A JAKE MERCER CASE · ONE

The Quiet Floor

Twenty-four people. One night.
None of them remember it.



Shay

A JAKE MERCER CASE

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The Quiet Floor — A Jake Mercer Case, Book One

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CONTENTS

One · The Ledge 5
Two · Twenty-Four Sick Days 13
Three · What the Webcam Saw 21
Four · Lull 29
Five · Family 37
Six · The Money 45
Seven · Admin 53
Eight · Friday 61
Nine · The Hale in Kessler Hale 69
Ten · Coffee, Black 77
Eleven · Glovebox 85
Twelve · 3:12 90

CHAPTER ONE

The Ledge

THE BODEGA ON ATLANTIC gives me two coffees, two lids, and a look that says nobody needs two coffees at three in the morning.

Nobody needs one, either. That's never been the point.

I set them in the cupholders of the Crown Vic, mine on the left, Ray's on the right. Ray says, "You get the seeds?"

"In the door."

"Ranch?"

"They were out of ranch."

"They're always out of ranch. You know why?" He's already working on the bag. "Because it's the best flavor, and the world is a cruel place, kid."

Ray Kowalski. Fifty-six, knees like a bad transmission, Mets cap on the dashboard where he can keep an eye on it. He's been a cop longer than I've been allowed to cross the street alone. He calls me kid like it's my rank.

We're parked under a dead streetlight on Atlantic, engine running for the heat. The night tour officially ends at four. For me it ends when the sky goes the color of dishwater and I run out of reasons to keep driving.

I haven't slept more than three hours a night in three years. The doctors call it chronic insomnia. I call it the long shift. Ray calls it "your thing," the way you'd talk about a cousin who drinks.

"Slow night," he says.

"Don't."

"I'm just saying it's slow."

"You say it's slow, it stops being slow. Everybody knows that."

"That's superstition. I'm a man of science." He cracks a seed. "You know why the scarecrow got promoted?"

"Ray."

"He was outstanding in his field."

The radio clears its throat.

Any unit in the vicinity, report of an EDP on a rooftop, one-eight-one Clinton Street, Cobble Hill. Male, possible jumper. Doorman on scene. Units responding, Seven-Six.

Ray looks at me. "That's the Seven-Six."

"That's six blocks."

"That's not us."

"Six blocks, Ray."

He sighs like a tire going flat and waves at the windshield. I pick up the handset.

"Mercer, Brooklyn North night squad. I'm two minutes out."

. . .

It's ninety seconds. Atlantic to Clinton, a hard left at the light, brownstones going by like a row of closed books. 181 is the tallest thing on the block. Nine stories of prewar brick with a green awning and a brass plate that says *The Whitford*, as if it needs a name to get into heaven.

The doorman's out on the sidewalk in a gray uniform, phone in his hand, looking straight up.

I kill the engine. Ray doesn't move.

"My knees, kid," he says. "Last flight's always stairs. You got this."

"Yeah."

"Don't be a hero."

"I'm never a hero."

"That's what worries me."

The doorman's name tag says HÉCTOR. Sixty, maybe, with the face of a man who's held a lot of doors.

"He's on the wall," he says. "He's just standing on the wall."

"You know him?"

"Mr. Ostrander. 8C. Paul." He swallows. "He's nice. He tips at Christmas."

"Elevator?"

"To nine. Then the stairs. I didn't go up. I'm sorry. I called, and I didn't go up."

"You did right."

The elevator is wood-paneled and slow. Nine floors is a long time to think. Keep your distance. Use his name. Don't promise anything. I think about the last time I did this, on a bridge, and I stop thinking about that.

The stairwell to the roof is concrete and cold. The door at the top is a steel fire door with a push bar, the kind that locks behind you.

It's propped open.

Wedged in the gap, holding it an inch off the frame, is a single brown leather slipper.

Write that down. I did.

. . .

The roof terrace is the kind people pay extra for. Teak furniture under covers. Planters of ornamental grass gone straw-colored for winter. Past the parapet, lower Manhattan is lit up across the river like an expensive argument, and below it the BQE runs in its trench, a river of headlights that never quite stops.

Paul Ostrander is standing on the parapet.

Brick, waist-high on the terrace side, eighteen inches across on top. Beyond it, nine stories of air and a parked Subaru. He's facing out, toward the water. Gray T-shirt. Plaid pajama pants. Bare feet on wet brick. His arms hang loose at his sides.

He's talking.

I move along the planters, slow, keeping a bench between us. Close enough now to hear.

"...four hundred at the bid. Limit eleven-ten. Cancel. Re-enter. Eleven-oh-eight. Two hundred..."

Tickers. Prices. Quantities. In a voice as calm as a man reading a grocery list.

"Paul," I say. "Paul, my name's Jake. I'm a police officer. I'm just going to stand here, okay?"

"...cancel. Re-enter..."

"Paul."

Nothing. Not a flinch. I click on my flashlight and let the beam slide up to his face. His eyes are open. Wide open. The light sits in them and they don't do a thing about it. They don't find me. They look at Manhattan the way a window looks at Manhattan.

I've seen jumpers. Jumpers cry, or bargain, or go so quiet you can hear them deciding. Jumpers know where they are. That's the whole

problem with jumpers.

This man doesn't know where he is.

He's asleep.

I stand there with that for a second and feel the back of my neck go cold. Then I notice the thing that doesn't move.

His feet. Everything else about him sways a little, the wind off the harbor at his shirt, his shoulders rocking forward on the numbers. But his feet are planted dead center on the wall, square, toes not gripping. Like they were put there.

And there's a sound coming off him. Thin, hissing, almost not there. I take another step and I place it.

Rain.

There's no rain tonight. The bricks are wet from the afternoon, but the sky is clear and orange from the city. The rain is coming out of his ears. Two tiny white earbuds, soft-looking, like something you'd give a baby.

"...Re-enter," Paul says, and rocks forward.

An inch. Then back. Then forward again, a little more.

You're not supposed to wake a sleepwalker. Everybody's grandmother says it. Nobody's grandmother says what to do when the sleepwalker is on a wall.

"Okay, Paul," I say, quiet, the voice you'd use on a dog under a car. "Okay. I'm just going to come over there. I'm not going to grab you. I'm just coming over."

Four steps. Three. He's above me now, the top of the wall level with my ribs, his bare ankle eight inches from my hand. Close enough to see the gooseflesh, and his lips moving on the numbers, and something else, between the numbers. Not a word. A small nod. Like he's agreeing with someone.

I reach up and hook two fingers through the waistband of his pajama pants. Then I take a fistful. Then I reach up with my other hand, and I pull the left earbud out of his ear.

The rain gets quieter.

Paul stops talking. His head tilts, just slightly, toward the missing sound. Like a radio losing a station.

I pull the right one.

For a second there's nothing at all. Then his whole body jolts, a full-length shudder that runs up from his bare feet, and his eyes change. I watch them come on. I watch them find the river, the lights, the drop, the Subaru nine stories down, the fact of his own toes on the edge of a wall in the middle of the night.

He screams.

It's the sound a man makes when the floor turns out to be the sky. His arms windmill. His feet slide on the wet brick, and I'm already falling backward with everything I've got, both fists in his clothes, and the two of us come down off that wall like a sack of laundry off a truck. My shoulder hits the decking. A planter tips and rolls. Paul lands half on me, elbow in my stomach, still screaming, then not screaming, then just breathing in big, ugly, hiccuping heaves.

I lie there and look at the orange sky.

The white earbuds are in my right fist. Somewhere in all that, I kept hold of them.

. . .

The patrol car shows up four minutes later. Officer Pruitt, young, red-faced from the stairs, says, "Jesus. You got here fast," and then, "Is he—?"

"He's fine."

He isn't. He's on a covered lounger with a thermal blanket around his shoulders, and his hands won't stop. Thirty-eight, according to Héctor. Handsome in a gym-every-morning way, the kind of face that photographs well on a fund's website. Right now it looks like a dropped plate.

"Paul," I say. "You want to tell me what happened?"

He looks at the earbuds in my hand. Then up at me. His voice is barely there.

"Did it send you one too?"

"Send me what?"

Something closes behind his eyes. I watch it happen. A door, slow, on a hydraulic arm.

"I don't know what I'm saying," he says. "I'm tired. I've been sick."

"Paul. You were standing on a wall."

"I want a lawyer."

"You're not under arrest."

"Then I don't have to talk to you." He pulls the blanket tighter and stares at the decking. "Thank you. I mean that. Thank you. Please go away."

EMS shines a light in his eyes, which do what eyes are supposed to do now. He signs a refusal of transport in a hand like a seismograph. Pruitt walks him down to 8C, and I follow, because the door is standing open.

Big windows, gray couch, a rug that probably has its own insurance policy. In the corner there's a desk, and on the desk a laptop, open, the only light in the room.

The screen is a trading platform. Columns of green and red, a chart sawing up and down, an order ticket half filled in. In the box marked QUANTITY, the cursor is blinking. Patient. Waiting for

someone to come back and finish the job.

The clock in the corner of the screen says 3:52 a.m.

Above the screen, over the little eye of the webcam, someone has stuck a yellow Post-it note. Fresh. The adhesive still flat and clean.

Paul sees me looking. He crosses the room faster than a man in a blanket should be able to and shuts the laptop with both hands.

"Goodnight, Detective," he says.

. . .

On the way out I drop the earbuds into a glassine envelope and fold it into my coat. There's no case number to put on it. There's no case. A man went for a walk.

He didn't ask for them back. People always ask for their things back.

It's 4:24 when I get in the car. Ray's where I left him. His coffee's where I left it too, full to the lid in the cupholder, gone cold, a skin on top like the river.

"So?" he says.

I tell him. The slipper in the door. The feet. The rain in his ears. The numbers. *Did it send you one too.* The laptop.

Ray doesn't say anything for a while. He cracks a seed and looks out at Clinton Street, where Héctor is standing under his awning again, looking up at the roof as if it might do something else.

"Guy's not suicidal," Ray says.

"No?"

He drops the shell in the door pocket.

"Guy's working."

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty-Four Sick Days

AT 6:40 A.M. I pour Ray's coffee into the gutter on Kent Avenue.

It's a habit. The sky over the river has gone from black to bruise, the Domino sign still lit red against it. The coffee hits the curb in one cold rope and runs off toward the storm drain. I crush the cup and put it in the can by the stoop. Every morning I tell myself I'll stop buying him one. Every night I buy him one.

Fourth-floor walk-up, a kitchen the width of a hallway, one window that looks straight at the sugar sign.

I hang my coat on the chair. The glassine envelope with Paul Ostrander's earbuds goes on the counter next to the toaster, where I'll see it. I take off my shirt, not the chain. I drink a glass of water standing at the sink.

The whiteboard on the fridge is where I keep the things I'd otherwise lose. A dentist appointment I've moved three times. *Call landlord re: radiator.* A phone number with no name, which has been there so long I'm afraid to erase it.

And at the bottom, in my handwriting, in blue marker, one word.

SEEDS

I stand there with the water glass. I don't remember writing it. I don't remember needing to. There's a bag in the car door. There's always a bag in the car door.

Probably I wrote it last week. Probably is a word that's done a lot of work for me these last three years.

I lie down on top of the covers at seven. At 9:06 I open my eyes, which is as close as I get to a miracle, and the first thing I think is: *eleven-ten. Cancel. Re-enter.*

. . .

Fulton Point is thirty-one floors of green glass at the Flatbush end of Fulton Street, built in the year Downtown Brooklyn decided it wanted to be Midtown. The lobby has a waterfall in it. An actual waterfall, a sheet of water sliding down a slate wall into a trough of black stones, making the sound of money relaxing.

I park in a bus stop on Willoughby with the placard on the dash, next to Ray's cap, and take my coffee with me.

"I'll wait here," he says. "Buildings over twenty floors, my ears pop. Then I'm deaf in the left one till Thursday."

"You're deaf in the left one anyway."

"What?"

"Funny."

"I got a million of 'em." He nods at the tower. "Go meet the rich people, kid. Don't let them sell you anything."

The guard at the desk looks at my shield a long time and prints me a visitor sticker with my own face on it, grainy, like a man who's been dead a week. The elevator to thirty-one doesn't stop anywhere else. I finish the coffee on the way up. It goes up so fast my ears pop anyway.

The doors open on a wall of frosted glass with two words etched into it.

KESSLER HALE

A woman is waiting on the other side, holding a lanyard with both hands like a rosary.

"Detective Mercer? I'm Megan Walsh. Human Resources. Mr. Kessler asked me to bring you right back." She has a nice blazer and a nervous smile and the shadows under her eyes of somebody who's been fielding phone calls she doesn't know how to answer. "Can I ask what this is about?"

"Paul Ostrander."

Something in her face drops a floor. "Is Paul all right?"

"He's fine. He had a medical thing at home last night. I'm following up."

"A medical thing."

"That's all I can say."

It isn't, technically. But something tells me not to say *roof*. Something tells me to keep the roof in my pocket with the earbuds.

She badges us through. And there it is.

. . .

The trading floor of Kessler Hale Capital is one long room the full width of the building, ringed with glass, a skyline on three sides. Lower Manhattan floats out past the Manhattan Bridge like a brochure. The desks run in four long pods down the middle, six seats to a pod, six monitors to a seat, the monitors stacked two high and curved in toward the chair like a cockpit.

