A JAKE MERCER CASE · TWO

The Second Jake

Someone is solving his cases.
In his handwriting.



Shay

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The Second Jake — A Jake Mercer Case, Book Two

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CONTENTS

One · Out of Ranch 5
Two · Block Capitals 13
Three · Floyd Bennett 21
Four · Locker 114 28
Five · Danny Price 36
Six · Night Self 44
Seven · Mileage 52
Eight · Shaw 60
Nine · Stor-Mor 68
Ten · Unit 3-117 75
Eleven · Dawn Call 83
Twelve · Ask Kowalski 89

CHAPTER ONE

Out of Ranch

THE NOTE IS TAPED to the cooler door at eye level, which is the first thing I don't like about it.

Not high, not low. Exactly where a man my height would look if he walked to the back of the Star Light Deli & Grocery on Knickerbocker Avenue and stopped in front of the walk-in. One strip of clear tape across the top, straight as a ruler. Yellow legal-pad paper, the top edge torn clean along the perforation, slowly, the way you tear it when you've got all night.

Block capitals. Black ink.

HIS NEPHEW. CHECK THE LOTTERY TICKETS. – J.M.

"It was there when we got here," says Officer Bailey from the Eight-Three. Young, level, braid tucked into her collar. "We left it up for you."

"For me."

"For whoever caught it." She shrugs. "It's signed. Seemed rude to take it down."

The J has a little bar across the top. Lots of people do that.

The cooler door stands open, held by a milk crate. Inside, past the cases of Modelo and the gallon jugs of whole milk sweating in rows,

there's a bare patch of concrete where Nasser Saleh, sixty-one, owner, spent about an hour tonight with a knot over his left ear and nobody to tell about it. He's at Wyckoff Heights now with a heated blanket.

He was breathing, she says, because somebody made him comfortable.

She shows me on her phone. Mr. Saleh on his side on a bed of flattened cardboard boxes. Another sheet of cardboard laid over him like a quilt, tucked in at the shoulders. His head on a folded white apron. Like somebody came by and saw to it he didn't catch a chill.

"Door was shut," Bailey says. "Not locked. Just shut. Gate out front was three-quarters down, no padlock."

"And the call?"

"Two fifty-one. From the Link kiosk on the corner of Troutman. Male, calm. 'There's a man in the cooler at the Star Light. He's breathing. He's been in there about an hour.' Then he hung up."

"He give a name?"

She tips her head at the yellow paper.

"Sort of."

. . .

I caught it off the radio at 2:58.

I remember because I looked at the dashboard clock, and the clock was wrong. The last time I'd looked, Ray was telling me about a book on anti-gravity he couldn't put down, and it was 1:52, and we were parked under the J train on Broadway with two coffees and the heat going. Then the radio said *unconscious male, Knickerbocker*, and it was 2:58, and the train had come and gone over us I don't know how many times, and my coffee was cold.

Not Ray's. Mine. Full to the lid.

I don't let my coffee go cold. It's the one reliable thing about me.

"You were resting your eyes, kid," Ray said.

"I don't rest my eyes."

"Then you were thinking real hard with them shut."

I drove. I didn't think about it. I've gotten good at that.

. . .

A bodega at three-thirty in the morning with nobody behind the counter is a strange animal. All the lights on. The coffee machine ticking as it cools. The lottery screen cycling the Powerball jackpot to an empty room. A gray cat with one torn ear sits on top of the bread rack and watches me like I'm late.

The register is shut. The Newports are all there in their slots. Anybody who robs a bodega takes the Newports. It's practically in the manual. Nobody robbed this place. Somebody left it.

Next to the register there's a wire rack of sunflower seeds, and in the middle of it, a full row of ranch.

I stand there longer than I should. I haven't seen a bag of ranch in a bodega in Brooklyn North since before Halloween. I'd started to think they'd quit making it. And here's a whole row, in a store nobody's minding, like it's been waiting up.

I take one. I leave two dollars under the edge of the register.

Bailey watches me do it. "They're a dollar fifty."

"Keep the change."

. . .

Sami Saleh walks in at 3:40 in a black puffer and new Jordans that have never met a puddle. Twenty-two. Hands in his pockets. His aunt called him from the hospital, he says. He worked till midnight, he

says, and his uncle took over, and everything was normal. Uncle Nasser was doing the cigarette count. Uncle Nasser is always doing the cigarette count.

"Who pulls the gate on a twenty-four-hour store?" I ask.

"I don't know. Maybe he took a break."

"In the cooler."

He doesn't answer that.

I don't need the note. I've done this long enough to know a nephew when one walks in. The note just saves me forty minutes.

"Show me where you keep the lottery tickets," I say.

His eyes go to the cooler. Not to the register, where the terminal is, where the scratch-offs hang off their dispenser in a long glossy tongue. To the cooler.

You caught that. So did I.

Inside it's thirty-eight degrees and smells like cardboard and cold beer. Behind a stack of Modelo, on the floor, about where a man would drop something if he were falling, there's a manila envelope with a rubber band around it.

Scratch-offs. Thirty-one of them, scratched clean, every one a winner. Twenty dollars. Fifty. A hundred. One for five hundred, with a tick mark beside it in blue pen. Somebody had been keeping score.

It goes like this. A customer brings in a ticket and you scan it. The terminal tells you if it won. The customer can't see the screen, and nine times out of ten the customer is seventy and left her glasses at home. You shake your head. *Not this time, mami.* You drop it in the little basket under the counter. Later you fish it out.

Thirty-one times since August, by the dates. Two thousand three hundred and forty dollars of other people's luck.

When I turn around, Sami's in the doorway of the cooler, and he's crying before I've said a word.

"He found it in my jacket," he says. "In the back. He was looking for the lighters. He said he was calling my father. He said he was calling my father in Sana'a. I pushed him. Not hard. I swear to God, not hard, he just—the shelf—" He touches his own head, over the left ear, exactly the spot. "He didn't move. I thought he was. I thought he was."

"So you shut the door."

"I didn't know what to do."

"And then you came back and covered him up."

He looks at me. Blank. Wet-faced.

"What?"

"The cardboard. The apron under his head."

"I shut the door," Sami says. "I pulled the gate, and I drove around. Two hours. I didn't come back. I didn't call nobody. I was too scared to call nobody."

Bailey and I look at each other over his head.

"Huh," she says.

. . .

Ray's in the passenger seat where I left him, cap on the dash, the heat running for him. I pop the glovebox for an evidence envelope and there's the elevator log, on top of everything, folded in thirds the way I left it two weeks ago.

Grant Kessler is out on a bail number with seven figures in it and a lawyer who goes on television. Dylan Hale hasn't been charged with anything. I haven't decided anything. The paper doesn't mind. It lies there and lets me look at it every time I need a glassine envelope.

I take one and close the glovebox on the rest.

Under the dome light I hold the note up in its sleeve. Ray leans over to read it. He doesn't reach for it. Ray treats evidence like other people's mail.

"J.M.," he says.

"Joe Mauer. Jim Morrison. Jimmy Moreno."

"Who's Jimmy Moreno?"

"Kid I went to high school with. Sold me a fake ID that said I was from Delaware."

"Kid."

"It's two letters, Ray. You know how many J.M.s there are in Brooklyn?"

I laugh. It's a decent laugh. People who were being nice have told me so.

Ray doesn't laugh. Ray, who laughs at his own jokes before he gets to the end of them. He looks at the note, and then out the windshield at the Star Light, where somebody from the Eight-Three has run the gate all the way up and the whole store is lit like an aquarium, the cat still on the bread rack, supervising.

"Who signs a tip?" he says.

"Somebody who wants credit."

"Credit, you leave a name. That's not a name. That's initials." He finally looks at me. "Initials is what you put on things that are yours. Your lunch in the fridge. Your gym bag."

"Ray."

"I'm just saying how it went. Guy walks in on a man laid out in a cooler. Doesn't call from the store phone. Doesn't wait for the bus. Makes him a bed. Writes it up, tears it clean, tapes it straight, walks two blocks to a kiosk, calls it in like he's ordering a pizza." He shakes

his head, slowly. “That’s not a Good Samaritan. Samaritans panic. Samaritans wait around to get thanked.”

“So what is it?”

He doesn’t answer. He looks at the bag of ranch on the dashboard, next to his cap, and he doesn’t open it.

“You’re not laughing,” I say.

“Neither are you, kid. You’re just making the noise.”

. . .

It’s 6:02 when I climb the four flights on Kent. The landing light on two is still out. Behind Mrs. Ocasio’s door a man is winning a dinette set in Spanish.

I turn on the stove light and nothing else.

On the fridge, at the bottom of the whiteboard, in the clean stripe where *SEEDS* used to be:

J.M. – 2

I’ve wiped it twice in two weeks. Paper towel the first time. The heel of my hand the second, at four in the morning, until the skin squeaked. Both times it came back. Not right away. A day. Two. I come home and there it is, black marker, square and unhurried, like a bill that knows you’ll pay it eventually.

I haven’t told anyone. Not Ruiz. Not Tran, who’d want the video, and then the laptop, and then would look at me the way Dylan Hale looked at me across the table in Interview B. Ray hasn’t brought it up. Neither have I. We leave it on the fridge where it lives.

I look at the J. The little bar across the top.

Lots of people.

I sit down at the kitchen table to take off my shoes, and my socks are wet.

Not damp. Wet. Cold through to the skin, the toes of both shoes gone dark with it. The left lace has a blade of pale, dry grass caught in the knot, folded in half like somebody marking a page.

I check the weather on my phone, which is a thing only a crazy person does about a night that already happened. Zero percent. Clear and cold and dry since Saturday.

I was in a car. I was in a bodega with a dry floor and a cooler with a dry floor, and then I was in a car again.

It didn't rain.

CHAPTER TWO

Block Capitals

THE SECOND ONE IS under my windshield wiper.

Monday, 7:40 p.m., Kent Avenue. I come down the four flights with my coat half on, and the Crown Vic is where I left it at six that morning, nose to a hydrant, with a Ziploc bag tucked under the driver's-side wiper. Sealed. Inside, one sheet of yellow paper folded in thirds.

It hasn't rained since Saturday. Somebody bagged it anyway. Somebody who plans for weather.

THE TIRE SHOP ON MORGAN AVE. GREEN AWNING. BAY TWO. THE BACK WALL IS PLYWOOD. – J.M.

I stand on the sidewalk and read it three times while the Domino sign comes on over the river, one red letter at a time.

Ray reads it over my arm when I get in.

"Tire shop," he says.

"Range Rover."

"Your Range Rover."

Saturday night I caught a stolen Range Rover off a driveway on Milton Street in Greenpoint. The owner's doorbell camera got two kids in ski masks and a laptop, forty-one seconds from the door

handle to gone. It's the nineteenth SUV out of North Brooklyn since Labor Day. Auto Crime has a corkboard. Mine is one card on it.

Mine's the only one with a pen pal.

"Call Pagano," Ray says.

"And say what? A guy who signs his initials says plywood?"

"Say you got a hunch. You got a hunch, kid. It just came in a bag."

. . .

Ray stays in the Crown Vic around the corner on Johnson Avenue. He doesn't do vans. He says they smell like other people's lunches.

Sergeant Lou Pagano from Auto Crime sits with me in a dead plumber's van across Morgan Avenue from one-thirty till the sky starts to lighten, and complains for most of it. His back, his ex-wife, my CI, whom I won't name.

"I don't have a CI."

"Everybody has a CI."

"I have a note."

The shop is called MORGAN TIRE & RIM, WE FIX FLATS 24 HRS, under a green awning gone gray at the edges. Three bays. At 2:15 a flatbed backs into bay two with something under a tarp. It's the wrong shape for a flat. Pagano stops complaining.

Around four Pagano catches me grinning at nothing. It's a joke Ray told me at midnight, the guy who invented the knock-knock joke and won the no-bell prize. It's not that good. It's the way he tells it.

The judge on overnight duty signs at 5:10. At six we go in.

The back wall of bay two is plywood. Somebody painted it the exact gray of the cinderblock and drew mortar lines on it in Sharpie, every brick, which is either a lot of work or a lot of time with nothing to do. Behind it, a second garage as long as a subway car. Nine SUVs

nose to tail, plates off. A folding table with a laptop and a key programmer. Bills of lading for a container leaving Port Newark on Thursday.

My Range Rover is third from the left. There's a child's car seat still buckled in the back, a stuffed giraffe wedged against the window.

Six arrests. Pagano shakes my hand in the street like we survived something.

"Who's your CI?" he says.

"Nobody."

"Nobody's good." He lets go of my hand. "Get me nobody's number."

. . .

The property window at the Nine-Oh is a steel cage at the end of the basement hall with a counter, a slot, and a jar of Tootsie Rolls nobody under fifty eats. At 7:20 Tuesday morning I'm standing at it with two notes in two sleeves, and on the other side of the mesh Sergeant Frank Doyle is reading them with his glasses on the end of his nose.

