

THE LAST DISPATCH

Three Rivers, One Body — A Hard-Boiled Crime Novel

LOW WATER IN THREE RIVERS

BOOK I



GARRICK STEVA

Low Water Press

Copyright © 2026 by Garrick Steva

All rights reserved.

Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this story are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, business establishments, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

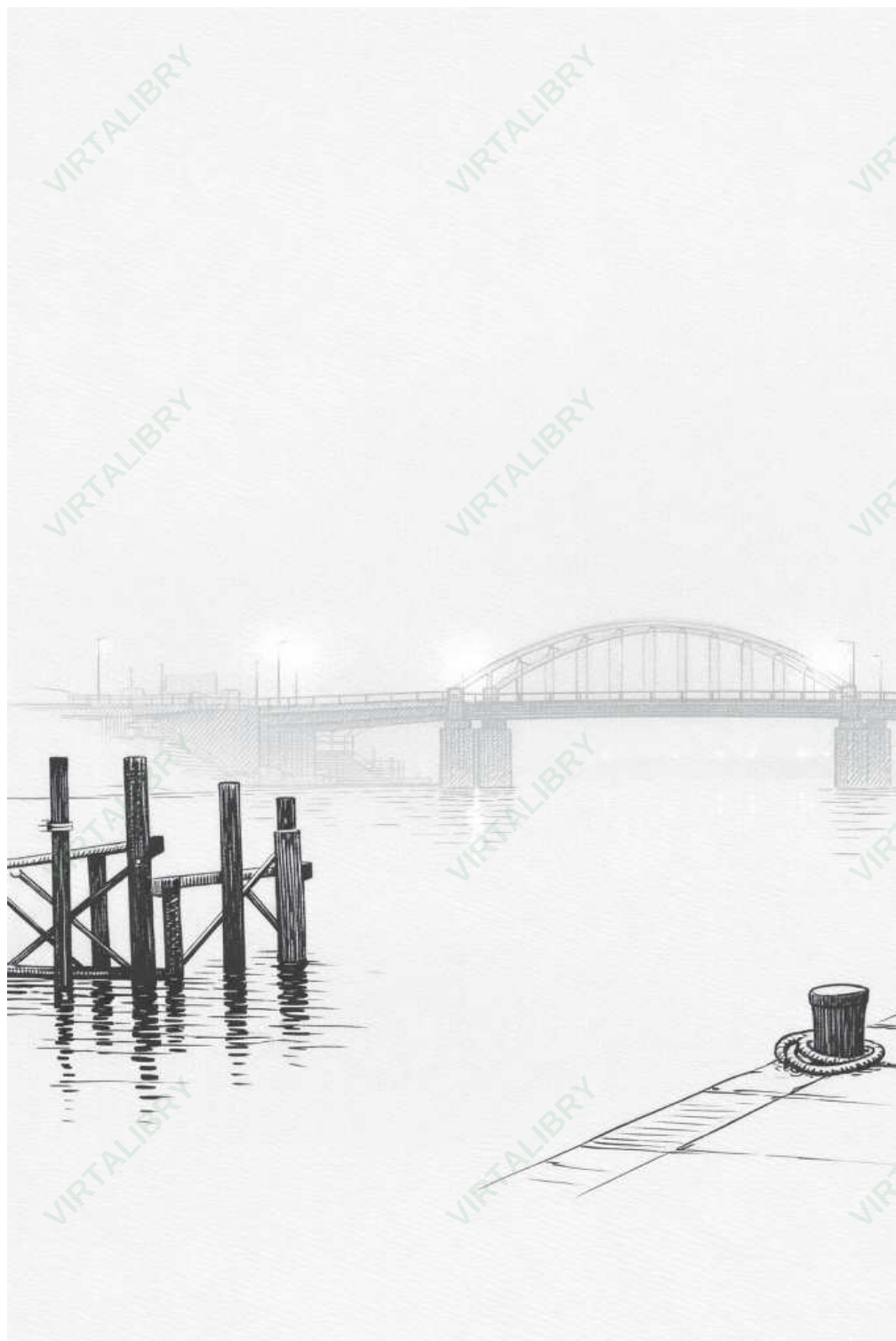
CONTENTS

Character List	iv
1. Hannah	i
2. James	7
3. Detective Kelly	15
4. James	25
5. Hannah	33
6. James	41
7. Hannah	49
8. Hannah	61
9. Detective Kelly	71
10. James	79
11. Hannah	89
12. Detective Kelly	95
13. Hannah	103
14. James	113
15. Detective Kelly	119
16. Hannah	131
17. Detective Kelly	141
18. Hannah	147
19. James	155
20. Detective Kelly	163
21. Detective Kelly	171
22. Hannah	181
23. James	187
24. James	193
25. James	199
About the Author	207
Also by Garrick Steva	208

CHARACTER LIST

- **Denise Parker** – Office manager with immaculate hair and trembling hands. Did she have something to do with the Greyhound ticket?
- **Detective Daniel Kelly** – A homicide cop who still believes in doing it "by the book," even as the book, the union, and his own bosses all try to throw themselves in their way.
- **Eddie Kozma** – A nervous, ink-stained night dispatcher who starts quietly logging the yard's dirty secrets and winds up the city's loudest corpse.
- **Eleanor Markham** – A steel-town widow with money, a razor for a mind, and just enough guilt about her contracts to hire a PI instead of another lawyer.
- **Greta Watson** – The Anchor's no-nonsense bartender, part confessor and part bouncer, who knows every driver's poison and way too much about their sins.
- **Hannah Robertson** – A sharp, stubborn reporter whose guilt and curiosity drag her from "body beat" photographer to unofficial detective, powered almost entirely by nicotine and outrage.