Every screen is dark.

Every chair is empty.

Some are pushed in neat. Some are swiveled out, like whoever sat there stood up in a hurry. A fleece vest over the back of one. Reading glasses folded on a mouse pad. A golden retriever in a Santa hat, framed.

Twenty-four places. I count them twice.

The only sound is the air handling, a low, expensive hush from vents I can't see. You'd think a room like this would be loud. You'd think it was built to be loud, all those screens, all those phones. It's like walking into a church on a Tuesday. It's like walking into a church after something happened in it.

"Everyone's out," I say.

"Everyone." Megan's voice goes small in the space. "Monday morning I had twenty-four emails before seven. Twenty-four people. Sick. Then again this morning, the same twenty-four. I've been in HR for nineteen years, Detective. I didn't see this in COVID."

"Same bug?"

"Nobody will say what it is. Flu. Migraine. One of the analysts just wrote *sick*." She swallows. "Mr. Kessler is very concerned."

"I bet."

Down at the far end, past the last pod, there's a long row of plants along the window. Big ones, fiddle-leaf figs and something with leaves like elephant ears, in white ceramic pots, under a rail of purple grow lights. There's someone down there in a gray hoodie, his back to us, moving slowly from pot to pot.

"Who's that?"

Megan glances over like she's checking a clock. "Oh. That's Dylan. He's the intern."

She says it the way you'd tell someone the name of a chair.

. . .

Grant Kessler's office is in the corner where the bridge is. It has a desk made from a single slab of some tree that used to be enormous, two leather chairs, and a man who gets up from behind the desk and comes around it with his hand already out.

"Detective. Grant Kessler. Thank you for coming yourself."

Fifty-eight, silver hair cut so well it looks inevitable, a tan he didn't get in November. His handshake lasts exactly as long as he wants it to. On the credenza behind him there's a photo of two blond young women on the bow of a sailboat, laughing at whoever's holding the camera.

"Megan says this is about Paul."

"He's okay. He had an incident at home. I'm following up."

"An incident." He lets that sit. He's waiting to see if I'll fill it. I don't. He smiles like he respects that. "Well. Thank God he's okay. Sit. Please. Jake, is it?"

"Detective's fine."

"Detective." Still smiling. "Paul's been with me eleven years. He was at my daughter's wedding. Everybody on this floor, I want you to understand, these people are family to me. That's not a line. That's how I built this place."

"Your family called in sick."

The smile stays where it is, but something behind it does the math. "Yes. Twenty-four out of twenty-four. Two days running." He sits on the edge of his desk. "Do you know what it costs to have every seat dark on a Tuesday, Detective?"

"You tell me."

"More than you'd want to hear. I've got people in Zurich asking if we've been raided." A small laugh. "I told them it's flu season. We've got a very close floor. Something goes around."

"Something like what?"

"If I knew, I'd fix it." He spreads his hands. "My people work harder than anyone. That's why I take care of them. Gym on nine, three meals a day. Megan runs a whole wellness program. We sleep better, we trade better. That's the philosophy."

"Paul say anything to you? About being under strain? Anything at home?"

"Paul? Paul's a machine. Best quarter of his life." Kessler picks up his phone, glances at it, puts it face-down. "If there's something going on with one of my people, Detective, I want to know before anybody. You understand. I'd consider it a personal favor."

He means it as a gift. It lands like a leash.

I give him my card. He reads it front and back, which nobody does.

"Night squad," he says. "You don't sleep either, huh?"

"Not much."

"Me neither. Used to be I'd be up at three looking at Tokyo." He taps the card against his palm. "Then I found something that works."

. . .

You're counting chairs. Good. So was I.

Megan walks me back. Halfway down the glass corridor she stops at her own office, because I ask her for a staff list with home numbers and she says Mr. Kessler said to give me whatever I need, in a voice that suggests Mr. Kessler has said that before and not meant it.

Her office has an orchid that's either real or a very good liar. While the printer warms up I look at the credenza.

There's an open cardboard carton on it. Inside, packed upright like books, are a dozen small white boxes. Clean, matte, no pictures. On the side of each, in soft gray lowercase letters:

lull

And under that, smaller: *sleep, adapted.*

"What are these?"

Megan looks at the carton like she'd forgotten it was there. Her fingers find the lanyard again.

"Oh, that's—our wellness program. Sleep earbuds. Everyone on the floor got a pair in April. Mr. Kessler's very passionate about rest." She tries a laugh. It doesn't come out all the way. "Those are spares. People lose them. They're very small."

I think about a pair of very small white things in a glassine envelope next to my toaster.

"Everybody wears them?"

"I mean. It's voluntary." Her eyes go to the window, to the floor, to anything. "They're very popular."

The printer pushes out four pages. She hands them to me, and her hand is not steady, and she sees me see it.

. . .

On the way to the elevator I take the long way, past the plants.

Up close, the intern is younger than he looked. Twenty-two, maybe. Thin. The gray hoodie is soft from a lot of washing. Dark hair that needs a cut, the kind of face you'd forget while you were still looking at it. He's holding a long-spouted brass watering can and pouring a careful amount into the base of a fiddle-leaf fig, watching

the soil drink it like he's measuring.

"Hey," I say.

He looks up. Polite. Unbothered. "Hi."

"You're Dylan."

"Yes, sir."

"Everybody's out sick. You came in."

He glances at the row of pots, the purple light lying on the leaves. "The plant service stopped coming." A small shrug. "Somebody had to."

Behind me the floor sits in its hush. Twenty-four dark cockpits and one kid with a watering can.

"You feel okay?"

"I feel fine." He sets the can down on the windowsill, straightens it so the spout lines up with the edge. Then he looks at me, really looks, for the first time.

"Can I get you a coffee, Detective? There's a machine in the kitchen. It's actually good." He's already turning toward it. "Black, right?"

I don't say anything. He's halfway across the floor before I realize why.

I never told him.

CHAPTER THREE

What the Webcam Saw

THERE ARE TWO COFFEES in the cupholders when I get in the car.

Both lids on. Both still hot enough to fog the windshield a little at the bottom. Mine on the left. Ray's on the right.

I sit with the door open and look at them.

The receipt is in my coat pocket. *KENT AVE DELI & GROCERY. 2 COFFEE LG. $4.50. 7:48 PM.* The dashboard clock says 7:55. I came down the stairs. I remember the busted light on the second landing, Mrs. Ocasio's TV playing a game show in Spanish. I remember the street door sticking like it always sticks.

I don't remember the deli.

It's on the corner. I go every night. I must have gone. You do a thing four thousand times and it stops needing you there for it.

"You getting in or what?" Ray says. "We're burning moonlight."

I get in.

. . .

The Nine-Oh is a squat brick precinct on Union Avenue. I'm parked out front reading the staff list Megan Walsh gave me under the dome light when somebody raps on my window with one knuckle.

Lieutenant Dana Ruiz. Forty-five, hair pulled back so tight it looks like policy, a coffee stain on her sweater she's decided not to care about. She runs the night squad like a good bartender: sees everything, lets you think she doesn't.

I roll the window down.

"Seven-Six called me," she says. "Said one of mine caught a roof in Cobble Hill at three-thirty this morning."

"It was six blocks."

She leans her forearms on the door. Her eyes go past me, to the passenger seat, and stay there a beat too long. Then they come back to me. "Mercer. A guy sleepwalks onto a roof, you pull him off, God bless. That's an aided. That's not a squad case."

"His whole office called in sick. Twenty-four people. Two days."

"So it's a flu."

"Nobody'll say what it is."

"Because it's a flu." She glances down at the cupholders. At the second coffee, steaming. She doesn't say anything about it. She looks at me the way my mother used to look at a thermometer. "You sleep today?"

"Two hours."

She straightens up and taps the roof twice. "You get tonight on it, because it's slow. Tomorrow you bring me a crime or you bring me nothing."

She walks back inside.

"She likes you," Ray says.

"She tolerates me."

"That's what liking looks like, at her rank."

. . .

I've already called them. All twenty-four, from my kitchen, at five in the afternoon.

Nineteen didn't pick up. Three sent me to voicemail on the second ring. A trader named Kyle picked up, heard the word *detective*, said "I'm sick, man, I'm really sick" in a voice that wasn't sick at all, and hung up.

And one picked up and didn't say anything.

I could hear her breathing, and a TV turned up loud, the way you turn it up so the apartment doesn't feel empty. I said I was NYPD and that she hadn't done anything wrong.

After a long time she said, "How did you get this number?"

Then she hung up.

Lauren Fisk. Twenty-nine. Quantitative analyst. Fourth Street, Park Slope, between Seventh and Eighth.

. . .

A brownstone with a Halloween skeleton nobody's taken down yet, sitting on the top step with a pumpkin in its lap. Her apartment's the top floor, and every window on it is lit, like she's trying to burn the night off the glass.

"I'll stay here," Ray says. "Scared people don't open the door for two cops, kid. They barely open it for one."

"You're not wrong."

"I'm never wrong. I'm occasionally early."

A guy coming out with a bike holds the street door for me without looking, which is how most crimes in this city begin. Four flights. A door marked 4R with three locks on it, and a cooking show through the wood, somebody braising something with a lot of enthusiasm.

I knock.

The TV doesn't change. But everything behind the door gets quieter in a way I can feel.

"Ms. Fisk. It's Detective Mercer. I called you earlier."

Nothing.

"I'm going to put my card under the door."

I crouch and slide it through. I hear it get picked up, fast, like she was standing right there. Which she was.

"I'm not here because you did something," I say. "Something's happening to the people you work with. Paul Ostrander had a really bad night."

A pause.

"Paul?" Her voice is right on the other side of the wood. Hoarse. "Is he—"

"He's okay. He's home."

"What happened to him?"

"I'll tell you what I can. Not through a door."

It takes her a full minute. Then the locks go, one, two, three, a scrape of something heavy dragged across a floor, and the door opens as far as the chain.

She looks at my face, my shield, the empty hallway behind me, both directions.

Then she takes the chain off.

. . .

The heavy thing was a dining chair. She stands next to it with her arms wrapped around herself in a big cardigan, the kind you wear to feel held.

Small, sharp-faced, dark hair in a clip and coming out of it everywhere. Her eyes are red-rimmed and moving too much. I know

that look from my own bathroom mirror. It's what you look like on the third night.

"When did you last sleep?" I ask.

She laughs. It's a terrible little sound. "Saturday."

"Me neither, mostly."

She studies me. For a second it's like we're two people standing on the same ledge.

It's a one-bedroom that somebody very organized lives in and has stopped being organized in. Equations on a whiteboard, half erased. Energy-drink cans lined up on the counter like a firing squad. A blanket and a pillow on the kitchen floor, wedged between the island and the fridge, the one spot in the place where you can't be seen from any window.

A desk in the corner by the window. Monitor, keyboard, dock. No laptop.

"Where's your computer?"

She doesn't answer. She looks at the oven.

I go over and open it. It's off and cold. On the middle rack, folded shut and wrapped in a bath towel like a sick animal, is a silver laptop.

I close the oven.

"It can't see through the door," she says. "It's metal. I know how that sounds."

"It sounds like you're scared of something."

"I'm a quant, Detective. I'm paid to look at a number and know what it means." Her jaw works. "I don't know what this means."

In the kitchen trash, sitting on top of a takeout bag, there's a small white box. Matte. Clean. I know the lowercase font now.

I don't mention it. She doesn't either.

"Show me," I say.

. . .

She does it on her phone, fast, the way you pull off a bandage.

The email came Sunday night. Early Monday. *3:12 AM*, it says, and where the sender's name should be there's nothing. Not a fake name, not a string of numbers. A blank. No subject line. No text in the body. Not a word. Just one attachment, a video file, forty seconds long.

She holds it out at arm's length and turns her face away while it plays.

The picture is dim and grainy, shot from low down, looking up. A webcam. The light is cold and blue, the way a screen lights you when it's the only thing on in the room. Behind her, a dark window and the corner of the whiteboard.

And there's Lauren.

Old gray T-shirt, a college crest faded to nothing. Hair down. She's sitting straighter than anyone sits at three in the morning, and her hands are moving on a keyboard below the frame. Fast. Fluent. The soft clatter of the keys is the only sound.

Her eyes are open.

They're on the screen, reading, tracking lines. But nothing in her face moves with them. No frown. No bite of the lip. It's a face with the person taken out of it and the lights left on.

She blinks, once, slowly, around the fifteen-second mark. Then not again.

At thirty-one seconds she tilts her head a fraction, the same small listening tilt I saw on a roof in Cobble Hill. Her lips move.

"Okay," she says, on the video. Soft. Agreeable. To no one.

Her hands keep typing.

At forty seconds her hand drifts toward the trackpad, and the video stops.

The apartment is very quiet. In the real kitchen, the real Lauren is standing with her eyes squeezed shut and her free hand over her mouth.

"That's my desk," she says through her fingers. "That's my shirt. I don't remember any of it." She opens her eyes. "Somebody watched me. Somebody was *in my computer*, watching me, and I was—I was doing something, I was working, and I don't—"

"Okay."

"Don't say okay." It comes out sharp, and then she hears it, the word from the video, and her face crumples. "Sorry. Sorry."

