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Gideon's Sword

Written by Douglas Preston
and Lincoln Child

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**GIDEON'S
SWORD
PRESTON&CHILD**



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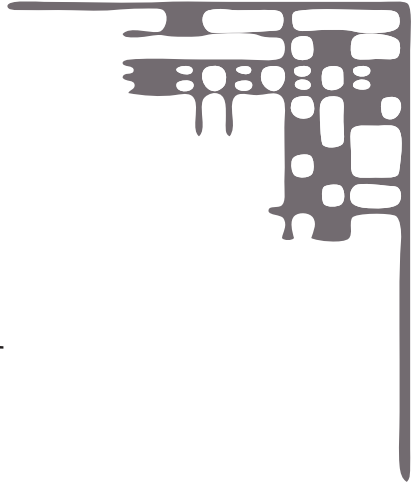
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1

August 1988

NOTHING IN HIS TWELVE YEARS of life had prepared Gideon Crew for that day. Every insignificant detail, every trivial gesture, every sound and smell, became frozen as if in a block of glass, unchanging and permanent, ready to be examined at will.

His mother was driving him home from his tennis lesson in their Plymouth station wagon. It was a hot day, well up in the nineties, the kind where clothes stick to one's skin and sunlight has the texture of flypaper. Gideon had turned the dashboard vents onto his face, enjoying the rush of cold air. They were driving on Route 27, passing the long cement wall enclosing Arlington National Cemetery, when two motorcycle cops intercepted their car, one pulling ahead, the other staying behind, sirens wailing, red lights turning. The one in front motioned with a black-gloved hand toward the Columbia Pike exit ramp; once on the ramp, he signaled for Gideon's mother to pull over. There was none of the slow deliberation of a routine traffic stop—instead, both officers hopped off their motorcycles and came running up.

“Follow us,” said one, leaning in the window. “Now.”

“What’s this all about?” Gideon’s mother asked.

“National security emergency. Keep up—we’ll be driving fast and clearing traffic.”

“I don’t understand—”

But they were already running back to their motorcycles.

Sirens blaring, the officers escorted them down Columbia Pike to George Mason Drive, forcing cars aside as they went. They were joined by more motorcycles, squad cars, and finally an ambulance: a motorcade that screamed through the traffic-laden streets. Gideon didn’t know whether to be thrilled or scared. Once they turned onto Arlington Boulevard, he could guess where they were going: Arlington Hall Station, where his father worked for INSCOM, the United States Army Intelligence and Security Command.

Police barricades were up over the entrance to the complex, but they were flung aside as the motorcade pulled through. They went shrieking down Ceremonial Drive and came to a halt at a second set of barricades, beside a welter of fire trucks, police cars, and SWAT vans. Gideon could see his father’s building through the trees, the stately white pillars and brick façade set among emerald lawns and manicured oaks. It had once been a girls’ finishing school and still looked it. A large area in front had been cleared. He could see two sharpshooters lying on the lawn, behind a low hummock, rifles deployed on bipods.

His mother turned to him and said, fiercely, “Stay in the car. Don’t get out, no matter what.” Her face was gray and strained, and it scared him.

She stepped out. The phalanx of cops bulled through the crowd ahead of her and they disappeared.

She’d forgotten to turn off the engine. The air-conditioning was still going. Gideon cranked down a window, the car filling with the sounds of sirens, walkie-talkie chatter, shouts. Two men

in blue suits came running past. A cop hollered into a radio. More sirens drifted in from afar, coming from every direction.

He heard the sound of a voice over an electronic megaphone, acidic, distorted. *"Come out with your hands in view."*

The crowd immediately hushed.

"You are surrounded. There is nothing you can do. Release your hostage and come out now."

Another silence. Gideon looked around. The attention of the crowd was riveted on the front door of the station. That, it seemed, was where things would play out.

"Your wife is here. She would like to speak to you."