- **Hugo (the yard dog)** – The only honest security on the property, a German Shepherd whose suspiciously deep “nap” says more about the night’s work than any human witness.
- **James Anderson** – Private investigator whose office décor leans “institutional poverty”; solves cases with a camera, a limp, and the kind of moral flexibility that keeps him awake at night.
- **Marcus Young** – A polished city councilman with perfect hair, a helpful pen, and a remarkable knack for signing exactly the permits Cameron needs.
- **Patrick Cameron** – Union boss who wears expensive aftershave to cover the smell of corruption.
- **Red (the gate guard)** – The union gatehouse lifer who swears nothing unusual ever happens on his shift, except those nights when it very obviously does.
- **Ron McGivern** – Night supervisor : Did he dose the guard dog or lie about the whistle? He discovers that perjury only matters when someone bothers to check the timestamps.
- **Ryan Bennett** – Nervous ACD driver who saw too much, drove the wrong truck, and now eats sunflower seeds like anxiety medication.
- **“Smitty”** – Cameron’s quiet, watchful enforcer in a windbreaker, the kind of guy who’s always just out of frame when crates and people begin to go missing.



CHAPTER 1

HANNAH



River patrol docks on the North Shore always smelled like a dog's last bath: dank river foam, diesel, and the morning shift's full-ashtray optimism. Even before sunrise, the Steel City glowed a sour sodium-orange under its own weather, which today was a sleet drizzle that turned your scalp to ice and stuck your hair to your skull. Hannah Robertson zipped her raincoat up to the jaw and told herself for the thirtieth time she didn't mind working the body beat, not even when the bodies came bloated and with their own tragic résumé.

The cops let her through the yellow tape, which flapped in the wind like a party streamer for the end of the world. Up ahead, two men from Freedom House Ambulance muscled a stretcher up the ramp from the Allegheny River, careful not to tip the corpse onto the rotting planks. The city had cut budgets again. No new dock boards since Kennedy. So every third step threatened to drop you into the water with the dead.

Lopez was there, already notebook-deep in official indifference, conferring with the paramedic, whose latex gloves were the only spot of color on the dock. Hannah's own gloves were wool, and as useless against the cold as a handshake with the mayor.

"Christ," said Lopez, seeing her camera, "you people don't waste time."

"Deadline's at ten," Hannah said. "He's not getting any less dead." She snapped a test shot of the stretcher, the flash painting the corpse in harsh blue. The lens steamed and she wiped it with the back of her hand, leaving a greasy smear. Lopez made a face.

The body was face-up, male, maybe forty, hair thinning and flesh already starting to drift off the jaw in white patches. The ambulance paramedic grunted and lifted the chin with two fingers. "Got some ligature here," he muttered. "See? Dark band, right under the beard."

Lopez leaned in, squinting against the rain. "That a cord or a wire?"

"Hard to say with the swelling. Maybe rope, maybe electrical." The tech let the head drop. "He's got blunt trauma, too. Back of the skull. Like somebody hit him after they tied him up."

Lopez took this in with the resigned sigh of a man whose night just got longer. "ID?"

The tech fished a thin wallet from the man's back pocket, holding it delicately. He thumbed through the contents, dropping a crumbling ten onto the dock and picking it up with a pinched look. "Edward Kozma," he read. "Employee badge. ACD Dispatch."

Hannah's brain lit up in a sequence of boxy fluorescent bulbs: ACD, the big overnight hauler out of Lawrenceville. She'd done an exposé on their union-busting last winter. Their graveyard dispatcher had called her once, left a rambling message about "something rotten in the yard," but she'd blown it off as union paranoia and hung up on him. *Fuck*.

Lopez paged through the badge and a stack of business cards, all waterlogged but legible. "No car keys?" He gestured to the corpse's pockets. The tech shook his head and fished out only a coin purse, a chewed pencil stub, and a Greyhound ticket with the stub still attached.

"Guy was set for Cleveland, 7:00 a.m.," the tech said, holding up the ticket.

Hannah's eyes stuck to the ticket, which looked suspiciously dry.

The rest of the wallet was pulp, every bill stained and soft, but the ticket was crisp as if just plucked from the station window. She focused on the ticket for a long moment, then quietly snapped a close-up, the edges sharp and the punch code visible in her lens. It was the kind of detail worth remembering; she resolved to file the photograph if it became important. She made a mental note to steal it if Lopez didn't bag it for evidence. *Nobody floats in the Allegheny with a dry ticket unless they never meant to ride the bus.*

"What time did he go in?" she asked, focusing the camera for a close-up of the face.

"Impossible to say. Water's cold, slows everything down," said the tech. "Cold water makes it tricky. Could be anywhere from twelve to thirty hours."

He shrugged. "Krieger'll pin it down at the morgue."

Lopez grunted, already bored. "You got your shot, Robertson?"