She sits down hard at the island and puts the phone face-down like it might start playing by itself.

"I thought I was losing my mind," she says. "I watched it two hundred times. Monday I called in sick. I thought maybe I've got some kind of—disorder. A brain thing. I thought, if I sit down at that desk, what if I don't know what I've done?"

"Did you look? At your accounts. Your logs."

"No." Fast. "I sat with my hand on the mouse for an hour and I couldn't."

"Have you told anyone? Anybody at work?"

She looks at me like I've asked whether she's tried flapping her arms.

"Who would I tell? 'Hi, I think I trade in my sleep'?" That laugh again. "They'd walk me out of the building. You don't get to be the crazy one, Detective. Not on that floor. Not with Grant."

Twenty-four sick calls. Nineteen phones nobody answered. One guy who wasn't sick. Paul Ostrander in a blanket on his own roof,

looking up at me with nothing left in his face, asking: *Did it send you one too?*

Not *did you get one*. Not *what was that*. *Too.*

He thought he might be the only one. He was hoping he wasn't.

They all got one. And every one of them is sitting in an apartment somewhere in this city with the lights on, sure they're the only person it happened to.

I don't tell her. Not yet. Some things you hold until you know what they weigh.

If you're wondering why I didn't, so am I.

. . .

I leave her my cell number on the back of the card and wait in the hall until I hear all three locks, and the chair.

In the car, Ray's coffee is still in the cupholder, lid on, untouched.

I tell him. The oven. The video. The tilt of the head. *Okay.*

He listens all the way through without cracking a seed, which for Ray is like a man taking his hat off in church.

Up on the fourth floor, every light in Lauren Fisk's apartment is still burning.

"Twenty-four people with the same secret, kid," Ray says quietly. "And nobody's told anybody."

"Yeah."

"That's not a coincidence." He looks up at her windows. "That's a design."

CHAPTER FOUR

Lull

THE WEBSITE IS MOSTLY women asleep in linen.

Women asleep in big white beds, on low gray sofas, in a hammock somewhere tropical, every one of them with a face like they've never owed anybody money. Across the top, in that soft gray lowercase: *lull. sleep, adapted.*

I'm reading it at the kitchen counter on Wednesday morning, with the Domino sign gone dark for the day.

Lull, Inc. Founded 2023. Eleven employees in a coworking space on Jay Street in Dumbo, a round of seed money from people who say *disrupt* without irony. The founder, Noah Brandt, thirty-one, ex-Spotify, has a talk on YouTube called *Your Brain Wants to Be Told a Story*.

The pitch: two tiny earbuds, soft silicone, made to sleep in. Sensors that read your pulse and the micro-movements of your jaw and work out what stage of sleep you're in. Then the audio changes to match. Rain for falling asleep. Brown noise for deep sleep. A gentle rising tone to wake you at the lightest point of your cycle, so you come up easy, like a diver who did it right.

There's an app. It gives you a score every morning. It gives you a little moon if you did well.

And there's a page near the bottom called *lull for teams*. Enterprise wellness. Rested employees are productive employees. One dashboard for HR, one subscription for the whole office, custom soundscapes pushed to every pair at once.

I call the number on the Contact page. A recording tells me how much they value my rest. I leave my name, and *NYPD*, and *as soon as possible*. Companies with eleven employees usually call back fast when you say NYPD.

Nobody calls back.

. . .

Héctor's on the door again at The Whitford, and he recognizes me and goes a little gray.

"He's okay," I tell him before he can ask.

"He hasn't come down," Héctor says. "Not since. I sent up soup."

"That's good of you. Call up for me? Tell him it's the cop from Monday night." I think about it. "Tell him I'm alone."

Ray's in the car on Clinton with the seeds. He said a man in his own apartment doesn't need two cops looking at his furniture. He's right. He usually is.

Paul Ostrander opens the door of 8C in sweatpants and a Kessler Hale fleece, and the soup is on the counter behind him, untouched, with the lid still on. In daylight he looks worse. Like someone put a nice suit on a man and then took the man out and left the suit.

"I said I don't want to talk," he says.

"I know. I'm not here to make you."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I know about the email," I say. "And because you're not the only one."

He goes very still in the doorway. Then his eyes fill up, fast, and he turns his face to the wall so I won't see, and he lets the door swing open behind him the rest of the way.

. . .

"I'm not a sleepwalker," he says. "I want you to know that. I was never a sleepwalker. Not as a kid, not in college. I sleep like a rock. I've always slept like a rock."

We're at his kitchen island. The laptop isn't anywhere I can see, and the desk in the corner has been cleared down to the wood.

"Did you wear them Monday night? The earbuds."

He looks at his hands.

"I hadn't slept since Sunday," he says. "Since the email. I lay there all Monday night, and I thought, you know what helps? The rain." He laughs, short and wet. "Isn't that funny? I put them in because I was scared. So I'd sleep. And the next thing I know, I'm—"

He stops. He doesn't say *on the wall*. I don't make him.

"Show me the app," I say.

He gets out his phone and opens it. The screen goes a calm, dark blue, the color of a hotel room with the blackout curtains drawn. A little white moon at the top. A week of nights in a row, each one a soft curving graph like a hill seen from a train.

Thursday, Oct 29. Sleep score 94. Deep sleep: 2:09 a.m.–4:31 a.m. Great night!

Tuesday, Oct 27. Sleep score 91. Deep sleep: 1:58 a.m.–4:02 a.m. Great night!

"Go back," I say. "Further."

He scrolls. September. August. July. Hills and moons. Great night, great night, great night.

"I felt like garbage," he says. "Since spring. Every morning. Like I'd been hit by a truck. I'd drag myself in and I'd think, what is wrong with me? And then I'd open this, and it'd say I slept great. Ninety-one. Ninety-four." He puts the phone face-down. "So I believed it. It's a machine. Why would it lie?"

"Can you pull your login history? From the firm. The trading side."

He's already shaking his head. Then he isn't. He's been here before. I can see it. He's sat at this island with this exact screen open, on Monday, alone, and closed it.

He opens Kessler Hale's own app, the logo in navy, goes into security, into a page called *Session Activity*, and slides the phone across the marble to me.

Thu Oct 29 — Session start 02:14 — Device: OSTRANDER-MBP — 2FA approved — 37 orders entered — Session end 04:22

Tue Oct 27 — Session start 02:03 — Device: OSTRANDER-MBP — 2FA approved — 29 orders entered — Session end 03:58

I lay the two phones side by side on the island. The blue moon and the navy logo. *Deep sleep, 2:09 a.m. Session start, 02:14.*

Two machines, and each of them is sure it knows what Paul Ostrander was doing at two in the morning last Thursday. One says he was asleep. One says he was working.

Both of them are right.

"Thirty-seven orders," Paul whispers. "I don't remember thirty-seven orders. I don't remember one." He looks up at me. "How did I get up there, Detective? On the roof. How did I even get through the door? It locks."

"You propped it open," I say. "With your slipper."

He stares at me. It's the slipper that does it. Not the wall, not the drop. The idea of his own hand, bending down, carefully wedging a slipper into a steel door so he wouldn't get locked out. Taking care of himself. For whatever came next.

He puts his face in his hands, and I take pictures of both screens with my phone.

. . .

At eleven that night Officer Kevin Tran walks into the Nine-Oh squad room with a backpack covered in stickers and a can of something neon in his hand, and says, before hello, "This better be real, because I was in the middle of a raid."

"A raid."

"Online. Like, a game. Forty people were counting on me." He drops into the chair next to my desk. Twenty-six, buzz cut, an expression of permanent mild disappointment in the adult world. Ruiz got him on loan by calling One Police Plaza and saying *favor* like a threat. "The lieutenant said you've got haunted headphones."

"Earbuds."

"Worse."

I put the glassine envelope on the desk. Ruiz came through for that, too: it has a case number on it now, in my handwriting, which means it's a real thing that happened.

Tran tips the earbuds onto a sheet of printer paper and looks at them like a pair of beetles.

"Okay. These are cute." He plugs a tiny cable into one, then into his laptop. "So these guys cache the audio locally. On the bud. So it plays all night if your phone dies. Which means whatever was playing

in this dude's head is—" tap tap tap "—sitting right here."

A file comes up. *soft_rain_tin_roof_v7.lull.*

He double-clicks. The squad room fills with rain.

It's good rain, I'll give them that. Rain on a cabin roof somewhere, the kind that makes your shoulders come down. Across the room, Detective Shapiro looks up from his paperwork and actually sighs.

"Nice," Tran says. "Relaxing. Let's look at it."

He pulls the audio into another program and the rain becomes a picture: a spectrogram, he calls it, a wide smear of gray static across the screen like fog, darker where the rain is heavier. He scrolls along it, bored, sipping his neon can.

Then he stops scrolling.

"Huh," he says.

At the very bottom of the picture, below where the fog thins out, there's a narrow band. Darker. Not a smear. It's structured. Little clumps and gaps, clumps and gaps, in a rhythm that comes back around and around.

"That's not rain," Tran says. "Rain doesn't do that. Rain's random." He leans in. "That's got *syllables*."

"Can you hear it?"

"You can't hear it. That's the point. It's slowed way, way down and sitting under the rain, so your ears file it as rain." He's not bored now. "Hang on. Hang on."

He chops the rain off the top. He drags the bottom band up, speeds it up, four times, eight, nudging a slider. The speakers growl. Then they warble. Then they make a sound like a tape being pulled out of a cassette.

Ruiz has come out of her office. She's standing behind my chair with her arms folded. I didn't hear her come.

Tran nudges the slider one more time.

And there's a voice.

A man's voice. Young. Gentle. So calm and so kind it makes the hair on my arms stand up all at once. It's the voice you'd use on a child who woke up from a bad dream. It's the voice you'd use if you loved someone.

You're okay.

A pause, long, even at this speed.

Sit up.

Another.

Your laptop is on the desk.

Then the rhythm comes back around to the start, and the voice says, *You're okay*, again, just as kindly as the first time, and nobody in the squad room says anything at all.

Stay with me. I know. I know.

Tran stops it. He looks at the screen. He doesn't look like a kid who was in the middle of a raid anymore.

"That's not a bug," he says. "Somebody recorded that. Somebody built that and put it in there."

Behind me, Ruiz unfolds her arms.

"Okay, Mercer," she says. Very quietly. "Now it's a case."

. . .

Tran keeps the earbuds. He signs for them, and sends the file to my phone, and tells me to go home, and puts his sticker backpack on, and says, "Seriously, dude, go home, you look like a screensaver."

It's 3:40 by the squad room clock. I remember that. I remember the clock, and Tran's back going out through the door, and Ruiz's office light going off.

It's 5:06 by the dashboard.

I'm in the Crown Vic, parked on Kent Avenue outside my own building. The engine's running. The heat's on high. The Domino sign is lit red through the windshield.

I don't remember leaving the precinct. I don't remember the lot, or Union Avenue, or the turn onto Kent. It's a ten-minute drive. It's an hour and twenty-six minutes I don't have.

My phone is in my lap. The screen's lit. The audio file Tran sent me is open, and it's paused, at the very beginning.

00:00.

In the cupholder, Ray's coffee is cold.

"You okay, kid?" Ray says.

"Yeah," I say.

CHAPTER FIVE

Family

GRANT KESSLER HAS CHANGED his tie since Tuesday.

It's darker now, like he's dressing for something he can feel coming up the elevator shaft.

"Detective Mercer." He comes around the desk with his hand out. "Twice in one week. People will talk."

"People are already talking."

It lands. A flicker at the corner of his mouth. He holds the handshake a second too long, checking who lets go first. I let go first. I'm too tired to win handshakes.

I slept two hours this morning, on top of the covers with my shoes on. Before that I was sitting in the Crown Vic outside my own building at five a.m. with no memory of the drive. I've decided not to think about that. Not thinking about things is a skill. I've put in the hours.

Behind him the Manhattan Bridge sits close enough to touch, a Q train crawling across it like a lit zipper. A man could look at this view every day and start to think he owned some of it.

"Sit. Please. Can I get you something? I'll have someone—" He stops. Looks through the inside wall at the trading floor.

Rows of black monitors. A banana going brown on a desk. The floor looks like a place people left in a hurry, which it is.

"There's an intern around somewhere," Kessler says. "Good kid. Daniel."

"Dylan."

"Dylan." He nods like I've confirmed something he already knew. "Of course."

He sits. I don't. Standing keeps me awake, and it makes rich men look up at you.

"I've had three calls this morning," he says. "Two prime brokers and a girl at Bloomberg asking whether my staff are sleepwalking."

"Is it true?"

"You tell me. You're the one who was in Paul Ostrander's apartment at four in the morning."

So he knows I was there. Not why. If he knew why, he'd have said it.

"Mr. Kessler, something happened to your floor."

"Something was *done* to my floor." He leans forward, and for the first time he isn't performing. Or he's performing better. "I don't know what. Nobody will tell me. People I've known for years won't pick up the phone. Megan says they're frightened. Of what? Of me?" He spreads his hands. "These people are my family, Detective. Paul's had Thanksgiving at my house. I paid for Lauren Fisk's master's. Whatever this is, they're victims. *We're* victims."

"The earbuds."

"What about them?"

"Whose idea were they?"

