



JUSTICE

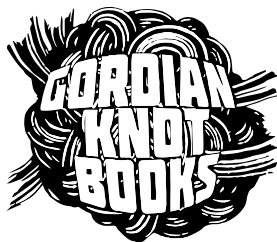
A HOLLYWOOD HOMICIDE

J. GRANT BOYD

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If We do not maintain Justice
Justice will not maintain Us.

Frances Bacon

Before

Alyce Justice took a deep breath in anticipation of the words—the name—that would be revealed in a matter of seconds. The audience was silent, and the brief passage of time would float past her, as if suspended. She wasn't nervous, as one would rightly expect, for she was only twenty-seven and this was her first nomination. Nor was she sure she was going to win. She had an enormous amount of self-confidence, bordering, but never crossing, into cockiness or arrogance. She knew she would win *someday* but it didn't have to be tonight. It would come when it was time, whether this year or the next or the next.

When her name was announced she opened her eyes, smiled that extraordinary smile, then turned calmly and kissed her husband, Brandon, then embraced her sister, Abigail. As if she had rehearsed her movements for years she moved surely onto the stage with a radiant grace, the audience applauding her every step.

Accepting the gold statuette, she turned to face her peers, their faces obscured by the lights, their admiration evident by their applause. She thanked her co-stars, her director, and the producers, said “I love you” to her parents in Pittsburgh, then walked off the proscenium as elegantly as she had entered, now filled with the knowledge that she mattered.

Watching her for only the four minutes she was in focus, it was apparent that she possessed a quality few attain. Often compared to Grace Kelly, she was a star in every sense of the word. Not only beautiful and talented but possessing the elusive aura that penetrates and permeates by her sheer presence. Her future was as bright as one could imagine: married to Hollywood's most popular actor, idolized by an adoring public, and now, an Oscar for Best Actress. As the pictures of her clutching the gold statuette were splashed across around the world, her place and magnitude of brightness in the mercurial galaxy of celebrity was nearly unsurpassed.

Yet fewer than twenty-four hours later, after the greatest triumph in her brief, meteoric career, the Internet and all its offspring were filled with news the police announced: Alyce Justice was found dead in her Palisades home.

1

Sgt. John Malloy took the vibrating phone out of his back pocket and looked at the screen. He saw the name Evans and answered brightly. “Hey! Pissed my Lakers took down your new-look Clippers last night?”

“No, not that. But nothing good, I’m afraid. We’ve got a body. Female, deceased,” Evans said, a tremor in his voice. “You’re not going to believe this, but it’s Alyce Justice.”

“Jesus,” Malloy whispered. “You sure it’s her?”

“Yeah. Housekeeper discovered the body about ten minutes ago, ran over to us in hysterics. I went to the house and confirmed it was her and that she was deceased. Looks like she was stabbed. Didn’t touch anything.”

Malloy took a deep breath. “Okay. Don’t do anything. No one out or in. I’ll have Gundy and a medic there as soon as possible. Probably ten minutes.”

Malloy put the phone against his chest, momentarily frozen by the two words Alyce Justice. He turned to Hernandez at the computer. “Take over, I gotta talk to Barton,” he said, walking rapidly across the small lobby and into the office area, knocking on the half-opened door on the left and then entering.

“We have a body over at the Palisades Estates,” he said, “Jerry Evans called it in and said it’s Alyce Justice.”

“Jesus Christ,” he said, the skin on Capt. Joe Barton’s face tightening noticeably. “Shit!” he said under his breath, his mind suddenly exploding into a hundred slivers of thoughts.

“Have Gundy and a medic go there?” asked Malloy.

Barton leaned forward. “Who did you say called it in?”

“Evans—he thought she had been stabbed and said she was dead. We need to get someone there quickly and not the easiest place to get to from here.”

“Yeah, take Gundy and Hector to confirm—no sirens, no lights once you get to Chautauqua. Call me on your cell when you see what the story is. I’ll call Banning. If it is her, he’s going to want his RHD guys to handle it.”

Malloy nodded then turned around quickly and left. Barton paused as he

picked up the phone, knowing if it was true, that if Alyce Justice had been murdered just a few miles away, his life could be a living hell for the foreseeable future. He prayed that it was a mistake.