Fourteen years Frank's run property. Big man, pink at the neck, forearms like he's been carrying kegs his whole life, reading glasses on a cord his wife bought him and he pretends to hate. Bombers windbreaker over his uniform shirt. WFAN on low, two guys taking the Jets personally.

"Lottery tickets," he says. "Tire shop. Who's this, your conscience?"

"Some guy."

"Some guy writes neat." He holds the bodega one up to the fluorescent light. "You know, I thought this was yours for a second. Eight years I been reading your vouchers, Mercer. You print like a

nun with a grudge."

He laughs. I laugh, a little after him.

He reads them again. Both of them, slowly, the bodega and then the tire shop. The second time through he isn't smiling, and then he is again, the way a sign flickers back on. He logs them into the computer with two fingers, and then writes them out a second time by hand, in cursive, in a green ledger with a cracked spine.

"Computers forget," he says, when he sees me watching. "Paper holds a grudge." He tears a ticket off a roll by the register and pushes it through the slot. "Bombers dinner. Saturday the twenty-eighth, K of C hall on Avenue U, forty bucks, open bar, I do a slideshow. You're coming."

"I work nights, Frank."

"It's a Saturday. Everybody works nights, on a Saturday, at my slideshow." He points at me with a Tootsie Roll. "You look like hell. You know what I do? Warm milk, History Channel. Something about the Romans. I'm out before the aqueduct."

I put the ticket in my coat and go home to look at the ceiling.

. . .

By eight Tuesday night I've got a fan club.

Somebody's left a yellow legal pad on my desk with a red stick-on bow. On the squad whiteboard, between the open cases and the overtime sheet, in green marker: *J.M. FOR COMMISSIONER*. Shapiro wants to know if J.M. does homicides or just the fun stuff.

On my chair there's another note, folded in thirds, on legal paper.

THE BUTLER. CHECK THE PANTRY. – J.M.

Loopy, slanting letters. The J's a fishhook. The M looks like two hills on a kid's drawing.

I laugh, a real one this time, because whoever did it can't fake block capitals to save his life, and something in my chest lets go that I didn't know was holding on.

Then I look at the fishhook J a while longer. I look at it until I'm not laughing.

Ruiz is in her office door, sleeves pushed up.

"Mercer."

She isn't laughing either.

. . .

"Close the door."

I close it. She doesn't sit, so I don't.

"Two notes," she says. "Two of your scenes. Nobody else's. Who's J.M.?"

"I don't know."

"Pagano's people have been on that crew since September. They had a wire request in front of a judge. And somebody slips you the bay number under a wiper on Kent Avenue."

"So somebody in Auto Crime's got a conscience."

"Or somebody in this building is selling, and you're buying." She lets that sit a second. "I'm not asking if it's you. I'm telling you somebody's going to ask. Downtown reads the same paper I read. They just read it slower."

Her eyes go past me to the window behind her desk, which looks down on the lot. The Crown Vic is under the one light that works, engine ticking, and her eyes stay on it a beat longer than they need to. On the passenger side.

"Write it all down," she says. "Every note. Where, when, who touched it. Make it boring."

"I'm always boring."

"Make it more boring than that."

. . .

At 1:05 Wednesday morning I'm at my desk with a DD-5 for Morgan Avenue and a pen, and I'm making it boring.

Everybody prints on these. A sergeant at the Academy tells you nobody on a jury can read cursive, so you write in capitals, and after ten years it's not a choice anymore. It's your hand.

SUBJECT VEHICLE RECOVERED AT MORGAN TIRE & RIM, MORGAN AVE

I stop.

I've got photocopies of the notes in the folder. I put them next to the form under the desk lamp, and I look.

Here's what I'd tell a jury. The M. Most people stop the middle of an M halfway down, a little v hanging in the air. Mine drops all the way to the baseline, like a W someone turned over. The R. The leg doesn't come down straight. It kicks out, long, leaning right, like it's leaving the room. The J, with the bar on top.

The note says MORGAN. My form says MORGAN.

Same M. Same R. Same lean.

Handwriting isn't a fingerprint. Half the cops in this building learned capitals from the same sergeant. I could find twenty people in the Nine-Oh who print like this by lunch.

I don't go looking.

I start the form over. I make my Ms stop halfway. I make the Rs come straight down. It takes a long time. It looks like a ransom note written by a careful child.

Halfway down the second page I get up to sit in the car for a minute and clear my head.

It's 1:31. I remember the stairwell. I remember the cold of the door.

. . .

It's 4:52, and I'm at my desk.

The lamp's on. My coat is on the back of the chair, which is not where I hang it. The squad room's empty except for the copier humming to itself, and the DD-5 for Morgan Avenue is lying in front of me, done.

All of it. Every line. Signed and dated at the bottom.

The first page and a half is mine. Ms stopping halfway, Rs coming straight down. A man trying hard.

The rest doesn't try. The rest is fast and square and sure of itself, the Ms dropping all the way to the line, the Rs kicking out to the right. Somebody finished my report for me in my handwriting. My real one.

You see where this is going. I'm trying not to.

I put the form in the out tray. I don't read it. I go out to the car and Ray is there in the dark with the heat off, his head back against the window and his eyes shut, cap on the dash, and I don't wake him.

. . .

I go down to the cage at 7:15 to voucher the Ziploc the second note came in, which I forgot yesterday.

The shutter is down. Frank Doyle is in that cage at 6:50 every weekday of his life, WFAN on, Tootsie Rolls topped up.

Ben Hughes is standing in front of it. Day-tour uniform on light duty, sling on his left arm, the kid who lifts the heavy bins for Frank. He's holding a ring of keys like he's never held keys before.

"Sarge isn't here," he says. "Sarge is always here."

"He call in?"

"He doesn't call in. He doesn't get sick." He looks at the keys. "Desk says Maureen called at six. He wasn't home when she woke up. His side of the bed was cold."

Upstairs a phone rings, then another. Footsteps on the stairs. The day squad's lieutenant comes down two at a time with his coat already on.

"Park Police," he says, to nobody, to the hallway. "They found Frank's car. Floyd Bennett Field. Keys in it. Phone on the seat."

Ben Hughes drops the keys.

I pick them up for him. While I'm down there, I do the math.

Last night, from 1:31 to 4:52, I don't know where I was.

CHAPTER THREE

Floyd Bennett

IN 1938 A PILOT named Douglas Corrigan took off from Floyd Bennett Field, told everybody he was going to California, and landed in Ireland twenty-eight hours later. He said his compass was broken. They gave him a parade.

That's the kind of place this is. A place where people say they're going one way.

It was the city's first real airport. Now it's a mile of cracked runway at the bottom of Flatbush Avenue with grass coming up through the seams, an old limestone terminal with nobody in it, a campground nobody camps in past October, and, way out at the far end by the water, the hangars where the NYPD keeps its helicopters. The Belt Parkway hums along the top of it like a refrigerator. Past the end of the runways there's Jamaica Bay, and past that there's nothing you can see at night.

Frank Doyle's car is in the lot by the terminal. A maroon Ford Explorer with a Bombers decal in the back window and a PBA card on the dash. It's parked dead straight between the lines, nose to the runway, like he pulled in to watch something take off.

Yellow tape on four orange cones around it. A Park Police cruiser idling beside it with a young officer inside eating sunflower seeds out of the bag, which I don't hold against him.

And Ruiz, standing at the tape in her long black coat with her hands in the pockets, looking at the car like it owes her an answer.

. . .

"Keys in the ignition," she says. "Phone face down on the passenger seat. Wallet in the console. Forty-two dollars in it. Park Police found it at ten after eight this morning on their first loop. Lot's supposed to clear at sunset."

"Anything wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Doors unlocked. No damage. No blood, no note, no nothing. CSU did the outside and the handles at noon and they want a crime before they do the inside. Park Police want it because it's their dirt. Missing Persons wants it because it's their paperwork." She breathes out through her nose. "It gets towed to our lot at seven tomorrow morning, and then everybody can fight about it indoors."

"Maureen?"

"He went to bed at ten. She went to bed at ten-thirty. She woke up at five-forty and his side was cold and the Ford was gone. She figured he went in early to do inventory. He does that." Ruiz looks at me. "He doesn't do that at two in the morning."

"Is that when?"

"Nobody knows when. That's why you're here."

She turns from the car to me.

"Missing Persons works days. Harbor's been in the bay since nine this morning. Aviation's got a bird up. Everybody's looking in daylight." She says it flat, the way she reads charges. "He went out of

his house in the middle of the night. You're the only one in that building who's awake at the hours he disappeared. It's yours, Mercer."

"Missing Persons is going to love that."

"Missing Persons has it on paper. You have it for real."

She looks past me then. At the Crown Vic, where I left it at the edge of the lot with the engine running. At the passenger side. Her eyes stay there a beat, and then come back.

"Find him," she says. "Whatever he's doing out here. Find him before somebody puts it on the news."

. . .

They come in their own cars.

By ten there are forty of them, off-duty, from the Nine-Oh and the Nine-Four and a couple from Gerritsen Beach who live around the corner from Frank. Bombers jackets. Precinct hoodies. Somebody's brought six boxes of coffee from the Dunkin' on Flatbush and lined them up on the hood of a Jeep. A sergeant from patrol organizes them without being asked, and they spread out along the edge of the grass, an arm's length apart, and start walking.

From the lot it looks like a slow line of stars moving across a field. Flashlights swinging low. Nobody calling his name. You don't call a grown man's name across a field. You just look.

The helicopter comes around off the bay, low, its spotlight laying a white coin on the water and sliding it along toward the marsh. The sound gets into your chest and stays there.

Maureen Doyle is standing by the Jeep with her sister. She's wearing a Bombers windbreaker that's his, too big for her, the sleeves turned back twice. Sixty, maybe. Reading glasses pushed up into her

hair. When I tell her who I am she takes my hand in both of hers and doesn't let go.

"He doesn't go out at night," she says. "Twenty-six years. In bed by ten, up at five-thirty. He snores. If he got up, I'd know. I'd know."

"Did he seem worried about anything lately?"

"Frank?" She almost laughs. "Frank worries about the bullpen. Frank worries about the banquet. The slideshow." She finally lets go of my hand. "Why would he come here? We used to bring Kelly here to fly kites. Before Phoenix. Why would he come here in the middle of the night?"

I don't have an answer. I tell her I'll find one. She looks at me like she's heard cops say that before, and is going to let me say it anyway.

. . .

Ray's in the passenger seat watching the flashlights.

"You know Frank?" I ask him.

It takes him a second.

"Everybody knows Frankie," he says.

That's all. Ray, who can tell you the middle name of every desk sergeant in Brooklyn since the Lindsay administration, and the name of their dog. He cracks a seed and looks at the field, the long line of lights going away from us into the dark.

"Forty cops looking at the grass," he says, after a while.

"So?"

"So nobody's looking at the car."

I look at the car. It sits there inside its tape like a dog that's been told to stay.

. . .

At 11:40 I call Megan Walsh, because I said I would, and because it's easier than looking at the car.

The Eastern District has Kessler's trial on a calendar now, and an AUSA named Feld who emails me in the voice of a man who's never been wrong about a comma. He wants chain of custody on every unopened pair of Lull earbuds that was still on thirty-one when the FBI took the floor. He wants me to confirm with the HR director.

She answers on the first ring.

"I'm up," she says, before I can apologize. "I'm always up now. It's fine. Is this about Mr.—is this about the case?"

I tell her what Feld wants. She tells me the FBI took the carton the Monday after the arrest. A woman agent in a navy windbreaker, very polite, counted them on Megan's desk.

"Eleven," Megan says. "I ordered a dozen spares in April. I count everything. It's a whole thing with me." She laughs, a small bright nervous sound. "Funny thing, actually. I was already one short after you came by."

The helicopter comes back around. The light slides across my windshield and away.

"I told her you must have taken one for evidence and forgot to tell me," she says. "Which is fine! Totally fine. You were looking at everything. I just didn't want the FBI thinking I'd lost one. Detective?"

I'm looking at nothing. At a kitchen drawer ten miles north of here, in a building on Kent Avenue, with takeout menus and dead batteries and a white box the size of a deck of cards. The seal torn. One bud not quite flush in the foam.

"I'll check my paperwork," I say.

"Oh, good. Thank you." Relief. "Okay. Goodnight, Detective. Or good morning. Whichever one you're on."

She hangs up. Ray doesn't say anything. I put the phone face down on my thigh, and we both watch the field.

. . .

By 12:30 the lights on the grass have started going out one at a time, the way a party ends. Harbor brings its boats in. The helicopter goes home to its hangar. The Park Police kid gets relieved by a Nine-Oh uniform named Petrakis, who played second base for Frank for six summers and sits down in his own car next to the tape like he's going to guard it with his life.

I go back to Union Avenue to read Frank Doyle.

