A JAKE MERCER CASE · THREE

The Passenger

Every night at 2:10, a dead man gets into the back seat.



Shay

A JAKE MERCER CASE

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The Passenger — A Jake Mercer Case, Book Three

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CHAPTER ONE

The Passenger

THE MAN AT THE front desk wants whoever does weird.

That's how Sergeant Haskins puts it when I come in off Union Avenue at 3:04 on a Monday morning. She doesn't look up from her crossword. She points her pen at me over her reading glasses, like a teacher picking the kid who wasn't listening.

"Him," she says. "He does weird."

The man turns around.

He's big in the way of men who used to be bigger somewhere else. Forty, forty-one. A brown work beanie pulled down to his eyebrows, a beard going gray at the corners of the mouth. His hands are in his hoodie pocket, holding each other.

At the far end of the desk, Officer Steve Petrakis is leaning on his elbows with two coffees. One is for Haskins. The other one is for whoever walks in next, because Petrakis always has a coffee for whoever walks in next. He played second base for Frank Doyle for six summers, and since Frank went where Frank went, he's been walking the building like a man who showed up for a game nobody told him was canceled.

"Detective." He grins. "You'll like this one. Guy's got a ghost."

"I didn't say ghost," the man says.

"You said dead guy."

"I said he's dead. I didn't say he was a ghost." He looks at me. "Those are different. Aren't they?"

"Most nights," I say. "Come upstairs."

. . .

His name is Nick Harmon. He shows me his TLC license before I ask for it, then his driver's license, then, for some reason, a Costco card.

"I drive," he says. "Overnights. Before that I tended bar fourteen years on Manhattan Avenue, a place that's a salad chain now. I'm good with people at three in the morning. I'm not a nut."

"Nobody said you were a nut."

"The guy downstairs did. With his face."

The squad room is empty except for Shapiro, asleep sitting up under a newspaper. I give Nick the bad coffee from the machine, which he drinks like it's medicine.

"Start wherever," I say.

He starts at Thanksgiving.

Two in the morning on Thanksgiving, which is when he works, because who's got a family. A ride request from a twenty-four-hour laundromat called Spin City on Metropolitan, between Lorimer and Union, across from the Getty station. Five blocks from here. The rider is waiting under the sign. Gray wool coat, gray knit cap, no bag. Gets in the back. Behind the driver.

"Nobody sits behind the driver," Nick says. "Everybody slides over. He didn't slide."

The drop pin is in Bay Ridge. When they get there, the man doesn't get out. He says, "Wait," and Nick waits, across the street

from a row of houses, for twenty minutes, with the meter running, while the man sits behind him and looks out the window. Then the man says, "Okay," and Nick drives him back to the laundromat. He gets out at 3:20 and goes inside.

"Then he leans in my window," Nick says, "and he gives me two fifties, and he says, 'Same time tomorrow. No app.'"

"And you said yes."

"It was Thanksgiving. I'd made forty-one dollars." He looks at the coffee. "Off-app. I know."

"I'm not the app police."

"And he was there the next night. Ten after two, under the sign. And the next." He counts on his fingers without meaning to, a bartender tallying a tab. "Eleven nights. Same block. Same twenty minutes. Two fifties every time. Always behind me. He says maybe four words a ride. *Wait. Okay. Thanks.* Once, *Jets.* That was a big night."

"So far you've got a lonely man with a laundry problem."

"I know. I know." He takes out his phone. "Night five I said, I'm Nick, what's your name? He said *Greg*. And the app had his whole name that first night, it's some old account. Greg Lawson. So six in the morning, outside a Dunkin', I google him. Because he gives me a feeling." He turns the phone toward me. "This is what comes up."

It's a funeral home website. Rendina & Sons, Flatlands Avenue. A navy banner and a dove, and under the dove a photograph.

Gregory Paul Lawson, 47, of Canarsie, lost at sea December 19, 2024, off Breezy Point. Proud owner of Lawson's Car Wash on Rockaway Parkway for nineteen years. He loved the Jets, striped bass, and his sister Denise. A memorial Mass will be held...

In the photo, a man in a navy polo with LAWSON'S stitched on the chest holds up a striped bass with both hands, like a check at a raffle. Heavy shoulders. A wide, pleased, slightly embarrassed face, a guy who doesn't get his picture taken much and has decided to make the most of it.

"It's him," Nick says. "Older. Thinner. Gray. He looks sixty. But that's him. That's the guy in my back seat."

. . .

People bring you two kinds of strange on nights. A story, or a story with a receipt.

Nick has receipts. He takes a bank envelope out of his hoodie and lays twenty-two fifties on my blotter in two neat rows, the way he'd set out glasses on a bar.

"I don't spend them," he says. "I tried once. At the gas station. I had it out and I put it back. It feels like spending a dead guy's money."

I don't touch them for a while. Then I pick one up by the edges.

They're new. Not clean. New, like they've never been anywhere. No soft corners, no cashier's pen, no smell of anybody's wallet. One fold down the middle, from being handed over, and that's all the life each one has had. I look at the serial numbers on the first row and then the second. They climb. Not every one in a straight run, there are gaps, but they climb, like seats in a stadium, a section at a time.

I photograph both rows and hand them back. I don't say anything about the numbers. I don't know yet what there is to say.

He has the dashcam, too.

A sixty-dollar two-lens unit, one eye out the windshield and one eye in. He plays me night nine on his phone.

The interior lens is night vision, gray and grainy, everything lit like an X-ray of a car. Nick's right shoulder and ear at the left of the frame. The empty front passenger seat. Past it, the back seat, from the hump in the middle to the right-hand door, and the rear window with the yellow lights of Metropolitan smeared across it.

The timestamp says 2:10:41.

The car rocks once on its springs, a little, the way a car does. Then it settles.

Nobody is in the back seat.

Nick scrubs forward. The rear window turns into the BQE, then the dark under the Gowanus, then a quiet street with porches. The car stops. Twenty minutes run. The back seat stays empty the whole time, the gray upholstery, the seat belt hanging in its loop. Then the street turns back into highway, then into Metropolitan, and at 3:21:09 the car rocks again, lightly, and rises a half inch, the way it does.

"That's me," Nick says. "I shift. When I get tense I shift."

"Audio?"

"Mic's been broken since August. Somebody spilled a Frappuccino in it." He swallows. "So on camera I'm driving an empty car to Bay Ridge every night and waiting and driving it back and talking to it. I look like a guy who needs help."

"You look like a guy who's tired."

"I'm tired because I'm driving a dead guy around." He puts the phone face-down on the desk, like that'll make it stop. "Tonight would have been twelve."

"Would have."

"I drove past at eight after. He was under the sign. Same coat. Same hat. Just standing there with his hands in his pockets, waiting

for me.” His voice drops. “And he looked at my car. Not at me. At the car. Like he knew it was mine from a block away, and he knew I wasn’t stopping. And I didn’t stop. I came here, and I sat outside for forty minutes, and I came in.”

“So what is he? Do I call a priest?”

. . .

I give him the speech, the short version.

Being dead isn’t against the law. Coming back isn’t either, unless somebody cashed a check on the way out. A man is allowed to ride to Bay Ridge every night and look at a house. It’s creepy. It isn’t a crime. People do creepier things in Bay Ridge for free.

“So what do I do?”

“Tonight, go home. Sleep.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow you pick him up. Ten after two, like always.” I write my cell on the back of a card. “I’ll be in your front seat.”

He looks at the card like it’s a ticket to something he isn’t sure he wants to see.

“You believe me?”

“I believe you drove somebody,” I say. “That’s where I start.”

Before he goes I copy the drop address off his first night’s trip into my notebook. I don’t really read it. I write it the way you write anything at a quarter to four, fast, in capitals, so the morning can deal with it.

. . .

The Crown Vic is out on Union where I left it, frost starting in the corners of the windshield.

Ray's in the passenger seat.

Two coffees from the bodega on Metropolitan, his with the lid on and no steam. A bag of sunflower seeds on the dash beside his cap, the same bag that's been there ten days, still folded over at the top. He hasn't opened it. I haven't asked.

It's been like this since the storage unit. Since *what night*. Since *not yet*. He's here every shift, just quieter, like a radio somebody turned down and forgot about.

I tell him. Spin City, the eleven nights, the fifties, the dove. The car rocking on its springs for nobody.

When I get to the obituary he makes a small sound in his nose.

"What," I say.

"Nothing." He looks out at Union Avenue. "Kid. Your guy's got it backwards."

"Got what backwards."

"Ghosts don't sit in the back." His voice is mild, the way it gets before a punchline. "Everybody knows that. They ride up front. Where they can see where they're going."

It's the most he's said in a week. I laugh, a little, out of relief more than anything, and for a second the car is the car again.

Then I open the notebook to read him the address.

I read it out loud. I read it the way I wrote it, in capitals, without thinking. *83RD STREET. BAY RIDGE. BETWEEN THIRD AND FOURTH.*

Ray doesn't say anything.

That's not unusual lately. But this is a different kind of not saying anything. This kind has edges. His hands are on his knees and they stay on his knees. He doesn't reach for his cap. In the corner of my eye he's as still as the cap is, as still as the coffee.

The engine idles.

I look down at the page again. At my own capitals.

“I know that block,” I say.

He doesn’t say a word.

CHAPTER TWO

Eleven Nights

SPIN CITY IS THE brightest thing on Metropolitan Avenue at 1:55 in the morning, and it knows it.

Two walls of front-loaders, a wall of dryers, orange plastic chairs bolted together in threes. A hand-lettered sign over the soap machine says NO DYEING IN MACHINES, and somebody has added, in pen, *or anywhere*. The C in the sign out front has a short in it. SPIN ITY. SPIN CITY. SPIN ITY. One dryer is going, a single load turning over and over behind the glass, nobody's.

I'm parked across the street, by the Getty station, with the engine off and two coffees going cold.

"I'll tail you," Ray says.

It's the first thing he's said since Union Avenue last night. I look at him. He's looking at the laundromat.

"You'll tail me."

"Silver Camry with T-plates, ten miles under the limit. I think I can manage, kid."

He doesn't say anything about Bay Ridge. Neither do I. We've been not saying it since four o'clock yesterday morning, and it's sitting in the car with us like a third passenger.

. . .

Nick pulls up at 2:06. Silver Camry, TLC plates, a little Christmas tree air freshener hanging off the mirror next to, yes, a hula girl. I get out of the Crown Vic, shut the door, and get into his front seat.

"Hi," Nick says. "Okay. You're here."

He holds out a Ziploc bag of mints. I take one so he'll feel better. He takes four.

"The hula girl came with the car," he says. "I want you to know that. She's glued." He looks at the laundromat, at the empty sidewalk under the sign, and his knee starts going. "Sorry. I'm a talker when I'm nervous. Four a.m. is nurses, mostly. Woodhull, Kings County, I'll do six hospital runs in a night. Nurses tip. Nurses are the—"

"What's the hula girl's name?"

He blinks at me. "What?"

"You've had her a while. She's got a name."

"Leilani," he says, embarrassed, and the knee slows down.

It's a trick for calming people down, giving them something small to answer. But I wasn't thinking about him when I did it. I was thinking about something else, and then I wasn't, and I don't know what it was.

My hand's in my coat pocket, turning my key ring over and over. Crown Vic key, apartment keys, the little brass one from Stor-Mor I never took off. I make myself stop.

At 2:10 the door of Spin City opens, and a man comes out.

He doesn't come down the sidewalk. He comes out of the laundromat, from inside, from somewhere past the dryers, like he's been in there all along.

. . .

He's the obituary photo with the air let out.

The same frame, but the weight that filled it has gone somewhere and not come back. A long gray wool coat that fit a bigger man, collar up. A gray knit cap pulled low. Gray stubble, gray face, cheeks fallen in under the bones. The funeral home said forty-seven. The sidewalk says sixty.

He walks to the curb. He looks at the Camry, and then through the windshield at me in the front seat, and nothing at all happens in his face. He opens the back door behind Nick and gets in and pulls it shut.

The car rocks once on its springs and settles.

He smells like dryer sheets and cold air.

"Hey," Nick says, to the windshield. His voice cracks on it and he tries again. "Hey. This is my buddy, he's gonna ride along tonight. That okay?"

Nothing.

"Morning," I say.

Nothing.

Nick looks at me. I nod at the road. He puts it in drive.

. . .

From the front passenger seat you can't see the man behind the driver. That's the thing about that seat. If I turn all the way around I'll see him fine, and he'll see me seeing him, and whatever this is will turn into something else. So I don't. I lean an inch toward the door and watch a slice of him in the rearview. A shoulder. An ear. The side of his face going orange, then dark, then orange, every time we pass

under a light.

His hands are in his lap. The knuckles are red and chapped, a working man's hands, a man who's had them in cold water a lot of years. The ring finger on his left hand stops at the last joint.

The BQE at 2:15 is a few trucks and a lot of nothing. Nick drives like his driving instructor is in the car, signaling into empty lanes. Past the Navy Yard. Down under the Gowanus, where the whole world goes the color of a parking garage. Behind us, headlights. A few sets, near and far. I decide one of them is Ray.

