

Life happened. I followed Claire to Harvard instead.

Brigette glances at Claire with a smile, their bond palpable. She places her hand lightly over Claire's, the gesture brimming with unspoken affection.

BRIGETTE

No regrets.

(to Vanessa)

What about you? How are things with Riley?

VANESSA

We're good.

CLAIRE

(to Vanessa)

Should I be concerned about you two... and his case?

Vanessa answers with assertion.

VANESSA

No.

CLAIRE

Good.

BRIGETTE

Well, how about some dessert to
sweeten the mood?

CLAIRE

Brigette's raspberry pie is
legendary.

BRIGETTE

(to Vanessa, with a wink)
Ice cream on top?

VANESSA

Always.

Brigette rises and heads into the house.

VANESSA

(to Claire, softly)
Thank you for choosing me.

Claire studies Vanessa for a moment, her expression
softening.

CLAIRE

Brigette says you remind her of me
when I was your age.

Vanessa hesitates, her gaze dipping to the table.

VANESSA

I know you lost your parents young.
You inspired me.

Claire's composure wavers, her eyes glistening. She blinks
quickly, brushing the moment away.

CLAIRE

What's taking Brigette so long?

Claire pushes her chair back, the scrape of the legs cutting
through the quiet tranquility.

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

The kitchen is serene, sunlight streaming through the window,
casting long shadows across the floor.

Brigette lies motionless on the cold tiles, a wineglass
shattered nearby, crimson liquid spreading like a wound.

EXT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE - OUTSIDE PATIO - DAY

Claire's footsteps falter as she approaches the open doorway.

CLAIRE
Brigette?

Her voice is a thread of dread, unraveling into the stillness.

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF ACT FOUR