There's not a lot of him on paper. Twenty-nine years on the job. Fourteen in property. Two commendations from the nineties for things that happened in East New York. No complaints. Not one. You don't see that much. A union delegate for a while. A softball coach forever. A mortgage on a house in Gerritsen Beach he's almost done paying. Everything about him is the kind of nothing you'd want in a neighbor.

I read it all twice. I make notes. My coffee goes cold next to my elbow while I'm reading, and at some point I look up and the squad room clock says 4:47, which seems like a lot. Paperwork eats hours. Everybody says so.

The tow comes at seven.

At 5:50 I'm back at the airfield.

. . .

The sky over the bay hasn't started yet. The lot is empty except for the Ford, the tape, and Petrakis asleep sitting up behind his wheel with his mouth open.

I knock on his window. He jumps.

"Go get a coffee," I tell him. "Get me one. Take your time."

He looks at the Ford, then at me, then goes, because I'm a detective and he's tired and it's Frank, and he'd like to be useful to somebody.

Ray stays in the Crown Vic.

I put on gloves. The driver's door opens with a soft clunk and the dome light comes on, and the inside of Frank Doyle's car smells like pine air freshener and old coffee and the vinyl of a man's whole life. Rosary on the mirror. A Bombers schedule in the door pocket, last season's, the games circled. An empty Tupperware on the passenger floor, washed, the lid on. The seat's pushed all the way back for a big man.

Nobody's searched this car. Not really. Everybody's looked at it.

I get down on one knee on the cold concrete with my flashlight and look under the driver's seat.

It's tucked into the seat rail, flat, square to the metal, where a man's heel would never touch it and a tow truck wouldn't shake it loose. Yellow paper. Folded in thirds.

I don't want to unfold it. I want that understood. I unfold it.

Block capitals. Black ink. The M in HIM dropping all the way to the line.

DON'T LOOK FOR HIM. LOOK AT HIM. – J.M.

Behind me, out over Jamaica Bay, the first helicopter of the morning lifts off from the hangars and swings out low across the water with its light on, looking for him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Locker 114

FRANK DOYLE'S COFFEE MUG says WORLD'S OKAYEST SERGEANT, and nobody has washed it.

It's on his desk inside the cage with a brown ring dried at the bottom, next to the jar of Tootsie Rolls and a radio tuned to WFAN with the sound off. Tuesday's coffee. He drank it, he rinsed nothing, he went home at a quarter to four, he ate dinner, he texted the boys goodnight, and some time after Maureen fell asleep he got up and drove to an airfield.

Ben Hughes stands just inside the cage door with the spare keys in his good hand, like a kid who's been left in charge of the house.

"Captain gave me the set from his safe last night," he says. "Sarge's are on his ring. His ring's in the car." He swallows. "In an evidence bag, I guess."

"I guess."

It's 7:35 Thursday morning. Ruiz read the note from under the seat at seven in her office with her coat still on, and she read it twice, and then she looked at me for a while, and then she said, "Quietly, Mercer," which is all she said.

So I'm looking at him. Quietly.

. . .

The property room at the Nine-Oh is a basement the length of the building behind a wall of steel mesh. Gray shelving in rows, floor to ceiling, bins with voucher numbers on the ends. Bikes hanging from hooks like meat in a cold room. A gun safe the size of a phone booth. And along the back wall, forty gray steel lockers, numbered 101 to 140, each one with its own brass padlock and a manila tag wired to the hasp.

Everything is labeled. Everything is square. You could do surgery in here.

"He's particular," Hughes says. He's twenty-six, maybe, with a soft Staten Island voice and a shoulder he hurt in June chasing a kid over a fence. He's been Frank's arms since July. "Everything's got a place. You move a bin two inches he knows. He doesn't yell. He just moves it back while you watch."

I go through the desk. Maureen and a girl with braces in a frame. A Bombers schedule, the banquet circled. A rosary in the pencil drawer. The green ledger with the cracked spine, every line in the same tidy cursive, years of it, bikes and guns and car stereos and cash and a single prosthetic leg in 2019, all of it entered twice, once in the computer and once here.

Computers forget.

On the clipboard by the door, the cage sign-in sheet. Name, time, purpose. I flip back a month. Two months. A year. Every other Saturday, the same entry in the same hand.

0800 – F. DOYLE – INVENTORY.

"He came in Saturdays?"

"Sarge says weekends are the only time it's quiet enough to count." Hughes shrugs his good shoulder. "Nobody else wants to be here on a Saturday."

"You ever help him?"

"With the lockers? No." He says it fast, like he's been asked before, or he's been told the answer. "Sarge does the high-value himself. Always. Cash, jewelry, the guns. He says that's the one part of the job you don't hand to anybody."

I look at the lockers. Forty brass padlocks in a row, every shackle facing the same way.

"Officer Hughes," I say. "Has anybody ever asked to count one?"

He looks at me like I've asked whether anybody ever checks the bottom of the ocean.

. . .

Ray's in the car in the lot with the heat going and the seeds out.

"Well?" he says.

"He's neat."

"Neat's not a crime."

"He comes in alone every other Saturday to count things nobody else is allowed to touch."

"That's not a crime either. That's a hobby." He cracks a seed. "My uncle Stash had forty years of *National Geographic* in his basement, in order, and nobody was allowed down there. Turned out he just liked the maps."

"Was that the whole story?"

"No," he admits. "There were also the other magazines."

I almost laugh. I put my head back against the rest. The lot's filling with the day tour, car doors and coffee and somebody's radio, a

Thursday like it's a regular Thursday, except that every cop who gets out of a car looks toward the front door first, where somebody's taped up a flyer of Frank in an apron.

"Look at him," I say. "Not for him. At him."

"So look," Ray says.

"I'm looking."

"You're looking at his desk, kid. His desk isn't him."

I shut my eyes. Just to think. Just for a second.

. . .

It's 10:41.

The sun's on the windshield. The lot's full. My mouth tastes like I've been chewing on the cuff of my coat, and my coat is buttoned, all four buttons, which I don't do. I've never once in my life buttoned all four.

Ray is looking out the windshield at the precinct door. He hasn't moved.

I unbutton the coat. It's a reflex, the way you'd brush off a spider. My right hand goes into the inside pocket for my phone, and my phone's not there.

There's paper there.

Yellow. Folded in thirds. Torn clean along the top.

COUNT THE CASH IN LOCKER 114. – J.M.

I sit with it on my knee. The engine's running. The heat's on high. The phone, I find, is in the cupholder on my side, face down, where I always put it and never remember putting it.

"Ray."

"Yeah, kid."

"Did anybody come near the car?"

He takes a long time to answer. He's watching a uniform cross the lot with two coffees.

"Nobody came near the car," he says.

There's a legal pad on the back seat. There's always a legal pad on the back seat; I'm a detective. I don't turn around to look at it.

. . .

I call Ruiz from the car. I tell her a locker number. I don't tell her where I got it.

There's a long pause on the line. In it I can hear her office, the radiator, a phone ringing somewhere and nobody getting it.

"On video," she says finally. "Hughes witnesses. Log it before you touch anything, and log it again after. I'll sign." Another pause. "Mercer. If it's all there, you never asked me."

"Understood."

"I hope you're wrong," she says, and hangs up, and I know she means it.

. . .

Locker 114 has a manila tag wired to the hasp in Frank's cursive. *90-21-0347. Bushwick Ave. 3/14/21. USC $412,000.* A stash house case from five years ago, still in appeals, still here because every time the transfer paperwork goes downtown the defense files something new and it comes back. The kind of money that just sits.

Hughes holds my phone and films. His hand isn't steady. I tell him that's fine.

The padlock opens on the third key. Inside, on the locker floor, there's one big clear evidence bag, heat-sealed across the top, two sets of initials in black marker running over the seal. One of them is *F.D.*

I put the date and time out loud for the camera. I cut the seal.

The bricks are shrink-wrapped the way they came out of the house on Bushwick Avenue, each one a stack of hundreds the thickness of a paperback, bound tight in plastic so you can see a Ben Franklin on the top and a Ben Franklin on the bottom. Forty-one bricks and two rubber-banded stacks. I lay them out on the counter in rows. Hughes reads the count to the phone in a small voice.

I cut the first brick. Hundreds. Real ones, worn soft, the paper smelling like the inside of a wallet. I count it twice. Ten thousand dollars.

Second brick. The same. Third.

I go to the bottom of the bag. The layer that sat on the locker floor for five years, under everything.

You already know. You've known since the Tootsie Rolls. Give me a second anyway.

The brick looks right. It weighs right. Ben Franklin on top, Ben Franklin on the bottom. I cut the plastic, and I peel away the top bill, and under it there's no stack.

There's confetti.

Green-gray, packed tight, a block of it pressed square, so many tiny pieces it looks like felt. I pinch some up between my gloved fingers. Strips the width of a matchstick. Half a serial number on one. An eye on another.

It's money. It's just not money anymore. It's the shredded currency the Federal Reserve used to give away in little plastic bags to schoolkids on field trips, a souvenir of what a hundred thousand dollars looks like after it's been retired. Color right through the plastic. Weight right in the hand. A real bill on top and a real bill on the bottom, so the edges look like money from every side.

I cut the next one. Confetti. The next. Confetti.

Seventeen bricks of forty-one.

"Oh no," Hughes says behind me, very quietly, to the phone, to nobody. "Oh no, oh no."

I stand there with my hands on the counter over a hundred and seventy thousand dollars' worth of nothing. I think about warm milk and the History Channel. I think about a slideshow at the K of C on Avenue U. I think about every cop in Brooklyn walking a field in the dark with a flashlight for him, an arm's length apart, not calling his name.

My stomach goes the way it goes in an elevator when the cable does something it shouldn't.

. . .

"Please don't stop on my account."

The voice comes from the cage window. Soft. Unhurried. The voice of a man who has never needed to raise it.

I didn't hear him come down the hall. Neither did Hughes, who almost drops my phone.

He's at the mesh with a paper cup of tea, the tag hanging over the rim. Fifties. Small and neat. Gray suit, gray tie, gray coat buttoned to the top, a face you'd trust to tell you the right dose. He looks at the confetti on the counter the way a doctor looks at an X-ray he's already seen.

"Keep filming, Officer. That's good. I like a recording." He nods to me, politely, the way you'd nod to a neighbor taking out his trash. "Lieutenant Gary Shaw. Internal Affairs."

"Lieutenant."

“Your lieutenant writes very boring memos, Detective. Every note, where, when, who touched it.” He takes a sip of his tea. “I’ve been reading them twice.”

He sets the cup down on the ledge of the window, square to the edge.

“Your fan club,” Gary Shaw says, “is getting very specific.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Danny Price

THE NINE-OH KEEPS ITS history on the wall between the soda machine and the men's room, which is about where history belongs.

A plaque from the blackout of '03. A framed *Daily News* front page nobody's read since it was framed. And fourteen team photos of the Ninety Precinct Bombers, one for every summer Frank Doyle has run the softball team, hung in two neat rows like a calendar of the same man getting older.

He's in the middle of every one. Big, pink-necked, forearms like Easter hams, a whistle he never blows. In 2013 he's got a mustache. In 2018 he's lost it. In every one he's got a hand on somebody's shoulder.

It's 4:50 Friday morning. Since Wednesday, someone's put a coffee can on the front desk with a strip of masking tape that says *FRANK – SEARCH*, and it's full of twenties. Uniforms have been walking the marsh grass at Floyd Bennett on their days off. The desk sergeant has a flyer of Frank taped to his monitor, Frank at a barbecue in an apron that says KISS THE CLERK, and he hasn't taken it down, because taking it down would mean something.

Since Thursday morning, the property room has had IA tape across the cage and Officer Ben Hughes sitting outside it on a folding chair, like a man waiting on news from surgery.

Nobody's said *locker 114* out loud. Everybody knows.

I'm on my way to the bathroom when I see the 2022 photo is crooked.

Everything in this building is crooked. The blinds, the radiators, a couple of the cops. The softball photos never are. Frank straightens them every Monday on his way in with a thumb and a tilt of his head. You could set a level on them.

This one hangs a quarter inch low on the left.

I lift it off the nail. Behind the glass, tucked between the mat and the photo, so it doesn't show from the front, is a strip of yellow legal paper. Folded once. The top edge torn so straight it could have been cut.

ASK WHY DANNY PRICE GOT TRANSFERRED. – J.M.

The block capitals sit on the line like they were set there with tweezers. The R in PRICE leans a little to the right, like it's trying to see around a corner.

I read the typed names under the photo. Back row, far end: *D. PRICE.* A kid with a buzz cut and a grin that takes up half his face. He's the only one on the team not squinting into the sun. Frank's hand is on his shoulder.

I bag the note. I put the photo back on the nail and straighten it with my thumb, and I don't think about the fact that my hand already knew the tilt.

. . .

Ruiz's light is on. It's been on since Wednesday.

She looks up when I knock and doesn't bother pretending she was doing paperwork. Her coffee's gone to sludge.