Nobody says anything for twenty-two minutes.

Off the Gowanus. Down Fourth Avenue, past the bakeries with their grates down, a Greek place, a church with a lit sign that says ADVENT: PREPARE YE THE WAY. Left. Right. And then we're on Eighty-Third Street, and I have to look at my hands for a second.

Nick pulls to the curb on the odd side, across from the pin, and puts it in park.

"Wait," says the man in the back.

A low voice, rough at the edges, Canarsie in every vowel. He says it to the window, not to us.

Nick waits. So do I.

. . .

It's a block like a hundred blocks in Bay Ridge. Two-story row houses with aluminum awnings and little gated front yards. Christmas already up on half of them, inflatable snowmen deflated for the night, face-down on the lawns like they've been shot. A Mary in a half-shell on one yard, a Jets flag on another.

The man isn't looking at our side of the street. He's looking at the other one.

At a narrow frame house, white siding, two windows up and one big one down. A small porch with a glider on it under a plastic cover. A real pine wreath on the door, with a red bow. And the porch light on, a plain yellow bulb, burning at 2:40 in the morning like it's waiting for somebody to come up the steps.

I know that house.

I know the second step gives a little when you put your weight on it. I know the wreath is real because she won't have plastic. I know why the porch light is on all night, and I know it's been on all night for a long time.

You want me to tell you whose house it is. I know. I'm not going to, not yet. I'm not even telling me.

The front window has the curtain open a hand's width, and a lamp on low in the front room behind it, the kind of lamp you leave on so the house doesn't look empty. From here, across the street, through glass, I can see the corner of a mantel. Something on it folded into a triangle. Something blue beside it. Shapes. I don't look hard. It's too far to make anything out.

The man behind Nick takes his cap off.

I see it in the rearview. He takes it off and holds it in his lap in both hands, by the brim, the way you'd hold a hat in church. His hair underneath is short and gray and thinning. He doesn't move after that. He sits and he watches the house.

Nick crunches a mint. The sound is enormous. He stops chewing and holds the rest in his cheek.

At 2:47 a light goes on upstairs in the frame house. A shape passes behind the shade, slow, careful, a shape that's not in a hurry to be anywhere. Then the light goes off again. The porch light stays.

In the rearview I see the man's hands tighten on the cap. Then let go.

"Who lives there?" I say.

He doesn't answer. I didn't think he would. I'm not sure I asked it for him.

At 2:58 he puts the cap back on.

"Okay," he says.

. . .

Nick drives the way back faster, like a man leaving a party where he didn't know anybody. I watch the headlights behind us. I can't tell if any of them are ours.

I've decided I'm not going to get anything tonight. That's fine. You don't always get something the first night. You get the shape of a thing. A house, a cap, a light going on upstairs.

We're coming up on the Metropolitan exit when the man behind the driver speaks.

He doesn't turn his head. He says it to the window, the same low voice, as if it's just occurred to him.

"You still drive that Crown Vic, Detective?"

Nick's hands jump on the wheel.

I don't turn around. I make myself not turn around. In the rearview the man's face is turned to the glass, and his eyes are on the river, and there's nothing in his face at all.

"Who's asking?" I say.

He doesn't answer that either.

. . .

Spin City at 3:21. Nick pulls to the curb under the flickering C. The man reaches forward between the seats, past Nick's shoulder, and lays two fifties on the console, folded once down the middle. Then he gets out.

On the sidewalk he stops.

He looks across Metropolitan at my car, parked by the Getty station. Not at the plate. At the windshield. He looks at it for a long moment, long enough for the C to go out and come back twice. Then he looks at me, through Nick's window, and something happens in his face for the first time, small and tired, and I can't read it. It's the look you give somebody when they've told you something without meaning to.

Then he goes into the laundromat.

I'm through the door in five seconds.

The dryer's still going. A woman in a puffer coat is asleep in the bolted chairs with her purse in her lap. The long folding table is empty except for a stack of somebody's drop-off, towels folded into perfect squares. At the back, past the last dryer, a gray steel door says EMPLOYEES ONLY.

It's locked. I put my ear to it. Nothing but the hum of the building.

He's gone.

. . .

The Crown Vic is where I left it, by the Getty station. I put my hand on the hood before I get in. Habit. The hood is cold. Cold all the way through, the way metal gets in December when it's been sitting.

Ray's in the passenger seat.

"Lost you at the Gowanus," he says. "Truck cut me off. Figured you'd come back here."

"You figured."

"I'm a man who knows when he's not needed."

I get in. The coffee on his side has gone to the temperature of the street. Across Metropolitan the laundromat sign flickers, SPIN ITY, SPIN CITY, and the one dryer keeps turning.

"He knew the car, Ray."

He doesn't answer.

"Nobody told him I was a cop. He looked at me in the front seat and he knew the car."

Ray is looking at the laundromat. At the steel door at the back, past the dryers, that I can't see from here. His cap is on the dash. His hands are on his knees.

"Everybody knows this car, kid," he says, very quietly. "It's the only one left."

CHAPTER THREE

Breezy Point

BY TEN ON TUESDAY morning I've been dead-man shopping for three hours, and the whiteboard on my fridge is watching me do it.

J.M. — 3. My block capitals. I don't wipe it anymore. It doesn't help, and lately it feels rude.

The dead man has a paper trail, the way dead men do. A short one. Nobody writes much about a man who owns a car wash until he goes off a boat.

The Coast Guard press release is three paragraphs. December 20, 2024. *Coast Guard suspends search for missing boater near Breezy Point.* Gregory Lawson, 47, reported overboard from the *Miss Gina*, a thirty-eight-foot charter fishing vessel out of Sheepshead Bay, at approximately 11:50 p.m. on December 19, while night-fishing for striped bass off the Breezy Point jetty. The vessel's captain threw a life ring and called a mayday. Fifty-two hours, three hundred and some square miles of black water. *The Coast Guard extends its deepest sympathies.*

No body. Bodies come back in that water, usually. Rockaway gives them back in the spring. Not this one.

Surrogate's Court, Kings County. A petition to declare Gregory P. Lawson presumptively dead, filed by his sister, Denise Lawson, granted the following September. Death certificate issued. Very orderly.

Property records. 1460 Rockaway Parkway, Canarsie. Lawson's Car Wash. Deed transferred December 16, 2024, three days before the boat, from Gregory P. Lawson to something called Canarsie Shine LLC, for one point three million. The LLC was formed in Albany on December 2 with a registered agent that registers agents for a living. No names. There are never names.

So: a man sells his business, and three days later he goes fishing in December, at midnight, and falls off the back of a boat.

I write that down and underline it.

. . .

Denise Lawson answers on the fifth ring, from what sounds like a dental office, a drill going somewhere behind her.

"Detective who?"

I tell her again. I tell her I'm following up on an old file. I don't tell her her brother has been riding to Bay Ridge in the back of a Camry.

"There's nothing to follow up. He drowned."

"Was there life insurance, Ms. Lawson?"

A pause long enough for the drill to finish.

"Two-fifty," she says. "Through the business association. I'm the beneficiary."

"Did you file?"

"No."

"Can I ask why not?"

"Because my brother was afraid of the water at night," she says. "He fished days. Every Saturday of his life he fished days. He never once in forty-seven years went out on a boat in the dark. You want to know why I didn't put in for the money, that's why. Don't call here again."

She hangs up. I write down *afraid of the water at night*, and under it, because it's true, *so is everybody*.

. . .

The *Miss Gina* is tied up on Emmons Avenue across from a row of Russian restaurants with their awnings rolled up for the winter. Sheepshead Bay at two in the afternoon is gulls, diesel, and old men fishing off the footbridge for nothing.

Ray didn't say anything the whole length of the Belt, and I didn't make him.

"I'll be a minute," I say.

"Take two," he says. "Boat guys like to talk."

Walt Ferris doesn't. He's seventy or so, with a face like a work glove left out in the rain, and he's on his knees on the deck with a can of something and a rag when I come down the dock, and he doesn't get up.

"I told the Coast Guard," he says, before I finish my name.

"I'm not the Coast Guard."

"I told the cops. I told the sister. I told the insurance man." He works the rag into a cleat. "Guy goes to the stern to take a leak. I'm at the wheel. I turn around, he's gone. I threw the ring. I called it. I've told it till it's worn out."

"Which insurance man?"

His rag stops.

"Some guy," he says. "Came around after. Asked the same questions you're asking. Had a card." He starts the rag again. "I don't keep cards."

The sister never filed. Insurance men don't come around on claims nobody made.

I look at the boat instead of at him. The *Miss Gina* is old, white paint gone to cream, the name hand-lettered on the transom in a blue that's been touched up a lot of times by a careful hand. But on top of the wheelhouse there's a radar dome so new it's still white as a tooth. Behind the wheel, through the glass, a chartplotter with a screen as big as a television. A new pair of Shimano rods in the rack, the cork handles still clean.

"Nice electronics," I say.

"Get off my boat," Ferris says, without looking up.

. . .

Ray waits until we're back on the Belt.

"Guy tells you who all he's told," he says, "he got paid once for every one of them."

"The insurance man."

"Mm."

"Somebody went looking for Greg Lawson after he drowned. Somebody who wasn't his sister."

Ray doesn't answer. He's looking out at the long gray flat of the bay, the planes coming down low over it into Kennedy. His cap is in his lap. He's turning it, a quarter turn at a time.

He hasn't asked about the house. I haven't told him what I saw in the window. Two men in a car, not talking about the same thing.

. . .

At 8:15 Tuesday night Steve Petrakis is sitting on the edge of my desk at the Nine-Oh with a coffee for me.

"Black," he says. "Right? Haskins said black."

I take it. I put it down next to the coffee I already have.

"So I hear you caught the dead guy's Uber." He's grinning, but it's a good grin, a team grin. Early thirties, built low and square like a second baseman, a buzz cut going thin on top, a Bombers windbreaker he still wears like the season isn't over. Nicotine gum going at the back of his jaw. "The car wash guy. Out in Canarsie. That's wild."

"It's something."

"Frank used to take the Explorer there. Every other Saturday. Swore by the hot wax." He shakes his head at the floor for a second, the way everybody in this building does when they say Frank's name now, like the floor might answer. "Listen. I know how it is around here since. People don't know where to put their face. I just want to say it. Frank always said you were the best. Whatever else he was." He taps the desk twice with his knuckles. "Anything you need. My cousin's Harbor Unit. He can pull whatever they've got on the boat. December of '24, right?"

"I'll let you know."

"Do." He stands up. "I mean it, Detective. Anything."

He goes off down the squad room and says something at Shapiro's desk that makes Shapiro laugh, which nobody has managed since Thanksgiving.

I look at the coffee he brought me. I look at my notebook. It's the only place I've written the words *car wash*. I didn't say them to

Haskins. Nick didn't say them downstairs; he said *dead guy*.

It's on the funeral home's website. Anybody can google.

I write *Petrakis – car wash?* on the legal pad anyway and put a box around it, a small one.

. . .

Ruiz's office light is on. Her window looks down on the lot, and I can see my car from here, under the one good light in the lot, and the shape of Ray's cap on the dash.

"Mercer." She doesn't look up from her screen. "Tell me it's not a ghost."

"It's not a ghost."

"Good. What is it?"

"A man named Greg Lawson."

She stops typing.

It isn't much. Her hands just stop, on the keys, mid-word. And then the color goes out of her face, from the top down, like somebody pulling a shade. I've watched Dana Ruiz take bad news for years. I watched her take Frank Doyle in a storage unit. I've never watched her do this.

"Where did you get that name?"

"Off a funeral home website. With a dove on it."

She takes her hands off the keyboard and puts them flat on the desk.

"He drowned," she says. "Two years ago. Off a boat. It's a Coast Guard case, it's closed, and it was never ours."

"You knew him."

"I knew the car wash." Her voice is very even. Too even. The way you walk on ice. "Half of Brooklyn North knew that car wash."

"Lieutenant—"

"Who else have you told?"

"Nobody. A driver. Petrakis heard *dead guy* at the desk."

She looks past me then. Out the window, down at the lot. At my car. Her eyes stay on it the way they do, a beat, two beats, longer than a lieutenant needs to look at a 2014 Crown Vic. Then she looks back at me, and whatever was in her face is gone, filed, locked.

"Write it up," she says. "Close it. Then go home, and lie down in a bed. In the dark. With your eyes shut. Have you heard of this?"

"I've read about it."

"Mercer." She says it quietly. "Close it."

. . .

I don't close it.

At 11:40 I'm alone in the squad room with a radiator banging like someone's trapped inside it. I pull up the squad's old activity sheets, the plant and observation logs the department scanned in when it went paperless, the ones CompStat eats once a week and nobody else ever reads. I type in the address.

1460 ROCKAWAY PKWY.

I'm expecting nothing. A stolen car dumped by the vacuums, at most.

One result.