Malloy, Detective Tim Gundy, and Medic Hector Campos drove quickly to Santa Monica Boulevard then to the Coast Highway with their siren and lights on before heading up Chautauqua. The gated, fortress-like Palisades Estates was on a plateau that was closest to the ocean and high above it.

He turned onto Corona Del Mar Drive, stopping at the Estates entrance gate to show his badge then quietly entered the compound. Belgian Block paving wound through a stretch of large plantings before curving left into the exclusive and ultra-private enclave of six houses. Malloy saw Evans outside of the third house and they parked in front. There was no sign of anyone else.

“Upstairs and to the right,” Evans said quietly. “No sign of forced entry. It’s almost impossible to get in without a key. Alarm system is state-of-the-art.”

“Where’s the husband?” Gundy asked.

Evans shook his head and pointed to the yellow Ferrari twenty yards away. “That’s his car but he isn’t in there. He doesn’t really live here anymore—he has a place in Brentwood. He only comes here to visit. There was a party here last night that went to the wee hours so maybe he’s sleeping one off in one of the other houses.”

Gundy took out his notebook and wrote: “Husband?”

Hector, Gundy, and Malloy put on sterile foot coverings and gloves before entering the house. “Jesus,” Gundy said upon entering, the view of the Pacific through the enormous, two-story window filling his eyes. “Must be nice,” he sighed as they walked slowly up the curving staircase to a balcony and then to the bedroom. They all stepped gingerly, careful not to touch any surface, at the same time surveying the surroundings for any clues or evidence that might tell them what happened.

Entering the bedroom slowly, the three men stopped as they saw the large king-sized bed. The sun streamed through a clerestory window above, illuminating her like a spotlight, the sleeping mask over her eyes not diminishing her beauty. A blood-soaked sheet covered her up to the base of her neck.

“Holy Mother,” Hector said, pausing momentarily to cross himself and whisper “*Que Dios descanse su almamay* (may God rest her soul).” He took her pulse at the side of her neck, shaking his head. “She’s dead. Looks like you got yourself a big-time homicide.”

“Yeah, someone does, but it won’t be me,” Gundy responded, peering closer but still cautiously avoiding any contact with the victim or the bed.

“She was beautiful, wasn’t she?” Malloy said softly.

“Yeah, a real shame. She just won the Oscar last night,” Tim said.

“Maybe someone was a sore loser,” Malloy commented as they left the room.

“I’m going to call Barton,” Gundy said as they exited the house. “Put some tape around the perimeter of the house. No, on second thought, no tape. Someone might see it and alert the fucking press. Just make sure all doors are locked. Only the door we came in will be used.”

Lucas Horne was at his desk in the squad room, reviewing his notes before a scheduled court appearance after lunch. It was just a preliminary hearing in a relatively obscure homicide, but Horne took all court appearances seriously. He was just as meticulous in his preparations for being a witness as he was as in being a detective. There were no obscure murders to him. They were all important, especially to the victims.

He was oblivious as Lt. Tommy Pedersen, his supervisor and head of the Homicide Special Unit, walked up to his desk, tapped the top with his knuckle then silently motioned him to follow. Horne was pained at the interruption, but nonetheless took his coat off the back of his chair and slipped it on as he followed Pedersen down the corridor.

“I think you’re going to have to cancel that court appearance,” Pedersen said as they entered the office of Captain Will Banning, the head of Robbery/Homicide.

Banning was standing at his desk, talking on the phone. His silvered hair caught the sun streaming through the window. He motioned for them to sit while he listened to Elisha Simpson, chief of the LAPD, offer his advice. Banning seemed annoyed at whatever Simpson was saying but answered politely, nodding his head like a bobble head toy. After a minute of what sounded like a one-way conversation, he hung up. After nearly forty years on the force and planning on retirement in six months, he had hoped his last year would be free of the mayhem he knew was about to be unleashed.

“Why the hell can’t I retire in peace?” he said fixing his gaze on Horne. “How’d you like a promotion, Luke? I’m ready to hand over the keys to the kingdom.”