"Danny Price," I say.

She doesn't ask where I got it. She looks at me for a long second, then pulls open the bottom drawer of her desk and takes out a green hanging folder, and the way she holds it, I know it's been in that drawer a long time and she's always known exactly which drawer.

The tab says *PRICE, LINDA* in Ruiz's own hand.

"She writes every month," Ruiz says. "First week. Addressed to the Ninetieth Precinct, To Whom It May Concern. They come up from the front desk to me because nobody else wants them."

I flip through. Envelopes slit neatly along the top. Blue ink, cursive, the kind they taught in Catholic school when they still hit you for it. Thirty-seven of them.

"You answer any?"

"No." She says it straight, the way she'd tell a jury. "I read every single one. That's what I did. I read them and I put them in a drawer."

"Why'd he get transferred?"

"Paperwork says he asked. Hardship. To be closer to his mother. Frank signed off on it. Said the kid was homesick."

"His mother says?"

Ruiz closes the drawer with her foot.

"Read the letters, Mercer."

. . .

The Verrazzano is the only bridge in the city that makes you pay to get onto Staten Island and lets you leave for free. Nobody has ever explained this to me in a way I believe.

Ray's got his cap on the dash. I've cracked his window an inch, the way he likes it over water. Second coffee in the holder by his knee.

"You know why the Verrazzano's always tired?" he says.

"Don't."

"It's been up since 1964."

"That's not even a joke. That's a fact with timing."

"That's all a joke is, kid." He cracks a seed. "Read me the lady."

So I read him Linda Price while I drive, one hand on the wheel, the letters on my thigh. The first ones are long. Danny's badge number, the name of the tow yard that crushed his car eleven days after the crash, before anybody she could find had looked at it. *I am not a crazy woman. I am asking for one person to look.* By the second year they're shorter. By the third they're four lines. The last one, from November, is two.

It's me again. Please.

"Thirty-seven," Ray says.

"Thirty-seven."

He doesn't say anything else. He looks out at the Narrows, the freighters at anchor with their lights still on.

The West Shore Expressway runs down the far side of the island with the Arthur Kill on one hand and a lot of New Jersey on the other. Somewhere past the Bloomfield exit there's a section of guardrail that's a different gray than the rest. Brighter. Newer. Zip-tied to the post at the end of it is a cross made of two paint stirrers, and a plastic bunch of carnations gone the color of a Band-Aid.

I don't slow down. I see it anyway.

. . .

Tottenville is the last stop on the island. After that it's water and Perth Amboy. Linda Price lives on a street of aluminum-sided houses with chain-link and above-ground pools under tarps, and a flagpole in her yard with a blue-line flag faded almost to gray.

Ray stays in the car. He says a mother doesn't need two cops on her stoop. I don't argue.

She opens the door before I knock. Sixty-four, small, a cardigan with a tissue up the sleeve, reading glasses on a beaded chain. She looks at the badge. She looks at my face. And something in her goes very carefully still, the way you hold a full cup.

"You're from the Ninetieth," she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Somebody read them."

"Somebody read them."

She has the kettle on before I'm through the kitchen door.

It's a small, hot kitchen with a cat clock whose tail has stopped swinging. On top of the refrigerator, where you'd keep the cereal, there's a softball trophy. Gold plastic batter on a fake-marble base. *NINETY PRECT BOMBERS — 2022 — CHAMPIONS.* It's been dusted. Recently. It's the cleanest thing in a clean room.

On the windowsill over the sink there's a glove with a ball in the pocket, held shut with two thick rubber bands. That's how you break in a new glove. You leave it closed all winter so it remembers the shape.

"He was breaking it in," Linda says. She's seen me look. "For spring. He was going to play for the One-Two-Three team." She sets two mugs down. "They sent him home, he said. Like a kid who got sent home from school. He thought that was funny for about a week."

"Mrs. Price. Before the transfer. Did he say anything about work?"

She sits and folds her hands on the oilcloth like she's been practicing this for three years in an empty kitchen, which she has.

"February," she says. "He calls me on his break. He's laughing. He says, Ma, I found something weird at work. Funny money. Monopoly money, he says. In with the real stuff." Her mouth moves. "He thought it was a prank. He thought somebody was messing with the new guy. He said, I told Sarge, and Sarge says I did good. Sarge says leave it with him."

"Sarge."

"Frank." She says it like a man's name she's said at a lot of birthday parties. "Six days later he's in Tottenville. Eight months later—"

She stops. She doesn't need to finish. I've seen the guardrail.

"Frank came to the funeral," she says. "He cried harder than anybody. Harder than me. I ended up holding him up, in the parking lot, at St. Joseph's. This big man." She looks at the trophy. "He held my hands and he said, Linda, he was like my own. He said if I ever needed anything."

"Did you ever need anything?"

"I needed someone to look at the car." Very quiet. "Frank said he'd ask around."

The kettle starts to climb. Neither of us gets up.

"He still sends a card," she says. "Every Christmas. With a fifty in it. For flowers, he writes. For Danny's flowers." She gets up, finally, and turns off the gas, and opens a kitchen drawer, and brings it over. Three Christmas cards, the cheap kind with glitter that comes off on your hands. In each one, folded once, a fifty-dollar bill.

She's never spent them.

The bills are new. Sharp at the corners. Sequential, nearly, two of them, the kind of new you only get straight from a bank strap.

"I couldn't," she says. "It felt like—" She shakes her head. "I don't know."

I know. I don't say it. I ask if I can photograph them, and she lays them out flat on the oilcloth for me, side by side, serial numbers up, like a report card.

She asks me, at the door, why now. Three years and thirty-seven letters, and why does a detective drive all the way to Tottenville on a Friday morning.

I could tell her a note told me to. Block capitals, my initials, a hand I'd know anywhere.

"Something came up," I say.

She nods like that's an answer. People who've been waiting long enough will take anything that sounds like a door.

. . .

Ray's watching the house when I get in.

I tell him. The funny money. *Sarge says leave it with him.* Six days. The card with the fifty, every Christmas, new bills off the strap. Frank in the parking lot at St. Joseph's, crying so hard a mother had to hold him up.

Ray doesn't crack a seed. His hands are in his lap. His coffee sits untouched by his knee, the steam long gone out of it.

"You know what thirty years teaches you, kid?" he says.

"Tell me."

"The ones who cry the hardest at funerals," Ray says, "are usually—"

And he stops.

He doesn't finish it. He looks out the windshield at Linda Price's faded flag, and his mouth stays a little open, like the end of the

sentence is still in there and he's decided not to let it out.

I wait. The heater ticks.

"Usually what, Ray?"

He shakes his head. Barely. At the flag, not at me.

In all the years I've known him, Ray Kowalski has never once left a sentence on the table. Not a joke, not a story about cookies, not a word.

He just did.

CHAPTER SIX

Night Self

HERE'S HOW YOU WATCH yourself sleep.

You take the mug with the Mets logo off the dresser and empty out the pennies. You lean your phone against it, camera out, landscape, so it gets the bed, the chair, the door, and the strip of hallway that goes to the kitchen. You turn the brightness all the way down. You hit record. You check it twice, then a third time, because you're the kind of person who checks the stove and still wonders.

Then you lie down in your own bed like it's a crime scene you're trying not to disturb.

Ruiz sent me home Friday at six. Not a suggestion. *Home, Mercer. Not the car. A bed.* She stood in the squad room door until I'd put my coat on.

Before I came up, I wrote the Crown Vic's mileage on the back of a receipt in the glovebox. 161,377. I took a picture of the receipt with the dashboard in the frame, like a kidnapper with a newspaper.

On the fridge, at the bottom of the whiteboard, it said *J.M. — 2* again. I'd wiped it Monday morning and again Wednesday. That's four times it's come back. I didn't wipe it this time. I wanted to see if it would get bored.

11:58. The Domino sign comes through the blinds and lays red bars across the ceiling. I lie there and count them. There are seven. There are always seven.

. . .

The car is cold.

That's the first thing. Then the light, gray, early, coming flat down Kent Avenue. Then the windshield, fogged on the inside in a ragged oval where somebody's been breathing.

I'm in the driver's seat. I've got my coat on, buttoned. Jeans. Shoes. The engine's off. The dashboard clock says 6:48.

Ray's in the passenger seat with his cap on the dash, looking out his window at the river.

"Morning, kid," he says.

I don't answer. I look down. My shoes are tied in double knots. I don't double-knot. On the toes and in the seams of the soles there's mud, gray, almost white where it's dried, gritty with little chips of something pale.

I lean over and open the glovebox and take out the receipt. 161,377.

The odometer says 161,418.

Forty-one miles. In the dark. On a night I spent in bed.

"Go upstairs," Ray says, still to the window. "Look at the tape."

. . .

The phone is face-down on the dresser.

I didn't leave it face-down. I'd swear that in court, which is a thing people say right before they find out they were wrong.

The battery's at four percent. The file is seven hours and two minutes long. I plug it in, sit on the edge of the bed in my coat, and scrub.

11:58: me, lying there, counting red bars.

12:40: still me. Rolling over. Rolling back.

1:12: still. Really still. For the first time, I'm watching what Natalie used to see, if she ever woke up and looked. A man finally doing it.

1:40.

I sit up.

Not the way you sit up when you wake. There's no fumbling, no rubbing the face. I sit up like someone said my name from the kitchen. Straight from the waist. Feet on the floor. Then I stand and go to the chair and get dressed.

Jeans. The gray shirt from yesterday, and I button it, every button, and then the cuffs, which I never do. I sit on the chair to put on socks. I tie my shoes, and I tie them twice. I put my watch on, and check it against the clock on the nightstand, and adjust it. I'm not rushing. I'm getting dressed like a man going to a job he's good at.

1:43. I pick up my keys from the bowl. I put on my coat.

Then I turn around and walk straight at the camera.

I come right up to the dresser, close, until my face fills the screen, a little out of focus and then not. And I look into the lens. Not past it. Into it. Into me, sitting on the edge of the bed in the morning in my coat, watching.

I want to tell you it's a stranger's face. It isn't. It's mine.

It just looks like it's slept.

The eyes are clear. The skin under them isn't gray. The mouth is relaxed, nothing in it, no clench at the jaw. It's my face the way it might have looked three years ago, before the long shift, if anybody

had bothered to take a picture. It looks at me for four seconds. Then a hand comes up, my hand, and the world tips and goes black.

The audio keeps going.

Footsteps down the hall. The fridge door, the seal letting go with that little kiss. The crackle of plastic bottles, pulled loose from plastic wrap. A cabinet. Something heavy set down inside a bag, twice. A thunk, and a thunk. The crinkle of the bag closing. The keys. The front door.

Then two locks. The deadbolt and the knob. From the outside.

I never lock the knob. It sticks. I've been meaning to tell the landlord for a year.

Then the radiator. For five hours and fourteen minutes, the radiator, knocking like someone who knows you're home.

. . .

I go into the kitchen in my coat.

The cabinet over the stove, on Thursday, had coffee filters and a can of chickpeas older than my divorce. I know because I looked for the filters.

Now there's a row of beef stew. Labels out, all facing the same way, like an honor guard. Ten cans. At the end of the row, two gaps exactly the width of a can, the shelf paper clean where they stood.

In the fridge, on the bottom shelf, where there used to be nothing, there's a gap in the dust the size of a six-pack of water.

Somebody in this apartment has started buying groceries. It isn't me.

. . .

"That doctor," Ray says, when I get back down to the car. "Fort Greene."

He says it before I've told him anything. I sit behind the wheel with the phone in my hand and look at him.

"How do you know about her?"

"You told me." He's watching the river again. "Last year. You went once."

I did go once. I'd forgotten I told anyone.

Her card's been in my wallet behind my MetroCard for thirteen months. *Karen Holt, MD. Fort Greene Sleep & Behavioral Medicine. DeKalb Ave.* On the back, in pen, *Sat 9–1*. Like she knew I'd only come on a day I had nothing else to blame.

Ray stays in the car on DeKalb. He doesn't say anything else the whole way there. He doesn't even do a joke about doctors, and Ray has a lot of jokes about doctors.

. . .

She remembers me. That's the first bad sign.

"Detective Mercer." She's in a cardigan the color of oatmeal, reading glasses pushed up into hair that's gone gray in one clean streak at the front. Late forties. The office is small and has a fake brain on the bookshelf, the kind you can take apart, with one lobe missing. "You came in once and told me you were fine. I wrote *fine* in quotation marks."

"I'm less fine."

"That's usually how it goes."

I tell her. Not everything. I tell her about the car, the miles, the shoes. The groceries. I show her the tape, the getting dressed, the face. I don't tell her about the notes. I tell her I've been writing things

down that I don't remember writing.

"What kind of things?"

"Good advice."

She watches the clip twice. On the second time she pauses it on my face. She looks at it longer than I can.

"How many hours a night, now?"

"Two. Three on a good one."