"Mine." No hesitation. He's proud of it. "That was my idea. I wanted my people rested. Do you know what this business does to

sleep? I nearly lost a marriage to it. Tokyo open, London open, you never close your eyes all the way." He taps the desk. "Sleep is the last edge. Everyone has the same data. We sleep better, we trade better."

He says the last line like he's said it into a microphone at a holiday party, to applause.

"Who set them up?"

"HR. Megan. The vendor. I don't know the plumbing, Detective. I pay for the plumbing."

"You wear a pair?"

"Me?" He smiles. "I sleep fine. I've always slept fine."

"Must be nice."

"It is."

I believe him. That's the problem with Grant Kessler. He's done things, I can smell it on him like bleach in a hallway, but whatever they are, they've never once kept him up.

"Sunday night," I say. "Around three in the morning. Did you get an email?"

"I get four hundred emails a night."

"No subject line. Blank sender. Twelve after three."

He actually thinks about it, eyes going up and left like he's scrolling.

"No," he says. "Why?"

I don't answer. He doesn't push. Men who don't push are either innocent or very good, and I've never met an innocent hedge fund founder.

. . .

Megan Walsh catches me at the elevators.

She just touches my sleeve and walks, and I follow her to her office, where she closes the door and stands with her back against it like she's holding something out.

"I'm not supposed to talk to you without Legal," she says.

"Then don't."

"I have to." She's in a cream sweater with the sleeves pulled down over her hands. Her eyes are pink at the rims. On the credenza behind her, the carton I saw Tuesday, the little white boxes standing in it like teeth. "When we rolled out the program, in April. The vendor needs an administrator. Someone who manages the accounts, pushes the audio profiles, sees the dashboard. I asked IT to set it up."

"And?"

"IT said it was already done." She swallows. "The admin account was created by Mr. Kessler's office. Before I ever called the vendor. I got an email with a setup link and a note that said the floor profiles were locked. Nobody could change their own settings. It said people would fiddle."

"From Kessler's office. Or from Kessler?"

"I don't know the difference." She almost laughs. "Nobody here knows the difference. Everything comes from his office. His office sends the birthday cards."

"Did you ask him about it?"

"I asked him if he was happy with the rollout. He said, 'Megan, they're sleeping like babies.'" Her voice cracks on *babies*. "I was happy he was happy. That's my whole job."

There's a soft knock. She flinches.

When she opens the door Dylan is standing there with a cardboard tray. Gray hoodie, sleeves pushed up, the same polite half-smile he had yesterday on the empty floor, a smile that asks for nothing.

"Ms. Walsh. Oat milk, no sugar." He hands it to her. Then he holds out the other cup to me. "Black, Detective. It's not as good as your bodega. Sorry."

I take it. The lid is hot.

"How long were you standing there?"

"I just got here." He says it the way you'd give your name. "Do you need anything else? I'm going down for the mail."

"No."

He goes, soft sneakers on carpet. I watch him all the way to the corner. He doesn't look back. People who've been listening at doors usually look back.

Megan holds her coffee in both hands and doesn't drink it.

"He's the only one of them who's come in all week," she says. "Monday. Tuesday. Yesterday. Today. Somebody has to keep the lights on, he said." She shakes her head. "He's twenty-two. He's the only one of us who's okay."

. . .

Tom Becker has the only office on thirty-one without a window, which tells you everything about what Grant Kessler thinks of compliance.

It's a box. Gray carpet, a fluorescent panel, a FINRA certificate hung slightly crooked. Becker is forty-five and looks sixty today. Tie pulled loose. A sheen on his forehead. Three empty water bottles lined up on the desk like he's been counting something.

"You were here Tuesday," I say.

"Door shut. All day."

"Nobody mentioned you."

"Nobody mentions compliance." He looks at the closed door anyway.

"Detective, am I going to need a lawyer?"

"I don't know yet, Tom. Did you do something?"

"No." Fast. Then slower: "No. I didn't do something. That's the problem. I didn't do something." He opens a desk drawer, takes out a manila folder, holds it flat against his chest. "Compliance runs a surveillance package on every order this firm sends. Pattern detection. It flags anomalies. Size, timing, correlation."

"And in June it threw a real one."

He blinks at me. "How did you—"

"You're holding the folder like it's a kid you're about to hand over to Child Services."

He looks down at his own arms. Lets the folder go flat on the desk.

"June ninth," he says. "The system flagged unusual overnight activity. Orders going out between one and four in the morning. Small lots, lots of them, from a lot of different desk logins. Not one trader. Most of the floor. It looked—" He searches for it. "It looked like people were working in the middle of the night and not telling anyone."

"What did you do?"

"I wrote a memo. I walked it into Grant's office myself." He pushes the folder an inch toward me. "He read the first page. He didn't read the second. He closed the door and he said, 'Tom, those overnight guys are giving us our best quarter in six years. Don't make me ask questions I don't want the answers to.'"

"His words."

"His words. Then he asked about my kids." Becker wipes his forehead. "He's very good at asking about your kids."

"And you dropped it."

"I suppressed the alert. There's a button." He says *button* like it disgusts him. "I'm compliance. I keep everything. That's the job, keeping the things nobody wants. I kept the memo. I didn't keep my spine."

I open the folder. Four pages, dated, initialed TB. A table of times. 1:14. 2:02. 2:47. 3:31. Columns of login IDs, twenty-something of them, the same ones repeating night after night like a heartbeat.

"Why tell me now?"

"Because on Monday twenty-four people didn't come in, and I'm the one who's supposed to notice when something's wrong on this floor." His eyes go to the dark screen of his laptop, and stay there. "I noticed in June."

. . .

Ray is where I left him, in the passenger seat, cap on the dash, shelling sunflower seeds into a napkin on his knee. The second coffee sits in the cupholder by his hand, lid still on, gone cold an hour ago. He never drinks it. Says he likes knowing it's there.

I drop into the driver's seat and toss the folder up on the dash next to his cap. He doesn't look at it. I tell it all to him anyway, *we sleep better, we trade better*, Megan against her door, Becker's button.

Ray listens with his eyes closed and his head back, like a guy listening to the ballgame on the radio.

"So he buried it," I say.

"So he buried it." Ray cracks a seed with his front teeth. "Rich guy kills the alert on the crime that makes him money. Doesn't mean he did it, kid. Means he didn't want to know."

"That's a distinction a jury won't make."

"Juries ain't detectives." He opens one eye. "You like him for it?"

"I don't like him for anything. I don't like him."

"Not the same thing."

"I know it's not the same thing."

Outside, Fulton Street is doing its four o'clock business. A guy selling phone cases off a folding table. A halal cart sending lamb smoke up into the gray. In forty minutes it'll be dark, and I'll feel almost normal.

My phone buzzes against the cupholder. RUIZ.

"Mercer."

"Where are you?"

"Outside Fulton Point."

"Good. Go back up." A pause. "I just got off with the SEC. Guy named Dorsey, New York regional office. He's on thirty-one right now, and he wants you in the room."

"The SEC. How'd they hear about it already? Nobody's filed anything."

There's a pause long enough that I check the screen to see if the call dropped.

"That's the thing, Mercer," Ruiz says. "They didn't hear about it. He says they've been on their way here since August."

CHAPTER SIX

The Money

THE SEC BROUGHT ITS own pastries.

That's the first thing I notice when I walk into the big conference room on thirty-one at 4:20 on Thursday afternoon. A white bakery box from a place on Court Street, lid open, the last four croissants arranged in a neat row like evidence. Then the banker's boxes, eleven of them, stacked against the glass. Then three laptops, two analysts, and a man in a navy quarter-zip under a sport coat, standing at the window with his back to me, looking at the Manhattan Bridge like he's thinking about making an offer on it.

"Detective Mercer." He turns. "Mark Dorsey. Securities and Exchange Commission."

He says the full name of the agency. People who say the full name want you to hear all four words.

He's forty or so, gym-built, the kind of haircut that requires an appointment. Good teeth. An Apple Watch he checks while he's shaking my hand, not to see the time, just to let me know he has somewhere to be after this.

"Your lieutenant says you caught the Ostrander call Tuesday," he says. "Nice work. Sit, sit. Have a croissant. They're excellent."

"I'm fine."

"You look tired."

"I'm a detective on the night tour. It's the uniform."

He smiles like I've told a joke at a dinner party he's hosting. One of his analysts, a young woman with a pencil behind each ear, doesn't look up from her screen. The other one, a heavyset guy with a Jets lanyard, glances at me and then away, quick, like I'm a dog he's not sure about.

Through the inside glass I can see across the trading floor to Kessler's corner office. Kessler's in there with two men in suits that cost more than my car, which, if you've seen my car, isn't the insult it sounds like. Kessler's not sitting. He's at his own window with his hands in his pockets. He doesn't look over.

"So," Dorsey says. "Let me save you some legwork."

. . .

Here's what the federal government knows.

In August, the SEC's Division of Examinations sent Kessler Hale Capital a letter. Routine. The firm was overdue for a look, the way you're overdue for a dentist. The exam was scheduled for the first week of November. This week. Monday, actually, before the whole floor went dark, so the exam team spent Monday morning in the lobby of Fulton Point being told by a security guard that nobody upstairs was answering.

"Imagine my surprise," Dorsey says.

Before the exam, his analysts ran the firm's trading data. Standard prep. Look for anything funny.

They found something funny.

"Since April," the woman with the pencils says, without looking up, "there have been eleven thousand four hundred and six orders placed from Kessler Hale employee logins between the hours of 12:50 and 4:15 a.m. Small lots. All of them in names the fund was about to trade in size the next morning, for its own clients. Pension funds, mostly. A teachers' fund in Ohio. Two hospitals."

"Front-running," Dorsey says. He leans back in his chair and laces his fingers behind his head. "Oldest trick there is. You know your big client is about to buy a million shares of something at the open. You buy a little first, in the dark. The client's order pushes the price up. You sell into it. Pennies. Every night, twenty-four logins, pennies on pennies on pennies."

"Those orders went where?"

"Seven LLCs. Delaware. Prime brokerage accounts the fund's systems were set up to route to, very quietly, through a configuration change made in March." He ticks them off on his fingers without needing to look. "The LLCs sweep weekly to a holding company. The holding company sweeps to a fund administrator in the Caymans. The administrator sweeps to a private account at a bank in Nassau."

"And the account."

Dorsey lets it sit. He enjoys this part. He's probably enjoyed it in front of a mirror.

"Beneficial owner," he says, "Grant Kessler. Passport scan. Signature on the account opening docs. Home address in Rye." He nods toward the glass, toward the man at the window. "Thirty-eight point six million dollars."

I look at the boxes. Eleven of them. Somebody spent a long time putting together eleven boxes.

"My floor is full of sleepwalkers," I say. "Your floor is full of front-runners."

"Same floor." Dorsey shrugs. "Your guys typed it. My guy owns it."

"They don't remember typing it."

"Detective. I've been at the Commission fourteen years. I've deposed a hundred and sixty people. You know how many of them remembered doing it?" He makes a zero with his thumb and finger.

There's a soft knock on the glass door. Dylan comes in with a tray.

He's in the gray hoodie. He moves around the table setting cups in front of people without asking who gets what, and every cup is right. Oat cortado for Dorsey. Two black for the analysts, one with a sugar packet already tucked under the sleeve. He sets the last one by my elbow.

"Black," he says. Quietly, just to me.

"Perfect, buddy." Dorsey's already got the lid off his, already back on his laptop. He doesn't look up. "Kid's incredible. I've been in this building forty minutes and he already knows my order."

"He knows everyone's," I say.

Dylan's at the door by then. He hears it, I'm sure he hears it. He doesn't turn around. He just eases the door shut so softly the latch doesn't click.

I pick up the coffee. It's the right temperature. Of course it is.

"Withdrawals," I say.

Dorsey's eyebrows go up.

"From the Nassau account. How much has he taken out?"

The woman with the pencils finally looks at me. It's the first time anyone at this table has looked at me like I said something interesting.

"None," she says.

"None."

"Not a wire. Not a card. Not a transfer to another account in his name. Nothing's ever gone out. It just sits there and gets bigger."

"Thirty-eight million dollars," I say, "and the guy doesn't buy a boat."

"He has a boat," Dorsey says. "He has two boats. He's patient. Men like Grant Kessler can wait. They've been waiting their whole lives, that's how they got rich."

"What kind of thief doesn't spend?"

"The kind," Dorsey says, and he smiles with all of those good teeth, "who got caught before payday."

. . .

It's full dark when I come out. The Crown Vic is where I left it, in the bus stop on Willoughby, with an NYPD placard in the windshield that every bus driver in Brooklyn has learned to hate.

Ray's in the passenger seat, squinting under the dome light at the crossword in the *Post* I left folded on the dash. He doesn't fill anything in. He never does. He just reads the clues and nods like he's agreeing with them.

"Well?" he says.

"Thirty-eight million in a bank in Nassau. Kessler's name. Kessler's signature. Kessler's home address."

"So he's done."

"Nobody's touched it. Not a dime since April."

Ray takes that in. Looks up from the paper.

"You know what my old man used to say about money nobody spends?"

"No."

"Me neither. He never said nothing about money. He never had any." He grins. Then the grin goes away. "But I'll tell you what, kid. In thirty years I never once saw a guy steal a thing and then leave it on the counter."