“No thanks, Will,” Horne smiled. “You’re a bit late. I’m retiring in another week. Before you.”

Banning ignored the comment. “Alyce Justice—the *movie star* Alyce Justice—was found dead in the Palisades less than an hour ago. West LA confirmed so it’s in our hands. Actually, your hands. You and Norelli need to get there quickly—where is he, by the way?”

“DA’s office. Something about the Fry case,” Pedersen said.

“Has he been paged or texted or whatever it is we do these days?” Banning asked Pedersen.

“Yeah. He’s on his way here,” Pedersen replied.

Banning looked at Horne. “Okay, as soon as he gets here, get out to the Palisades. We’re lucky so far, nothing has gone out over the radio, so the media doesn’t know yet. When they do, all hell will break loose,” he said, shaking his head. “I know I don’t have to tell you, but everything by the book. I don’t want any screw-ups. We can’t afford another T.D. Not on my watch, anyway.”

Horne remained expressionless, knowing exactly what he meant. “I’m sorry, Will, but did you not hear what I just said? I’m retiring at the end of this week.”

Banning nodded. “Yes, I heard you, but until that time you are still a homicide detective, correct?”

“Yes.”

Will walked around his desk and sat on the edge of the front, facing Horne. “You and I go back a long time, Lucas. A very long time. You’re the best detective I’ve ever known, and you’ve always been loyal to the law and the department no matter what. Now I’m asking you to do something I wouldn’t ask anyone if it wasn’t important. Important to me and to the department,” he said firmly. He walked back around the desk and looked out the window, hands in his pockets. “This is big, Luke. She’s not just any movie star. She’s young and after last night...” he said, sadly. “Plus she’s married to the biggest fucking star on the planet. I know you don’t give a crap about Hollywood stuff but this is as big as T.D. White, maybe bigger. We fucked that one up royally and I can’t have that happen again.”

“You seem to forget I was one of the ones who, as you said, fucked it up royally,” Horne said plainly.

“No, I haven’t forgotten and you know I’ve always stood by you and defended you because I know it wasn’t your fault,” Banning said, turning around to face him. “I need you to do this, if not for the department, for me.”

Horne stood silently for a moment before turning around and walking to the door where he stopped and looked back. “I’ll do it, Will, partially for you, partially for the department. But most importantly, I’ll do it for the same reason I work every case. I’ll do it for the victim, Alice Justice.”

Pedersen put his hand on Luke’s shoulder and said softly. “Her name is not *Alice*. It’s spelled A-L-Y-C-E and pronounced *Ah-lease*. You might want to remember that.”

Horne gave him a thin smile.

“Tommy, you go with them. I want to be kept informed of everything every step of the way.”

Pedersen waved as they left the office.

“What about West L.A.? What are they going to provide?” Horne asked, their steps echoing in the corridor.

“They’ve got a detective on the scene, but he’s just waiting for you. Once you get there and assess the situation, we’ll decide what we need from them.”

“Do you know who the detective is?” Horne asked.

“Gundy. Know him?”

“Yes. Good detective. Worth keeping on the case, at least to begin with,” he replied as they nearly ran into Norelli getting off the elevator.

“What the hell’s happening?” Norelli asked.

“Homicide, detective,” Horne said, gently pushing him back into the elevator. “Your car.”

Norelli gave them a puzzled look but said nothing. He was the neophyte in Homicide Special and knew enough to wait until the right time to ask any questions.

“Should I ask where we’re going?” Norelli said as he pulled out onto First Street, the time right.

“Palisades. Take the Ten,” Horne said. “I hate the freeways but we’re going opposite rush hour so that’s going to be fastest this time of day.”

Norelli put the lights and siren on, blaring a hole in the traffic as they merged onto the Santa Monica Freeway.

“Palisades? Must be a big-time homicide for us to be going out there.”

“Alyce Justice. Or so we have been told,” Pedersen said plainly.

Norelli turned his head abruptly toward Horne, his eyes wide with astonishment. “*The Alyce Justice?* The movie star?”

“I believe so,” Horne replied, his knowledge of Hollywood celebrities minimal at best. “Watch the road.”