"For how long?"

"Three years."

"What happened three years ago?"

"Nothing happened."

She lets that sit where I put it. Then she takes her glasses off her head, folds them, and puts them on the desk, which I think is what she does instead of sighing.

"Sleep isn't a switch," she says. "Everybody thinks it's a switch. On, off. It's more like a neighborhood at night. Some houses go dark. Some leave a light on. Under enough deprivation, the brain stops being able to get every house dark at the same time. So you get people who are asleep and awake at once. Partly."

"Sleepwalking."

"That's the cartoon of it. Arms out, wandering into the yard." She shakes her head. "I've had a patient who repainted his kitchen. Two coats. Cut in the edges. I've had a woman drive to her sister's in New Paltz and back. A man who wrote and sent nine work emails, all correct, all polite, all of them better than the ones he wrote awake." She looks at the paused frame of my face. "Complex parasomnia, sometimes with a dissociative piece. Usually it's chaos. People eat raw things. They walk into traffic. But sometimes—"

"Sometimes."

"Some people's night self is more organized than their day self, Jake." She says my first name like she's decided it's necessary. "It doesn't sleep. It just... works."

The radiator in her office knocks too. Every radiator in Brooklyn knows something about me.

"Does it know things I don't?"

"It knows what you know. Everything you've seen, everything you've half-noticed and put down. Your training. Your instincts." She thinks about it. "What it doesn't have is your hesitation. All the reasons you've built up for not doing a thing. It's you, without the brakes."

"Can you commit me?"

She looks at me for a long time.

"You're asking me to hospitalize you."

"I'm asking you to lock a door that I can't open in my sleep."

"I can't do that. You're not a danger to yourself or to others." A beat, and she's honest, which is the worst thing a doctor can be. "As far as we know."

She gives me a referral for an overnight study at Methodist, a pamphlet about door alarms, and the advice to give my car keys to someone I trust every night before bed.

"Is there someone?"

"I'll figure something out."

. . .

At home I sit on the couch in my coat to think about who I trust.

I close my eyes. To think.

When I open them, it's dark. The Domino sign is on. The clock on the stove says 9:40 p.m. My coat is folded on the arm of the couch,

neatly, the sleeves tucked in, like a store does it.

The kitchen light is on.

I don't want to look at the fridge. I look at the fridge.

The bottom of the whiteboard has been wiped clean in one tidy stripe. In the stripe, black marker, square and patient, the M with its middle dipping all the way down to the line, the way mine does:

J.M. — 3

The marker's back on its tray. The cap's on.

It isn't a signature. It never was.

It's counting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mileage

161,377. 161,418. 161,459. 161,500.

Forty-one. Forty-one. Forty-one.

Whoever's driving my car doesn't take detours. He doesn't stop for gas, either. The tank's been going down an eighth every night like a glass somebody's sipping when you leave the room.

Saturday I tried Dr. Holt's advice. I knocked on Mrs. Ocasio's door at eleven, with the game show going behind her, and asked if she'd hold my keys till morning. She looked at me the way you'd look at a grown man asking you to hold his keys, and took them, and said, "Okay, *mijo*."

Sunday at eight she gave them back on the landing.

"You came for them at two," she said. "I was up with my show. You said thank you very much." She patted my arm. "So polite. You're never so polite."

I said I was sorry I woke her.

"You didn't wake me," she said. "I told you. I was up."

. . .

The lot at Floyd Bennett Field is a long apron of cracked concrete at the end of Flatbush Avenue, with the old terminal building at one end, all limestone and nobody, and the marsh grass going on forever at the other. Monday afternoon, it's three dog walkers and a guy flying a drone. The tape's gone from where Frank Doyle's car was parked. There's just a dry patch and a coffee cup somebody's left like a flower.

I crouch at the edge of the concrete where the grass starts and pinch up some of what's there.

Pale sand. Gray-white, fine, gritty with flecks of crushed shell. The whole airfield's built on it. They pumped it up out of Jamaica Bay a hundred years ago to join an island full of garbage to the rest of Brooklyn and call it the future. You can't find dirt like it in Williamsburg. You can't find dirt like it anywhere but here and the beach.

I've got the shoes in a paper bag on the back seat. I don't need to compare. I compare anyway.

It's the same.

Ray's in the passenger seat with the window up. He's been quiet since Tottenville. He's still been there every morning, still says *Morning, kid*, but it's like listening to a radio station from the next car over.

"Where do we go, Ray?" I say. "At two."

He's looking at the terminal. At the dark windows of it.

"I don't know, kid."

"You're in the car."

"I'm in the car," he says.

That's all. He doesn't turn his head.

I drive back up Flatbush with the shoes rattling in their bag. It's the long ugly end of the avenue, past the marina and the golf course nobody plays in November, then the strip: a tire place with its tires stacked out front like a dare, a Popeyes, a car wash, a church in a former carpet store. A self-storage place, four stories, painted the orange of a traffic cone, the kind of building that looks like it was designed by a filing cabinet.

At the light in front of it, I hear a ticking.

My turn signal is on. Right turn. Into the lot.

I don't remember putting it on. I look at my own hand on the stalk like we've never been introduced.

The light goes green. Behind me a livery cab leans on its horn. I push the stalk back to center and go straight, and the orange building slides past on the right, and in the mirror it gets smaller, and it doesn't stop being orange.

Ray doesn't say a word about it. Ray, who has something to say about every bad lane change I've made in my life.

. . .

Tran is at my desk at the Nine-Oh Monday night because Ruiz borrowed him back from One Police Plaza to do Frank Doyle's phone, and because nobody's told him which desk is his, and mine was the one with an outlet.

He's got Frank's phone in a cradle and two cans of something electric blue lined up beside the keyboard like ammunition.

"Your guy takes a lot of pictures of grills," he says without looking up. "Like, an unbelievable number. Close-ups. He's got a burger in here from 2019 that he photographed from four angles. He's got four hundred pictures of a softball field." He scrolls. "Last outgoing call,

Tuesday, 9:12 p.m., to a pizza place. Last text, Tuesday, 9:20, to the same group chat he's been texting since 2017. It says 'Night boys.' Then nothing. Nothing in, nothing out, no data. The phone just sat in the car."

"Can you run a plate for me?"

"I'm not your uniform, dude."

"Not a plate check. Readers. E-ZPass and the cameras."

That makes him look up. The NYPD reads every car that goes past a camera on every highway in this city and keeps it. Plates on one system. E-ZPass tags on another, from the city's traffic sensors, which don't care if there's a toll. Nobody thinks about it. Everybody's in it.

"Whose plate?"

I tell him. He knows the car. Everybody knows the car.

He takes a long time looking at me.

"This query has my name on it," he says. "Forever. Somebody's gonna ask me why I ran a detective's personal ride the same week IA is crawling up the property room."

"So tell them I asked."

"Oh, I'm absolutely going to tell them you asked."

He types.

. . .

It comes up as a list. Clean. That's what bothers me about it. It looks like the kind of report I'd write.

EB BELT PKWY – EXIT 11N FLATBUSH AV.

Wed 1:51 a.m.

Thu 2:09 a.m.

Fri 2:11 a.m.

Sat 2:06 a.m.

Sun 2:12 a.m.

Mon 2:10 a.m.

And then, every one, coming back the other way, *WB*, between 4:20 and 4:40, give or take a red light.

The Verrazzano shows up once, Friday at 10:14 in the morning, when I went to see a woman whose son drove into a guardrail. It looks so normal on the list. A man going to work.

Thursday, 2:09 a.m. I was at this desk. I remember being at this desk. I remember it the way you remember a room in a photo, everything in place and nobody in it.

"Floyd Bennett's Exit 11," Tran says. His voice has gone careful. "That's where they found Sergeant Doyle's car."

"I know where it is."

"You've been on the Belt at two in the morning every night since he went missing."

"I know."

He waits for the rest. There isn't a rest I can say.

"Okay," he says. Then, quieter, without the dude in it: "Okay."

. . .

I ask him about the other thing because I'm already in it up to my neck, and because I've been carrying it three weeks, and I need one more person to see it.

I put my laptop on the desk next to Frank's phone. I open the spam folder on my phone and show him the line. *Sun 3:12 AM.* No sender. No subject.

"Same as the Kessler ones," he says, before I ask. "That's the kid's trick. Header's broken on purpose."

"The kid says he didn't send it."

"The kid sent twenty-four. We accounted for every one." Tran's already got my laptop turned toward himself. "You mind?"

"Go."

His fingers do the thing they do, fast and bored and not bored at all. A black window. White text. My own folders scrolling past like the inside of someone's medicine cabinet.

"Sent folder's empty," he says. "Like, scrubbed. Not even the stuff you'd normally have. Did you do that?"

"No."

"Okay. Doesn't matter. Your account keeps a log you've never looked at. Nobody looks at it." He scrolls. Stops. Scrolls back. "Huh."

Stay with him. He's about to say it.

"Scheduled send," Tran says. "Created Saturday, 11:47 p.m. Delivery set for Sunday, 3:12 a.m. From your account. To your account." He leans closer. "And it didn't go out normal. It went out through a script sitting in your Documents. Folder's just called *notes*. It's a little relay. It strips the sender line, blanks the subject." He opens something else. "It's built off the Lauren Fisk email. The one you saved for evidence. It literally copied her header. Like somebody used it for a template."

Saturday, 11:47 p.m. The Knicks were on with the sound low. I was on the couch with my shoes on, the longest sleep I'd had in three years.

I was asleep.

"Dude," Tran says.

He's not looking at the screen anymore. He's looking at me like the floor's moved and he's not sure which way.

"Dude. You emailed yourself."

. . .

Tran leaves at 3:30 without his second energy drink, which is how I know.

I sit at the desk with the list of readers in front of me. Six nights. Six exits. Six returns. A man so regular you could set a clock by him, and I've never been regular about anything in my life.

At 4:05 the squad room door opens and I don't hear it, again, because nobody in this building makes noise when they want to see what you're doing.

"Detective Mercer."

Lieutenant Gary Shaw stands just inside the door, coat still buttoned, with a manila envelope in both hands, the way people hold a cake. He's soft-spoken. He's always soft-spoken. He's the kind of soft-spoken that makes you check where the exits are.

"You're up late, Lieutenant."

"I hear that's catching." He crosses the room and sets the envelope on my desk, on top of the readers. "I thought you'd prefer to see this from me than hear about it from your delegate."

I open it.

It's a lab report. NYPD Police Laboratory, Questioned Documents. Five J.M. notes, photographed under glass with a ruler beside each. Under them, four of my DD5s, from 2019 to last month, my block capitals in the boxes where you write the facts down. Lines drawn between the M's. Between the R's. A little arrow at the place where my S always starts too high.

At the bottom, one paragraph. I read it once and then read only the last part, because that's the only part anybody reads.

...the questioned writing is consistent with the known exemplars of Det. J. Mercer.

"Consistent with," I say.

"It's the strongest thing they'll say about anything," Shaw says. "They're very careful people. Like me." He straightens the envelope on the desk so it's square with the edge. "Hudson Street. Nine a.m. Bring your delegate, Detective."

He's at the door when he turns back.

"And bring a pen."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shaw

RAY DOESN'T SAY ANYTHING on the Williamsburg Bridge.

Ray always says something on the Williamsburg Bridge. The bridge is ugly, and Ray loves ugly things, and every time we cross it he tells me the same fact about how it was the longest suspension bridge in the world for twenty years and nobody ever bothered to love it, like a guy at a wedding who's good at fixing cars. This morning he watches the J train go by beside us, rattling and orange-lit and full of people asleep standing up, and keeps his mouth shut.

On Hudson Street I park in a loading zone outside a building that looks like it sells insurance. Internal Affairs likes buildings like that. Nobody walks into an insurance building and thinks they're about to lose their life.

"Kid," Ray says.

I wait. I've got my hand on the door.

"Tell the truth," he says.

"Which one?"

He looks at the dashboard, at his cap. He doesn't answer.

. . .

My delegate is a man named Lou Bracco from the Detectives' Endowment Association, who smells like nicotine gum and has been doing this for twenty-two years and tells me in the elevator, "Say less than you want to. Then say less than that."

The room on the eleventh floor has a window, which is somehow worse. You can see a sliver of the river between two buildings, flat and gray, going about its business.

Shaw is already seated. There's a paper cup of tea at his elbow, the tag hanging over the rim, and he doesn't offer me one. Not rude. Just exact. There's a recorder on the table. A sergeant from his team sits at the end with a legal pad, a white one. There's a box of tissues on the windowsill that someone has put there on purpose.

"Thank you for coming in, Detective," Shaw says. "Please, sit."

He says please the way surgeons say *small pinch*.

He starts the recorder and says the date and the time and all our names, and he does it slowly, so I can hear each one go in.