I call Lauren Fisk.

She picks up on the first ring, which means she was holding the phone, which means she hasn't put it down since Tuesday.

"Detective."

"Did you sleep?"

"No. I have tape over my laptop camera and the earbuds are in a Ziploc in my freezer." A short, cracked laugh. "Is that crazy? You can tell me if that's crazy."

"It's not crazy. Lauren, I need the quant's view of something."

I tell her. The eleven thousand orders. The seven LLCs. Nassau. The name at the bottom.

She's quiet for a long time. I can hear a radiator knocking somewhere in her apartment, and under it, keys. She's typing. Of course she's typing. You can lock the door and freeze the earbuds, but you can't stop a quant from running the numbers.

"I can see my own login history," she says finally. "I pulled it last night. I couldn't not." She breathes out. "It's beautiful."

"Beautiful."

"I don't mean it's good. I mean it's—" She stops, starts over. "Every one of those orders is sized two percent under the threshold that triggers the firm's internal large-order review. Not *about* two percent. Exactly. Every single one. The timing's spread so it never trips the volume surveillance. And then it routes through, what, seven shells to an account with his actual passport on it?"

"Yes."

"That's not how you'd do it. Detective, anyone who could design the first part would never, ever do the second part. You don't build a lock that good and then leave your name taped to the door." The typing stops. "It's like a proof. You know? When you write a proof, you show every step. Not to hide anything. So someone can check it."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's too clean." Her voice goes small. "It's like they were built to be found."

Ray's stopped pretending to read the crossword.

"There's something else," Lauren says. "I wasn't going to say, because I thought maybe I was reading it wrong. But I checked it four times."

"Tell me."

"It stopped. All of it. Every login, every account. Sunday night. 2:58 a.m. The same minute." She pauses. "Fourteen minutes before the emails."

The heater ticks. A bus pulls up behind us and leans on its horn, long and tired, and I don't move.

"Everyone except Paul," she says. "Paul's login tried to place orders Monday night. 3:19, 3:21, 3:24. They all bounced. There was nowhere left to send them."

3:24. Six minutes before the doorman found him on the ledge.

"So whoever was running it," I say slowly, "turned it off. And then fourteen minutes later, told everyone."

"Why would you do that?" Lauren asks. She sounds like she's really asking, like she thinks I might know. "Why would anyone rob a bank, and then pull the alarm themselves?"

I don't have an answer for her.

Next to me, Ray sits up straight in his seat, the way he does when a game's about to go to extra innings.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Admin

KEVIN TRAN EATS LIKE somebody's timing him.

It's 11:40 on Thursday night at a diner on Atlantic Avenue that has been open twenty-four hours since the Koch administration and has not been cleaned since the Dinkins one. Tran's in a back booth with a cheeseburger deluxe, a vanilla shake, and a laptop with so many stickers on the lid I can't tell what brand it is. He's got one earbud in. Not white. Black, cheap, wired.

"Don't worry," he says, before I can ask. "It's Spotify. I'm not getting hypnotized by Spotify."

Ray stayed in the car. He hates this place. Says it smells like somebody washed a Ford in the coffee.

I slide into the booth. The waitress comes, a woman with reading glasses on a beaded chain, and I order coffee because I'm a person who orders coffee, and she brings it, and it does taste like a Ford.

"So," Tran says, and turns the laptop around.

. . .

Lull is eleven people at shared desks on Jay Street. Ruiz leaned on them this afternoon with an emergency disclosure request and a

phone voice I've heard her use exactly twice, and by six o'clock Noah Brandt himself, in a beanie, saying *privacy-first* every other sentence, had handed over every log they had for the Kessler Hale organization account.

"Each company that buys in bulk gets one admin," Tran says. "Admin can see everybody's sleep data. Admin can push audio profiles to everybody. Admin can lock it so nobody can change their own settings. Admin is basically God with a dashboard."

"And God is."

He taps the screen. A username, highlighted in yellow.

gkessler@kesslerhale.com

"Created March third," Tran says. "Before the earbuds even shipped. Your HR lady didn't set it up. She just got the invite."

"From his account."

"From his account." Tran swipes a fry through ketchup and points it at the screen. "Now here's the part. Every admin session has a device fingerprint. Browser, OS, screen resolution, network. All of them. Every single one. Same machine. A Dell workstation on the Kessler Hale internal network, asset tag KH-31-001."

"Which is."

"The big computer on Grant Kessler's desk. Corner office, thirty-first floor. I had their IT guy read me the sticker on the back over the phone. He sounded like he was going to cry."

I look at the column of timestamps. They run down the screen and off the bottom, months of them.

00:52. 01:14. 01:31. 02:20. 03:03.

"It's all at night," I say.

"All at night. Never once during business hours. Somebody sits down at that machine after midnight, pushes the profiles, watches the

dashboard. You can see the dashboard views. Sleep stages. Twenty-something little graphs going down into the light stuff, N1, N2. Like checking on the oven."

I think about Lauren Fisk's video. Her own face, eyes open, lit blue by the screen. Somebody on the thirty-first floor, at that exact minute, watching a little graph of her.

"Last login," Tran says, and scrolls. "Sunday night. 2:51 a.m."

"And?"

"And at 2:57 the admin hits one button. *Disable all profiles.* Every pair on the floor goes back to plain rain sounds. Then he logs out. Never logs in again."

2:57. One minute before every trade on the floor stops dead.

"So Kessler shut it down himself," I say.

"Kessler's *account* shut it down from Kessler's *computer*." Tran sucks the shake through the straw until it rattles. "Computer doesn't care who's sitting at it. It cares who has the password."

"Who has the password?"

"Anyone who's ever stood behind him while he typed it. It's his wife's name and the year he founded the firm. IT guy told me. Says Kessler makes them reset it for him every quarter because he forgets, and then sets it back to the same thing." He shrugs. "Guy's got thirty-eight million in the Bahamas and the security habits of my grandma."

"So either he's careless."

"Or he's careless." Tran turns the laptop back around. "I don't do *or*, Mercer. Logs don't do *or*. Logs say his account, his machine, his floor, every night since March."

"The voice," I say. "On the track. It's young. Kessler's fifty-eight."

"Slow a voice down that far and speed it back up, you lose everything that makes it old or young. Could be a kid. Could be him with a pitch shifter. Could be my uncle." He takes his earbud out, finally, and looks at me straight. "You want my honest opinion?"

"That's why I'm eating here."

"You're not eating."

"Opinion, Kevin."

"Whoever built this," he says, "is the best I've ever seen. And whoever's name is on it can't forward a calendar invite." He picks up the burger again. "Those can both be true. People hire help."

. . .

At 12:50 a.m. Fulton Point looks like a building somebody forgot to turn off.

We're parked across Willoughby with the engine running for the heat. Downtown Brooklyn at this hour is a stage after the show. A street sweeper droning past the Macy's. Steam coming out of a grate on Lawrence in a long white ribbon that bends east. One guy in a puffer coat walking a pit bull who looks more awake than either of us.

Thirty-one floors of glass, all dark.

Except one light.

It's on the top floor, but not in Kessler's corner. Middle of the floor. A low, strange color, pinkish-purple, like the inside of a nightclub or a fish tank.

"That ain't an office light," Ray says.

"No."

"Plants. Those grow lights. My sister-in-law has 'em in the basement for her tomatoes." He thinks about it. "She says tomatoes."

The second coffee sits in the cupholder by his knee, lid on. I bought it at the bodega on Myrtle at nine. It's been cold since ten.

"Go on up," Ray says. "I'll watch the door."

. . .

The night guard is a Haitian guy in his sixties named Fritz with a paperback Bible open face-down next to the camera monitors. Half the monitors show static.

"Thirty-one?" He doesn't even look at the board. "That's the boy. With the plants."

"He's here every night?"

"Most nights." Fritz signs me in on a clipboard, a real clipboard with a pen on a string. "He brings me a café con leche. He knows I take it sweet. Nobody else in this building knows my name, but he knows how I take my coffee."

"What about Kessler? He come in late?"

"Mr. Kessler?" Fritz makes a face like I asked if the Pope comes in late. "He has the garage elevator. Private. Runs on a key, goes straight up from the parking level to thirty-one. Comes, goes, I never see him." He taps the dead monitors. "And those cameras been out since the summer. I put in a ticket in July. Badge does everything now. I just sit."

. . .

The elevator opens on thirty-one into dark.

Not full dark. The exit signs are red. The monitors on the trading desks have little amber standby lights, rows of them, like a city seen from a plane. And along the far window, past the last row of desks, there's the purple glow, and in front of it a line of tall potted trees,

fiddle-leaf figs, glossy leaves the size of a hand, lit from above by bars of LED like they're on a stage.

And Dylan, in the gray hoodie, with the long-spouted brass watering can, going from pot to pot.

He doesn't startle. He hears the elevator, hears my shoes, and finishes the pot he's on, tilting the can until the water stops, before he turns around.

"Detective Mercer." Polite. Unsurprised. "Hi."

"It's one in the morning."

"I know." He moves to the next pot. "They die if nobody does it. The service stopped coming in October. Somebody forgot to renew. Nobody noticed." He tips the can. The water goes into the soil without a sound. "Nobody notices plants until they're dead."

"Why at night?"

"I don't sleep much." He says it simply. A fact, like his shoe size.

"That makes two of us."

"I know," he says.

I wait for him to explain that. He doesn't. He sets the can down and wipes his palms on his jeans. Up close, under the purple light, he looks younger than twenty-two and older at the same time. There's nothing in his ears.

"You don't wear a pair?" I ask.

"Of the Lulls?" A small smile. "I never opened mine. I don't like things in my ears."

Across the floor, through two layers of glass, Kessler's corner office is dark. But I can see the big monitor on his desk, asleep, a slow dot of white light breathing on its edge. On. Waiting.

Dylan follows my eyes.

"He leaves it on," he says. "Mr. Kessler. He never logs out. IT's always on him about it." He picks the can back up. "Do you want anything? There's coffee in the kitchen. It's been sitting since six."

"No."

"Okay." He waters the last tree. Then, without looking at me, gently, like he's asking after somebody's dog: "How's Mr. Ostrander? The one on the roof."

The floor is so quiet I can hear the grow lights hum.

"How do you know about the roof?"

He looks at me then. Gray eyes, steady, a little tired, a little sorry for me.

"Everyone knows," he says.

. . .

You caught it. So did I. Hold on to it for me, because I'm about to spend a long time trying not to.

Nobody knows.

That's what I'm thinking in the elevator going down, watching the numbers fall. Nobody knows about the roof. The call came in from the doorman as a man on a ledge. I took it, I cleared it, I asked the two uniforms from the Seven-Six to keep it off the radio and out of the paperwork as anything but an aided case. Ruiz kept it from the press. Paul Ostrander hasn't been out of 8C since, and I told his own boss it was a medical thing.

The doorman knows. Two uniforms know. Ruiz knows. I know.

And a kid with a watering can.

Fritz says goodnight. I say it back. Outside, the cold gets in under my collar like it's been waiting for me specifically.

Ray's in the passenger seat, same as I left him. The radio's on the all-news station, low.

"Well?"

"He's watering plants."

"At one in the morning."

"At one in the morning." I put my hands on the wheel and don't start the car. "He asked how Paul was. The one on the roof, he said."

Ray stops cracking seeds.

"Nobody knows about the roof, kid."

"I know."

"So how'd he know?"

"I don't know, Ray."

We both look up. Thirty-one floors. While we watch, the purple light at the top of Fulton Point goes out, and the building is all the way dark, and there's no way to tell anymore which floor anyone is on.

My phone lights up on the dash. A text. RUIZ.

EDNY got a warrant signed at midnight. Feds take Kessler at 9am, on the floor, in front of his people. Dorsey wants an audience. Be there.

Then, a second later:

Good work, Mercer. It's over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Friday

THEY CAME BACK.

Not because they wanted to. The SEC sent every employee a letter asking them to be present Friday morning for interviews, and the letter used the phrase *strongly encouraged* twice, and people in finance know what that means on federal letterhead.

So at 8:50 a.m. the thirty-first floor is full for the first time since I've known it, and it's the quietest room I've ever been in.

Nobody's trading. The monitors are on, tickers crawling green and red, and nobody's looking at them. People sit at their desks with their coats still on. Somebody's got a bagel in a paper bag and hasn't opened the bag. No one is talking to anyone, and it's not the silence of people concentrating. It's the silence of people who all have the same secret and still think it's only theirs.

I see Lauren Fisk at a desk by the window in a black turtleneck, her hair scraped back, a legal pad in front of her with nothing written on it. She sees me. She doesn't nod. She just holds my eyes for a second, like she's checking I'm real, and then looks back at the pad.

Paul Ostrander is two rows over. I wasn't sure he'd come. He's in a suit that fit him a week ago. His hands are flat on the desk on either

side of his keyboard, like he's holding the desk down, or himself. He hasn't touched the keyboard. I'd bet my pension he won't.

Tom Becker stands in the doorway of his windowless office, arms folded. Megan Walsh is by the kitchen holding a mug she isn't drinking from. Everyone in this place is holding a coffee they aren't drinking.

And in the middle of it all, Dylan, gray hoodie, moving down the rows with a tray.