Norelli couldn't believe it. “Jesus, I just watched her on TV last night winning the Oscar. Jesus. What do we know? Anything?”

“No, just that she was found about an hour or so ago. Apparently stabbed in her bed,” Horne said. “Did West L.A. call it in to the coroner?” he asked, turning around to Pedersen.

“As far as I know, no. They didn't want to do anything until we got there.”

Horne immediately called the Scientific Investigation Department—SID—to tell them to send a criminalist team, and then the county's coroner's office for an investigator, specifically asking for Linda Christian's team.

Norelli paid attention to the road but also to Horne. He had been his partner for only a few months and was seventeen years younger. Having only worked two relatively minor and simple cases together they were still feeling each other out.

Horne made a few notes then put the pad into his coat pocket and looked toward Norelli. He wanted to make sure his partner knew what was at stake with this one.

“The media doesn't know about this yet, but they will very shortly. Until you go through it, you have no idea what they can do to an investigation, to say nothing of the trial. Everything on this case is by the book, and if you're not sure of something, ask me. And above all else, do not so much as *look* at a reporter, do not even acknowledge their presence. Tommy will take care of them. Right, Tommy?”

Pedersen was looking at his cell phone. “What? What did you say, Luke?”

Horne half smiled. “Nothing, lieutenant.” Then to Norelli, “Understand?”

“Sure,” he answered nervously, his mind suddenly thinking of T.D. White. “Understood.”

2

They turned off the lights and siren before they turned onto Corona Del Mar drive and soon arrived at the Estates entrance where Norelli held up his badge to the security guard outside. They were waved through the sliding gates that closed quickly behind them. Horne noted immediately how secure the place seemed considering its location. The enclave was eerily quiet, no police tape around the house, no neighbors huddled outside, no signs of life anywhere. It was as if no one cared that Alyce Justice was dead.

They were met by Gundy as soon as they got out of their cars and Horne went to him with his hand out.

“How are you, Tim?” he said. “I think you know Tommy Pedersen, and this is my partner, Mike Norelli.”

They all shook hands as Malloy passed around the log sheet for them to sign. Horne noted that only three names were on the sheet. *That’s good*, he thought. *At least we get to see the scene fresh, before twenty people come in and screw it up.*

“So, what do we know?” Pedersen asked anxiously. “This place seems awfully quiet. Doesn’t anyone live here?”

“I think they’re all asleep,” Gundy said. “According to the guards, there was a party at the home of one of the residents that lasted until about five or six this morning. They were evidently celebrating the victim’s Academy Award. The housekeeper arrived at 8:30 and discovered the body shortly before 9:00. She immediately went to the guard station and told one of the guards, who checked out the house and then called us at 9:15.”

“Where is the housekeeper, now?” Horne asked.

“She’s lying down in the office. She was pretty distraught when we got here so our medic gave her something to calm her. We were afraid she was going to have a heart attack.”

“How about the guard she went to? Where is he right now? Do we know anything about him?” Horne continued.

“Jerry Evans, former LAPD, a good guy. Was careful and made sure he

didn't touch anything."

"What about the husband? Do we know where he is?" Pedersen asked, knowing who he was.

"No. He wasn't in the house when the maid arrived, but he doesn't live here anymore. He's got a place in Brentwood. That's his car over there," he said pointing. "Maybe he's staying with one of the other residents," Tim said. "I'm not much with the Hollywood gossip but I know he and the wife were not on great terms. Evidently, they're divorcing."

"Which means we need to find him and find out what went on here last night," Horne said, looking around. "You haven't talked to anyone else here?"

"We haven't knocked on any doors yet. We wanted to wait until you got here. This place is tighter than a drum, so I wasn't worried about anyone leaving or getting in. Plus, this is about as rich as it gets. Everyone who lives here is a bigwig at IP Studios which means the media will be crawling all over this place once they find out who the victim is."

"No doubt about that. Let's look inside before the coroner unit arrives," Horne prodded, making a mental note to find out when LAPD had been here in the past.

After putting sterile shoe coverings on, Gundy led them into the house, a crisp, modern two story of mostly glass and lustrous wood. The living room jutted out like the prow of a sleek sailing vessel, greeting the view of the Pacific below. Norelli whistled as he entered, his eyebrows arched at the sight of a foreign world.