DATE: 12/11/2024. TOUR: 2000x0400.

TYPE: PLANT / OBSERVATION.

LOCATION: 1460 ROCKAWAY PKWY (LAWSON'S CAR WASH), CANARSIE.

UNIT: BKN NIGHT SQUAD. DET. R. KOWALSKI. DET. J. MERCER.

REQUESTED BY: KOWALSKI. BASIS: PERSONAL INFORMATION.

START: 0104. END: 0219.

DISPOSITION: TERMINATED – SEE AIDED.

I read it once.

I read my name. I read Ray's name next to it, the way it's been next to mine on a thousand sheets. A car wash in Canarsie, eight days before its owner went off a boat in the dark. A plant that Ray asked for. A night I was there. A night I don't—

I read the last line.

And the screen goes white. Not the screen. The page in my head. It goes white the way your eyes go white when you look at the sun and then back at the room, bright and empty and humming, and there's nothing on it, nothing at all, and I hold on to the edge of the desk because that seems like a good idea—

. . .

It's 3:37.

I'm in the car. The engine's running for the heat. I'm on Metropolitan Avenue, across from Spin City, by the Getty station, and I don't remember the drive, or the stairs, or the lot. The C in the sign goes out and comes back. The dryer in the window is still turning.

My phone is in my lap, face up. Four texts from Nick Harmon.

2:04 you coming?

2:11 hes in. going

3:22 back. same as always. 20 min

3:24 he asked if youre ok

Beside me Ray is in the passenger seat with his cap in his hands. His coffee is in the cupholder by his knee, full to the lid, cold.

He doesn't say where we've been.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blind Spot

KEVIN TRAN GETS INTO the back of Nick Harmon's Camry, behind the driver, and disappears.

"Okay," he says. "Now look."

I'm in the front passenger seat with Nick's phone, watching the dashcam's live feed from the interior lens. Nick's right shoulder. The empty seat beside him, because I'm leaning out of frame on purpose. The back seat from the hump to the right-hand door. The rear window, and through it the Nine-Oh's lot at 6:50 on a Wednesday morning, the sky over Union Avenue going from black to the color of a nickel.

Nobody's in the back seat.

"Dude," Tran says, from the back seat. "I'm right here."

He waves. On the screen, nothing waves. He leans toward the middle, and a slice of his sticker backpack slides into the edge of the frame, a cartoon cat and half of the word ENCRYPT. He leans back. Gone.

Nick makes a sound like a man letting go of a rope he's been holding for two weeks.

. . .

"It's the mount," Tran says.

He's out of the car now with an energy drink the color of antifreeze, explaining it the way he explains everything, as if we're slightly slower than the equipment. He hasn't been to bed either. The feds want every Frank Doyle export twice.

"Your camera's not center. You stuck it right of the mirror and aimed it at the passenger seat."

"That's where the drunks sit," Nick says. "That's where everybody throws up."

"Sure. So the lens is wide, like a hundred and forty degrees, but it's wide from *there*." He points. "It sees you, it sees the front seat, it sees the right rear. Behind you is your headrest, and the pillar, and the angle. That seat's a wall. You could put a horse back there."

"So he's not a ghost," Nick says.

"He's a guy who sat in the one seat your camera can't see," Tran says. "Night one. Before he knew you, before he knew your car. He got in and went straight behind you."

"Nobody sits behind the driver," I say.

"Right. So either he got lucky eleven times, or he knows how cameras work." Tran shrugs. "You said car wash? Car washes are all cameras. Bays, register, vacuums. Guy who runs one for nineteen years knows where every lens points without looking."

It's a good answer. I don't think it's the whole answer. A man doesn't learn to live in blind spots from a car wash.

The half inch the Camry rises at 3:21 every night was Greg Lawson getting out. Nick stands in the lot with his hands in his hoodie, relieved and a little let down, the way people are when the

noise in the attic turns out to be a raccoon.

"He's a guy," he says.

"He's a guy."

"A dead guy."

"A guy who isn't as dead as his paperwork."

He nods at the asphalt. Then he says, not looking at me, "Last night. When he asked was you okay. He meant it. That's what got me. He asked like he knew you."

I don't answer that. Tran is looking at me over his antifreeze.

Before he goes, Tran pulls the first night's trip receipt up on Nick's app. The rider account is old, opened in 2017, dormant for two years, woken up the day before Thanksgiving with a prepaid gift card.

"You buy those with cash at a CVS," Tran says. "That's what I'd do if I was dead."

He tosses his empty can in the recycling and looks across the lot at the Crown Vic.

"You should put one of these in the boat," he says. "A camera. I'll do it for free. That thing's a fossil."

"Nobody needs to see what goes on in that car," I say.

He laughs like I made a joke.

. . .

I don't do daylight well. Everything has edges in it. People are out buying things.

Spin City at eleven in the morning is a different animal. Every machine going. Two women folding at the long table, a toddler asleep in a laundry cart, a man in a Knicks jacket feeding quarters into the soap machine one at a time like he's mad at each one.

The owner is behind a counter by the door, under a hand-lettered price list for wash-and-fold. Seventies, Korean, a pressed plaid shirt buttoned to the neck, reading glasses on a beaded cord. He's watching a drama on an iPad propped against the register, a woman crying beautifully in the rain. The nameplate taped to the counter says MR. CHOI – OWNER – NO CHECKS.

I show him the shield. He looks at it, then at me, then back at the woman in the rain.

"The man who goes out at two in the morning," I say.

"Mr. G."

"Mr. G."

"He sleeps in back. Forty dollars, cash, every night." He doesn't pause the drama. "He folds the drop-off for me. Best folder I ever have. Folds like army. Customers write me notes." He holds up a Post-it from beside the register: *WHO FOLDED THIS??* "I don't know what to tell them."

"How long?"

"Night before Thanksgiving. Eleven o'clock, he says he needs a place, he can pay. I say I'm not a hotel. He says he can fold." He shrugs. "Two o'clock he goes out. Three-thirty he comes back. He sleeps till six. He folds. Daytime he goes out. Where, I don't ask."

"Can I look?"

He turns and looks at me properly, over the glasses. "You have a warrant?"

"No."

He considers that. The woman in the rain is being held by a man in a long coat. Mr. Choi watches them for a while, then takes a key off a hook.

"He pays me for a cot," he says. "He doesn't pay me for privacy."

. . .

The steel door at the back says EMPLOYEES ONLY. Behind it, a cinderblock room with a boiler that breathes, shelves of jug detergent, a mop in a bucket, and a smell of warm lint.

The cot is against the far wall. Army surplus, canvas. A gray wool blanket on it, folded into a square so sharp you could mail it. A pillow with no case. Under the cot, a black duffel, zipped, and a pair of white rubber boots, the kind fishermen wear, the soles cracked and dry.

On the shelf over the cot: a box of dryer sheets. A toothbrush standing up in a paper cup. A small paperback booklet, *Tide Tables 2026, Jamaica Bay & Rockaway Inlet*, the corners soft from being thumbed. That's a strange thing for a drowned man to keep by his bed. Maybe not. Maybe it's the only thing that makes sense.

And on the wall, at the height of a man's face lying down, one photograph, held at the top by a strip of masking tape.

It's a drugstore print, four by six, the kind people stopped making. Creased once across the corner, like it's been carried in a wallet and taken out a lot. A woman, sixties, sitting on the top step of a porch, painted boards, a black iron railing beside her. She's got a mug in both hands. She's wearing a blue scarf tied over her head and knotted at the back of the neck, the way you tie one when there's nothing underneath it. She's thin in the face, the way people get. And she's laughing. Not smiling for the camera. Laughing at whoever's holding it, with her whole face, like he's just said something stupid and she loves him for it.

Something about the railing.

Half of Brooklyn has that railing. Every house from here to Bensonhurst has those same black iron curls going up the steps. It's

nothing. I look at it anyway, longer than I mean to, and then I look at the tide tables instead.

I photograph everything; it's a habit, like the two coffees. I photograph the cot, the boots, the booklet. I don't take the picture of the picture. I couldn't tell you why.

. . .

When I come back out front, Steve Petrakis is at the counter.

He's in the Bombers windbreaker with a quilted comforter in a dry-cleaning bag over one arm and two coffees in a cardboard tray. He lights up when he sees me.

"Detective! I saw the car out front." He holds the tray out. "Figured you'd be running on empty."

"What are you doing here, Steve?"

"My mother-in-law's on Lorimer. She's got a comforter she swears only this guy can do." He nods at Mr. Choi, who doesn't nod back. "Small world, right?" His eyes go past me, just for a second, to the steel door I've just come out of. "This where your ghost lives?"

I didn't tell him which laundromat. I wrote it in a DD-5 on Monday morning. DD-5s get read. That's what they're for.

"You came Monday," Mr. Choi says.

Petrakis turns. "Sorry?"

"Monday. You came Monday, you asked about drop-off. You didn't drop off." Mr. Choi points at the comforter with his chin. "Now you drop off."

Petrakis laughs, easy, a team laugh. "Different comforter. She's got a lot of comforters." He holds the tray out to me again. "Black. I remembered."

I take the coffee. I set it down on the long folding table on my way past, next to a stack of somebody's T-shirts folded like army, and I go out into the daylight without looking back.

. . .

The Crown Vic is at the meter by the Getty station. Ray's in the passenger seat, his cap on the dash.

I come around the back of the car to get to my door, and I stop.

The trunk lock.

I know every mark on this car. The dent in the left rear quarter from a garbage truck on Grand Street. The long scratch on the passenger door from a shopping cart. A rust bubble on the hood the size of a dime.

There are new scratches around the trunk lock. Bright ones, fresh metal, three thin silver lines curving in from the edge of the cylinder, and a little gouge at nine o'clock where something slipped. Somebody worked a tool in there. Not long ago. Not well. The lock held.

I lean down and look at it and I don't touch it.

"Ray," I say. "Anybody come by the car?"

"Didn't see anybody, kid."

I take out my keys. I find the trunk key, the one that never gets used, the one with the rubber head still clean, and I put it into the lock, past the scratches.

I stand there with it in.

There's nothing in the trunk. A spare tire, a jack, a box of road flares from some year that doesn't matter. I don't use the trunk. I never have, not in two years. I throw my gym bag in the back seat like an animal. There's nothing in there that anybody would want.

I don't turn the key.

"Leave it, kid," Ray says. His voice is very quiet through the glass. "It's just a spare."

I take the key back out.

In all the years I've known him, Ray Kowalski has never once told me to leave something alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eighty-Third Street

THE SCRATCHES ARE ON the left side of the lock, where a right-handed man would start.

Three of them, bright and short, a little crescent around the cylinder, and the gouge at nine o'clock where the tool slipped. Somebody tried a pick and didn't have the touch. Kids, probably. Kids with a pick set off the internet. That's what I decide, and I decide it fast.

I crouch behind the Crown Vic in the precinct lot at 6:20 in the morning with my flashlight in my teeth. Day tour is coming in, guys with gym bags and wet hair who nod at me the way you nod at a man crouching behind his own trunk.

The key goes in. This time I turn it. It's stiff, then it gives, like a joint nobody's asked anything of in a while.

Flares in a cardboard sleeve. A box of old DD-5s from before. A Bombers windbreaker Frank gave me that I've never worn, because I've never played. The carpet panel over the well, flat, square. The spare's under there, and the jack I've never used, and nothing else.

Nobody got in. The lock held. They built these to be beaten on by drunks for a decade.

I don't lift the panel. There's no reason to.

I shut the trunk and stand there with my hand flat on it. Up on the second floor, one slat of the blind in Ruiz's window is bent down at eye level. It stays bent while I walk around to my door, and then it isn't.

Ray's in the passenger seat. The seeds are on the dash, folded. His coffee's by his knee where I put it at 2:40, lid on.

"Somebody wanted in," I say.

He doesn't say anything. He hasn't said much since the night Nick Harmon walked into the Nine-Oh. *Morning, kid.* A grunt at a lane change. The rest is him looking out the window.

. . .

I mean to go home.

I take the BQE, and somewhere past the bridge exits I don't get off. The Gowanus comes up under the car on its long rusted legs, and Sunset Park goes by, the brick warehouses of Industry City, the cemetery up on its hill. I tell myself I'm going to look at a block in daylight. A cop looks at a location in daylight. It's in the book.

Ray doesn't ask where we're going. That's how I know he knows.

I get off at Ninety-Second and come back up Fourth Avenue, under the long string of traffic lights, past the Greek bakery and the R train stairs at Eighty-Sixth, and I turn onto Eighty-Third and park across the street and three houses down, a foot from a hydrant, where a man can see the whole house without looking like he's looking.

It's 9:50 in the morning. I don't remember the bakery. I remember going past it. I don't remember the light being green.

. . .

It's a good block. That's the first thing anybody would say.