He puts a cup by Lauren's elbow. She doesn't look up. He puts one by Paul's hand, careful, a few inches from his fingers so he won't knock it, and stands there for half a second longer than he does anywhere else. Paul doesn't notice him. Nobody notices him. He moves on like water finding its level.

You could walk this floor every day for a year, I think, and never once see him. That's not a talent most people have. Most people spend their whole lives trying to be seen.

. . .

At 8:58 the elevator opens and the federal government steps off.

Dorsey first, in a charcoal suit today, the quarter-zip retired for the occasion. Behind him two FBI agents from the white-collar squad, a man and a woman, gray suits, windbreakers folded over their arms so the yellow letters show. Behind them one of Dorsey's analysts, the woman with the pencils, carrying nothing, there to watch.

Dorsey sees me and nods like we're at the same wedding.

Twenty-some heads come up at once. You can feel the air in the room change, like a plane dropping a few hundred feet.

Kessler's office door is already open. He's been waiting. His lawyer must have gotten the call at seven, because there's a lawyer in there

with him, a tall woman in red with her phone to her ear, and Kessler's in his good gray suit with the dark tie, standing behind his desk with the Manhattan Bridge at his back.

The male agent says the words. Grant Kessler. Securities fraud. Wire fraud. Conspiracy. He says them in a normal speaking voice, not loud, but in that silence everyone on the floor hears every one.

The lawyer says something about cuffs. Dorsey says something back. The cuffs go on, in front, white-collar style, and somebody hands Kessler his overcoat to drape over them, and he does it, neatly, like he's been practicing in a mirror.

Then they walk him out onto the floor.

He doesn't hurry. I'll give him that. He walks down the center aisle between the desks the way he must have walked it a thousand times, the king going through the market. And he looks at them. That's the thing I'll remember. He looks at every face he passes, one by one, like he's taking attendance.

"I didn't do this," he says.

Not to the agents. To the room.

Nobody answers. Lauren looks at her legal pad. Becker looks at the carpet. Megan's mug is shaking just slightly, a little ring trembling on the surface.

"Twenty-four years," Kessler says. His voice is steady, but it's working harder than it was yesterday. "I built this for you. You're my family. You know me. I didn't do this."

Somewhere near the back, a trader I don't know laughs once. It isn't a nice sound.

Then Dylan is beside me.

I didn't hear him come. One second I'm watching Kessler and the next there's a cup being placed into my hand, warm, a soft voice at

my shoulder.

"Black, Detective."

"Thanks."

He doesn't move away. He stays right there next to me, the empty tray hanging at his side, and he watches Grant Kessler come down the aisle.

Kessler passes within four feet of us. He looks at me. He looks right through Dylan, the way you look through a window to see what's on the other side of it. He doesn't look at Dylan at all.

Dylan watches him the whole way.

Every step. Down the aisle, past the kitchen, past Megan, to the elevator bank. Everyone else on the floor is looking at their desks, their shoes, their own hands. Dylan is the only person on thirty-one who watches Grant Kessler all the way to the elevator.

There's no smile on his face. No anger either. Just attention. Total, patient, unblinking attention, the way you'd watch a car pull out of a space you've been circling the block for, for a very long time.

The doors close.

Next to me, Dylan breathes out. A long breath, through his nose, so quiet I only know because I'm standing close enough to see his shoulders drop.

Then he turns, with his tray, and goes back into the kitchen, and I hear the tap come on. He's washing the cups.

. . .

"He got our document request list the Friday before," Dorsey tells me in the lobby, buttoning his coat. He's glowing. Some men glow after a marathon. Dorsey glows after an arrest. "Item fourteen. Overnight order logs, all employee credentials. His general counsel forwarded it

to him at 4:40 p.m. He reads it. He panics. Sunday night he kills the whole thing from his own desk."

"And the videos?"

"Smoke." Dorsey makes a little poof with his fingers. "He sends every one of his own people a video of themselves, from nowhere. Now they're victims. Now it's some hacker, some Russian, some ransom thing. And who's the biggest victim of all? The founder. Whose good name was stolen. Whose staff were puppeteered." He smiles. "It's not bad. It almost works. He just didn't have time to finish the story."

"There was no ransom demand."

"Like I said. He didn't have time." He claps me on the shoulder. "You did good work, Detective. Go home. You look like hell."

He goes out through the revolving door, and the door keeps turning after he's gone, empty, pushing nothing.

. . .

Ruiz is leaning on the Crown Vic when I come out.

She's in her long black coat with the collar up, a coffee from the cart on the corner in one hand, looking the way she always looks at the end of a week: fumes and pride.

"Mercer."

"Lieutenant."

"Federal arrest, SEC press release by noon, my phone hasn't stopped since six, and nobody fell off anything." She lifts her cup at me. "That's a good week. I don't get a lot of good weeks."

Ray is in the passenger seat, cracking seeds into his palm, looking anywhere but at her. They have an arrangement, Ray and Ruiz. She doesn't talk to him, he doesn't talk to her. I stopped asking about it a

long time ago.

Her eyes go to the passenger seat anyway, and stay, the way they do.

Then she looks back at me, and there's something soft in her face, something she usually keeps filed away.

"You're still riding solo, huh?" she says. "Get some sleep, Mercer."

I almost laugh. It's an old joke between us. Ray doesn't do stairs, Ray doesn't do doorbells, so every flight in Brooklyn North gets climbed by me. She's been threatening for a long time to find me a partner with working knees.

"Ray's fine where he is," I say.

She looks at me for another second. Then she taps the roof twice, same as Tuesday, and walks off toward the Jay Street subway with her coffee.

. . .

I mean to sleep. I want that on the record.

I get in the car and point it toward Kent Avenue, and somewhere around the Navy Yard I take a left I didn't plan, and then another one, and at ten in the morning I'm parked on Furman Street under the Promenade with the engine off, looking at the East River. I stay most of the day.

It's flat and gray in daylight, nothing like the black oil it turns into after dark. A ferry pushes up toward Dumbo, half empty. Across the water, the towers of lower Manhattan stand around with their hands in their pockets.

Ray doesn't say anything for a long time. He shells seeds.

Case closed. The bad guy in federal custody. Paperwork for Monday. Ruiz happy. Dorsey happy. Twenty-some people who'll

never have to put those things in their ears again.

I keep seeing Kessler going down the aisle, taking attendance. *I didn't do this.* Guilty men say it all the time. It means nothing. I've heard it from people still holding the knife.

That's not what keeps me up.

What keeps me up is the kid.

Four feet away. Close enough to touch. Grant Kessler looked at every face on that floor, and he looked through one. And that one face didn't look away from him once. Not until the doors closed.

"Nobody watches a man that carefully," I say, "unless they've been waiting a long time for him to leave."

Ray cracks a seed. "Or they're glad to see him go. Guy wasn't exactly a sweetheart, kid."

"He asked about Paul."

"Lotta people probably asked about Paul."

"Megan asked because it's her job. Lauren asked through a door. Kessler asked about Paul's quarter." I watch a gull work at something on the rocks. "That kid asked like he'd been checking every day."

Ray doesn't answer that.

The light goes the way it goes in November, all at once, like somebody pulling a plug. By 4:45 the river's black. By five the bridges are lit. I start the car to get the heat going and don't put it in drive.

At 5:40 I drive back to Fulton Street. I tell Ray it's on the way home. It isn't. I park across from Fulton Point and watch the lobby empty out. Suits. Coats. Rolling bags. People going home to sleep in a building that will be dark in an hour.

The thirty-first floor is dark already. Nobody left up there to run.

At 6:14, it isn't.

Up at the top of the glass, in the middle of the floor, a low purple light comes on.

CHAPTER NINE

The Hale in Kessler Hale

THE LIGHT STAYS ON for twenty-six minutes. I watch every one of them.

Nobody comes out of the lobby in a gray hoodie. Nobody goes in. At 6:40 the purple goes out, the way it went out Thursday night, and Fulton Point is just a building again, thirty-one floors of nobody.

If he leaves, he doesn't leave by the front.

"Lady said sleep, kid," Ray says. "Go home."

So I go home. Four flights, slow, like a man with something soft waiting at the top. I take my shoes off. I lie on the covers in my clothes with the light off, the Domino sign coming through the blinds in red stripes across the ceiling, and I do what the doctors call sleep hygiene. In for four. Hold for seven. Out for eight.

I last forty minutes.

Here's the thing I keep telling the ceiling. The case is closed. Grant Kessler is in a federal cell on Twenty-Ninth Street tonight, because a magistrate at Cadman Plaza decided a man with thirty-eight million dollars in Nassau counts as a flight risk, and his lawyer bills more per hour than I make in a week. Dorsey has his paper and his press release. Twenty-four people on the thirty-first floor of Fulton Point

are going to sleep tonight with nothing in their ears. That's a win. That's the version that goes in the file.

The ceiling doesn't care. The ceiling keeps showing me a kid in a gray hoodie holding a watering can at one in the morning, on a floor where nobody else would come in. *They die if nobody does it.*

At 7:40 I get up and put my shoes back on.

. . .

The bodega on Broadway has the good cups, the blue Greek ones that burn your hand. I buy two, black, and the guy behind the counter doesn't look up from his phone, because I've been buying two every night for long enough that I'm furniture.

Ray's in the passenger seat when I get to the car. He doesn't ask why I'm not asleep. His cap's on the dash and his knees are up against the glovebox the way they always are, because the seat only goes back so far and Ray goes further.

"Look at you," he says. "Day off and you're dressed."

"Couldn't sleep."

"Stop the presses." He watches me fit his coffee into the cupholder. "You know what they call a cop who can't let go of a closed case?"

"Don't."

"Divorced." He grins. "I'm kidding. They call him a detective. Everybody else is just a guy with a badge."

I open the laptop on the steering wheel and tether it to my phone. The engine runs for the heat. Kent Avenue is mostly black windows and a couple of guys smoking outside the bar on the corner, hunched like it's January already.

Kessler Hale Capital has a very good website. Gray on white, a lot of words like *conviction* and *discipline*. A photo of the thirty-first floor in daylight, every chair full. Under *Our Story* it says the firm was founded in 2002 by Grant Kessler, who built it from a two-desk office on Court Street into one of Brooklyn's most respected independent funds.

Two desks. One name.

"That's the part that bugs me," I say.

"Which part."

"The name's got two words in it. The website explains one."

Ray works a seed out of its shell with his front teeth. "Partner who retired. Partner who died. Partner who got bought out and lives in Boca and doesn't return calls."

"Then they'd say so. Rich guys love a dead partner. You put him in the lobby in bronze."

"Him," Ray says.

I don't answer that. I type.

The search engine gives me eleven pages of Kessler. Kessler at a charity thing at the Brooklyn Museum. Kessler and his daughters at a wedding in the Hamptons. Kessler in a fleece vest telling a business channel that the secret to his firm is that it's a family. He's been silver for twenty years.

Hale is a ghost. There's no Hale on the board, no Hale in the filings, no Hale on any page that has the firm's name in it, except in the name.

It takes me until a little after ten to find her, and I find her in a place nobody looks. The Brooklyn Business Ledger was a free weekly that died in 2009. Somebody at the public library got a grant to scan the whole run, and now every issue lives in a database with a search

bar that was clearly built by the lowest bidder. I put in *Kessler* and *Court Street* and wait while it thinks about it.

March 2003. Page fourteen, below a piece about a bakery expanding into Carroll Gardens.

The photo is grainy, the way old newsprint goes when you blow it up, everybody made of dots. Two desks pushed together under a window. A younger Grant Kessler, dark-haired, sleeves rolled, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head like the world owes him rent. Across from him, a woman with a phone pinned between her ear and her shoulder, writing something on a legal pad, laughing at something out of frame. Dark hair pulled back. Twenty-five, twenty-six. She isn't looking at the camera. She's working.

The caption says *Kessler and Hale: the two-desk start-up taking on Manhattan.*

The article is four paragraphs. It calls her *Kessler's partner, Rachel Hale, 26,* once, in the second paragraph, and quotes her saying that the trick is to read the boring part of the filing, because nobody else does. After that it's all him.

I find two more Ledger pieces from that year. In September she's *Rachel Hale, the firm's head of operations.* In a profile from 2005 she isn't there at all. Kessler is pictured alone at a bigger desk in a bigger office, and the firm has nine employees, and the writer calls the name *Kessler Hale* "a nod to the firm's early days."

A nod.

I sit there with the dots of her face on the screen. A couple walks past the car arguing about whether somebody named Josh is worth it. The heater ticks.

Ray's been quiet a long time. When he talks, he talks low, like he doesn't want to wake anybody.

"Kid," he says. "The intern's last name."

I already know. I knew at the caption. Knowing a thing and letting it sit down inside you aren't the same, and I've kept the door shut on this one since Thursday night.

How's Mr. Ostrander? The one on the roof.

I type *Rachel Hale obituary Brooklyn*.

Three years ago. A funeral home in Sunset Park, the kind of page with a stock photo of lilies at the top and a guestbook at the bottom. Rachel Anne Hale, 46. Died at home after a long illness. Born in Bay Ridge, graduated from Baruch, worked in finance and later as a bookkeeper for small businesses across South Brooklyn, *where she was known for catching the mistakes nobody else could find.* No mention of a firm. No mention of Court Street. Somebody wrote this who either didn't know or had signed something that said they didn't.