"There is no sign of forced entry, and the housekeeper said nothing seemed out of place or missing," Gundy narrated as they ascended the staircase. "The victim's in there—the door to your right."

The four of them filed into the long narrow room, approaching the bed cautiously. There was still some color in her face from what Horne could see despite the sleeping mask she had on but he did not get any closer than the foot of the bed. There was no point in getting a better look until the coroner team arrived. But he noticed that the blood seemed to have flowed from her chest in such a way that confirmed she was stabbed rather than shot.

"A lot of blood. Probably stabbed several times," he said.

Norelli just shook his head and looked away, as if he knew her. He had seen hundreds of bodies in fifteen years as a cop, a lot of them in worse shape, but none of them were someone he recognized. It made a difference.

“What do you think, Luke? Four, five hours?” Pedersen asked.

“Hard to say. Still a little color in her, but it’s not too old. Linda should be here soon. Once we can get a good look at her we can say with a little more certainty.” Horne looked around the room and noticed that there was no sign of her husband’s clothes or personal belongings, confirming his absence. “What’s her husband’s name?”

Gundy looked at him with disbelief. “You’re kidding.”

Horne stared at him hard. “Why would I kid about that?”

“I’m sorry, I just thought everyone knew. Her husband is Brandon Bradford.”

Horne suddenly remembered. “Right. Mr. Hollywood. How could I forget.” He turned and headed back out the door. “Well, let’s leave this for Linda. I think it’s time we knock on a few doors and find out what went on last night.”

“I need to call Banning,” Pedersen said. “What do you think we’re going to need, Luke?”

“Hell, Tommy, I don’t know. We’re obviously going to need a couple of detectives to question people. If we can keep this inside the compound we may only need a few uniforms to keep peace in the neighborhood. See if Hardy and Sanchez are available.” He turned to Tim. “I’d like you to join us since you’re familiar with the place. It’s always helpful to have someone who knows their way around the area.”

“Sure, Luke. Anything you need.”

Horne looked around, hands on hips and turned to Norelli. “Let’s look around a bit before the coroner gets here. Then we need to find the husband.”

“Okay.”

Horne headed down the hall, finding another bedroom where a handbag and small suitcase rested on the bed. He looked at the name tag and read aloud.

“*Abigail Justice, 489 Sarah Street, Pittsburgh PA 15202,*” he said, shaking his head. “Hell, that’s right near my sister’s place.”

He opened the handbag, finding a cell phone and wallet which he opened to reveal a driver’s license. “*Abigail Justice.*” He looked up as Norelli walked in. “Who the hell is *Abigail Justice*? And where is she?”

“What’s that?”

“I thought we were dealing with Alyce Justice. Who is *Abigail Justice*?” Horne asked, perplexed.

“That’s her sister. I saw her with Alyce at the Oscars last night.”

“Okay, so where is she?”

Norelli shrugged. “Maybe she’s already gone home.”

Horne pointed at the suitcase. “Not without this, or this,” he said, holding the phone. “This seems odd, don’t you think?”

Norelli shrugged. “Maybe she spent the night somewhere else. Maybe she’s with the husband.”

“You have two kids, right?”

“Yeah, two teenage daughters.”

“Well, tell me if I’m wrong but from what I know about young women, a phone is usually glued to their hands.”

Norelli nodded. “Yeah, glued is the right word. So, are you thinking maybe the killer was her sister and she’s skipped?”

Horne shrugged his shoulders. “Good question. One sister dead, the other missing. Maybe the sister saw the murder and was taken by the killer. Maybe not missing but kidnapped. If she was the killer it’s doubtful she would leave this stuff here. A more likely scenario is she was taken by the killer.”

A different look came over Norelli. “Or maybe dead as well. Jesus,” he said. “We need to find out about last night. Maybe someone can tell us what the fuck went on and where the sister is.” He turned and walked away, not waiting for Horne who was still looking into Abigail Justice’s handbag.

Horne took Abigail’s iPhone and pushed the home button. It was an older model with fingerprint or a passcode option for security.