She kept snapping anyway, working the dock from every angle. Blood had pooled behind the man's left ear, crusted dark against the scalp. She noticed his hands: calloused, nail beds black with dirt or grease, but the knuckles unbruised. "No sign of a fight," she said. "Looks like he just took it."

"Or was drugged," said the tech, scribbling a note. "I'll run tox, but don't hold your breath."

"Where's his car?" she asked, turning to Lopez.

"Nothing in the lot. Maybe he got dropped off." He gave the body a long, blank stare. "Or maybe somebody wanted it to look like a river suicide."

Hannah snorted. "Yeah, all the best suicides tie their own hands first." She waited for Lopez to snap back, but he just shrugged and gestured for the paramedic to bag the body.

"Get him to the morgue," Lopez said. "I want a full workup. And call me when you have cause of death, not before."

The tech zipped the body with a practiced yank, pausing only to slide the wallet into an evidence bag. Hannah got a final shot of the face before the zipper closed, noting the slack jaw and the way the left eyelid didn't quite cover the eyeball. She'd seen hundreds of

corpses, but this one looked what? Expectant? Like it had something to say, if you just waited for the last twitch.

As the stretcher disappeared into the back of the van, Hannah trailed after Lopez, who was already lighting a damp cigarette under the lee of a steel piling. He offered her one, but she waved it off.

"Anything you're not telling me?" she asked, pulling out her notepad.

He glanced at her, eyes hooded. "Just another stiff in the Allegheny. Off the record, you ask me, he pissed off somebody who didn't like being recorded. Maybe a union thing, maybe not. City's full of people who want to see you sleep with the fishes."

She jotted it down, knowing he'd deny it in print. "You find anything else on him?"

Lopez flicked ash onto the dock and hesitated. "There was a matchbook in his jacket. The Anchor, down on Smallman. You know it?"

"Never been," she lied, picturing the place instantly. Smoky union bar, busted jukebox, the kind of clientele that never gave their real names.

He handed her the matchbook, sealed in a little bag. She pressed it between her gloved fingers—three matches missing, the inside cover scribbled with a time and date: "H.R.—Thurs 2 AM—urgent." Her initials. It sucked the breath right out of her.

"You okay?" Lopez asked, catching the sudden silence.

"Fine," she snapped, handing the bag back before he could notice the way her fingers shook. *No way he knew what those letters meant. No way Kozma tried to call her the night he died. Right?*

She turned away, staring at the city across the river. The steel mills belched smoke over the bridges, neon beer signs flickered in the dawn, and somewhere in the haze a train wailed its arrival to a city that would keep moving even if every body in the Allegheny told its story.

As she walked back to her car, Hannah's hand found the matchbook again, and for the first time in months, she felt something like fear. Not of the river, or even of the men who sent bodies to it. It was of the stories she'd missed, and the debts they'd come to collect.

She jotted a quick note in her pad: Dry Greyhound ticket, stub attached, Cleveland. Photograph on film.

She drove in second gear through the Strip, the sun not yet up, and the only company was the bakery's sour waft and the odd set of headlights from a dray truck lumbering past. She didn't head straight for the Press, or even toward her usual greasy spoon. Instead, she parked under a blown-out streetlamp, rolled down her window for a smoke, and stared at the matchbook in her lap. The city was a bruise in the pre-dawn, the river still moving beneath the surface, the story already metastasizing in her head.

She popped her trunk and did her own evidence collection. The Anchor's matchbook was a cheap red one, cellophane torn at the corner, the sulfur heads worn flat from some obsessive finger. Inside, the handwriting: H.R.—Thurs 2 AM—urgent. Her own initials, block-printed in a hand that wanted to be forgotten. *Thurs* was tonight. Two A.M. was now only hours away.

"Hey," someone called from the curb. It was the paramedic, hauling his own gear back to the van. He looked less like a scientist and more like a janitor who lost the mop war. "You're the reporter, right?"

"Yeah. Press."

He squinted at her, then at the matchbook in her hand. "Don't suppose you knew Kozma? He tried to reach your paper yesterday. Said he needed the girl who did the strike stories. My sister reads your stuff; she likes the labor beat."

She flinched, which was not professional, and ground out her cigarette with a force that snapped the filter. "We get a lot of calls," she lied, hearing her own voice wobble. "Most don't pan out."

He shrugged, already bored. "Just thought you'd want to know." Then he trundled back to the van, never glancing at the body he'd just zipped.

She sat in the Beetle for a long time after that, running through the tape in her head. The message light on her office phone,

blinking red and angry. Eddie's voice, soft and shaky: "You don't know me. It's about the yard; someone's in real trouble. You did the stories about the janitor's wildcat, right? Call me, please." Her voice dropped, becoming a whisper. "Someone higher up is in on it. Not just the foreman. Maybe city hall, I don't know. Just call me." She had deleted it three nights ago, an after-hours ramble from a man who couldn't find the words. Now he never would.

How many other bodies float past because you're too busy to listen?

She pressed the matchbook until her knuckles blanched, then snapped it shut and stuffed it in her camera bag. She replayed the shot she'd taken of the Greyhound ticket, impossibly dry, as if the universe wanted to be sure she noticed it. She wondered who Kozma thought he was meeting in Cleveland, or if that was just the destination someone chose for his last ride.