Then he opens the envelope from last night and lays the notes out on the table between us in a row. Photographs, not originals, each one in a plastic sleeve. Bushwick, the cooler door. The windshield wiper. Under the driver's seat of Frank Doyle's car. My coat pocket. The softball photo.

He squares them with two fingers.

"I want to tell you what I think," he says. "And then you can tell me where I'm wrong. Is that fair?"

"Sure."

"I think someone is giving you information." He says it with real sympathy, like a doctor delivering a number. "Someone close to the property room. Possibly someone close to Sergeant Doyle. Possibly Sergeant Doyle himself. I think it's good information, because it's

been correct every time. And I think you've been writing it down in block capitals and leaving it where you'll find it, so that when it pays off, it looks like a tip from nowhere, and nobody ever has to ask who you've been talking to."

Lou shifts in his chair.

"You wouldn't be the first," Shaw says. "Detectives want to look brilliant. It's not a crime to want that. It's a crime to protect a dirty source to get it."

"I'm not protecting anybody."

"Then tell me who J.M. is."

The room is very quiet. Down on Hudson somebody's backing a truck up, beep, beep, beep, patient as a heart monitor.

I could tell him. I've thought about it all night. I've thought about how it sounds. *Lieutenant, I get up at 1:40 in the morning and dress like a man with a job, and I drive to Floyd Bennett Field, and I solve my cases there while I'm asleep, and then I come back and lock both locks, and I've started buying stew.*

He'd write it down. He'd write it down very carefully.

"I don't know who's writing them," I say.

Shaw nods slowly, like that's interesting and sad.

"Officer Tran ran your car through the readers at one in the morning," he says. "At your request. He told us that. He's an honest young man. He seemed upset." He slides a single sheet across. I already know it. EB BELT PKWY – EXIT 11N. Six nights. "Floyd Bennett Field, Detective. Every night since Sergeant Doyle disappeared. Two hours. Then home." He tilts his head. "Who do you meet out there?"

"Nobody."

"For two hours."

"I drive."

"You drive to the place a missing sergeant's car was found, and you sit there, alone, every night, for two hours."

"I don't sleep," I say. "Everybody knows I don't sleep."

"Yes," Shaw says. "Everybody does."

He lets that go out into the room and sit by the tissues.

. . .

"I'd like a sample of your handwriting," he says. "Block capitals. Your delegate can tell you that you're not obligated."

"You're not obligated," Lou says.

"I'll do it."

Lou gives me the look of a man watching another man climb a ladder in the rain.

The sergeant slides me a yellow legal pad. Yellow. Somebody in this building has a sense of humor, or no sense of humor at all, and I can't tell which is worse. Shaw holds out a pen. I take it. I said I'd bring one. I forgot.

"Please write what I say," Shaw says. "Count the cash in locker one-fourteen."

I write it.

It comes out of the pen like it's been waiting there. COUNT. THE. CASH. The C's tight and round. The S starting too high. The R in LOCKER leaning, a little, to see around the corner. I can feel my hand know it, the way it knew the tilt of the photo frame. I want to make it worse. I want to slant it, curl it, write it like a kid with a broken wrist. My hand writes it the way it writes.

"Don't look for him," Shaw says. "Look at him."

I write it.

He takes the pad. He holds it beside the photograph from the car, the note that was under Frank Doyle's seat at Floyd Bennett.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to. Lou looks at it and closes his eyes for a second, like a man who's heard a car crash two streets over.

It's the same. Not similar. Not consistent with. If you shuffled them I couldn't tell you which one I wrote at a table on Hudson Street with a pen I borrowed, and which one I wrote at some hour I don't have, in a car, in the dark, with my eyes open.

You'd think it'd be a relief. Proof of something. It isn't. It's just me, twice.

. . .

"Detective Mercer," Shaw says, gently, "effective immediately you're suspended pending review. Thirty days, subject to extension. I'll need your shield and your weapon."

He says it the way you'd tell someone their flight's been moved. Then he waits, hands folded, while I do it.

I unclip the holster and set the Glock on the table, unloaded, the magazine beside it, the round from the chamber beside that, standing up like a tiny person. I take the shield out of my jacket. It's heavier than it's been for years. It's the exact same weight.

Shaw writes a receipt. He signs it. His signature is small and neat and nothing at all like mine.

"Go home, Detective," he says. "Stay there. If anyone gives you anything, in any handwriting, I'd like you to call me before you read it."

At the door, Lou puts a hand on my shoulder and says, "For the record, Mercer, I've seen worse."

He hasn't. I can tell from the hand.

. . .

The Nine-Oh, eleven a.m. Day tour. People I don't know at desks I do.

I come for my things. There isn't much. A coffee mug, a phone charger, a framed picture I keep in the drawer instead of on the desk. The squad room goes quiet the way rooms do when somebody they've been talking about walks in. Shapiro finds something fascinating on his monitor. Somebody's wiped *J.M. FOR COMMISSIONER* off the squad whiteboard. There's a green ghost of it where the eraser didn't reach.

The property room is still taped. Ben Hughes is still outside it on his folding chair. He looks at me, and then at my belt where the gun isn't, and then at the floor.

I take the back stairs, because the front stairs go past Ruiz's office, and I'm a coward before noon.

She's on the landing between two and one. Coat on. Like she's been waiting. Like she knew which stairs.

"Lieutenant."

"Mercer."

The stairwell smells like floor wax and someone's microwaved fish. A radio somewhere upstairs is playing the traffic report, every bridge in the city slow.

She doesn't ask how it went. She looks at my belt the way Hughes did, but longer, and then up at my face.

"I read the last one again this morning," she says. "Linda's. From November. *It's me again. Please.*" Her jaw goes tight. "Thirty-seven times I put that woman in a drawer."

"Lieutenant—"

"Don't tell me." She holds up a hand, not high. "I don't want to know how. Gary Shaw told me where you go at two in the morning, and I don't want to know why. I don't want to know who J.M. is. If I know, I have to write it down, and if I write it down, Gary Shaw owns it." She looks at me. "Whatever this is, finish it."

She goes down the stairs past me, and her shoulder doesn't touch mine, and the door at the bottom bangs, and I'm alone in the stairwell with the traffic report.

. . .

I take the stairs slow. Halfway down, something knocks against my knee.

It's been doing that all week. I noticed it the way you notice a bad tooth: a little tap, every other step, in the hem of my coat on the right side. I put it down to the keys. My keys are in my pants.

I stop on the landing. I feel along the hem. There's something in there, hard and flat, down inside the lining.

The inside pocket of this coat tore a year ago. I never sewed it. Things fall through it into the lining, pens, a lighter I didn't know I had. I work my fingers into the tear and down, past the seam, chasing it, until I've got it.

A key. Small, brass, cheap, the kind that opens a padlock and nothing else. Beside it on the split ring, a second one, smaller still, silver, that I can't place at all.

The ring runs through an orange plastic tag. Traffic-cone orange. Printed across the top in white: *STOR-MOR.*

Under that, in black marker, in block capitals, the 1s each with the little flag at the top the way I've made them since the academy:

3-117

CHAPTER NINE

Stor-Mor

SHAW GAVE ME A receipt for the badge and the gun. Then he gave me a second piece of paper, a pamphlet from the Employee Assistance Unit, folded in thirds.

"Nobody reads these," he said. "I'd like you to be the exception."

I've read it twice. There's a lighthouse on the front. Inside, a woman in a cardigan holds a mug with both hands and looks out a window at nothing, the way people in pamphlets do, the way I do for a living.

It's 11:10 Tuesday night. I found the key at twenty past eleven this morning, and I've spent the twelve hours since not driving to Flatbush Avenue. I'm at my kitchen table with every light in the apartment on, like a man waiting up for a burglar who has his own key. In front of me there's a bodega coffee, black, and an orange plastic tag the size of a domino. STOR-MOR. Under that, in marker, 3-117. On the split ring, the brass padlock key, and the small silver one I still can't place.

My coat is on the back of the chair. Without the badge in it, it weighs about the same. I keep checking anyway.

I looked the place up. Stor-Mor Self Storage, Flatbush Avenue, the long ugly end of it, a mile up from the Belt. Open 24/7. *Your stuff. Your business.* Four point one stars. One review, from a man named Tony: *Night guy is nice.*

On the fridge, at the bottom of the whiteboard, in my handwriting that isn't:

J.M. — 3

It hasn't moved since Saturday. I've stopped trying to make it.

Here's the plan. I want it on the record that there was one. I stay up. I don't go anywhere tonight. Tomorrow, in daylight, like a citizen, I drive to Flatbush Avenue with a lawyer's number written on my hand, and I open whatever there is to open with the sun on it. I've written the odometer on my other hand so I'll know if the plan holds. *161,544.*

I drink the coffee. I look at the key. I look at the key.

. . .

It's 1:52.

I'm in the Crown Vic on Kent Avenue with the engine running and both hands on the wheel at ten and two, like a kid on a road test. My coat's on. All four buttons. My shoes are damp at the toes.

The heater's been going a while. The windshield's clear.

There are two coffees in the cupholders. I pick mine up. It's barely warm. There's a receipt tucked under the lid like a fortune: *FLATBUSH STAR DELI. 11:44 PM. 2 COF BLK.*

I look at the odometer. I look at my hand.

Thirty-eight miles.

Ray's in the passenger seat. His cap is on the dash, the seeds beside it, the bag still folded shut. I keep meaning to ask him what's wrong,

and I keep not asking, the way you don't ask about a noise in the engine because then it's a noise in the engine.

"Where'd we go?" I say.

He doesn't answer for a while. Out on Kent a man walks a dog in a coat better than mine.

"You know where," Ray says.

. . .

I don't tell the car where to go. I want to be clear about that, too.

I pull out onto Kent and I take the BQE south because that's how I'd go, and then the Belt Parkway, because that's how I'd go, and the E-ZPass beeps under the windshield like it recognizes me. The water opens up on the right, black, with Staten Island lying low across it, a string of lights and then nothing. Planes stacking up for Kennedy in a slow line, blinking, patient.

I'm in the right lane before the sign for Flatbush. My hands put the blinker on before I've read it.

Flatbush down here isn't the Flatbush anyone writes songs about. Behind me, past the parkway, there's the long dark of Floyd Bennett Field, old runways under the weeds, a fence going on for a mile. Frank Doyle's car sat out there with his keys in the ignition and his phone on the seat. I stood next to it with a flashlight. I put a note from myself in an evidence bag.

Ahead of me it's the strip. The tire place with its tires stacked out front like a dare. The Popeyes. The car wash. The church in a former carpet store.

Stor-Mor is on the right. Four stories of corrugated orange, lit from below like a pumpkin, with a sign on the roof where the two O's are padlocks. Yesterday my turn signal came on in front of it by itself.

I told myself that was a loose wire.

I pull into the lot and park in a space by the door. It feels like my space. I don't know why.

At the back of the lot, where the asphalt gives out, it's sand. Pale, almost white under the sodium lights, with chips of shell in it. I don't have to crouch to know.

"Come up with me," I say.

Ray looks at the cap on the dashboard. He's not cracking seeds. He's not doing anything.

"Somebody should stay with the car," he says.

"Ray."

He doesn't look at me. That's all.

. . .

The office is a glass box inside the front door with a counter and a sheet of plexiglass and a slot at the bottom for money. Behind it, a kid in his late twenties with a fade and a Stor-Mor fleece is studying flashcards with a highlighter in his teeth. The name tag says MARCUS. The flashcard on top says *What is an easement?*

He looks up. He takes the highlighter out of his mouth.

"Back again, Mr. Mercer?" he says. "Twice in one night?"

There's a feeling you get on a stakeout when you realize the car you've been watching for an hour has been watching you. It starts at the back of the neck and it doesn't go anywhere. It just stays and waits for you to do something.

"Twice," I say.

"Gate log says eleven fifty-two." He taps his monitor. "You forget something?"

"What did I have with me? The first time."

He gives me a look. Not suspicious. Concerned, the way you'd look at a regular who comes in limping.

"Same as always. Deli bag. Couple cans, some water." He sets down the flashcards. "You okay? You seem different."

"Different how?"

"You're talking." He shrugs. "No offense. Usually you just nod. You're a nodder. You come in, you nod, you go up, you come down, you nod. Like an hour, hour and a half. I figured you had, like, a band. Practice space. Some guys have a drum kit up there."

"Can I see my contract?"

"Your contract." He says it slowly. Then he decides it's none of his business, which is the whole business model, and turns the monitor around so it faces the glass.

MERCER, JACOB. A Kent Avenue address. Mine. Unit 3-117, ten by ten, interior, third floor, climate controlled. Three months, paid in advance. Cash.

Start date, October 27.

Frank Doyle didn't come in for his Wednesday shift three weeks after that. I rented this room for him before he went anywhere. I'd measured it.

Below the dates there's a scan of my driver's license. My face looks out of it, straight at the camera, nothing in particular going on. Below that, the signature box. Not a signature. Block capitals, square and careful, the J with the little bar across the top.