A buzz of fumbled static came through the sound system and then the electronically magnified sound of a partial sob, grotesque and strange. *"Melvin?"* Another choking sound. *"MELVIN?"*

Gideon froze. *That's my mother's voice*, he thought.

It was like a dream where nothing made sense. It wasn't real. Gideon put his hand on the door handle and opened it, stepping into the stifling heat.

"Melvin..." A choking sound. *"Please come out. Nobody's going to hurt you, I promise. Please let the man go."* The voice over the megaphone was harsh and alien—and yet unmistakably his mother's.

Gideon advanced through the clusters of police officers and army officers. No one paid him any attention. He made his way to the outer barricade, placed a hand on the rough, blue-painted wood. He stared in the direction of Arlington Hall but could see nothing stirring in the placid façade or on the immediate grounds cleared of people. The building, shimmering in the heat, looked dead. Outside, the leaves hung limply on the oak branches, the sky flat and cloudless, so pale it was almost white.

"Melvin, if you let the man go, they'll listen to you."

More waiting silence. Then there was a sudden motion at the front door. A plump man in a suit Gideon didn't recognize came

stumbling out. He looked around a moment, disoriented, then broke into a run toward the barricades, his thick legs churning. Four helmeted officers rushed out, guns drawn; they seized the man and hustled him back behind one of the vans.

Gideon ducked under the barricade and moved forward through the groups of cops, the men with walkie-talkies, the men in uniform. Nobody noticed him, nobody cared: all eyes were fixed on the front entrance to the building.

And then a faint voice rang out from inside the doorway. "There must be an investigation!"

It was his father's voice. Gideon paused, his heart in his throat.

"I demand an investigation! Twenty-six people died!"

A muffled, amplified fumbling, then a male voice boomed from the sound system. "*Dr. Crew, your concerns will be addressed. But you must come out now with your hands up. Do you understand? You must surrender now.*"

"You haven't listened," came the trembling voice. His father sounded frightened, almost like a child. "People died and nothing was done! I want a promise."

"*That is a promise.*"

Gideon had reached the innermost barricade. The front of the building remained still, but he was now close enough to see the door standing half open. It was a dream; at any moment he would wake up. He felt dizzy from the heat, felt a taste in his mouth like copper. It was a nightmare—and yet it was real.

And then Gideon saw the door swing inward and the figure of his father appear in the black rectangle of the doorway. He seemed terribly small against the elegant façade of the building. He took a step forward, his hands held up, palms facing forward. His straight hair hung down over his forehead, his tie askew, his blue suit rumpled.

"*That's far enough,*" came the voice. "*Stop.*"

Melvin Crew stopped, blinking in the bright sunlight.

The shots rang out, so close together they sounded like firecrackers, and his father was abruptly punched back into the darkness of the doorway.

“Dad!” screamed Gideon, leaping over the barrier and running across the hot asphalt of the parking lot. “*Dad!*”

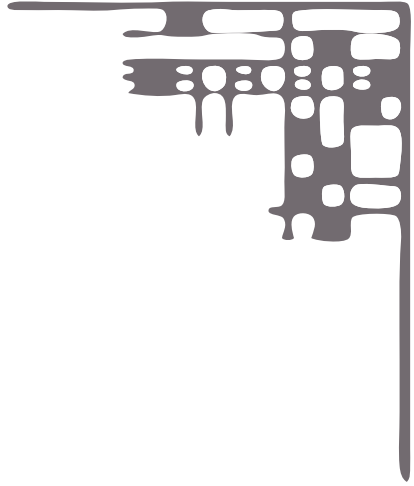
Shouts erupted behind him, cries of “Who’s that kid?” and “Hold fire!”

He leapt the curb and cut across the lawn toward the entrance. Figures raced forward to intercept him.

“Jesus Christ, stop him!”