She wrote the time and address for The Anchor on the back of an old press pass, then tore the matchbook in half to keep the note separate from the evidence. It felt stupidly melodramatic, like something out of a detective serial. *Next you'll be monologuing into a tape recorder, lady.* She allowed the smallest smile to curl her lips.

When she finally started the car, the engine coughed and shook before settling into its little blue rattle. She didn't drive toward home, or the Press. She pointed the nose toward Smallman, toward the bar where dead men left messages and reporters got their second chances.

She was still forty-eight hours from her first real byline, but the city was already closing in, heavy as water and twice as cold.

CHAPTER 2

JAMES



James Anderson squinted at the water stain on his office ceiling and told himself it wasn't getting any bigger. The rain outside had stopped hours ago, but in these Strip District buildings moisture lingered like a grudge. On his desk, three envelopes with bold red "FINAL NOTICE" stamps vied for position against an empty bottle of Old Overholt and a chipped mug half-full of something that might once have been coffee. The mug tasted like cigarette ash.

The room's decor leaned institutional: battered steel filing cabinet (bottom drawer welded shut since last March), a scarred wooden desk with the finish worn to the woodgrain in all the places that mattered, a telephone bolted to the wall with a cord long enough to pace, and a window that both rattled and refused to open past the width of a cigarette. He'd tried to fix it, once. Now he just let it whistle when the wind was up.

He cracked a new pack of Old Golds, shook out two by accident, and watched both land on the folder labeled "PI #1166 – Markham, E." His hands shook, as they sometimes did, a tremor that started in his wrist and ran up the arm if he let it. Usually, he

didn't let it. He took a moment to press the heel of his palm against the glass, steadying the nerves. *Still got it. Just not when you need it.*

The Markham file sat heavy on the desk, nearly untouched except for the original intake form and a set of carbons with his own scrawled notes. The case wasn't complicated on paper: a missing informer, probably an employee with a gambling problem or a tendency to take things home. The intake had been rushed; the client insistent on discretion and cash terms. He'd told her to wait until Monday, but she'd demanded first slot. *Monday's when the world gets serious about its problems. Or maybe just admits them.* The phone hadn't rung once since seven that morning, and Anderson had run out of reasons not to start drinking by ten. At least the rent office kept office hours.

He was just about to pour himself the last inch of rye when the hallway outside erupted in the staccato of expensive heels. The sound had a frequency all its own, each impact sharper than the last, like someone daring the building to collapse beneath her. The outer door whined open. A chemical sweep of perfume, something floral with the mean aftertaste of alcohol, preceded the client by two full seconds.

She was thirty seconds early. Anderson liked her less for it.

Eleanor Markham walked in without asking, eyes already scanning the room for threats or stains. She wore a gray skirt suit that cost more than his car, and carried a matching handbag clenched under one elbow like it might leap for the exit. Her hair was perfect, every strand lacquered in place, but her face had the half-set, brittle look of someone who'd been told "no" more times than she cared to count.

She closed the door with a click and hovered just inside, not sitting, not moving. "Mr. Anderson."

He motioned at the only other chair, a castoff with duct tape on the armrest. "You're early, Mrs. Markham."

She hesitated, as if sitting might start a sequence she couldn't control, then lowered herself with precise care. "Miss. I haven't used 'Mrs.' in almost a year." Her tone was practiced, clipped but oddly soft, as if she wanted you to notice both the control and the effort.

He grunted, already reaching for his notebook. "I'll fix that on the file." He scribbled a note, not because it mattered, but to give her a moment to get comfortable. "You said your informer's name was Kozma."

"Eddie. Edward. Kozma." She tried to keep her eyes on his, but they kept flicking to the window, the phone, anywhere else. "I haven't heard from him since Friday. He was supposed to call after shift. He hasn't."

Anderson flipped the page. "You said he worked for you?"

"He worked for my late husband's foundation. The Markham Trust. We contracted ACD for freight, Eddie handled the dispatch. Oversaw everything." She caught herself smoothing her skirt, then folded her hands. White knuckles. "He was reliable. Never missed a call."

Anderson watched her with the blankness of a man who'd already heard two hundred variations of the same story. "Why not go to the police?"

A smile ghosted across her mouth, vanishing before it landed. "Because it's not just a missing person. Because the last thing Eddie said was, 'The Boss is onto me, and the numbers don't add up.' And because the last time I went to the police, they made it worse."

He waited, giving her room. Sometimes silence worked better than whiskey.

She took the bait. "There's a shipment, Mr. Anderson. ACD runs for my foundation, paid through city contracts. I asked Eddie to review them, privately. Some of the paperwork didn't make sense. The invoices weren't matching the deliveries." She looked up, and for a second the polish slipped. "Eddie said he'd found something. He was scared."

Anderson scratched at his scar, a nervous habit he despised but couldn't break. "How scared?"

"Scared enough to call me at two in the morning. Scared enough to say he was going to leave town until it blew over." She let out a shaky breath, and the scent of perfume sharpened. "He never made it. I called his apartment, the yard, even the bar he liked. Nobody's seen him."

Anderson nodded, mentally filling in the blanks. Union yard, probably mob-adjacent. ACD wasn't a name you heard much outside logistics, but the riverfront was full of guys who made problems go away. "You said 'the Boss.' You mean Cameron?"

Her fingers squeezed the bag tighter. "I don't know. I don't want to know. But yes. I think it's him."