J. MERCER

"You always sign like that," Marcus says. "I said once it's like you're filling out a customs form. You didn't laugh." He pauses. "You didn't do anything."

"Sorry."

"It's cool. It's a storage place. Everybody's got something." He buzzes the inner door. "Freight elevator's on the left. Lights are motion, so wave if they go off on you."

. . .

The freight elevator has a cage gate that you pull across by hand, and it closes with a bang like a cell door in a movie, and that's the last clever thought I have for a while. The car goes up slowly. Third floor. I pull the gate back.

The corridor runs off ahead of me, long and narrow, concrete floor painted gray, orange roll-up doors on both sides like the teeth of something. It's dark until I step into it. Then the first light clicks on over my head, and a second one ahead of me, and as I walk they keep coming on, one at a time, just in front of me, and going off one at a time behind me. A small square of light that travels with me down the hall.

There's a hum in the walls. The climate control. Or the building breathing.

Numbers stenciled above each door. 3-101. 3-102. Some with padlocks, some with a red sticker that says VACANT. I know where I'm going before I get there. The left turn at the end. The fire extinguisher in its glass box. The fourth door on the right, where the floor is scuffed in a pale arc from a door going up and down, up and down, more than a storage unit door goes up and down.

3-117.

The padlock is a heavy steel disc, the kind with a shrouded shackle you can't get bolt cutters on. Good lock. I'd buy that lock.

I stand there with the brass key in my hand.

You're ahead of me. You've been ahead of me since the car at Floyd Bennett. You get to read this. I have to stand in it.

I put the key in the lock. It goes all the way in, the way a key goes into its own lock, no wiggle. I don't turn it.

Behind the door something creaks. A low, tired sound. Springs. Somebody shifting their weight on something that isn't a bed.

Then a man coughs.

It's a real cough, wet and ordinary, the kind you hear on the subway in November. He clears his throat afterward, and spits, and mutters something I can't make out, in the voice of a man talking to himself because there's nobody else to talk to.

The light over my head clicks off. I've been standing still too long.

I raise my arm and it comes back on.

I turn the key. The lock opens with a small, expensive click and drops into my palm, heavier than it looks. I set it on the floor.

I bend down and hook my fingers under the handle at the bottom of the door. The metal is cold. On the other side, the springs creak again, and stop, as if he's heard me.

As if he's been waiting.

I pull, and the door goes up.

CHAPTER TEN

Unit 3-117

THE FIRST THING IS the light. A camping lantern on an upturned milk crate, turned low, the white kind that hisses. After the corridor it's warm, almost yellow, and it makes the room look smaller than ten by ten.

The second thing is Frank Doyle.

He's sitting on the edge of an army cot with his elbows on his knees, in the clothes Maureen gave Missing Persons for the flyer: tan Carhartt jacket, gray Bombers softball sweatshirt under it, jeans. A week of stubble, gone white at the chin. His hair's been combed with water. He's fifty-two and he looks it tonight, the big softball-coach shoulders rounded forward, but there's nothing wrong with him. No marks. Color in his face. He looks like a man who's been snowed in at a cabin with people he doesn't like.

He doesn't get up. He looks at my hands, and then at my face, and then he says, flat, "You forget something?"

I don't say anything. I can't find anything.

"You're early," he says. "Or late. I don't know what time it is. You took my watch." He holds up his wrist to show me the pale stripe. "Well? You going to stand there, or you going to do the bucket?"

There's a cable running from his left ankle. A padded cuff, black nylon, the kind they sell for horses. A steel cable, plastic-coated, maybe eight feet, to a ring bolt drilled into the concrete at the foot of the back wall. Eight feet gets him to the cot, the milk crate, the bucket with its lid in the corner. It doesn't get him to the door. I can see the arc on the floor where he's tested it, a pale scuff in a half-circle, stopping two feet short of me.

Somebody measured that, too.

"Frank," I say.

It comes out wrong. It comes out like a question. His head comes up, slow.

"Oh," he says. "Oh, now he talks."

. . .

The rest of it I see the way you see a room on a warrant: all at once, then piece by piece, then again.

Six-packs of bottled water, the brand from the bottom shelf of my fridge, the empties crushed flat in a trash bag. A row of beef stew along the wall, pull-tab cans, labels out, all facing the same way. I know that label. I've got ten of them over my stove. A box of granola bars. A roll of paper towels, wet wipes, a toothbrush in a plastic cup. A stack of westerns, Louis L'Amour, the covers soft from being read in a hurry. A Bible, still in its shrink wrap. Two wool blankets, folded square at the foot of the cot, hospital corners. I fold like that. Nobody taught me. I just do.

And the walls.

All three walls that aren't the door are papered, floor to as high as a tall man can reach. Not a mess. It's a filing system that happens to be vertical. Rows. Columns. Every page taped at all four corners,

every row labeled across the top in block capitals on strips of yellow legal paper.

PROPERTY ROOM — VOUCHER LOGS 2015–2025. Photocopies, page after page, certain lines run through with yellow highlighter, the same initials in the custody column over and over. F.D. F.D. F.D.

LOCKER 114. Stills from the video Hughes shot on my phone last week: the bricks cut open, the bank-paper confetti inside, my own gloved thumb at the edge of the frame. I don't remember printing them. They're printed.

DEPOSITS. Bank statements from four branches of Ridgewood Savings, a column of cash deposits, nine thousand five hundred, nine thousand two hundred, nine thousand eight hundred, never ten. Ten years of never ten.

PRICE, D. A transfer order to the One-Two-Three on Staten Island, dated six days after an internal memo with the same name on it. A team photo, the Ninety Precinct Bombers, 2022, a skinny kid in the back row with his cap pushed up, and next to him, one arm around his shoulders, grinning, the coach.

Halfway down that column, a print of the photo I took on Linda Price's oilcloth on Friday. Three fifty-dollar bills, serials up. Beside it, a page from the green ledger, Frank's cursive, a 2022 seizure off Wilson Avenue: *USC, $50 x 400, new, sequential.* Somebody has run a yellow highlighter through the serial range. Linda's fifties sit inside it.

The money for Danny's flowers came out of his own cage.

Some of the pages are newer than others. You can see it in the tape. Some of the tape is creased and cloudy from being peeled up and stuck back, and some is clean. There are torn corners on the floor under the cot, swept into a little pile.

"First night I tore it all down," Doyle says. He's watching me look. "Every page. You came back the next night with copies. Put it all back. Second night, same thing. Third night, I didn't bother." He spits on the floor, carefully, away from the blankets. "You don't get tired. That's what I figured out. A guy who doesn't get tired, you don't fight him. You wait for him to make a mistake."

On a folding chair by the door, square to the wall, there's a three-ring binder. Two inches thick. White. On the spine, on the cover, in block capitals:

FOR RUIZ

. . .

"Shut the door," Doyle says. "Heat's getting out."

I pull the door down behind me, most of the way, until it's a foot off the floor and the corridor light is just a stripe. It's what you do. Somebody asks you to shut a door, you shut it.

That's when I see the note.

It's taped to the inside of the door, low, at the height of a man sitting on a cot. Where he'd see it every time he looked toward the way out. One sheet of yellow legal pad, torn neat along the perforation.

I TOOK HIM. YOU WOULD HAVE LET HIM GO HOME. – J.M.

I read it again. It doesn't change. That's the thing about my handwriting. It's very legible.

"He's not wrong," Doyle says, behind me. "You would've. You had me at Floyd Bennett, you'd have had me in an interview room by Thursday, you'd have had nothing. A locker with some paper in it. I'd have been home for dinner. Maureen makes a pot roast on Thursdays."

I turn around.

"You called me," he says. "Two in the morning. Not my phone. The other one. The one nobody has the number for." He lets that sit, so I'll know what it cost him to say it. "Said you had a problem with a voucher out of Locker 114 and could I meet you someplace quiet. I figured you wanted a piece. Guys do." He looks at me, and something changes in his face. It's the way a man's face changes when he's been talking to a dog for a week and the dog says something back. "You brought me stew every night. Two cans, two in the morning, like a nurse. You'd do the bucket, check the cable, put the wall back up, sit on that chair for an hour and watch me eat. Never said a word. Seven nights, not one word."

He leans forward.

"You don't remember," he says. "Christ. You really don't remember."

I don't. I've got nothing to give him. I stand there with the lantern hissing and my own block capitals at my back.

He starts to laugh. Quietly, with his hand over his eyes.

"Okay," he says. "Okay. That changes things."

. . .

It does. I watch him take it apart and put it back together and come at me with every piece.

First he's the sergeant. "You know what this is? Kidnapping in the first. A cop. You'll do twenty in protective custody with every mope you ever put away walking past your cell. Let me go now and maybe I'm too embarrassed to say anything. Maybe."

Then he's a businessman. "There's money, Mercer. You have no idea. There's four hundred thousand that isn't on that wall. You can

have it. Half. All of it. Nobody counts it but me."

Then he's a father. "Maureen thinks I'm in the bay. You get that? My daughter's flying in from Phoenix. They're going to have a mass. For a guy who's sitting in a box on Flatbush Avenue eating cold stew out of a can."

Then he's my uncle. That's the worst one. He drops his voice and opens his hands and it's the voice from the barbecue in the precinct lot, the voice that ran the hat for half the families in Brooklyn North. "We're the same job, Jake. You and me. I've been to every racket, every christening, every funeral this precinct ever had. You want to put me on a wall? Fine. But we take care of it in the house. We don't do this to each other. Not to one of ours."

I say nothing.

He sees that. His face goes still. Then he says, very quietly, almost kindly, like he's doing me a favor:

"You think you're the only one who covered something up in that car?"

I don't understand.

I mean I really don't. My car is a 2014 Crown Vic with a dented quarter panel and ketchup packets in the glovebox. The only thing covered up in it is a printout from an elevator in Downtown Brooklyn. Folded in thirds. Under the registration. And nobody knows that. Nobody in the world knows that.

Unless I told him. Seven nights on a folding chair. Never said a word, he says.

It must all be on my face, every bit of it, because Doyle watches me for a long moment, and then he starts to laugh again. Not the quiet kind. A real laugh, from the stomach, delighted, a man who's just been dealt the card he needed.

"Oh, you don't know," he says. "You drive it around every night and you don't know."

. . .

I don't ask him what he means.

I go to the wall instead, because that's the job, because when you don't understand a room you look at what doesn't move.

PRICE, D. The bottom of the column. A Staten Island collision report. West Shore Expressway, southbound, past the Bloomfield exit. October 14, 2023, 2:20 a.m. One vehicle. A 2016 Honda Civic into a concrete barrier. Operator, Price, Daniel J., 27. Contributing factor: *mechanical – brake failure, probable corrosion of line.* Signed off. Closed.

Behind it, the photo log from the tow yard. Twenty-two pictures. Photo 14 has been blown up to a full sheet.

It's the brake line. Close up, a little out of focus, with a tech's six-inch ruler laid next to it for scale. The end of the line where it separated.

I've seen corroded lines. Corrosion is ugly. It's rust and bloom and metal gone soft like wet bread, and it fails ragged.

This end is bright. Straight. Angled clean across, like the end of a new pipe in a hardware store.

Under it, a strip of yellow paper, and my block capitals:

NOBODY LOOKED AT PHOTO 14.

And under that, a receipt, photocopied. Sal's Auto & Tire, Amboy Road, Tottenville. September 22, 2023. *Brake service, front & rear, lines inspected.* Paid in cash. The customer's signature, a young man's loopy scrawl. Three weeks before the barrier.

I stand there and read it all again, slower.

"He had his brakes done," I say. "Three weeks before. His mother keeps his trophy in the kitchen."

Behind me, on the cot, Frank Doyle stops laughing.

It goes out of the room like air out of a tire. The lantern hisses. The cable on the floor ticks once against the concrete, a small sound, the sound of a man who has moved his foot without deciding to.

I don't turn around. I don't need to see his face. I've seen it already, on the wall, in the back row of a team photo, with his arm around a kid's shoulders.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dawn Call

I PULL THE DOOR down. I put the padlock back through the hasp and squeeze it shut, and it clicks, and I stand there with my hand on it.

Seven nights somebody did this. Tonight is the first time it's been me.

Inside, Doyle doesn't shout. He hasn't shouted once. I understand why now. If he shouts, somebody comes, and if somebody comes, they lift the door, and the first thing they see isn't a kidnapped sergeant. It's the wall.

The cable was never the lock.

The lights go off down the corridor behind me one at a time as I walk to the elevator.

. . .

Marcus has fallen asleep on his flashcards. His cheek is on *What is an easement?* I go past the glass as quietly as I can, which isn't very, and he lifts his head and says, "Night, Mr. Mercer," and puts it back down.

Outside, it's 4:50 and the lot is empty except for the Crown Vic and a U-Haul with a flat tire that's been there long enough to grow a parking ticket. The air smells like low tide and jet fuel. Out past the marsh, over Jamaica Bay, there's no color yet, just a place where the dark is thinner.