Two-story row houses, mostly, brick and siding, each with its own little front yard behind a waist-high iron fence. Aluminum awnings over the porches, the scalloped kind, in colors you can't buy anymore: avocado, mustard, a brown like a church pew. A plaster Virgin in a half-shell in somebody's yard, colored lights wound around her shell. Recycling bins with the house numbers painted on in white. Halfway down, somebody's inflatable snowman, deflated for the day, is a white puddle on the grass.

The house is a narrow frame house with white siding, two windows up and one big one down, five steps to a small porch. There's a glider on the porch under a plastic cover. There's a wreath on the door, real pine, the red bow a little crushed on one side where it got shut in the door. In the front window, low, there's a small flag, a black-and-white one with a single blue stripe across the middle. Half the houses in Bay Ridge with a cop in them have one. They sell them at the Knights of Columbus.

The porch light is on.

It's ten in the morning and the porch light is on. It always is. She's been doing it since he was in a sector car in the Six-Eight and worked midnights, Ray says, so he'd never come home to a dark house. He tells it like a complaint. He's told it to me three times.

It's Ann Kowalski's house.

I've had Thanksgiving at the table you can't see from here, in the back room with the plastic on the good chairs. Ann at one end telling Ray he was carving against the grain, Ray at the other end carving against the grain on purpose. Her sister's husband asleep in front of the Lions game. Me in the middle, eating three plates because Ann kept putting things on my plate while I was looking at somebody else.

Ray doesn't go home much these days. That's theirs, not mine. Thirty-one years married, you're allowed a door I don't knock on. Ann was sick, a few winters back, sick in the way where you stop saying the word in the house, and she beat it, and something about that year is still in the walls of the car when he doesn't talk. I don't make him.

Every night for two weeks, at about 2:35 in the morning, a man who drowned off Breezy Point two years ago has sat in the back of a rideshare across the street from this house for twenty minutes and watched that porch light. He didn't knock. He didn't leave anything. He watched, and then he paid in cash, and went back to a cot in the back of a laundromat with a photograph by his pillow.

I've got my hand on the door handle.

I've had it there for a while. I notice that the way you notice you've been holding your breath. The metal's gone warm under my palm.

"Don't go up there, kid."

Ray says it to the windshield. Quiet. It's the most he's said in days.

I take my hand off the handle. I look at him. He's got his cap on the dash in front of him, the old orange NY gone the color of a cantaloupe rind, and he's looking at the cap and not at the house.

"Why not?"

He doesn't answer for a while.

"Not yet," he says.

"That's twice now, Ray."

"I know how many times it is."

"A dead man's watching your house, Ray. You want me to sit out here and pretend it's a nice block?"

"It is a nice block."

"Ray."

"You go up those steps," he says, "you'd better know what you're going to say when she opens the door. You don't. So don't."

I look at the house. The wreath. The light. The little flag in the window.

He's right. I'd stand on that porch and say *Ann, a man who drowned is guarding you, do you know why?* and she'd look at me over her reading glasses, and I'd have nothing to put after it.

The front door opens.

Not all the way. Six inches, a hand on the inside knob, a sleeve, green, a cardigan. Somebody about to come out for the mail.

I've got the car in drive before I've decided anything. I pull off the hydrant and go down Eighty-Third toward Third Avenue at exactly the speed limit, like a man who lives here, and I don't look in the mirror.

Ray doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to.

. . .

I sleep for forty minutes at my desk at the Nine-Oh and wake at 4:15 in the afternoon with the corner of a death certificate stuck to my cheek. Greg Lawson, *presumed drowning, body not recovered.* It leaves a line on my face I can feel for an hour.

At eight, the night tour comes in, and so does Steve Petrakis.

He's in civvies, the Bombers windbreaker and jeans, off a day tour, gum going. He sat by Frank's Explorer at Floyd Bennett all night like a dog by a grave. Since Frank went to federal custody, he's been the friendliest man in the building.

"Mercer. My man." He drops into the chair by my desk without being asked and puts a folded printout on my blotter. "My cousin came through. Harbor Unit. Everything they had on the *Miss Gina*,

December of ‘24.”

I unfold it. Two pages. A Harbor Unit aided report, a Coast Guard case number, the same fifty-two hours I already read in the press release. Water temperature, forty-four degrees. *Subject last seen at stern.*

“Not much,” Petrakis says. “Figured you’d want it anyway.”

“Guy’s still riding?”

“Guy’s still riding.”

“Where’s he go, every night?” He says it easy, chewing. “Where’s a dead guy need to be at two in the morning?”

“Around,” I say.

He grins like I’ve made a joke, and taps the desk twice with his knuckles, the way he did Tuesday. “Anything you need.”

On his way out he stops at the window that looks down on the lot. Stands there a second with his hands in his windbreaker pockets.

“Still driving the Vic,” he says. “Fleet must love you.”

“Fleet sends me a letter every quarter.”

“I bet they do.” He keeps looking down at the lot. “Those old trunks. You could fit a body in there. Not that I’d know.”

He laughs. I laugh. He goes.

· · ·

At 12:40 a.m. I’m back on Eighty-Third Street.

I park at the Fourth Avenue end this time, facing in, lights off, engine off. It’s cold in four minutes. The R train comes through under the avenue and the whole block hums with it for a second, the way a glass hums when you run a wet finger around the rim.

Nick picks up at 2:10. The passenger’s here by 2:35. I want to see the block before he does.

The porch light is on. The upstairs is dark. Downstairs, in the front room, there's a lamp on behind the curtain, low, the kind of light someone leaves on when they've fallen asleep in a chair.

Ray's in the passenger seat with his hands folded on his stomach.

At 1:04 a car turns onto the block from Third Avenue.

It comes slow. Slower than a man looking for parking, because there's parking. It goes past the Virgin and the face-down snowman and pulls in on the far side, across the street from the house, two car-lengths up. The headlights go off. The engine goes off. Nobody gets out.

A white Jeep. Late model. When it went under the streetlight I saw a decal in the rear window, round, a cartoon bomb with a lit fuse and a softball for a body.

I know that decal. I saw it on Frank Doyle's Explorer under the lights at Floyd Bennett.

Inside the Jeep, a phone screen comes on. It lights a face from below for three seconds, the way a campfire would. Buzz cut. A jaw working on a piece of gum.

Then the screen goes dark, and Steve Petrakis sits in the dark across the street from Ann Kowalski's house, watching the same porch light I am.

CHAPTER SIX

Greg

AT 1:38 THE JEEP'S engine turns over.

No headlights. It rolls off the curb dark and goes down Eighty-Third toward Third Avenue at walking speed, and the lights come on only at the corner, like a man putting his shoes on once he's out of the house. Then it's gone.

I could follow him. That's what the book says. Follow the car you know is wrong.

But there's a dead man due outside a laundromat on Metropolitan Avenue in thirty-two minutes, and I know where Steve Petrakis lives, and I don't know where Greg Lawson sleeps when he isn't sleeping on a cot.

I call Nick. He picks up before it rings.

"Don't take the ride without me," I say.

"Man, it's one-forty. He's at two-ten. You're in—where are you?"

"Bay Ridge."

"You're not going to make it."

"Sit on the curb. If he comes out before I'm there, you take a long time finding your keys."

I hang up and start the car. Ray has his hands on his knees.

"Gowanus to the BQE," he says. "Don't get caught in the tunnel lanes. Everybody does."

It's the first useful thing he's said in a week. I don't get caught.

. . .

It's 2:08 when I come down Metropolitan. SPIN ITY. SPIN CITY. Nick's silver Camry is at the curb under the sign with its hazards on, and Nick's got both hands on the wheel, ten and two, like it's his road test.

I put the Crown Vic by the Getty station across the street.

"Somebody's got to watch the door," I tell Ray.

He doesn't argue. He's looking at the laundromat window, the rows of white machines under the fluorescent light, one dryer still turning with nobody's clothes in it.

I get into the back of Nick's car on the passenger side. Nick twists around.

"You were up front last time."

"Not tonight."

"He sits behind me."

"I know where he sits."

Nick turns back to the windshield. He's forty-one and looks it at this hour. He told me the first night he could tell from across a bar which guy was going to start something. He's got both thumbs drumming on the wheel now.

"You've got the look," he says.

"What look?"

"The guy at the end of the bar who's been quiet all night. Right before."

The dash clock says 2:09. Leilani nods on the mirror. Nick doesn't open the app. He hasn't opened it for this ride since Thanksgiving.

. . .

At 2:10 the laundromat door opens with a bell I can hear through the glass. He comes from somewhere in the back, past the dryers.

Gray coat, gray cap, hands in his pockets. He's forty-seven on the death certificate and he walks like a man of sixty-five who's been told to take it easy on the stairs. He comes across the sidewalk with his head down, the way he has every night, and he reaches for the handle behind Nick.

Then he sees me.

He stops. Not a flinch. He just stands there on the curb with his hand an inch from the handle and looks at me through the window, and I look at him, and the dryer behind him goes around.

He opens the door and gets in.

"Detective," he says.

"Mr. Lawson."

Something moves at the side of his mouth. "Nobody's called me that in two years."

Up close his face is all edges, a long jaw gone gray with stubble, a scar through one eyebrow, eyes the pale washed blue of jeans that have been through too many cycles. His hands come out of his pockets and lie on his knees. The knuckles are split and healed and split again. Car-wash hands. Twenty years of water and soap and winter.

"Same as always?" Nick says to the mirror. His voice cracks on *always*.

"Not tonight," I say. "Drive to Bay Ridge, Nick. Don't stop on Eighty-Third. Just keep going around."

Nick looks at Greg in the mirror. Greg nods once. Nick puts it in drive.

The little camera on Nick's windshield has a red light on its back. Its inside lens looks at the passenger side of the car. It's got me, sideways, the whole ride, a cop talking to a seat it can't see.

. . .

We're on the BQE before he says anything.

"You booked the first ride in your own name," I say. "On Thanksgiving."

"I did."

"A dead man doesn't use his own name by accident."

"No." He watches the Navy Yard go by, the cranes, the dark water past them. "Eleven nights, same guy, same stop, a driver like Nick goes to the cops. Nearest cops to that laundromat are the Nine-Oh. Who's awake at the Nine-Oh at three in the morning?"

Nick's eyes come up to the mirror and go back down.

"You wanted me."

"I wanted somebody who'd look." He turns his head, finally, and looks at me. "You looked."

"Nick says you asked if I was okay. Tuesday night."

"You were sitting in that car across from the laundromat when we came back. Engine running. Eyes open. I walked right past your window, Detective, and you didn't see me." He says it without any weight on it at all. "I've seen that before. Guys at the car wash, end of a double. You sit down in the waiting room and an hour goes somewhere."

"So talk."

He does. Not all at once. In pieces, between exits, the way men talk in cars.

He ran Lawson's on Rockaway Parkway for nineteen years. Four bays, a vacuum island, a sign with a cartoon octopus holding a sponge in each arm. Nine of those years, every other Sunday night, somebody from the Nine-Oh brought a gym bag to the back office. Not always the same somebody. He won't say who. Cash, banded, smelling like a basement. Greg ran it through the register as wash tickets. Ultimate Shine, nineteen ninety-nine. Four hundred cars a day that never came.

"You know what a car wash is, Detective? It's a cash business nobody believes is a cash business. Nobody ever stood in my lot and counted cars."

"Doyle's money."

"Frank's money." He says the name like it's a word in a language he used to speak. "Frank's cage. Frank's evidence bags. I just made it clean enough to spend."

"The fifties you've been giving Nick," I say. "They climb. Like they came off one strap."

"Last of what I walked out with." He doesn't look surprised I checked. "Frank liked them new."

"And two years ago."

"Two years ago somebody downtown started asking about property-room numbers. Frank's people started looking at me the way you look at a loose step." He shrugs. "Walt Ferris got twenty thousand dollars and a new transmission for the *Miss Gina*. I went over the side off Breezy Point at night with a dry suit on under my clothes and a guy in a skiff a quarter mile out. You'd be amazed how

easy it is to drown, if you plan it."

"And now you're back."

"Frank's in a federal building." He looks out at the Gowanus Canal going by below us, black, a single light on a barge. "Frank was the leash. You took the leash off."

I don't say that I didn't, exactly. That a man with my hands did.

I look at the front passenger seat. I keep doing it. It's empty, the way a rideshare's front seat is supposed to be, a phone charger cable lying across it in a loop. In my car, that's where the person sits who tells me when I'm wrong. Every time I say something, my eyes go there to check.

. . .

Nick comes off at Ninety-Second and goes up Fourth Avenue and turns on Eighty-Fifth, and then Third, and then back down Eighty-First, a slow square around the block, and on the second time around Eighty-Third Street goes by on the left like a lit room seen from a train. The porch light. The wreath. No Jeep.

Greg watches it go by. He doesn't turn his head to keep it. He just looks at it the whole time it's there, the way you'd look at a fire you'd been told to keep an eye on.

"There was a Jeep on that block tonight," I say. "White. Bombers decal. One-oh-four to one thirty-eight."

"Steve." Flat. No surprise in it at all. "He's been through her garbage twice. Sunday he walked her side yard with a flashlight like a meter reader. She's got motion lights. He knows where they are now."