Anderson jotted a note, then flipped the notebook closed. "You want me to find Kozma. Or just what he found?"

Her laugh was a tight, crystalline thing. "Both. If you can." She reached into her bag and produced an envelope, thicker than it needed to be, crisp edges still warm from her hand. "A hundred a day, plus expenses. I need answers, Mr. Anderson. Quietly."

He took the envelope, didn't bother to count it. "I'll need addresses. His home, the yard, maybe a bar or two."

She had them ready on a typed sheet, sliding it across like a poker chip. Her nails were perfectly shaped, but the cuticles were raw. "You don't seem surprised."

He flicked at the folder. "People don't come to me for the easy ones. And I don't take jobs unless they're hard."

A silence settled. She watched him, expecting something, maybe a promise, maybe the comfort of certainty. He gave her neither. Just the slow, measured drag of a man who intended to survive the week with minimal fuss.

"You don't ask a lot of questions," she said.

"I ask the right ones," he replied.

Her lips pressed together, calculating. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

He paused, considered the shape of her problem, the way it twisted around guilt and self-preservation. "You said your foundation's money comes from city contracts. But you paid cash today. Why?"

She blinked, once, slow. "I don't want my name on your books."

Anderson filed it away. *Money's dirty, but not her only worry.* He nodded. "I'll let you know when I find something."

She rose, took a careful step toward the door, then stopped. "Thank you, Mr. Anderson. I know you're not cheap."

He shrugged. "Neither is regret."

She left, heels clicking the same challenge down the hall, and Anderson sat for a long minute with the envelope in his lap. The room still hummed with her perfume, the alcohol note lingering.

He poured the last of the rye into his mug, lit a cigarette, and stared at the case file.

You said you wouldn't get involved again. You said it was just a job. He stubbed out the cigarette and watched the tip sizzle in the cold, black coffee.

You lied. Again.

The next morning, the office was colder and the headache sharper. Anderson tried to blame the weather, but the truth was in the mirror: skin yellowed from old whiskey, eyes two shades past tired. He never got hangovers in country. Stateside, he had one every morning.

He didn't open the envelope until after the first cup of coffee. Inside was a neat stack of twenties, all fresh, all sequential. There was also a sheaf of documents: three canceled checks made out to E. Kozma, all labeled as "consultation fees" in typewriter ink; a second envelope, smaller, sealed in clear plastic; and a creased black-and-white photo, the kind you get from a corner photo mart, stamped JUL 1973 on the back.

He fanned the checks, noting the dates: midweek, late at night, always after hours. The memo line was a tell. Nobody called it "consulting" unless they needed the distance. The payor on the account wasn't Markham or her foundation, but a shell company, SRS Holdings. The address listed a PO box on Carson Street. He made a note to ask the desk sergeant at Zone 2 who was picking up the mail.

He opened the smaller envelope. It contained a single slip of onionskin; the words typed with a heavy hand:

"Your little problem is taken care of. Be more careful who you trust."

No signature. No letterhead. The bottom third of the page had been scorched, like someone tried to burn it but chickened out.

Anderson ran his finger over the chart, feeling the fine grit of carbon dust. *Threat or warning? Or both?*

The photograph was a surprise. Eddie Kozma, front and center, balding and bespectacled, holding a plastic cup of Iron City and wearing an expression halfway between smile and seizure. He stood in front of what looked like a loading dock, the painted ACD logo just visible over his shoulder. The shot was off balance, tilted. There was an arm draped over Eddie's shoulder, just a sleeve and a fragment of hand, the rest cropped out. Anderson flipped it over. No note, just the stamp. He stared at it for a while, then slid it into the Markham file.

He heard the steps before the knock, the same pattern as the day before. Eleanor entered with less poise, her hair windblown and her eyes rimmed in sleepless red. Today she wore black slacks and a beige blouse, no jewelry but the watch on her left wrist. She didn't speak right away, just put a yellow legal pad on the desk and sat, knees together, hands folded.

"I thought you might need more details," she said. "I wrote down everything I remembered."

He picked up the pad. The handwriting was feminine, fast, slanted leftward like it was running out of time. She'd listed addresses, shifts, bars, even Kozma's bus route. There were names he recognized—Szymanski, Greer, Faraci—and one he didn't: Denise Parker. Underlined twice.

"Denise?" he asked.

"Payroll. She handles the books for ACD." Eleanor chewed her lip, then looked at the ceiling. "If Eddie was cooking numbers, she'd know. Or she'd know who did."

Anderson nodded, then looked at her hands. She still wore the watch tight, the skin dented beneath the band. "You said last time the police made it worse. How?"

She looked out the window. "My husband's car was bombed in '71. They said it was an accident, a leaky gas line. He'd been arguing with Cameron about a contract bid the day before. I went to the police. Next day, someone threw a brick through my house window. After that, I hired you people."

"You people," he repeated.

She ignored it. "The police never found the brick. Never called me back."

Anderson caught himself wanting to reassure her, but that wasn't in the contract. He instead asked, "Why was Kozma scared? Really."

She swallowed, the tendons in her neck tightening. "He said Cameron was shipping something through the yard at night. Something off the books. He didn't say what, but he told me to stay away from the yard after dark."

He considered that, then made a decision. "You should stay at a hotel for a few days."

She shook her head. "I have a house. I have a schedule. If I disappear, Cameron knows I'm onto him."