She is survived by her son, Dylan.

Seventeen entries in the guestbook. A couple of former clients. A woman who says Rachel did her taxes for twelve years and never once charged her for the phone calls. A cousin in Staten Island. No Kessler. No one from the firm with her name on the door.

The last entry is from Dylan. It's two lines. *Thank you all for coming. She would have pretended she didn't want the fuss.*

I close the laptop.

You're ahead of me. You've been ahead of me since Tuesday. I'm the one who took the coffee.

. . .

Kevin Tran answers on the sixth ring with a headset on. I can hear it in his voice, the little flatness of a man talking into a boom mic, and behind him somebody yelling about a flank.

"Detective. It's Friday. Your guy's in a cell. Ruiz sent the whole thread a cake emoji."

"I saw."

"So why are you calling me at—" A pause while he looks. "Eleven-oh-four on a Friday, which is, for the record, my time."

"Fulton Point's building logs. The badge readers. The elevators."

"I have them. Management sent the whole dump Thursday with the subpoena response. I pulled Kessler's badge for the timeline and that's it, because that's what I was asked." He says something off-mic, sharp, and the yelling stops. "What are you looking for?"

"Sunday night. Into Monday. Thirty-first floor."

"The night of the emails."

"Yeah."

Keys. Tran types like he's mad at the keyboard personally. Ray watches the street. A delivery guy goes by on an e-bike with a bag of food in a milk crate and no lights, and it's like watching something swim past in the dark.

"Okay," Tran says. "This is weird."

"Tell me."

"Building's dead. Sunday night, nothing between eleven and five except the guard doing rounds below twelve. Then one swipe at the lobby turnstile, 2:38 a.m. One elevator call, 2:41, card reader in the car, floor thirty-one." He stops. "One badge. Out again 3:58."

"Whose."

"Hale, Dylan. Intern. Badge issued March second." Another pause. "Huh."

March second. The admin account was born on March third. He'd had his badge one day.

2:41 in the elevator. 2:51, somebody logs in at Grant Kessler's desk. 2:57, *Disable all profiles*. 2:58, every trade on the floor stops. 3:12, twenty-four emails.

3:58, he goes home.

"What."

"Nothing. It's—okay, so. The emails, the 3:12 ones. They bounced around a bunch of garbage relays, and I told you I couldn't trace the sender. That's true. But the first hop's handshake, the very first thing, it touched the guest Wi-Fi on thirty-one. I flagged it Thursday. I figured it was Kessler sending them from his office, because everything else was Kessler from his office." He's quiet for a second, and when he talks again he sounds younger. "Kessler's garage elevator runs on a key, so his badge doesn't prove anything either way. But somebody was on that floor Sunday night. And there's exactly one name."

"Send it to me."

"Sending. It's going to your spam, by the way. Department filter eats everything I attach. Check your spam."

"Tran."

"Yeah."

"Don't put this in the thread."

The headset breathes. "I wasn't going to put it anywhere," he says. "I pulled what I was asked to pull on Thursday. Tonight I'm playing a video game." He hangs up.

. . .

The precinct on Union Avenue is quiet the way precincts are quiet at midnight on a Friday, which is not quiet. A guy in the cage singing. A phone nobody's answering. The night tour I'm not on, doing the things I'd be doing. Ray waits in the car. He hates the squad room, the lights, the smell of old microwaved fish.

Nobody looks at me when I come up the stairs. Somebody says "Mercer" without lifting their head, the way you'd say good morning to a coat rack.

Tran's email is in my spam, between a pharmacy in Canada and a notice that my package couldn't be delivered. I print it at the machine by the coffee pot nobody's fixed since I made detective. The printer warms up, thinks about it, and pushes out one sheet.

It's a table. Timestamps, reader IDs, names. Almost all of it is the guard's rounds in tidy repeating rows, a whole dead building on a Sunday night. And then near the bottom, alone:

02:41:17 — ELEV CAR 3 — FLR 31 — HALE, DYLAN — INTERN

The paper's still warm when I fold it.

I stand there by the broken coffee pot for a while. Long enough that the guy in the cage finishes his song and starts it over.

Then I go down to the car. Ray's still there. His coffee's still full.

CHAPTER TEN

Coffee, Black

THE ADDRESS IS ON the last page of Megan Walsh's staff list, below the twenty-four, on a line by itself that says INTERN and has no extension. A brownstone on Halsey Street in Bed-Stuy, split into four apartments, a stroller chained to the railing. His buzzer says HALE in his own handwriting on a strip of masking tape. Top floor. The window's dark.

I've been parked on his block since one, deciding. It's 3:46 a.m. I don't ring.

Across Nostrand there's a laundromat with a sign that says OPEN 24 HRS, and the 2 has burned out, so it says OPEN 4 HRS, which is the most honest thing I've seen all week. The light inside is that blue-white fluorescent that makes everybody look like they're recovering from something. One customer. Gray hoodie. Sitting on the folding table with his sneakers hanging off the edge, watching a dryer go around.

"I'll wait," Ray says.

"You always wait."

"I'm good at it." He settles. "Go easy, kid. He's a kid."

. . .

The door has a bell on it. Dylan doesn't jump. He turns his head and looks at me the way you'd look at a bus you'd been expecting for a while, and then he looks back at the dryer.

"Detective."

"You don't sleep either."

"Not much." He shrugs, one shoulder. "It's easier here. There's noise, but it's not for you. Nobody's asking you to do anything."

The place smells like hot lint and that blue detergent. A TV bolted in the corner plays a Spanish-language shopping channel with the sound off, a woman demonstrating a knife on a tomato over and over. There's a vending machine against the wall that sells coffee in paper cups with playing cards printed on the side.

"It tastes like the cup," he says. "I can get you one anyway. Black."

"How'd you know that? Tuesday."

He thinks about it like it's a fair question. "You had a cup in your hand when you came off the elevator. Bodega cup. You'd drunk it down past the logo and there wasn't a ring. People who take milk leave a ring on the inside, a tan line where it sat." He looks at his hands. "I do coffee for twenty-four people. You start to see what they leave."

I take the folded printout out of my jacket and put it on the table next to him. I don't open it. He doesn't either. He puts one finger on the corner, lightly, the way you'd touch the edge of a stove to see if it's still on.

"The elevator," he says.

"The elevator."

"I thought about the elevator. I thought about it for a month." He almost laughs. "Then it was Sunday and I just got in."

You'll want me to tell you he made a speech. He didn't. He sat on a folding table at quarter to four in the morning and watched his laundry and told me, in pieces, the way you'd tell somebody where you'd parked.

. . .

"She kept the article," he says. "The one in the Ledger. Did you find that?"

"Page fourteen."

"Under the bakery." He nods. "She had it in the folder with her diploma. I didn't know about any of it until after. I was cleaning out the apartment, and there was the diploma, and the article, and a stack of paper about this thick." He holds up a thumb and finger, an inch apart. "Separation agreement. Confidentiality agreement. Non-disparagement. A release of claims. He called it a restructuring. She was four months pregnant. With me."

"She ever say his name?"

"Never. Not once. I thought my father was a guy from Baruch who moved to Arizona. That's what she told me, and I didn't ask, because she didn't like it when I asked." The dryer thumps. Something with a zipper. "She did people's books. Delis. A dentist in Bay Ridge. She'd find a mistake on a tax return from six years ago and call the client so happy, like she'd found money in a coat. She was really good. She was better than him. She built the first models on a legal pad, and he put her name on the door because clients liked a partner, and then he took her off everything but the door."

"So you applied."

"As Dylan Hale." He says it carefully, like the name is the point, and it is. "I want you to understand this part. I didn't go in there to do anything. I put Hale on the form and I thought, he'll see it. He'll see it on the form and something will happen in his face, and I'll get called into the office, and I'd ask him. Just ask him. Did you know about me. Did you ever think about her." He swallows. "That's all I had. That was the whole plan. I'd been telling myself that for three years."

"He didn't look."

"My first morning I put his coffee on his desk at 7:15. Oat milk, one sugar. He was on the phone, and he lifted two fingers off the receiver. Like that." He shows me. Two fingers, an inch off an invisible phone. "Didn't look at the cup. Didn't look at the badge. I'd clipped it high so it would be right at his eye level." He says it to the dryer. "I gave him one day. The second day I was in at six-thirty. He never logs out."

March second. March third.

"He walked past me every morning for eight months. He thanked me for his coffee twice. Out loud. Twice in eight months. I wrote down the days."

"He called you Daniel. Thursday, to my face."

"He's called me Daniel since March." Not a flicker. "Daniel's fine. Daniel never did anything to him."

I don't say anything. There's nothing in my pockets for that.

"I made the account first," he says. "His name, his desk. Then I left a brochure under his cup, and by April it was his idea, and he gave a little speech about it to the whole floor. *We sleep better, we trade better.*" He says it in Kessler's voice, the warm one, and it's a good impression and he hates it. "He's never had an idea he didn't find on his desk."

. . .

I should be angry. I'm trying. It won't come. He's tired, I'm tired, and the dryer's the only thing in the room with any energy.

"The money," I say.

"It's all there." He looks at me for the first time in a while. "Every cent. I never took a dollar. I didn't even move it to look at it. It's sitting in an account with his name on it, the way he sat in an office with her name on it. I just wanted somebody to find it and see whose name it was."

"Why the emails."

"The audit." He says it simply. "I knew the SEC was coming this week. Megan had it on the shared calendar as *external review*, like a dentist. If it just kept going, quietly, they'd find a pattern, and his lawyers would spend four years calling it a software glitch and settle for a number he'd pay out of petty cash. I needed the whole floor to stop. All at once. Twenty-four people calling in sick on the same Monday. You can see a hole like that from space."

"You filmed them."

The word does something to him. He nods anyway.

"I wanted them to know what was being done to them," he says. "He was the one doing it, you understand? It was his program, his idea, his admin account. That's how it reads. That's how it *is*, on paper. But nobody looks at paper. I had to make them look." His voice goes thin. "I just had to be the one to do it to them first. So they'd see."

"Lauren Fisk hasn't slept in a week."

"I know." Very quietly. "I bring her a coffee with two pumps of vanilla she doesn't know I know she likes."

The woman on the TV cuts the tomato. Cuts it again.

. . .

"Tell me about the roof," I say.

That's where it goes. Not his face. His hands. He's been holding them still on his knees the whole time, and now they don't know where to go. He puts one over his mouth. Takes it away.

"I shut it down Sunday," he says. "The emails were the last thing it did. 3:12. After that, everything was supposed to go dark. The app pushed an update to every pair, and the update killed the second layer, and that was it. Over. Clean." He shakes his head. "His were offline. Mr. Ostrander's. I don't know why. His phone was off the Wi-Fi, or the app didn't sync, I've been through the logs a hundred times and I don't know. They never got the update. They just kept playing the last loop. Monday night he put them in to sleep, because why wouldn't he, they're for sleeping."

He stops.

"The loop was for the walk," he says. "Bed to desk. Sit, log in, and then the admin side takes over. But there was no admin side anymore. His orders bounced. And the loop just starts over. *You're okay. Sit up. Your laptop is on the desk.* He was already at the desk." He swallows. "So it kept sending him to a desk he was already at. I think he went looking for it."

"Officer Tran pulled that voice off his earbuds," I say. "He's still got them."

"Then you've heard me." He looks at his hands. "I recorded it in my mom's kitchen. I was trying to sound like her."

"He's okay," I say.

"I know he's okay. I call the front desk at his building. I say I'm from a florist and I have a delivery for Mr. Ostrander and is he home. They say he's home. I hang up." He laughs, and it isn't a laugh. "I walk past his building on Clinton Street on my way to the train. It's not on my way to the train."

"You asked me about him. Thursday."

"You were the only one I could ask." He looks at me, and his eyes are wet, and he's not doing anything about it. "Everybody else thinks it was an accident. Or that he's sick. I'm the only person in the world who knows what happened to him, and I couldn't ask anybody if he was okay."

"That's how I knew," I tell him. "Nobody else asked like they needed the answer."

He nods, slowly, like he's filing it. Like it's a mistake on a tax return from six years ago.

"I didn't mean the roof," he says. "I need you to know that. I never meant the roof."

"I know."

. . .

The dryer stops. It buzzes, short and ugly, and the drum turns once more on its own and settles.

Dylan gets down off the table. He opens the door and takes out an armful of clothes and puts them on the table, hot, and starts folding. T-shirts. Socks, matched. A second gray hoodie, the same as the one he's wearing. He does the sleeves first, both behind, then halves it, then halves it again, square, the way somebody taught him once in a kitchen in Sunset Park.

"Are you going to arrest me?" he asks. He doesn't look up.

I pick the printout up off the table. I put it back in my jacket.

"Go home, Dylan. Get some sleep."

"You first," he says.

The bell on the door rings behind me. Across Nostrand the Crown Vic idles under the streetlight, exhaust going up white in the cold. Ray's waiting. He's good at it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Glovebox

I PARK AT THE end of North 5th, where the street gives up and turns into a railing and the river.

It's 6:10. Manhattan is still mostly lights, a wall of them, the Empire State lit some color for some cause I'll never look up. The water between here and there is black and moving fast and not saying anything. A guy in a reflective vest jogs past with a dog that would rather be home. Behind us the BQE has started its long low breathing. Saturday. Trucks don't know it's Saturday.