"What's he looking for?"

Greg puts his hands together between his knees.

"There was a last bag," he says. "One hundred and eighty thousand. It went out of Frank's cage two years ago and it never came back to my car wash. Frank's boys have been sitting on that number for two years like it's a lottery ticket in a drawer." He looks at the back of Nick's headrest. "They think it went home to Eighty-Third Street. With Kowalski."

The car goes over a pothole. Nick says sorry to nobody.

"Ray doesn't have Doyle's money," I say.

Greg doesn't say anything.

"Ray's been on the job thirty years. He's got a pension and bad knees and a Mets cap he's had since Gooden. He doesn't have a hundred and eighty thousand dollars of Frank Doyle's money in his house."

Nothing.

"Why would Ray have Doyle's money?"

"Ask your partner."

"I'm asking you."

I hear my own voice in the car. It's louder than I meant. Nick's shoulders come up around his ears.

Greg doesn't answer. He looks at me. Then his eyes leave me and go to the front passenger seat, the empty one with the charger cable lying across it in a loop, where my eyes have been going all night. He looks at it for a long time. Long enough for Nick to make the turn onto Fourth and stop at the light at Eighty-Sixth.

Then he looks back at me. It's a different look. I've seen it on doctors. I've seen it on myself, in the windows of houses where I had to knock.

"You really don't know," he says. "Jesus."

"Know what?"

"Why I'm sitting on that house." He reaches for the door. "Don't ask me, Detective. Go ask her."

"Lawson—"

The door's open. Cold comes in. He's out on the corner of Fourth and Eighty-Sixth with his hands back in his pockets, and he doesn't run. He walks to the subway stairs, the green globes on either side lit up like they're expecting somebody, and he goes down them one at a time, taking it easy, and the top of his wool cap goes below the sidewalk and is gone.

I could catch him. He's walking.

The light goes green. Nick doesn't move. Behind us a car leans on its horn, one long flat note.

"Detective," Nick says, very quietly, to the mirror. "Who's Kowalski?"

"My partner," I say.

I'm looking at the front seat again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Woodhull

WOODHULL LOOKS LIKE A building somebody turned inside out to check the wiring.

A city block of rust-colored steel on the corner of Broadway and Flushing, the frame on the outside where everybody can see it, the ducts and pipes running up the face of it like veins on the back of an old man's hand. They built it in the seventies to be the hospital of the future. The future came and went and parked in the ambulance bay.

I don't know why I'm here.

That's not a figure of speech. I left the Nine-Oh at 9:15 to get coffee on Metropolitan, and I got the coffee, two, and I got back in the car, and now it's 9:52 on a Friday night and I'm in the little lot off Flushing Avenue by the emergency entrance, nose in to a concrete planter with a dead shrub in it, and the engine's off and my keys are in my lap.

It's a good spot. Close to the doors. Under the light. The yellow paint on the curb is worn down to the concrete in two stripes, right where a front tire would go.

My front tire is right there.

Ray's in the passenger seat. His cap's on the dash. His coffee's by his knee. He's looking at the doors.

Somebody knocks on my window.

Hospital police. Navy jacket, a radio on his shoulder, a gray mustache and the tired, patient face of a man who's spent twenty years telling people where they can't stand. I roll the window down and hold up my shield before he has to ask.

He looks at it. He looks at me.

"Lot's for ambulance overflow after ten, Detective," he says. "You bringing somebody in?"

"No."

"Picking somebody up?"

"No."

He nods slowly, like that's an answer he's heard before and didn't like then either. He puts one hand on my roof and looks out across the lot at the doors.

"Take your time," he says. "Just don't block the bay."

He gives the roof a pat and walks off toward the booth by the gate. I roll the window up. I watch him in the side mirror until he's inside, and he doesn't look back once, which is how I know he wanted to.

. . .

The J train comes over Broadway on the el, a block away, and the noise of it gets into the car the way it gets into everything around here, a long iron shiver, then quiet.

Ray had a heart thing. Two years ago. That's how he says it, when he says it, which is never: *my heart thing*. The hospital called it a cardiac event, which sounds like something with a ribbon-cutting. I drove him here. That's all there is to it. That's the whole story, and we

don't tell it, and it's not the kind of thing you need to tell. Partners have a lot of stories they don't tell. That's half of what a partner is.

An ambulance turns in off Flushing with its lights going and no siren. It backs into the bay with that beeping, and the back doors open, and two EMTs come down with a stretcher between them, quick, not running. The automatic doors to the ER slide apart and stay apart and the light inside is that white light, the one that doesn't come from anywhere.

The doors hiss when they close.

. . .

Lawson's sign is dark. The octopus with the sponges, eight arms, no lights. Rockaway Parkway at one in the morning, the vacuum island, a chain across the entrance.

Ray's idea. "A hunch, kid." He won't say what kind.

Two coffees in the cupholders. Ray's got the seeds open on his knee and he's not eating them. He's turning one over in his fingers like a coin he's deciding whether to spend.

I look at the ambulance. Unit number on the side, 31-Victor. FDNY EMS. The driver's leaning on the rear bumper now, writing on a clipboard against his thigh.

"Kid," Ray says. "I gotta tell you something about the car wash—"

He stops.

Not like a man thinking. Like somebody lifted the needle off the record. The rest of the sentence is right there in his mouth, I can see it, his lips still shaped around the next word.

His hand goes flat on his chest. Then it isn't flat. It's a fist, full of his own shirt.

The driver of 31-Victor finishes his clipboard and climbs back into the cab. I count the bays. Three. I count the windows on the second floor I can see from here. Eleven. One with a paper snowflake taped to it. I count the stripes on the curb.

I'm driving.

Brookdale is closer. I know that. Brookdale is straight up Rockaway Parkway, two minutes, and I go right past the blue H and I don't turn. Woodhull is where the Nine-Oh takes everybody. My hands know the way to Woodhull and the rest of me isn't in the car. North, toward the precinct, toward Broadway, toward everything I know, doing sixty on streets you don't do forty on, the dash light throwing red across his window, red, dark, red.

The handset's in my fist. I'm saying a code into it, my shield number, the word cardiac, the word en route, like a man reading off a card.

I'm talking the whole way. I'm telling him to stay with me, I'm telling him the scarecrow joke, I'm telling him it's okay, I'm telling him which lights I'm running. He always talks back. That's the thing about Ray. You can't say a sentence in this car without him having a better one.

His cap falls off. It goes down between his knees onto the floor mat. Onto a gray canvas bag by his shoes, a gym bag, zipped. Whose bag. I don't know whose bag that is.

I've got the keys in my hand. I don't remember picking them up out of my lap. The teeth of the ignition key are pressing a line into the inside of my thumb.

The bay. I'm out and around the hood and I've got his door open and I'm saying his name into the white light. Two nurses, a gurney, a man in scrubs with his hands already up. They're faster than me. They're so much faster than me.

Somebody at the desk says "Kowalsky?" with a y. I spell it for her. K-O-W-A-L-S-K-I. I spell it slow, twice, like if I get it right it'll matter.

A plastic chair, orange. A TV on the wall on mute, a man selling knives that cut through a shoe. I've got Ray's cap in my hands. I'm holding it by the brim with both hands. I don't know when I picked it up.

The double doors. A doctor, young, a woman, her hair pulled back tight. She comes through the doors already pulling off her gloves, one, then the other, and she's looking around the waiting room for whoever came in with—

No.

I stop it there.

I always stop it there. I've had two years of practice and I'm very good at it, the way you get good at stepping over the same broken stair in the dark without ever turning on the light. You don't think about it. Your foot just knows.

What comes after is just after. A man with a bad heart and bad knees and opinions about my lane changes. Nothing in it anybody needs to look at.

You'd stop it there too. Don't tell me you wouldn't.

. . .

I sit there with my hands on the wheel.

It's 10:31. The coffee in my cupholder is warm, not hot. I don't remember drinking any of it, and a third of it's gone.

Ray hasn't moved. His hands are on his knees. He's still looking at the doors.

"It was Lawson's," I say. "That night. The stakeout. You picked a dead man's car wash."

"He wasn't dead then."

"What were you going to tell me?"

He doesn't answer.

"About the car wash. You started to say it. You had it right there, Ray. I watched you have it."

The doors slide open for a man in a wheelchair, pushed by a woman in a parka, and close again. Ray watches them do it.

"Greg Lawson says Frank Doyle's people think you had their money," I say. "A hundred and eighty thousand dollars. He says they think it's on Eighty-Third Street. He says go ask her. Not him. Her." My voice isn't doing what I want. I bring it back down. "He looked at me like I was the one who drowned."

Ray picks up the cap off the dash. He turns it over in his hands. The sweat line on the inside of the band, gone brown. The little split in the stitching where the button on top used to be.

"You're getting close," he says.

"To what?"

He puts the cap back on the dash, very carefully, square, the bill pointing out at the doors.

"Me," he says.

I wait for the rest of it. With Ray there's always the rest of it, a punch line, a story about his uncle in Greenpoint who sold the same Buick three times. Nothing comes. He just sits with his hands on his knees and looks at the doors, patient, like a man in a waiting room who already knows what they're going to say and has decided to let them say it.

. . .

My phone goes at 10:44.

RUIZ, on the screen. She doesn't call this late unless something's on fire. I think about letting it go. I pick it up.

"Mercer."

"Where are you?"

I look at the doors. "Out."

She lets that go. That's how I know it's bad. Dana Ruiz never lets anything go.

"Records called me at home," she says. "There's a flag on a personnel jacket. I put it there a long time ago. Anybody signs for it, they call me. Tonight somebody signed for it." A breath. "Steve Petrakis. He told the clerk he was helping you on your ghost. He wanted the home address on file, and anything else in the name. A garage. A second property. A storage unit. A bungalow in Breezy. Anything."

"Whose jacket?"

She doesn't say anything for a second.

"Kowalski's," she says.

The ER doors open and close on nobody. Somewhere inside a phone is ringing at the desk, and ringing, and nobody's picking it up.

"When?"

"Nine-forty. The clerk's twenty-three. He didn't read the flag until Petrakis was out the door with copies."

I look at the passenger seat. Ray's looking at the doors.

"Why would Petrakis need a jacket for that? He knows where the house is. I watched him sit on it last night." I hear myself getting louder again. "He wants to know if Ray's got a garage, he can ask Ray. Ray's right—"

"Jake."

She's never called me that. Not once. Not at the Christmas party, not in the stairwell the day Gary Shaw took my shield. It stops me the way a hand on the chest stops you.

On the line, I can hear her breathing. It isn't steady.

"Go to Ann," she says.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ann

I MAKE THE GOWANUS in eleven minutes from Flushing Avenue, which can't be done.

I talk the whole way. That's what you do when you're scared in a car, you make a plan out loud so there's something in the air besides the engine. Ann's sister Joanie is in Massapequa, a split-level off Merrick Road with a boat in the driveway that hasn't been in the water since the Clinton administration. I'll drive Ann out myself tonight. Forty minutes on the Southern State at this hour. She'll argue. She'll want to bring the good knives. Let her bring the knives. In the morning I'll sit down with Ruiz and Shaw and put Steve Petrakis on a piece of paper, and Ray can tell Ann whatever Ray has to tell Ann, in his own kitchen, in his own time.

"That's the plan," I say. "Ray. That's the plan."

Ray's got his hands on his knees. His cap is on the dash where he put it at Woodhull, square, the bill pointing out at the road. His coffee's by his knee. He watches the Gowanus go by under us, the cranes at Red Hook, the lit windows in the projects at the foot of the expressway.

He doesn't say it's a good plan. He doesn't say it's a bad one.

. . .

Eighty-Third Street at 11:19 p.m.

I come in from Third Avenue slow and look at every car on the block like it's a lineup. A Honda with a parking ticket. A contractor's van with ladders. A Lexus somebody's son is going to inherit. No white Jeep. No Bombers decal. Nobody sitting in anything.

The snowman on the lawn halfway down is inflated tonight, lit from inside, nodding in the little wind off the Narrows like he agrees with everything. The Virgin's lights are on in her shell. The R train comes through under Fourth Avenue and the block hums with it.

The porch light is on. The lamp in the front room is on behind the curtain.

I don't park three houses down tonight. I don't park at a hydrant. I pull up to the curb right in front of the gate, the way you park at a house where you're expected, and I turn off the engine.

It ticks. Ray looks at the house.

He looks at it the way you'd look at a house you grew up in, from the street, years later, when there's somebody else's car in the driveway and you're not sure they'd let you in.

"She'll want to see you," I say.

"Go on, kid."

"Ray."

"I'll wait here." He doesn't look away from the porch. "Go on. She's up."

. . .

The gate squeaks on the second half of its swing. Five steps, the iron railing cold under my hand. The second step gives under my weight,

the way it always has; Ray's been saying he'll fix it for as long as I've been coming here.

The glider under its plastic cover. The wreath on the door, real pine, close enough now to smell, the red bow still crushed on one side. The little flag in the front window, the black one with the blue stripe. Somebody's dusted it. There's a line in the dust on the sill where the cloth stopped.