Anderson didn't argue. "If you get another note, bring it to me. Don't burn it."

She almost smiled at that, a little less brittle. "Thank you."

He waited until she left, then stood and stretched, feeling the old pain in his left knee click twice on the way up. He dug in the desk for the city directory, found the ACD yard number, and dialed. The rotary phone spun with a satisfying rattle.

"ACD dispatch," said a voice, female, nasal. Denise, maybe.

"I'm trying to get ahold of Eddie Kozma," Anderson said, letting his voice go flat and friendly. "He's supposed to call me about a job."

"He's not here," the woman said, no hesitation. "Maybe try the Anchor. He drinks there."

"Thanks," he said, but the line was already dead. He hung up, scribbled a note, then tried the home number from Eleanor's list. No answer. Just a tired ring, over and over.

He put on his coat and hat, checked the cylinder in his snub-nose, then paused by the window. The Strip was coming to life below, box trucks lining up in the alley, bakery men tossing sacks of flour over their shoulders. The world turned, and somewhere in it, a man named Eddie Kozma was either dead or hiding very well.

Anderson took the photo out again, studied the face, the

awkward smile. He thought about the hand on Kozma's shoulder, the cropped-out half of the story. The dock in the background. The night shifts Eleanor had mentioned. Same loading bay, same time window as whatever got her husband killed. *Coincidence is a story nobody finishes.*

A hundred bucks a day to find a dead man, or worse. Not enough.

But he slid the photo into his coat pocket anyway and locked the office behind him.

There was a bar called The Anchor, and it opened at noon. He had questions, and maybe someone there still had answers. *The kind of place where union muscle drinks and gossip travels faster than a fist.* He'd know the layout inside ten minutes: who watched the door, who nursed a grudge, who might spill for the right price.

That was his world. Shadows, yards, the criminal edge. The reporter, if there was one, could have the documents and the bureaucrats. He'd take the alleys.

CHAPTER 3

DETECTIVE KELLY



Daniel Kelly spent the morning in the morgue, watching a stranger's hands peel the secrets out of Eddie Kozma's body. The coroner's office was built like a shoebox and smelled like Lysol, old formaldehyde, and burnt coffee. The assistant's radio, perched above the autoclave, spat out an endless parade of Nixon jokes and warnings about Parkway East closures, but even at full volume it couldn't drown out the wet mechanical sounds of the saw.

Kelly rocked on his heels, arms folded tight against his chest. The pathologist, Krieger, was a scarecrow of a man with nicotine-stained fingers who narrated the autopsy like a priest reading the Stations of the Cross.

Krieger peeled his gloves off with a wet snap and reached for his coffee. The mug said WORLD'S BEST GRANDPA, which was three different lies.

"You want the short version, Kelly, or the one I put in Latin for the DA?" he asked.

Kelly stayed by the steel, eyes on the Y-shaped incision. "Give me the truth. I'll translate."

Krieger grinned, a quick, foxlike flash. "All right. Your boy here didn't drown."

Kelly frowned. "You sure? He spent some quality time in the river."

"Body, yes. Lungs, no." Krieger tapped the chest with a knuckle. "Little bit of water where you'd expect from a dip, but no foam, no classic drowning goo in the airway, nothing in the stomach. Whatever killed him, it happened before he went swimming."

Kelly's gaze slid up to the neck. "The ligature."

"Now you're thinking like a doctor." Krieger tilted the head, exposing the dark band around the throat. "See this? Full circle bruise, front worse than the back. Inside, the neck muscles look like somebody took a crowbar to them. Hyoid bone's cracked. That doesn't happen from a tight collar."

"Rope?" Kelly asked.

"Something flexible. Rope, heavy cord. Not wire; edges are too soft." Krieger set the head back down. "And it was working while his heart still was. This isn't postmortem fooling around."

Kelly nodded toward the back of the skull. "And the lump?"

"Nice catch." Krieger parted the hair with two fingers, exposing the dark swell behind the ear. "Left posterior parietal. Subgaleal hematoma, no depressed fracture. Not enough to kill him, but enough to ring his bell hard. You get that and then a rope on your throat, you're not filing an appeal."

"So he gets bashed, goes down, somebody finishes the job," Kelly said.

"Bingo." Krieger sipped his coffee, winced. "Head shot's your setup. Strangulation does the main event."

Kelly flipped open his notebook. "Time of death?"

"Give or take, 24 to 30 hours before they dragged him out," Krieger said. "Cold water slows the clock, but I'm factoring that in. He'd been dead about a day. Rigor, lividity, core temp—all playing the same tune."

Kelly scribbled. "And the river?"

"Secondary," Krieger said. "Look at the lividity." He pointed to the purpled skin along the back and shoulders. "Fixed on the posterior. That tells me he was flat on his back for hours after he died,

before he went in. If he'd died floating face-down, we'd see it along the front."

"Stored somewhere," Kelly muttered. "On a floor. Or in a truck."

"Horizontal, at least," Krieger said. "Then dumped. And not for long. Skin's macerated, but not prune-woman levels. I'd say less than 24 hours in the water. Death first, river later."

Kelly closed the notebook for a second, let the picture settle. "Any defensive wounds? Signs he fought?"