The printout is on my knee. One sheet, folded in thirds, soft now at the creases from being in and out of my jacket.

Ray's cap is on the dashboard where it lives, the orange NY gone pale from years of sun through the windshield. He's working through seeds. I can hear them. There are shells in the door pocket on my side, a little drift of them, and I can't picture Ray ever leaning across me to put them there.

"So," he says.

"So."

"You want to do it out loud, or you want to sit here till the sun comes up and makes the decision for you."

"Those are the two options?"

"There's a third, but it involves you sleeping, and I'm a realist."

I unfold the paper. I don't need to read it. I read it anyway. *02:41:17. ELEV CAR 3. FLR 31. HALE, DYLAN. INTERN.* The other rows above and below it are nothing. A guard checking doors on floors he's allowed on. It's amazing how much of a building's night is just someone making sure nothing happened.

"Out loud," I say.

. . .

"Okay." Ray sits back. "Door number one. You walk this into Ruiz on Monday. Tran backs you, because Tran's an honest little weirdo and he already flagged the Wi-Fi, and he's got a pair of earbuds in an evidence bag with the kid's voice on them. The kid confesses, because the kid's been wanting to confess since Monday morning. He's twenty-two. He's got no record. He's got a dead mother and a story a jury's going to cry at, and a lawyer who can count will plead it to something with a number on it he can live through."

"And Kessler."

"Kessler walks on the trades. All of them. Dorsey looks like a horse's ass in front of his bosses in Washington, which, I'll be honest, is a point in favor." He cracks a seed. "Kessler gives an interview. Kessler talks about how he was the victim of a disturbed young man, and he's praying for him. He uses the word family. He keeps the name on the door."

The river does what it does.

"Door number two," I say.

"Door number two, the paper goes somewhere nobody looks. Kessler goes down for a crime he didn't commit. Which is a crime.

Yours, by the way, not his. You'd be the one sitting on it." He doesn't say it hard. Ray never says anything hard. "And he does the time for what he did do, which nobody's ever going to charge him with, because you can't arrest a guy for walking past his kid."

"That's not justice."

"No," Ray says. "That's poetry. They're cousins. They don't get along."

. . .

The sky over Manhattan goes from black to slate. You can watch it if you don't blink. The lights in the towers start to look a little foolish, the way streetlights do at dawn, like somebody who didn't get the memo.

"Paul Ostrander," I say.

"Paul Ostrander's alive because a doorman went out for a smoke at the right time and you took the stairs fast." Ray looks at the river. "The kid didn't mean it. You believe that?"

"Yeah."

"Me too. Doesn't mean it didn't happen."

"I know it happened. I was there."

"I know you were there, kid. I was in the car."

I almost laugh. It comes out through my nose.

He tells me about a case from '98. A kid in East New York who boosted a car to drive his grandmother to the hospital because the ambulance didn't come. He's told it before. I know how it ends: Ray drove the kid to the precinct himself and then drove the grandmother home himself and then went to the kid's arraignment on his day off and sat in the back row in this exact cap. I let him tell it anyway. The way he tells it, the grandmother gives him a tin of butter cookies

every Christmas till she dies, and he never eats one, he says, because they're for looking at.

"What's the moral," I say.

"There's no moral. It's a story about cookies." He looks at me. "The moral is you can do the job right and still do it like a person. You're asking me which door. I'm telling you I don't know. Nobody gets to know. You just get to pick."

. . .

At 6:41 the sun comes up behind us, over Williamsburg, and I see it in the windows across the river first. The whole of Manhattan catches it at once, floor by floor, glass going gold like somebody's flipping it on one switch at a time. On this side, the Domino sign goes from red to nothing. It's still there. You just can't see it in daylight.

Somewhere in Bed-Stuy a kid is folding the last of his laundry, or lying on top of his covers in his clothes doing the breathing.

Somewhere in Cobble Hill a man is sleeping with nothing in his ears.

In Sunset Park, not far from a funeral home nobody from his firm ever visited, Grant Kessler is waking up on a federal bunk. On Monday at 7:15, nobody is going to put an oat milk with one sugar on his desk.

"You know what I think," Ray says.

"Tell me."

"I think you already did it. I think you did it at the laundromat when you put that paper back in your jacket instead of in front of Ruiz's face. You're sitting here so you can feel bad about it properly." He picks a shell off his lip. "That's not a criticism. Feeling bad properly is most of this job."

"Ray."

"Your call, kid."

"I know."

I fold the printout back into thirds. I lean across him and open the glovebox. It's the usual: registration, a flashlight with dead batteries, ketchup packets, a Rangers ticket from a game Natalie dragged me to the year before she moved to Philly, a pair of reading glasses that aren't mine. I put the paper on top of it all, flat, and shut the glovebox, and it clicks.

That's it. That's the whole sound a decision makes, if it's a decision. Maybe it isn't. Glove boxes open. I know that. I'm a detective.

Ray doesn't say anything.

The second coffee is still in the cupholder where I put it outside the bodega on Broadway, eleven hours ago, the lid still on. I pick it up. It's stone cold, the way it always is by morning. I open my door and pour it out onto the pavement by the railing, and it runs black toward the river and finds a crack and goes.

I get back in. The heater's still going. My hands are cold anyway.

"Home?" Ray says.

"Home."

He tips his head back against the window and shuts his eyes, like one of us should.

CHAPTER TWELVE

3:12

RUIZ TAKES ME OFF the board for the weekend. She does it by text, which is how she does things she knows I'll argue with. *You're off Sat and Sun. Not a suggestion. Sleep, Mercer.*

So Saturday night I'm home. I know I'm home because I make eggs, and I eat them standing up, and I put the Knicks on with the sound low and lie on the couch with my shoes still on, and the last thing I remember is a free throw in the third quarter.

Then it's 6:20 Sunday morning and the TV is on the menu screen, asking if I'm still watching.

Six hours. Longest I've slept in three years. I should feel like a new man. I feel like I've been carried somewhere and put back.

. . .

At four in the afternoon I call Dylan and ask him to come in. Voluntary. A chat for the record, I tell him, loose ends on the Kessler matter, which is the kind of sentence that means nothing and everybody accepts. He says, "Okay," and then, "Should I bring anything?" like it's a dinner party.

It's dark by the time he gets to Union Avenue. Sunday at the precinct is a desk sergeant eating soup out of a deli container and a radio on low playing the Giants losing. Ray waits in the car. The printout waits in the glovebox. I tell myself I haven't decided anything, and I'm almost convincing.

Interview Room B is the good one, meaning the radiator works. Gray table, bolted. Two chairs, one with a short leg. A camera up in the corner with its red light off, because I didn't turn it on. Dylan sits in the short-leg chair without being told, rocks once, finds the angle where it holds, and stops. Same gray hoodie. His hair's wet like he showered right before.

"You slept," he says.

"How do you know?"

"You've got a crease on your cheek. From a cushion." He touches his own face to show me where. "Couch?"

"Couch."

"That's good," he says, and means it, and I don't know what to do with that, so I open the folder in front of me, which is empty except for a legal pad.

We do the loose ends. He tells me about Kessler's office: who had the keys, who cleaned it, that the cleaning crew came Tuesdays and Fridays and never touched the desk. That Megan Walsh cried in the supply closet on Friday after the arrest and Dylan brought her a tea. He answers everything. He doesn't volunteer. He answers like a witness, carefully, like a kid reading the boring part of the filing.

Then there's only one question left on the pad, and I haven't written it down, and we both know what it is.

"Sunday night," I say. "A week ago. Where were you?"

He looks at me for a long time.

"Do you want me to answer that, Detective?"

"I want to know if you would."

"Yes," he says. Just that. His hands are flat on the table. "If you ask, I'll tell you."

I don't ask. Not yet. I pick up my phone instead, because I want to see the line again. I want to look at the time before I make it real. The printout's in the car, but the email's still where Tran sent it, so I open my spam and scroll down and find it. *02:41:17. FLR 31.* Out again at 3:58. I read it twice. I put the phone down on the table between us, face up, still lit.

When I look up, he's not looking at me.

He's looking at the phone. And all the color has gone out of him, the way it goes out of people when the phone rings at four in the morning.

"That's not mine," he says.

"What?"

"On your phone." His voice is very small. "The one at the top."

I look down.

My spam folder. Tran's email, Friday, 11:09 p.m. And above it, a row I scrolled past without seeing, because it looks like nothing. No sender. The space where a name goes is just blank. No subject. A little paperclip. No preview text.

Sun 3:12 AM.

"That one's not mine," Dylan says. "I only ever sent twenty-four."

. . .

The radiator knocks. Down the hall the Giants fumble and the desk sergeant says something about their mothers.

"It's spam," I say. "It's nothing."

"It's how I built them." He hasn't taken his eyes off it. "No sender. Not a fake one, *nothing*, you have to break the header to do that, most servers won't even deliver it. No subject. One attachment." He swallows. "Mine were forty seconds. Every one."

"You sent this."

"No." He finally looks at me, and it's the first time all week I've seen him scared. Not ashamed, not tired. Scared. "I sent twenty-four. I counted them going out. I watched every one go, I sat on that floor and watched the little bar twenty-four times, and then I shut it down and I deleted the server and I sat there till almost four because I couldn't make myself stand up. It's gone. I'm the only one who knew how it worked."

"Then who sent it?"

"I don't know."

"Somebody copied you."

"I never showed anyone. I never wrote it down anywhere that wasn't—" He stops. He's doing the math. I watch him do it. Then he asks it, quietly, like he's asking how Mr. Ostrander is. "Detective. Do you own a pair?"

"No."

He looks at me the way I looked at Paul Ostrander on the ledge on Monday night. Like I'm standing somewhere I don't know I'm standing.

"We're done," I say. "Go home."

He goes. At the door he stops with his hand on the frame, and he doesn't turn around.

"I didn't give it to anyone," he says. "I need you to know that."

"I know."

I don't. That's the first time I've said it to him and not meant it.

. . .

Ray's in the passenger seat. He watches me get in and doesn't say anything, and I don't either, and I pull out onto Union and take Metropolitan toward the river. The phone's on my thigh, face down now. It feels warm through my jeans. It isn't.

You've done the math. I'm doing it too, at red lights.

"You gonna open it?" Ray says, around Bedford.

"At home."

"Want company?"

"You hate the stairs."

"My knees," he agrees. "I'll wait in the car."

I park on Kent. He settles in. The second coffee I bought on the way sits in the cupholder by his knee, steaming the inside of the windshield in a little oval. I leave the engine running for him.

Four flights. I don't close the door behind me. I don't know why. My hands are busy with the keys and the phone, and then I'm inside, and it just stays open, the hallway light lying across the floor in a long yellow wedge.

I search the place first. Habit. I do it the way I'd do anybody's apartment, closet, bathroom cabinet, under the bed, the shoebox on the shelf with the papers from the divorce. Nothing. I don't own a pair. I'd know. I'm the kind of person who'd know.

The junk drawer in the kitchen is last, because it always is. Takeout menus. Rubber bands. Batteries that may or may not be dead. A screwdriver from a set I never bought.

And a white box, the size of a deck of cards. Matte. No pictures. On the side, in soft gray lowercase: *lull.*

The seal is torn. I don't remember tearing it. Inside, the two earbuds sit in their soft white foam, one of them not quite flush, like it was put back by someone in a hurry or someone in the dark. Under the foam there's a small cream card, heavy stock. *Sleep well, family. — G.K.*

I was in Megan Walsh's office for six minutes on Tuesday. I remember all six.

· · ·

I open the email standing at the counter.

The video loads slow, the little wheel going around. Then it's my kitchen.

It's shot from low, from the table, a little wide, and I turn my head and there's my laptop, exactly where it is in the frame, lid up, the way I leave it. The black dot of the camera above the screen. No Post-it. No tape. Paul Ostrander thought of it. Lauren Fisk thought of it. I never did.

The light on the stove hood is on, nothing else. That orange.

And there I am. Barefoot. Saturday's shirt. A white earbud in my left ear.

My eyes are open. There's nothing behind them. I'm standing at the fridge with the marker from the little tray. I wipe something off the bottom of the board with the side of my hand. Then I take the cap off and I write, slowly, the way you'd write if someone were telling you each letter. Then I cap it. I put it back on the tray. I stand there with my arms at my sides for a long time, longer than anyone would stand anywhere, the refrigerator humming.

At thirty-six seconds I turn my head and look straight into the laptop.

Nothing in my face. Nothing at all.

Forty seconds. It ends.

I put the phone down on the counter. I look up at the fridge.

The whiteboard is where I keep the things I'd otherwise lose. The dentist I've moved three times. *Call landlord re: radiator.* The phone number with no name.

At the bottom, where *SEEDS* used to be, there's one clean stripe, the blue wiped away. In the stripe, in black marker, in handwriting I'd know anywhere, the J with the little bar across the top the way I sign my reports:

J.M. — 2

I don't remember writing it.

Behind me, in the doorway, Ray says, "Kid."

I don't turn around.

END OF CASE ONE

Jake Mercer will return in The Second Jake.

Thank you for reading. Don't check your spam at 3:12.

— Shay