I ring the bell. Two notes, low then high, the same two notes as every Thanksgiving.

Slippers on a wood floor. The curtain on the little window in the door moves an inch and drops back. Three locks, one after another. The chain.

Ann Kowalski opens the door.

She's sixty-three, small, in a green cardigan with a dish towel over her shoulder and her reading glasses pushed up into her hair. Her hair is silver and short and thick, cropped close like a boy's, the way it grew back. Her face does what it always does when she sees me, which is light up and then worry, in that order, a second apart.

"Jake," she says. "Honey. It's nearly half past eleven."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Get in here. You look terrible."

"I can't stay." I hold onto the storm door. "Ann, I need you to listen to me for a minute. There's a cop at the Nine-Oh named Steve Petrakis. If he comes to this door, you don't open it. You don't talk to him on the phone. I want you to go to Joanie's. Tonight. I'll drive you."

She gives me the look she gives over her reading glasses, even with them up in her hair. It's a look that has sent a lot of men back down these steps.

"Why would a police officer come to my door at night?"

"It's about something from a while back. Frank Doyle's people."

Her mouth goes flat. "Frank Doyle," she says, "can rot."

"I can't tell you all of it. Not yet. I don't know all of it." I let go of the storm door. "Ray can. Ray'll explain. He's in the car." I turn a little and lift my hand toward the curb, toward the Crown Vic under the streetlight. "He wanted to come up, but—his knees."

. . .

I've watched a lot of faces take news. On doorsteps, in hallways, in the backs of radio cars. Faces fall, mostly. They come apart from the mouth out.

Ann's doesn't fall.

The dish towel stops. That's the first thing. She'd been working one corner of it between her fingers and her fingers stop. Then her eyes go past me, to the curb, to the car, and they stay there. One beat. Two. Exactly as long as Dana Ruiz's do.

Then she looks back at me, and her face isn't surprised. It's sorry. It's the sorriest face I've ever seen on anybody, and it's for me.

She takes the towel off her shoulder and lays it on the radiator cover in the hall. She comes out onto the porch in her slippers. She takes both my hands in both of hers.

Her hands are warm. Mine aren't.

"Jake," she says. "Honey."

I wait.

"Ray died two years ago."

The R train goes under Fourth Avenue. The porch hums with it, very faintly, under my shoes.

"Two years today," she says. Quietly. She doesn't let go. "You gave the eulogy. At St. Anselm's. You read it off an index card and you never looked up once. You said he talked the whole way to every call he ever went on and you never got tired of it. And then you told that scarecrow joke, and I laughed out loud in the front pew, God forgive me." She looks down, at the top step, at the painted boards between our feet. "And you sat right there. All night, after. You wouldn't come in and you wouldn't go home. Dana came and sat with you until it got light."

I try to take my hands back. She doesn't let me.

I look at the top step.

It's gray. Porch paint. A little worn in the middle where people stand to ring the bell.

"He's in the car, Ann," I say.

She doesn't argue. She doesn't let go of my hands either. She just steps back, one step, into her doorway, and turns sideways so I can see past her.

The hall. The runner. The radiator cover with the dish towel on it. The stairs going up on the left. On the right, through the wide doorway, the front room: the lamp on low by the curtain, a recliner with a blanket folded over the arm.

The mantel.

A wooden triangle with a glass front, and in it, folded tight, the flag. Thirteen folds. Only the stars showing. A photograph beside it in a silver frame, Ray in dress blues, thirty pounds lighter, looking at the camera like it owed him a dollar.

And next to the flag, on the mantel, a Mets cap.

The orange NY gone the color of a cantaloupe rind. The sweat line inside the band. The split in the stitching on top where the button

used to be.

I know that cap. I looked at it an hour ago. It was on my dashboard, square, with the bill pointing out at the doors of Woodhull.

. . .

I turn around.

Down the five steps, past the gate that squeaks, to the curb. Under the streetlight, the Crown Vic, its engine still ticking as it cools.

I can see straight through the windshield from up here. The light falls right across the front seat.

There's no cap on the dashboard. Just the bag of seeds, folded shut, where I left it.

There's nobody in the passenger seat. There's no shape in it. No hands on any knees. Just the gray cloth, and the seat belt hanging straight down from its post, the way a belt hangs when nobody's pulled it across anything in a long time.

I notice what doesn't move. That's the one thing I've ever been good at.

. . .

The second coffee. Two years of second coffees, two lids every night, and every dawn I poured one out by a back tire, full to the top, cold all the way through. I thought he just never got around to it.

Héctor under his awning. Lauren Fisk through her door. Linda Price at her oilcloth. Frank Doyle on the end of his cable. Not one of them ever said a word to him. Not hello. Not his name. I thought Ray didn't do small talk.

My knees, kid. You got this. Every flight of stairs in Brooklyn North, and I went up every one of them alone.

The shells in the door pocket. On my side.

Frank Doyle, laughing on his cot. *You drive it around every night and you don't know.* Greg Lawson in the back of Nick's car, looking at an empty seat, then at me.

Ruiz. Her eyes going to the passenger seat, every time, and staying a beat too long. She was never looking at him. She was looking at where he wasn't. Checking, the way you'd check on a man standing too close to an edge.

You're still riding solo, huh?

It was never a joke.

. . .

Ann doesn't let go of my hands. She doesn't say anything else. She's said it, and she stands there with me in the cold with her slippers on the boards where I sat all night two years ago, under the porch light she still leaves on all night, so he won't come home to a dark house.

I look at my car.

The passenger seat is empty. It has always been empty.

CHAPTER NINE

Riding Solo

THE KNOCK IS THREE knocks, evenly spaced, the way they teach you at the academy and nobody does after the first year.

I'm on the couch, in my coat, all four buttons done, shoes on. The keys to the Crown Vic are in my right hand so tight the teeth have left a row of marks across my palm. The window over the sink has gone the gray that comes before anything. The Domino sign is still on. It's always the last thing to give up.

I don't remember the drive back from Bay Ridge. I remember the porch light. I remember Ann's hands, which were warm, and which didn't let go when I tried to take mine back. I remember turning around.

After that it's the couch.

Three more knocks.

"Mercer. It's me."

. . .

Ruiz is in yesterday's work clothes with the long black coat over them, and she hasn't slept either. There's a smear of mascara under her left eye where she rubbed it and didn't check. She's holding two

coffees from the Kent Ave Deli. She looks at them like she just found out she was carrying them.

"Habit," she says. "Somebody's."

I let her in. She puts both cups on the counter and doesn't take the lids off. She looks around the kitchen the way she'd look around anybody's: the stew cans over the stove, the tape over the laptop camera. The whiteboard.

J.M. – 3

She reads it. Her face does nothing. She sits in one of my two kitchen chairs with her coat still on.

"Ann called me at ten to twelve," she says. "She's had my number since the funeral. She watched you sit in the car for twenty minutes with the engine off, and then you drove away very carefully. She said you signaled at the corner."

"I always signal."

"I know you do." She takes a breath. "I've got two uniforms from the Six-Eight on her block. Not ours. She's going to her sister's in Massapequa this morning, which she's not happy about, and which she's doing anyway, because she's Ann."

"Petrakis?"

"Went home after a four-to-twelve. I know where he is. Sit down, Jake."

Twice in one night. I sit down.

. . .

"Woodhull," she says. "I got there at 3:40. You'd called it in from the car. Officer needs assistance, cardiac, en route. You didn't wait for the bus. You drove him yourself. When I came through the doors you were in an orange plastic chair in the waiting room, under the TV,

holding his cap. Both hands. Turning it."

I know exactly how a cap turns. A quarter turn at a time, by the brim.

"The doctor came out and said it to me, because you wouldn't look up. It was massive, she said, and it was fast, and he was gone before you were out of that lot. The closest hospital in Brooklyn couldn't have done a thing. I don't think you heard that part." She looks at me to make sure I hear it now. "And you said, 'Okay.' Like she'd told you the time. And then you told me you'd moved the car out of the ambulance bay, so you wouldn't be a jerk. You told me which spot. Like I'd need it."

"That sounds like me."

"It was very you." She almost smiles. It doesn't take. "St. Anselm's. The Tuesday after. You were a pallbearer. You and Frank Doyle on the front corners. Frank cried the whole mass. Loud. People were patting him. I remember thinking it was nice, a man who wasn't afraid to cry for his friend." She looks at her hands. "You didn't cry. You got up and gave the eulogy. Four minutes. You told the scarecrow joke."

"Outstanding in his field."

"Half the church laughed and the other half didn't know they were allowed to. Ann laughed. That was the half that counted." She stops. "You sat down. You went back to work on the Wednesday. I told you to take two weeks. You said two weeks of what."

"The fleet wrote about the car," Ruiz says. "Thirty days, then sixty. I signed the paper that let you keep it. About a week after the funeral, I'm at my window, and I watch you come out of the deli across Union with two coffees. You put one in the cupholder on the passenger side. And then you talk to it." She lets that sit. "You didn't look like a man

talking to himself. You were listening. You turned your head to the passenger seat and laughed."

. . .

There's a thing that happens after a fall. You're on the ground and nothing hurts yet, and you take inventory, very calm, like it's someone else's body. Elbow. Knee. Can you feel your feet.

I can feel my feet.

"You could have mentioned it," I say.

"When?" It comes out sharp. She brings it down. "When, Mercer. At a scene. In the stairwell. *Good work on the Ostrander thing, by the way, your partner's been dead for two years.*" She shakes her head. "I thought it would stop. I gave it a month. Then three. It didn't stop, and your clearance rate went up eleven points, and I'm a lieutenant in Brooklyn North, and I let that number make the decision for me."

"The department has people for this."

"The department has people who would take your gun on a Tuesday and your shield on a Friday. I watched a guy from the Eight-One lose his partner and the job in the same month." She doesn't say what happened to him after. She doesn't have to. "You were the best I had. You still are. And you were talking to Ray Kowalski in a car. And I owed Ray. So I let you."

"You looked at the seat."

"Every time."

"Why?"

She takes a long time to answer. "To see if you'd stopped," she says. "Every time I said riding solo. Every time. I kept thinking one day you'd hear it."

I heard it. I heard a joke about a department too cheap to give me a partner with working knees.

You heard it too. I'm sorry. I'd have told you if I'd known.

. . .

"One more thing," she says. "Then I'm going home to lie down on my bed in my shoes, like you."

"Ann's treatment. The first round, at the place on York Avenue. It wasn't on the plan. Ray told the squad the union came through. I know what the union covers. It isn't that." She looks at the whiteboard instead of me. "And he started paying cash. A new water heater, he was proud of it. Once he had a fold of twenties with a bank band on it, and he put it away when he saw me looking. He was a terrible crook. He was the worst crook I ever met."

"You knew."

"I suspected. It's not the same." She says it like she's said it to herself a lot of nights. "The Monday before he died, he came in my office and closed the door, which he never did. He sat down. He said, 'Dana, Friday I need an hour of your time, and you're not going to like it.' And I said fine, Friday. And I was relieved it wasn't that day."

"If I'd asked him what about, I'd have had to write it down. If I'd written it down, it's an IA case. A sergeant, a property room, a man with a sick wife and thirty years in. I didn't ask. Then he was dead, and there was nothing to ask, and you were in the car, talking to him." Her voice goes very flat. "I didn't want to lose two of you."

The fridge hums.

"I'm going to need you to say something," Ruiz says. "Anything. I'll take anything."

"The second coffee's getting cold," I say.

She closes her eyes. Then she laughs, once, through her nose. It's the worst sound I've heard her make. It's also fine.

At the door she stops with her hand on the knob. She doesn't turn around.

"Don't drive," she says.

"I won't."

She knows I'm lying. She lets me.

. . .

The Crown Vic is where I left it, nose to a hydrant. The windshield's fogged on the inside, but only on my side.

I unlock it. I get in.

The passenger seat is gray cloth with a split in the bolster somebody stitched with black thread, badly. There's a dent in the cushion, the shape of one particular weight. The weight's been gone two years. The cloth hasn't gotten the news. There's nothing on the dashboard but the seeds. Beside them, a paler patch on the vinyl above the vents, a rough oval, where something sat so long the sun couldn't get to it.

The door pocket on my side is empty, the way it's been since the storage unit. I don't remember eating a single seed that ever went in it.

"Ray."

Nothing.

I start the engine for the heat. The radio has a fender-bender on Grand that nobody wants.

"Ann's going to her sister's," I say.

"She told me about the joke. The eulogy." I wait. I wait the way I'd wait for him to finish a seed. "You'd have liked it. Half the church

laughed."

It's the quiet that does it. Not the empty seat. I can look at an empty seat. It's that I've been in this car every night for two years and there's never once been quiet like this in it. Somebody always had something. Now the quiet has the passenger seat, and it doesn't say anything either.