He slipped on the grass, fell to his hands and knees, rose again. He could see only his father’s two feet, sticking out of the dark doorway into the sunlight, shoes pointed skyward, scuffed soles turned up for all to see, one with a hole in it. It was a dream, a dream—and then the last thing he saw before he was tackled to the ground was the feet move, jerking twice.

“Dad!” he screamed into the grass, trying to claw back to his feet as the weight of the world piled up on his shoulders; but he’d seen those feet move, his father was alive, he would wake up and all would be well.



2

October 1996

GIDEON CREW HAD FLOWN IN FROM CALIFORNIA on the red-eye, the plane sitting on the LAX tarmac for two hours before finally taking off for Dulles. He'd hopped a bus into the city, then taken the Metro as far as he could before switching to a taxi: the last thing his finances needed right now was the unexpected plane fare. He'd been burning through cash at an alarming rate, not budgeting at all—and that last job he'd done had been higher-profile than usual, the merchandise difficult to fence.

When the call came he'd hoped at first it was one more false alarm, another attack of hysteria or drunken plea for attention. But when he arrived at the hospital, the doctor had been coolly frank. "Her liver is failing and she's not eligible for a transplant because of her history. This may be your last visit."

She lay in intensive care, her bleached-blond hair spread over the pillow, showing an inch of black roots, her skin raddled. A sad, inept attempt had been made to apply eye shadow; it was like painting the shutters on a haunted house. He could hear her raspy breathing through the nasal cannula. The room was

hushed, the lights low, the discreet beeping of electronics a watchful presence. He felt a sudden tidal wave of guilt and pity. He'd been absorbed in his own life instead of tending to her. But every time he'd tried in the past, she had retreated into the bottle and they'd ended up fighting. It wasn't fair, her life ending like this. It just wasn't fair.

Taking her hand, he tried and failed to think of anything to say. Finally he managed a lame "How are you, Mom?"—hating himself for the inanity of the question even before he'd finished asking it.

She just looked at him in response. The whites of her eyes were the color of overripe bananas. Her bony hand grasped his in a weak, trembling embrace. Finally she stirred weakly. "Well, this is it."

"Mom, please don't talk like that."

She waved a hand dismissively. "You've talked to the doctor: you know how things stand. I have cirrhosis, along with all the lovely side effects—not to mention congestive heart failure and emphysema from years of smoking. I'm a wreck and it's my own damn fault."

Gideon could think of no response. It was all true, of course, and his mother was nothing if not direct. She always had been. He found it puzzling that such a strong woman was so weak when it came to chemical vices. No, it wasn't so puzzling: she had an addictive personality, and he recognized the same in himself.

"The truth shall make you free," she said, "but first it will make you miserable."

It was her favorite aphorism, and it always preceded her saying something difficult.

"The time has come for me to tell you a truth—" She gasped in some air. "—that will make you miserable."

He waited while she took a few more raspy breaths.

"It's about your father." Her yellow eyes swiveled toward the door. "Shut it."

His apprehension mounting, Gideon gently closed the door and returned to her bedside.

She clasped his hand again. “Golubzi,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry?”

“*Golubzi*. A Russian salt-cabbage roll.”

She paused for more air. “That was the Soviet code name for the operation. The Roll. In one night, twenty-six deep-cover operatives were rolled up. Disappeared.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Thresher.” She closed her eyes, breathing rapidly. It was as if, having decided to take the plunge, she couldn’t wait to get out the words. “That’s the other word. The project your father was working on at INSCOM. A new encryption standard...highly classified.”

“Are you sure you should be talking about this?” Gideon asked.

“Your father shouldn’t have told me. But he did.” Her eyes remained closed and her body looked collapsed, as if it were sinking into the bed. “Thresher needed to be vetted. Tested. That’s when they hired your father. We moved to DC.”

Gideon nodded. For a seventh grader, moving from Claremont, California, to DC had not exactly been fun.

“In 1987, INSCOM sent Thresher to the National Security Agency for final review. It was approved. And implemented.”