Krieger shook his head. "Hands are clean. No busted knuckles, no torn nails, nothing under the nails but river muck. Either he trusted whoever got close enough to hit him, or the first shot turned the lights out fast."

Kelly's jaw worked. "Tox?"

"Preliminaries are boring," Krieger said. "No big alcohol load, no barbiturates, no chloral hydrate. If they doped him, they used something fancy or in a small enough dose to play nice with the river. My money's on good old-fashioned muscle."

Kelly flicked his eyes toward the evidence shelf, where a plastic bag with a yellowed bit of bone sat among others. "You get the dog's bone yet?"

Krieger snorted. "Yeah. If your mutt had a prescription, it was a strong one. Plenty of sedatives in there. Somebody wanted the only honest guard on that shift taking a nap."

Kelly opened the notebook again. "So: dead about a day before we found him. Hit, then strangled on land, laid out flat, then dumped in the Allegheny for flavor."

"That's the opera," Krieger said. "You want the libretto, I'll type it up. But don't let anybody sell you a drowning. This was a hands-on job."

Kelly slid the notebook back into his coat. "You just made my night longer, Doc."

Krieger smirked. "That's what you get for asking the right questions, Detective. Now go find whoever tied the knot."

The assistant, a bored twenty-something with a mustache that never quite filled in, held up a damp evidence bag. "Found this in

the wallet," he said, waving the Greyhound ticket between thumb and forefinger.

Kelly snapped his fingers for it. The ticket was crisp, blue on white, "Cleveland" typed in blocky capitals. The stub was attached, the paper sharp along the edge, as if it had never seen water. The wallet, by contrast, was a shrunken, blackened husk, the leather puckered and warped.

"Looks new," said Kelly. "Everything else is soaked to hell. Why's this dry?"

The assistant shrugged. "Wallet was floating. Waterline's here." He pointed to a faint brown stain about halfway up the billfold. "The ticket was above it, pressed tight against the fold. Maybe that kept it dry?"

Kelly frowned. "That's not how paper works. Not after twelve hours in the Allegheny."

He flipped the ticket over, scrutinized the punch marks. Greyhound clerks used a three-hole pattern for the Cleveland line, always the same spots unless you had a new guy on shift. This one had a single square punch, not round, and in the wrong spot entirely. He made a mental note to stop by the station and check the pattern, but already his gut was doing the arithmetic.

Somebody wanted it to look like Kozma was running.

He set the bag down and turned back to the body.

The assistant started bagging the hands, rolling each finger into an individual print card. Kelly watched him, thinking about Eddie Kozma: forty, balding, just another night dispatcher with a taste for cheap cigars and cheaper company. Who cared enough to kill a union dispatcher?

Kelly, you already know the answer. Or you will, soon as you get brave enough to write it down.

He took a seat on the only empty bench, pulled out his spiral notebook. The cover was scored with knife marks and the edges curled from sweat. He started a new page, headed it "KOZMA, EDWARD."

He jotted the coroner's notes in shorthand, then added his own: "No sign of struggle. Possible trusted assailant. Runaway narrative

staged?" He drew a box around the Greyhound ticket and underlined it twice. The punch pattern bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

Krieger finished with the chest cavity and started a low murmur about heart weight and liver texture, but Kelly wasn't listening anymore. He was seeing the faces at the union hall, the way they'd all looked right through him last time he'd asked about a body in the river. Eyes front, keep moving, nothing to see.

Ramirez, he thought. *The Ramirez case*. Two years back, a foreman at the same yard turned up beaten to death in a parking lot off Second Avenue. Kelly had worked it by the book—interviews, warrants, chain of custody pristine. The DA had everything lined up. And then, three days before trial, the key witness recanted. Said he'd been mistaken. Said he never saw a thing. The foreman's killer walked, and the union rep who'd arranged the alibi got a promotion.

Kelly remembered standing in the courtroom, watching the defendant shake hands with his lawyer, knowing the system had been played and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. *You followed the rules, Danny. And the rules got a killer back on the street.*

He closed his notebook, stood. "You'll send the full report to my desk?"

Krieger waved a bloodied hand in lazy salute. "You'll have it by noon. And Detective—" He waited for Kelly to look back. "—this isn't the first one they've tried to float past me. But it's the cleanest."

Kelly nodded, a tight ball forming in his stomach. "Thanks, Doc."

He left the morgue and made for the hallway, boots echoing on the linoleum. The building was still mostly asleep, the maintenance crew mopping the same stretch of floor they'd cleaned an hour earlier. Kelly paused by the elevator, watched the numbers blink down to three, then decided he'd rather take the stairs.

On the landing, he stopped, leaned against the concrete wall, and replayed the last hour in his head. The ligature marks, the ticket, the empty phone records. The way the wallet had soaked but the ticket hadn't.

If he wrote it up the way the department wanted, it was an open-and-shut: dispatcher gets cold feet, fakes a getaway, ends up face-down in the Allegheny. Another failed runaway, another case closed.

But if he wrote what he saw (if he flagged the ticket as a plant, if he called out the timing, the punch, the way the hands showed no fight at all) it would start a storm bigger than Kozma's corpse. Union would be on him, city would call for a review, and his own captain would quietly remind him how many pensions depended on nobody asking too many questions.

Captain Briggs already dropped that hint, Kelly thought, picturing the morning briefing. "Keep it clean, Kelly. Quick and quiet. The union's got enough heat right now without us adding to it." The words had been friendly enough, but the message was clear: don't make waves.