I talk anyway. I tell him about Woodhull, the orange chair. I tell him the fleet's going to win eventually. Then I stop, because I'm waiting for him to tell me I've got it wrong, and nobody's going to. That was his job. I'm the one who gave it to him.

. . .

I sit there a long time. Then I go to work. It's the only thing I've ever known how to do in this car.

The fleet letters I never answered. I told myself it was the heater, a car you get used to.

Last March I got a flat on the BQE by the Kent Avenue exit. I had a spare and a jack, and I sat on the shoulder in the rain for ninety minutes waiting for a tow, and when the tow guy reached in to lift the trunk carpet for the spare, I said *don't*, too loud, and paid him forty extra to flatbed it. I remember not wondering why.

The scratches on the trunk lock. I wrote them up in my head as kids, and I lifted the lid, and I didn't lift the carpet.

You still drive that Crown Vic, Detective?

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

The weight. That's what comes back, not a picture. The weight of a bag in my right hand in a parking lot with orange lights, heavier than it looked, and the sound a trunk makes when you shut it carefully so it doesn't slam. I've heard that sound a thousand times

since, at four in the morning, and called it nothing.

I know where it is. I've always known where it is.

My hand goes to the trunk release on the floor by the door. It's cold.

I don't pull it.

"Not yet," I say to the empty seat.

It comes out low and tired and a little rough at the end. It sounds exactly like him.

CHAPTER TEN

The Trunk

LIEUTENANT GARY SHAW POURS his tea into the lid of his thermos, and then, after thinking about it, pours a second lid and slides it across Ruiz's desk to me.

"It's chamomile," he says. "I'm told it's useless. I've been drinking it for thirty years in order to find out."

Ruiz has the blinds down. It's two in the afternoon and her office has the light of an aquarium. Shaw has listened to me for twenty-five minutes without writing anything down, which is the most frightening thing I've ever seen an IA lieutenant do.

I've told him everything I can prove. Greg Lawson, declared dead off Breezy Point, riding to Bay Ridge every night at 2:10. The car wash on Rockaway Parkway. Petrakis, Frank's second baseman, pulling Ann Kowalski's address out of a dead man's personnel jacket and sitting on 83rd Street at one in the morning with his lights off.

I've told him about Ray, too. The part that's a fact. That he died, and when, and in which seat. Shaw looked at Ruiz when I said it. Something went between them I didn't get to read.

"Officer Petrakis believes Mrs. Kowalski has a hundred and eighty thousand dollars," Shaw says now. "Which belonged to Sergeant

Doyle. Which Sergeant Doyle didn't own either."

"Yes."

"And you'd like to tell him where it is."

"Yes."

He sips. "Do you know where it is, Detective?"

"Yes."

"Have you looked?"

"No."

Ruiz makes a small sound. Shaw puts the lid down on the blotter, precisely, in the ring it left last time.

"Then when he asks you," he says, "tell him the truth. People rehearse for lies. Nobody rehearses for the truth, because nobody expects to hear it." He folds his hands. "Also, it records better."

. . .

The wire is a button, on a gray shirt in my size that one of Shaw's people brings in a dry cleaner's bag. I don't ask. The battery sits in the small of my back, warmer than I'd like.

At 9:15 that night I'm at my desk with the phone to my ear, and Ruiz is on the other end of it, forty feet away, behind her door.

"She says he kept a footlocker," I say. Squad-room loud. "In the garage. Padlocked. She figured it was his old uniforms. She's back tomorrow, ten a.m., with the key."

"Fine," Ruiz says, bored, the way we agreed. "Take Tran."

"I'll take Tran."

Behind me, the coffee machine stops gurgling.

"Mercer." Petrakis puts a cup down by my elbow. Milk, two sugars. I've never once taken milk. He's smiling the softball smile, square in a Bombers fleece zipped to the chin. "How's the ghost?"

"Still dead."

"Anything you need." He taps the desk twice with a knuckle. "Tomorrow, you want a hand with the widow's thing? I'm off at four."

"I'm good, Steve."

"Yeah you are." He winks. He goes.

He doesn't look back. A man with nothing on his mind looks back.

I pour the coffee in the plant by Shapiro's desk. The plant has seen worse.

. . .

Ann's garage smells like motor oil and Christmas.

The Christmas is the boxes, a wall of them on metal shelves, labeled in a round, careful hand. ORNAMENTS – GLASS. LIGHTS – WORK. LIGHTS – DON'T. The oil is Ray. His workbench, pegboard over it with the outlines of tools drawn on in marker so you'd know what was missing. Coffee cans of screws, labeled in a blockier hand. A garage fridge with a brown door, humming. I opened it in the first hour. Six cans of Coors Light, the cardboard gone soft. She can't throw them out and she can't drink them.

I'm in his lawn chair, green webbing, one strap sagging where a heavy man sat for a lot of summers. It's the only chair.

The Crown Vic is around the corner on Fourth Avenue, where a man coming in from Third won't pass it.

12:40. 1:15. The furnace kicks on and off. A few streets over there's a dog with opinions.

I keep turning my head to the right. There's nothing on my right but the pegboard. Every time, I catch it halfway.

Two years of nights I wasn't alone. I didn't know I was practicing for this one.

At 1:58 my phone buzzes. Nick Harmon. I told him to take the night off.

is he ok. the passenger. you didnt say.

I don't answer. I don't know which passenger he means.

. . .

At 2:10 the side door opens.

He's good. No light until he's inside, and then a small one, red-lensed, held low. He shuts the door with two fingers so the latch doesn't click. Black watch cap, gloves. Under his arm, a pry bar wrapped in a towel so it won't ring if he drops it.

The red light finds the shelves, the workbench, the floor under it where a footlocker would be.

It finds my shoes.

I reach up and pull the string on the bulb.

Steve Petrakis is fast. Six summers at second base. The pry bar goes down in its towel, a dull thump, and the gun comes up out of his jacket and finds the middle of me before the bulb's done swinging. His service Glock. Nobody plans on needing a clean one in a widow's garage.

"Hands," he says.

They're already on the arms of the lawn chair. I lift them an inch so he can see.

"Hey, Steve."

"Don't." His face is doing three things. None of them is the softball smile. "Where's the footlocker?"

"There isn't one."

"The widow said—"

"The widow's asleep in her sister's split-level in Massapequa. She doesn't know anything. She never did." Our shadows go back and forth on the boxes. "I made it up, Steve. So you'd come here instead of somewhere else."

He thinks about that. A man with a gun and a bad night, adding.

"Then where is it?"

So I tell him the truth.

"It's in the trunk of my car," I say. "Around the corner. Under the spare. It's been there two years. I put it there myself, in the parking lot at Woodhull, the night Ray died. While they had him inside. I picked it up off the floor on his side and put it under the spare and shut the trunk quiet. Then I went in and sat down in an orange chair." I keep my hands where they are. "I've driven it to every scene in Brooklyn North since. I didn't know I knew."

He stares at me.

Then he laughs, the laugh of a man who's been told the answer to a riddle and hates it.

"Two years," he says. "I had a pick in that lock Wednesday, outside a laundromat. A lady came out with a cart and I walked away. We pulled that widow's trash twice. And you're driving it around to homicides."

"Domestic disputes, mostly. It's a slow precinct."

"Keys."

"Left coat pocket."

"Stand up. Slow."

I stand up. The lawn chair sighs. He comes around the workbench with the gun out in front, arm straight, the way the range teaches you.

"You think this is about Frank?" he says, low. Almost friendly again. "Frank was a sergeant. Frank's in the MDC doing the rosary. Frank's not the one who's gonna be upset about this money, Mercer."

I file it. Somewhere in the back of my head, in a part of me that doesn't sleep, someone else files it too.

He reaches for my pocket.

"Steve."

. . .

It comes from the side door. A man's voice, hoarse, like it doesn't get used much.

Petrakis turns his head. Not the gun. Good training. But his head goes, and I watch his face get there.

Greg Lawson is standing in the doorway with the cold coming in around him. Gray coat. Wool cap. Hands open at his sides, empty, so there's no question. He looks like his obituary photo plus two years of being dead.

"You're dead," Petrakis says.

"Yeah," Greg says. "It's less work than you'd think."

"Get out of here, Greg."

"No." He doesn't come any closer. "I kept a book, Steve. Frank kept his in green. I kept mine in blue. Every bag through the car wash for nine years. Your name's in it from 2019. I've been dead two years. I had a lot of time to make copies."

"You're a ghost. Nobody's going to put a ghost on the stand."

"They will now," I say. "He's got witnesses."

Petrakis looks at me, then at Greg.

"What witnesses?"

I touch the button on my shirt, the third one down. Just a tap.

"Lieutenant Shaw says hi," I say. "He's in a van on Third Avenue drinking chamomile. He says it's useless."

. . .

I'd like to tell you it takes a long time. It doesn't. There's a point where a man realizes the room has more doors than he thought, and somebody behind every one, and the only door left is the one he came in through, and a dead man is standing in it.

Petrakis lowers the gun halfway. His arm's tired. It's been a long two years.

"Put it on the workbench, Steve," I say. "Next to the hammer. You can see where the hammer goes. Ray drew it."

He looks at the pegboard. The marker outline of a hammer. Ray's blocky hand on the coffee cans. 1 INCH. 2 INCH. DRYWALL.

He puts the gun on the workbench.

Then there are lights in the driveway, and a lot of feet, and Ruiz in the black coat with her shield out on a chain, saying *on the ground, Officer*, coming through the side door past Greg Lawson like he isn't there.

Shaw comes in last. He looks at the pry bar in its towel, and at me, and nods once, as if I've handed in a report on time.

. . .

Greg doesn't run.

I find him on the bottom step of Ann's porch, under the wreath, hands on his knees, watching them put Petrakis in an unmarked. When Ruiz comes down the driveway he holds out his wrists without being asked, the way a man holds out his hands for a cup of coffee.

She looks at him for a long moment.

"Mr. Lawson."

"Lieutenant."

She doesn't cuff him. She sits down on the step below him, and neither of them says anything. They've met before. I'll ask her some other year.

"You saw me," I say to Greg. "At Woodhull."

He nods. "I followed you from the car wash. I was supposed to take the bag." He looks down the block toward Fourth, where my car is, not at me. "I watched you put it in the back. You stood there with your hand on the trunk a long time. Then you went in."

"You never told them."

"They asked. I said he never got out of the car with it. Then I died."

"Why?"

He takes a while. "2011. He pulled me over on Rockaway Parkway with something in my trunk I couldn't explain and my sister's boy asleep in the back seat. Denise's kid. He was six. Ray looked at him for a long time. Then he said, 'Get him home, Greg.' That's all. 'Get him home.'"

"The picture by your cot."

"He left it on my desk, the last Sunday. Showed me why he was getting out, and forgot it." He thinks about that. "Or didn't."

He looks up at the porch light. At the flag in the window.

"So I've been watching his," he says.

It's 3:20. Dawn is three hours off. I've always known what's in the trunk. In a few hours I'm going to open it in front of people, and look.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kid

THE NINE-OH LOT AT 6:30 in the morning is the most honest place in Brooklyn. Nobody's performing. A uniform from the day tour sits in his car finishing an egg sandwich over a napkin. The pigeons on the precinct roof are lined up along the gutter like they're waiting for a bus. Somebody's left a traffic cone on the hood of a radio car, and nobody's going to move it until it becomes a tradition.

I park in my spot, under Ruiz's window. I turn the engine off. I get out.

Ruiz is already there, by the fence, in the black coat. Shaw is beside her with his thermos. Tran is a step behind them both, holding a department camera with both hands like it might go off, wearing a hoodie with a cartoon frog on it and the expression of a man who was told to come in at six and not told why.

"Morning," Tran says. Then, to Ruiz, quieter: "Is this a thing where I don't ask?"

"It's a thing where you take pictures," Ruiz says.

I walk around to the back of the car. The trunk lock has its little bright crescent of scratches. Somebody's been here. Somebody's always been here, I think. Every night. Driving.

I put the key in. I turn it.

. . .

It's a trunk.

That's the first thing. I don't know what I thought. It's a trunk, gray carpet gone shiny in the middle, the flares in their cardboard sleeve, the box of old DD-5s, Frank's windbreaker still in its plastic. The things a cop keeps, the way he keeps them when he's stopped looking.

Tran's camera clicks. The sound goes right through me.

I lift the carpet panel. Under it, in the well, the spare. A doughnut, the skinny kind they give you so you can limp to a garage. It's held down by a big plastic wing nut. I unscrew it. It turns easy. It's been turned before.

I lift the spare out and set it on the asphalt.

The bag is underneath. It's a gray canvas gym bag, the zipper pull broken off and replaced with a paperclip bent into a ring. I know that paperclip. I watched him bend it. At a red light on Flatbush, with his teeth, while I told him he was going to chip a molar.

Nobody says anything.

Shaw puts on a pair of blue gloves, the way you'd put on reading glasses, and leans in, and works the paperclip, and opens the bag about six inches.