“I never heard any of this.”

“You’re hearing it now.” She swallowed painfully. “It took the Russians just months to crack it. On July 5, 1988—the day after Independence Day—the Soviets rolled up all those US spies.”

She paused, releasing a long sigh. The machines continued beeping quietly, mingling with the hiss of the oxygen and the muffled sounds of the hospital beyond.

Gideon continued to hold her hand, at a loss for words.

"They blamed your father for the disaster—"

"Mom." Gideon pressed her hand. "This is all in the past."

She shook her head. "They ruined his life. That's why he did what he did, took that hostage."

"What does it matter now? Long ago I accepted that Dad made a mistake."

The eyes opened suddenly. "No mistake. He was the *scape-goat*."

She pronounced the word harshly, as if she were clearing her throat of something unpleasant.

"What do you mean?"

"Before Operation Golubzi, your father wrote a memo. He said Thresher was theoretically flawed. That there was a potential back door. They ignored him. But he was right. And twenty-six people died."

She inhaled noisily, her hands bunching up the bedcovers with the effort. "Thresher was classified, they could say whatever they liked. No one to contradict. Your father was an outsider, a professor, a civilian. And he had a history of treatment for depression that could be conveniently resurrected."

Listening, Gideon froze. "You're saying... it wasn't his fault?"

"Just the opposite. They destroyed the evidence and blamed him for the Golubzi disaster. That's why he took that hostage. And that's why he was shot with his hands up—to silence him. Cold-blooded murder."

Gideon felt a strange sense of weightlessness. As horrifying as the story was, he felt a burden being lifted. His father, whose name had been publicly vilified since he was twelve, wasn't the depressed, unstable, bungling mathematician after all. All the taunting and hazing he'd endured, the whispering and sniggering behind his back—it meant nothing. At the same time, the enormity of the crime perpetrated against his father began to sink in. He remembered that day vividly, remembered the promises that

were made. He remembered how his father had been lured out into the sunlight only to be shot down.

“But who . . . ?” he began.

“Lieutenant General Chamblee Tucker. An INSCOM deputy chief. Group leader of the Thresher project. He made a scapegoat of your father to protect himself. He gave the order to fire. Remember that name: *Chamblee Tucker*.”

His mother ceased speaking and lay in the bed, covered with sweat, gasping as if she had just run a marathon.

“Thank you for telling me this,” he said evenly.

“Not finished.” More labored breathing. He could see her heart monitor on the wall, registering in the one forties.

“Don’t talk anymore,” he said. “You need to rest.”

“No,” she said with sudden forcefulness. “I’ll have time to rest . . . later.”

Gideon waited.

“You know what happened next. You lived through it, too. The constant moving, the poverty. The . . . men. I just couldn’t pull it together. My real life ended that day. Ever afterward I felt dead inside. I was a terrible mother. And you . . . you were so hurt.”

“Don’t you worry, I survived.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” But deep within, Gideon felt a twinge.

Her breathing began to slow, and Gideon felt her grasp relax. Seeing she was going to sleep, he eased her hand from his and placed it on the bedcovers. But when he bent down to kiss her, the hand shot up again, grasping his collar with claw-like fingers. Her eyes pinned his and she said, with manic intensity: “*Even the score.*”

“What?”

“Do to Tucker what he did to your father. Destroy him. And in the end, make sure he knows why—and by whom.”

“Good God, what are you asking?” Gideon whispered, look-

ing around in sudden panic. "Mom, you don't know what you're saying."

Her voice fell to a whisper. "Take your time. Finish college. Go to graduate school. Study. Watch. Wait. You'll figure out a way."

Her hand slowly relaxed and she closed her eyes again, the air seeming to run out of her forever, like a final sigh. And in a way it was; she lapsed into a coma and died two days later.

Those were her last words, words that would resonate endlessly in his mind. *You'll figure out a way.*