“Well, don’t think my finger’s the right one,” he said to himself as he looked at her driver’s license for a date of birth, thinking she might have used that for the code. He entered the month and day without luck. He entered it again only in reverse and the phone suddenly opened. “Who said I was technically challenged?” he said aloud to no one.

He saw there were several voicemails from a John at Aero Limo and touched the latest one.

“Good morning, Miss Justice. This is John at Aero Limo. Since we haven’t heard back from you to confirm your ride to the airport we’re going to have to assume you’re cancelling. I’m sorry we couldn’t have been of service. Have a good day.”

Horne saw there were three messages from Aero starting at nine that morning. He also found her digital boarding pass in her email: United Flight Ninety-three, leaving LAX at eleven-thirty. He called headquarters and asked

someone to find out if an Abigail Justice had checked in for her flight. It took about thirty seconds to learn she had not.

He stood up and took Abigail's phone and purse with him outside, seeing Gundy talking to a short, forty-ish man in a tee-shirt and jeans.

"Mr. Niles, this is detective Horne. Luke, this is Roger Niles. He lives two houses down."

"What's going on detective? What's happened?" he asked calmly, more curious than worried.

"Do you know where Mr. Bradford is, Mr. Niles?"

"He's probably still passed out at Heidi's—Heidi Unger's house." He pointed to a house behind Horne. "He got pretty ripped last night and passed out. He was still there when the party broke up."

"And what time was that?" Horne asked.

"When the party broke up? About five, five-thirty, or so. Now please, will you tell me what's happened? I'm an attorney," he insisted, sensing something was wrong. "Has something happened to Alyce?" His eyes became anxious as he looked at her house.

"I'm sorry, we need to speak to Mr. Bradford." Horne turned away and walked to the car Pedersen was sitting in, talking to Banning. Norelli, who had been walking around the houses, was motioned over to the car. Pedersen opened the door as he put his cell phone away.

"Okay, two things. One, Bradford is in that house. Maybe still asleep. Two, the victim had a sister who was visiting and was supposed to fly back home this morning. Her suitcase, handbag, and phone are still here but no sign of her. What do you want us to do?" Horne asked.

"Wake Bradford up," Pedersen snapped. "He's got to find out from us before this hits the airwaves. Banning said someone from the *Times* called asking about a burglary here. One of the houses across the street must have seen the cars. It won't be long before their fucking choppers are overhead."

"And the sister? Who may or may not have killed Alyce or may or may not have seen the murder and may or may have been abducted or maybe is just out having a good time," Horne said.

Pedersen shook his head. "Bradford first. Maybe he can tell you all you need to know about the sister but regardless, he needs to hear the news from us, not *TMZ*."

"Right, that's all we would need."

He got out of the car and waved Gundy over. “Horne and Norelli are going to talk to Bradford. Take one of the uniforms and go to each house and wake them up.”

“Get statements from the residents—and separate husbands and wives. I’d like individual stories of what happened here in the middle of the night. Must have been some party if the wife is dead in one house and the husband is passed out in another,” Horne added. “Tell them everything is under control but not to leave their houses. Do *not* tell them what happened. No, on second thought, tell them there was an accident but nothing to worry about. Tell them not to speak to anyone.”

Gundy raised his eyebrows. “You really think everyone is going to stay quiet?”

Horne rolled his eyes. “I dream of the day, Tim.”

“This place seems very secure. I can’t imagine anyone getting in without the guards knowing it,” Norelli said as they walked to Unger’s house. “I see cameras so there’s going to be some surveillance video. Based on how there was no forced entry I’m thinking it’s got to be one of the residents.”

“Great. The media will love that,” Horne sighed, the thought having occurred to him as well. “After we talk to the husband, find the housekeeper and confirm her story.”

“Okay,” Norelli answered.

It was the way Horne worked, therefore it was the way Norelli worked. Horne was senior, the most experienced detective in the department. Although they were partners, it was clear who was in charge and who made the decisions. Horne handled the crime scene and Norelli did witnesses, at least until they had a clear picture of the circumstances of the murder. And right now, they had no picture at all. Just a body.