Cash. Banded. Stacks of twenties and fifties in paper straps from Ridgewood Savings, and on every strap, small, in pencil, in the same tidy cursive as the green ledger: *F.D.*

"One eighty," Shaw says, not counting, the way a man says the weight of a baby he's held a lot of. "I'd think."

Tran's camera clicks. Clicks.

Then Shaw stops. He doesn't reach in any further. He just looks, and then he steps back from the trunk, and takes the gloves off, and looks at me.

"That's addressed," he says. "Not to me."

Tucked in the bag's side pocket, where you'd put a thing you meant to take back out before you handed the rest over, there's an envelope. White, letter size, gone slightly yellow at the edges. Sealed. One word on the front, in blue ballpoint, in big slanting block capitals with a fat K that's been gone over twice.

KID

. . .

I read it in the car.

Nobody tells me to. Nobody stops me. Shaw nods, very slightly, and turns to look at the precinct roof and the pigeons, which is a kindness, and he knows it. Ruiz walks over to the fence and stands with her back to the lot.

I get in on my side. I shut the door. The passenger seat is empty. I can look at it now. It's just a seat.

The envelope is soft from two years in a trunk. It opens without tearing. One sheet of yellow legal paper, folded in thirds, torn neat along the perforation. Of course it is. Where do you think I learned.

Kid,

I'm writing this down because I know me. I'll get to the important part and tell a joke instead.

Since last fall I've been carrying for Frank Doyle. Bags out of the cage to a car wash in Canarsie. I knew what it was. I'm not going to tell you I didn't.

It was for Ann. The place on York, the one that wasn't on the plan. They said eight months without it. I did the math, and I'm a cop, so I did it wrong.

She thinks the union came through. Let her. She's going to be fine, and that's the part I can't make myself sorry about. I tried.

Tonight's the last bag. I give it back to Lawson, I tell Frank I'm out, and Friday I walk into Dana's office and say all this to her face. I picked the car wash so you'd be sitting next to me when I told you. That was cheap. Sorry.

If I lose my nerve in the car, you've got this.

Don't you dare make this your fault. You didn't see it because I'm good at hiding things. It's the only thing I was ever better at than you.

Get some sleep.

Ray

P.S. The scarecrow one is funny. Don't let anybody tell you different.

. . .

I read it twice. Then I fold it back into thirds, along the same creases, and I hold it.

Here's what I want to tell you. That I cried. That something broke and came out of me in the front seat of a Crown Vic in a precinct lot, and it was ugly, and it was good for me, and after that I felt better.

I didn't. I sat there. My hands were steady. That's the part I keep coming back to. My hands have been steady for two years.

I did the math, and I'm a cop, so I did it wrong.

That's him. That's exactly him. The joke's in the wrong place, two sentences before the part that hurts, so you're still smiling when it gets you.

Friday. He was going to walk into her office on Friday. She was relieved it wasn't that day.

I look out the windshield. Ruiz is still at the fence. Her shoulders are up around her ears, and she's holding the chain-link with one hand, and she isn't moving at all. I think she knows what's in the letter. I think she's known what was going to be in it for two years. Knowing isn't the same as reading it. I'm not going to make her read it.

The cupholder on the right is empty. I don't know what to do about that, so I don't do anything about it.

. . .

When I get out, Shaw is waiting by the trunk with his thermos, and Tran is putting the camera back in its case very slowly, as if speed might be disrespectful.

"Lieutenant."

"Detective."

"His pension," I say. "Ray's. It goes to Ann. It's all she's got that isn't the house. If this goes in a report with his name—"

Shaw unscrews the lid of the thermos. He pours. He doesn't drink it. He holds it, steaming, in the cold.

"Dead men don't get charged, Detective," he says. "And I don't charge widows."

It's said the way he says everything, like he's reading you the dosage. I don't trust my voice, so I nod.

"As for you." He looks at the bag in the trunk, and at me. "You concealed evidence in a federal case for two years, in shock, in a hospital parking lot, after driving your partner to an ER. I've read the Woodhull intake. Somebody put a blanket on you and you didn't take

it off for three hours. So you'll write it down. All of it. In your own hand, which I'm told is very legible." He sips, finally. "And then I'll decide what number I like."

"That's it?"

"That's never it," Shaw says. "But it's where it starts."

. . .

At 7:40 I open the glovebox.

Registration. A dead flashlight. Ketchup packets. A Rangers ticket. A pair of reading glasses that aren't mine. I know whose they are now. I've moved them out of the way a hundred times to get at the registration and never once picked them up.

Under them, the printout. One sheet, folded in thirds. *02:41:17. ELEV CAR 3. FLR 31. HALE, DYLAN. INTERN.*

I take an envelope from the drawer in Ruiz's outer office and nobody stops me. I write an address in Bed-Stuy on it, a street I've driven past three times in the last month without slowing down. I put the printout inside. Then I tear a strip off the bottom of a sheet of yellow legal paper, neat, along the perforation, and I write two words on it, and I put that inside too.

Your call.

It's Ray's line. I know that now. It was always mine.

The mailbox is on the corner of Union and Grand, blue, dented, covered in stickers for a band that broke up. I pull the handle down. I hold the envelope over the slot for a while. A guy waiting for the bus watches me do it. He's seen people hold envelopes over mailboxes before. This is New York. He doesn't care.

I let go.

The handle clanks back up. That's the whole sound. It isn't much. It never is.

I walk back to the car. I get in on my side. I don't say anything to the seat next to me, and the seat next to me doesn't say anything back, and for the first time in two years that's the way it's supposed to be.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Last Coffee

ANN COMES HOME FROM Massapequa that afternoon with a casserole she didn't make and her sister's opinions about all of it, and she calls me at three and tells me to come for coffee, and not to bring anything, which means bring something.

I bring a crumb cake from the Italian place on Third. She takes it at the door like evidence.

"Jake."

"Ann."

She looks past me at the Crown Vic at the curb. She looks at it the way you'd look at a dog that bit someone you love: not angry, exactly. Just keeping an eye on it. Then she takes my arm and brings me in.

The house is warm. It's always warm. Ray used to say she kept it at a temperature where you could grow orchids or raise lizards. The kitchen has the same yellow wallpaper with the teapots on it, and a chair at the end of the table that nobody sits in, with a seat cushion that's still flattened in the middle.

She doesn't ask me about the garage. Ruiz has told her a version. A break-in. An officer with a gambling problem who thought the Kowalskis kept cash in the house, because people talk, because Ray

was a cop. Caught in the act. Nothing taken. It's a good version. It's even mostly true.

She pours coffee into two mugs and puts one in front of me, and then she sits down across the table with her hands around hers, and she looks at me for a long time.

"Steve Petrakis," she says. "He came to the funeral. He brought a ham."

"Sounds like him."

"It was a very good ham." She turns the mug a little. "Was Ray in some kind of trouble, Jake? Before?"

There it is. She's sharp. She was always sharp. She did the books for a plumbing supply on Fifth Avenue for thirty years and she can smell a number that's been moved.

I think about a gym bag with a paperclip for a zipper pull. York Avenue. *She thinks the union came through. Let her.*

I don't know if it's right. I'm a detective. Right is somebody else's department.

"No," I say. "He was just tired, Ann. He was tired for a long time."

She watches my face. I let her. Whatever she finds there, she decides it's enough, or she decides it's what she's getting, which with Ann is sometimes the same thing.

"He was," she says. "He snored like a leaf blower that last year."

Before I go she takes something down off the mantel in the front room, next to the flag folded into its triangle in the wooden case. She holds it out.

The Mets cap. The NY faded almost to pink. The brim curled from a lot of years of being turned.

"It belongs in the car," she says. "It looks wrong up there. It always looked wrong up there."

I take it. It weighs nothing at all.

. . .

I don't go home.

I drive. That's the long shift, and it doesn't care what kind of week you've had. Fort Hamilton Parkway. The Gowanus with the trucks. The BQE, nobody on it going anywhere they want to be. The cap is on the passenger seat. I keep it there. I don't know why I don't put it on the dash. It doesn't seem like my call.

Around four I'm on Kent Avenue, and the deli's lit, and I go in.

The guy behind the counter has two cups out before I'm through the door. Two lids. He's reaching for the pot.

"One," I say.

He stops with the pot in the air.

"Just one."

He looks at me. He looks at the second cup. Then he takes it off the counter and puts it back on the stack, upside down, and doesn't say anything, and charges me two twenty-five, and I give him five and tell him to keep it, which I've never done, and he looks at me like that's the strangest part.

. . .

I park at the end of North 5th, where the street gives up and turns into a railing and the river.

It's 6:15. Manhattan is still mostly lights. The water's black and moving fast and not saying anything. Behind us the BQE breathes.

I set the coffee in the cupholder on the left. My hand goes to the right one anyway, with nothing in it. I let it stay there for a second. Then I take it back.

"You get the seeds?" Ray says.

He's in the passenger seat.

He's got the cap in his hands, in his lap. Not turning it. Just holding it, the way you'd hold a thing somebody gave you back. His knees are jammed under the dash where they always were. He looks like he always looks. Big, tired, his coat buttoned wrong by one, a shaving nick on his jaw that he's had for two years.

I know what he is. I know it the way you know a word you've been saying wrong your whole life, and somebody finally says it right in front of you. It doesn't make him go away. It just means I know.

"They were out of ranch," I say.

"They're always out of ranch." He smiles at the river. "World's a cruel place, kid."

We sit there.

"I read it," I say.

"I figured."

"Friday. You were going to tell her Friday."

"I was going to tell you that night. In the car." He looks at the cap. "I had a whole thing worked out. I was gonna start with the car wash and work backwards. I got about four words in."

"I know. I was there."

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

It comes out of me before I can stop it. It's not a laugh. It's the shape of one.

The sky behind us starts to go, black to slate, and the tops of the towers across the river get it before anything else does.

"Tottenville," Ray says. "Outside Linda Price's. I never finished that one."

"No."

"The ones who cry the hardest at funerals," he says, "are usually the ones who owe the dead."

I think about Frank Doyle at the front corner of a casket on Fourth Avenue, crying loud enough that people patted him. I think about a man in a gray coat on a cot in the back of a laundromat with a photo of a woman in a scarf. I think about two years of coffees going cold by a window, poured out at dawn into gutters all over Brooklyn, by someone who never once asked himself who they were for.

"Which one of us is that?" I say.

Ray looks at me. He takes his time. He always took his time with the good part.

"Both, kid."

· · ·

I don't know how long. The river doesn't keep track. A guy jogs by with a dog that would rather be home. The Domino sign clicks off for the day.

"You going to be okay?" Ray says.

"No."

"Good. That's honest. Start there." He shifts in the seat, the way he did when his knees got bad, and the seat doesn't give, and neither of us mentions it. "Get some sleep. I mean it this time. Not on the couch with your shoes on."

"Everybody keeps telling me that."

"Everybody's right. It happens." He leans forward and sets the cap on the dashboard, square, over the pale patch on the vinyl where it lived for all those years, and pats the brim once. "There. That's where it goes."

He looks at me.

He tips two fingers off his eyebrow. That little salute he did to the doormen and the desk sergeants and the lady at the bodega on Atlantic who was always out of ranch.

I look at the river for a second. Just a second. The sun's hit the windows across the water.

When I look back, the seat is empty.

I wait. A plane goes over, low, toward LaGuardia. The heater ticks. The seat stays empty. I look at it for a long time and it doesn't change.

The cap stays where he put it.

. . .

I drive home. Four flights. Mrs. Ocasio's game show through her door. The second-floor landing light is still broken, and I go up through the dark part the way I always do, with my hand on the rail.

I take my shoes off. I take my coat off and hang it on the hook, which I haven't done since I can't remember. I lie down on the bed, on the sheets, under the blanket, like a person.

I look at the ceiling. There's a crack in it shaped like Staten Island. I've looked at it a lot of nights.

I don't remember looking away.

. . .

When I open my eyes the light in the window is wrong.

It's the last of the daylight, the thin blue you get just before five in December. The Domino sign is lit again. I check my phone. 4:52.

Nine hours.

The old record was six, on the couch, the Knicks on low. I stopped sleeping right the year Natalie moved to Philly. After an orange chair at Woodhull I stopped sleeping at all. I lie there and feel it, the sleep,

heavy in my arms and the back of my neck, like a blanket somebody put on me while I wasn't looking.

I get up. I go into the kitchen in my socks to make coffee. One mug.

The fridge hums.

The whiteboard is where I keep the things I'd otherwise lose. The dentist. *Call landlord re: radiator.* The phone number with no name. At the bottom, the stripe where *J.M. – 3* has been since the storage unit.

It's been wiped. Clean, with the side of a hand. The marker is in its tray, cap on, put back square.

In the stripe, in black, in block capitals, the S starting a little too high, the M with its middle dipping to the line, in handwriting I'd know anywhere:

J.M. – 4. DOYLE WASN'T THE TOP. – J.M.

I stand there in my socks with the empty mug.

Nine hours. I slept nine hours.

Somebody didn't.

END OF CASE THREE

Jake Mercer will return in Case Four.

For Ray.

— Shay