Ray's in the passenger seat.

He's got his cap off. He's holding it in both hands in his lap, turning it slowly by the brim, a quarter turn, then another, like a man in a hospital waiting room. The seeds are on the dash, still folded. He doesn't look up when I come across the lot. He's looking at the cap.

I don't get in. I lean on the trunk with my hands in my pockets and the phone in my right hand, and I do the math. I'm a detective. Math is what I've got.

. . .

Door number one is three numbers.

I call it in. Patrol is here in six minutes, two uniforms from the Six-Three, and they cut the lock because I tell them to, and they find a sergeant everyone in the borough has been praying for, alive, on a cable, in a unit rented in my name and paid for in cash, with my driver's license on file at the desk and my face on the camera every night at two in the morning carrying stew.

Kidnapping in the first degree. A police officer. There's no version of that sentence where I go home.

And Doyle. Doyle gets a lawyer from the union by lunch, and the lawyer is good, because they're always good when it's one of ours, and the lawyer stands up and says the words *fruit of the poisonous tree*. Everything on that wall was assembled by the investigating detective while he held the subject in a box. Every page. Every highlighted line.

Photo 14. The lawyer won't even have to say Danny Price's name. He'll just make the wall disappear, page by page, the way Doyle did the first night, and when it's gone there'll be only one thing left in the room that anyone can prove, and that's me.

Locker 114 survives, maybe. A locker with some paper in it. *I'd have been home for dinner.*

Danny Price stays an accident. Linda Price writes her thirty-eighth letter.

That's door number one. The honest one.

. . .

Door number two is a lieutenant.

I can see her in the stairwell at the Nine-Oh the day Shaw took my badge, on the landing between two and one, where the camera doesn't reach. Standing a step above me so we were the same height. Not touching the rail. *Whatever this is, finish it.*

She didn't know what she was saying. Or she did. With Ruiz, I've never been sure there's a difference.

If I call her, I'm not asking her for help. I'm asking her to choose. Twenty-two years on the job, a pension, a name in the building that means something, and I'm going to call her before sunrise and ask her to put all of it on the hood of a car next to a storage unit and look at it and decide. I'm going to hand her a glovebox of her own.

I open the driver's door and lean in across the seat.

Ray doesn't move. He doesn't say anything. I reach past his knees and pop the glovebox. Registration, the dead flashlight, the ketchup. The printout, folded in thirds, where I left it. I don't take it out. I just look at it, because Frank Doyle laughed at me an hour ago about something in this car, and it wasn't this, and I don't know what it was.

You drive it around every night and you don't know.

I shut the glovebox. It clicks.

"Ray."

He turns the cap another quarter turn.

"Up to you, kid," he says.

He says it to the cap. His voice is very quiet, the way it gets when he's telling the end of a story he's told before, the part he doesn't like. I wait for him to say something else. A joke. The one about the scarecrow. Anything.

He doesn't.

. . .

I straighten up out of the car and stand in the lot and look at the phone.

The screen's bright enough to hurt. 5:04. One text, from Tran, sent at 1:15: *you ok dude.* Nothing from Shaw. Shaw doesn't text. Shaw sends letters.

Three weeks ago somebody with my hands sat at my laptop at 11:47 on a Saturday night and set an email to go off at 3:12. A warning, or a hello. Every note since has been right. The last one says I'd have let Frank Doyle go home.

He's right about that, too. He knows me.

I put my thumb on the nine. I hold it there. I can feel the shape of the next two numbers already, the way you can feel a step in the dark before your foot gets there.

Then I go to the contacts and scroll down to R.

She picks up on the second ring. She doesn't sound asleep. She sounds like someone who's been lying in the dark with the phone on her chest, waiting for it to do exactly this.

"Mercer."

"I found him."

Nothing on the line. Not even breathing. Then:

"Alive?"

"Alive. He's not hurt." I look at the orange building, at the third row of windows, which are painted over. "He's not hurt, Lieutenant."

Another silence. Longer.

"Where are you."

I tell her. Flatbush, the last building, the one with the padlocks on the sign.

"Who else knows?"

"Nobody."

"Keep it that way. Don't call anyone. Don't touch anything."

"I've already touched everything," I say. "That's sort of the problem."

The silence this time has something in it. I can't tell if it's a laugh or the opposite of one.

"Thirty minutes," Ruiz says, and hangs up.

. . .

I stand there for a while with the phone in my hand.

Out over the bay the dark has started to come apart at the bottom, a band of gray, then a thin stripe of something that isn't quite a color yet. A plane comes in low over the marsh with its lights on, heading for Kennedy, full of people who slept on it.

I open the passenger-side door. Ray doesn't look up.

His coffee is in the cupholder by his knee. The second one, from the Flatbush Star Deli, 11:44 p.m., bought by somebody who knew to buy two. The lid is still on. It's cold all the way through.

I pour it out by the back tire. The sand at the edge of the asphalt takes it and doesn't show a mark.

I shut his door. I get in on my side. We wait.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ask Kowalski

SHE COMES IN A ten-year-old Honda I didn't know she owned, and parks two spaces from the Crown Vic, and gets out in gray sweatpants and running shoes with no socks and her long black work coat thrown over all of it. Her hair is down. I've never seen Dana Ruiz with her hair down. It makes her look younger and more tired at the same time, which I didn't think was possible.

She doesn't say hello. Her eyes go to the passenger seat of my car, and stay there the way they do, a beat too long. Then she looks at me.

"Show me."

. . .

Marcus is awake now. He looks at her, at me, at her, and makes a decision about his career, and buzzes us through without a word.

In the freight elevator she stands with her back to the gate and her hands in her coat pockets and doesn't ask me anything. On the third floor the lights click on ahead of us and off behind us, and she watches them do it like she's memorizing the building.

I take the padlock off. I lift the door.

Doyle is on his feet at the end of his cable. He's heard two sets of footsteps. His whole body has been waiting a week for a second set.

"Dana," he says. "Dana. Thank Christ. Dana, look at me. He—"

She holds up one hand. She doesn't look at him. She looks at the walls, all three of them, slowly, left to right, the way you'd read a page. Then she picks the binder up off the folding chair, and moves the chair into the doorway, half in the corridor and half in the unit, and sits down, and opens it.

"Dana."

She turns a page.

He talks for a while. Most of what he said to me, in a different order, with her name in it. Then he talks less. Then he sits down on the cot. Then he stops.

She reads for forty minutes. I know because there's nothing else to do but watch the time. She doesn't skip. She reads the voucher logs like they're letters. She reads the bank statements and runs her finger down the column of never-ten. Every few minutes the corridor light over her head clicks off, because she's sitting so still the building thinks she's gone, and I lift my arm and bring it back.

The last tab is near the back. I can see the label from where I'm standing. PRICE, L.

It's the letters. Thirty-seven of them, photocopied, one a month, the same blue ballpoint, the same careful schoolteacher hand. *To Whom It May Concern. I am writing again about my son, Officer Daniel Price.* Each one has the precinct's received stamp in the corner, and under the stamp, initials. Every one of them is hers.

She turns them one at a time. All thirty-seven.

Then she closes the binder and sits with both hands flat on the cover.

"Whose name is on the unit?" she says. To me. Quiet.

"Mine."

"The notes. The handwriting."

"Mine."

She nods, like I've confirmed a delivery time. She looks at the inside of the door, where the yellow sheet is still taped at the height of a man on a cot. She reads it. I watch her read it. Her face does nothing at all.

"Somebody's been leaving you notes for ten days," she says. "Lieutenant Shaw has spent a week establishing that it's somebody with access. Somebody with access used your name." She stands up. She tucks the binder under her arm. "Anonymous tip. You followed it. That's the story."

"Lieutenant—"

"That's the story, Mercer."

It isn't a lie, exactly. That's the worst part, the part I'll think about later. Every word of it is true.

Doyle laughs, once. "He'll tell you himself. He kept me in a box. Stew every night. Ask him. Ask whoever's on the desk downstairs—"

"Tell whoever you want, Frank." She takes a pair of cuffs out of her coat pocket. Of course she brought cuffs. "Tell them about the stew. Then tell them about photo fourteen. I want to be in the room for that one."

The small silver key on my ring, the one I couldn't place at my kitchen table, fits the cuff on his ankle. It opens with a little sigh. Ruiz cuffs his hands in front, the way you do for a cop, and puts a hand on his elbow, and walks him out.

. . .

He goes quietly down the corridor. The lights come on ahead of the three of us, and go off behind. At the elevator she pulls the gate back and steps him in, and he turns around in the cage, and it's me he looks at. Not her.

"Ask Kowalski," he says.

It's loud. The first loud thing he's said in a week, and it goes down the corridor and comes back off the orange doors.

"Ask Kowalski! Ask Kowalski what he saw that night!"

Ruiz goes very still.

Not stops. Still. Her hand is on the gate and it stays on the gate, and the rest of her goes somewhere. I've seen her get news on the radio, bad news, a cop down in the Seven-Five, and her face didn't move like this. This is something else. This is a door I didn't know she had, and it's shut.

She looks at me. For a long time. Long enough that the light over my head clicks off and I don't lift my arm and we stand there in the half-dark with Frank Doyle breathing between us.

She doesn't say anything.

Then she pulls the gate across, and it closes with a bang, and the elevator takes them down.

I stand in the dark.

Behind me the unit is open. The lantern is still going on its milk crate, hissing at nobody. Eight feet of cable lie on the concrete in a loose curl, the shape of a man who isn't there anymore.

Ray's in the car. I could go down and ask him. It's a simple question. What night.

I stand there a while longer instead.

. . .

It's ten past nine that night when I get to the Nine-Oh. Ruiz asked me to come in, by text, which means it wasn't optional.

The squad room is half full and it gets quieter when I walk through it. Not hostile. The way a room gets quiet around a man who's been on the news without his name in it. *Missing Sergeant Found Alive in Brooklyn Storage Unit; Officials Cite Anonymous Tip.* Somebody has taken down the Bombers. Fourteen team photos, gone off the wall by the soda machine, and fourteen clean rectangles left behind in two neat rows, like a calendar with the year torn out.

Ruiz's door is closed. Through the glass I can see her at her desk, with a manila folder open in front of her, thick, gone soft at the corners. She's on the phone. Her other hand is flat on the folder.

I can't hear all of it. I hear "Mrs. Price." I hear "Lieutenant Dana Ruiz, at the Nine-Oh." Then a long time where she's just listening, her eyes closed. Then, very clearly, because she's said it louder than she meant to:

"Yes, ma'am. All of them. I read all of them." A pause. "I'm sorry it took so long."

I stop looking. It's not mine to look at.

Lieutenant Gary Shaw is sitting on the bench outside her office with his coat folded on his knees and a manila envelope on top of the coat. Gray suit, gray tie, the face of a pharmacist who's about to tell you something gently. He stands up when he sees me, which nobody from IA has ever done for me.

"Detective."

"Lieutenant."

"The notes have stopped," he says. "I find that when a leak stops, either it's been plugged or it's finished. My report's the same length either way." He holds out the envelope. "Your shield. The rest is with

the desk sergeant, because I'm not walking through a precinct with a sidearm in an envelope. The inquiry is closed. Unfounded. You'll get it in writing."

I take the envelope. It weighs what a badge weighs.

"The handwriting," I say.

"Is consistent with yours." He puts on his coat, one arm, then the other, without hurry. "It's also consistent with a great many men who were taught to print by nuns. I've decided that's the number I like."

He looks at me for a moment. Not the IA look. Something older.

"Get some sleep, Detective," he says, kindly. "Whoever you are at night is better at this than you are."

He goes down the stairs. I don't watch him go.

. . .

The Crown Vic is where I left it on Union Avenue, under the light that works. I stopped at the bodega on Metropolitan on the way. Two coffees. Two lids. The guy didn't even look at me this time. I'm a regular now. I've been a regular in a lot of places lately, apparently.

I get in. I put mine on the left and the second one on the right.

Ray's in the passenger seat.

He has his cap off, in his hands, in his lap. He isn't turning it anymore. He's just holding it. The seeds are on the dashboard where they've been all week, folded shut. The door pocket on my side is empty. I don't know when I stopped finding shells.

He doesn't say anything.

I wait. I start the engine for the heat. The radio has a car fire in the Seven-Nine and nothing for us. A bus goes by, lit up, empty, and its light moves across the windshield and across his hands and away.

It's the first time I can remember getting into this car and Ray not speaking first.

The coffee by his knee is still hot. It'll be cold by morning. It always is.

"What night, Ray?"

He doesn't answer. The engine idles. Down Union Avenue a light goes from green to yellow to red with no one there to see it, and stays red, and goes green again.

He doesn't look at me. He looks at the cap in his hands.

"Not yet, kid."

END OF CASE TWO

Jake Mercer will return in Case Three.

Thank you for reading. Sleep well.

— Shay