He pressed his palms together, cracked his knuckles one by one.

You wanted homicide, Kelly. You wanted to see if you could still do it clean. This is clean as it gets, isn't it?

He thought about Ramirez again. About the witness who'd folded, the killer who'd walked. *What if you'd bent the rules, just a little? What if you'd found a way to make the case stick?*

The thought made his stomach turn. But it didn't go away.

He went back up to the office, flagged the ticket as "suspicious," and filed a request for a full workup on the route punch patterns. Then he dialed the operator, asked for the union hall's number, and waited through three transfers before getting a secretary who knew how to keep her voice neutral. He asked for a list of anyone who'd seen Eddie Kozma after Thursday night.

He didn't expect an answer. But he asked anyway, because the book said you followed the facts until they stopped.

And when the facts stopped, you wrote your own ending.

Kelly had barely made it back to his desk when the morgue door banged open. The noise ricocheted off the tiled corridor, echoing in the empty space like a warning shot. Hannah Robertson strode in with her notepad out, eyes locked and loaded, and for a split-second Kelly felt an irrational urge to duck behind the counter.

She moved with a momentum that would have flattened a lesser man, shoes rapping the floor in crisp staccato. Her hair was a mess, damp from the rain and haloed by static, but the rest of her was pure intention: coat slung open, pencil already tapping out a nervous metronome against the notebook spiral.

"Detective Kelly?" She didn't bother with hello, just stopped short of his desk and planted herself like a challenge coin.

He considered the correct answer, then nodded. "You're the reporter."

She flashed a press badge with a practiced flick, the kind of move designed to make authority eat its own hat. "Hannah Robertson, Steel City Press. You got a minute?"

Kelly gave her the look he reserved for water bills and census takers. "I'm working a case."

"Good," she said, unfazed. "That's what I'm here about. Eddie Kozma: ACD dispatcher, pulled from the river this morning?"

He kept his face a blank wall. "I can't comment on an ongoing investigation."

She leaned in, voice softening enough to suggest she knew the rules but had no plans to follow them. "I'm not asking for a statement. I just want to know if you're treating it as homicide."

Kelly steepled his fingers, hiding the tic in his right thumb. "All deaths are investigated until ruled otherwise. City policy."

She arched an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You're not going to call it a suicide, are you?"

"It's early. We're waiting on toxicology and full autopsy." He kept his voice measured, even, but he could feel her probing for the crack in his routine.

She scanned the desk, eyes landing on his open notebook, then back to his face. "Word is, Kozma was about to blow the whistle on a union scam. You buy that?"

He shrugged, careful not to give anything away. "You know how rumors work."

She pressed. "Maybe, but I know how union politics work too. Last time someone crossed Cameron, they found him in a lot off Carson Street. You remember that one?"

He did, though he'd never admit it. "I remember a lot of cases."

"Yeah," she said, voice climbing a half-step, "but most don't get the same courtesy from homicide."

The line was baited, and Kelly let it dangle. "We run the same process for everyone."

She grinned, without humor. "Sure you do. So, what's the process here?"

He folded his arms. "We're reviewing evidence. If you have something useful, you can leave it at the front desk."

She didn't blink. "You'll just file it in the circular, right? Like the last three times."

He ignored the jab, glancing past her at the clock on the wall. The second hand crawled.

She shifted tactics. "I heard the coroner found ligature marks. That's not exactly standard for a runaway."

Kelly gave her a long, even stare. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I have sources," she said. "Yours don't return calls, so I have to improvise."

He almost smiled, but caught himself. *Tenacious. Probably hell on her editors.* "You should wait for the official report."

She cocked her head, voice dropping. "Look, I know you're not going to spill. But off the record... do you think this was a setup?"

He hesitated, just long enough for her to notice. "Off the record, I think Kozma's life was complicated. People like that make enemies."

She scribbled something in her pad, then looked up. "You know about the Greyhound ticket?"

He nodded. "It's in evidence."

"Was it real?" She was leaning in now, all intensity, a chess player waiting for him to tip his next move.

"We're checking it," he said. "Don't print anything until it's verified."

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "No promises."

The door at the back of the office swung open, and Lopez entered carrying two coffee mugs. He stopped short at the sight of

Hannah, then gave Kelly a look that said, *You want backup or a firing squad?*

"Morning," Lopez said, handing a mug to Kelly.

Hannah seized the opening. "Officer Lopez, you worked the scene?"

Lopez sipped his coffee, nodding. "River gave us the body. Not much to add."

She pressed, "Did you see the matchbook in his jacket?"

Lopez shrugged. "Bagged it. Anchor Bar, right? That's where most of them drink."

Kelly felt the detail slot neatly into place, but kept his face neutral. "Is there a question, Miss Robertson?"

She snapped the notebook shut, smile tight. "Just doing my job, Detective."

He watched her, weighing how much damage she could do in print. *Probably a lot. Maybe just enough to keep the pressure off homicide and on the real problem.*

She turned to leave, but hesitated at the door. "If you find anything that doesn't fit, call me. I'll make sure it gets daylight."

Kelly snorted. "I bet you will."

The door closed behind her with a satisfying thud.

Lopez took the seat next to him, lowering his voice. "She's a shark, huh?"

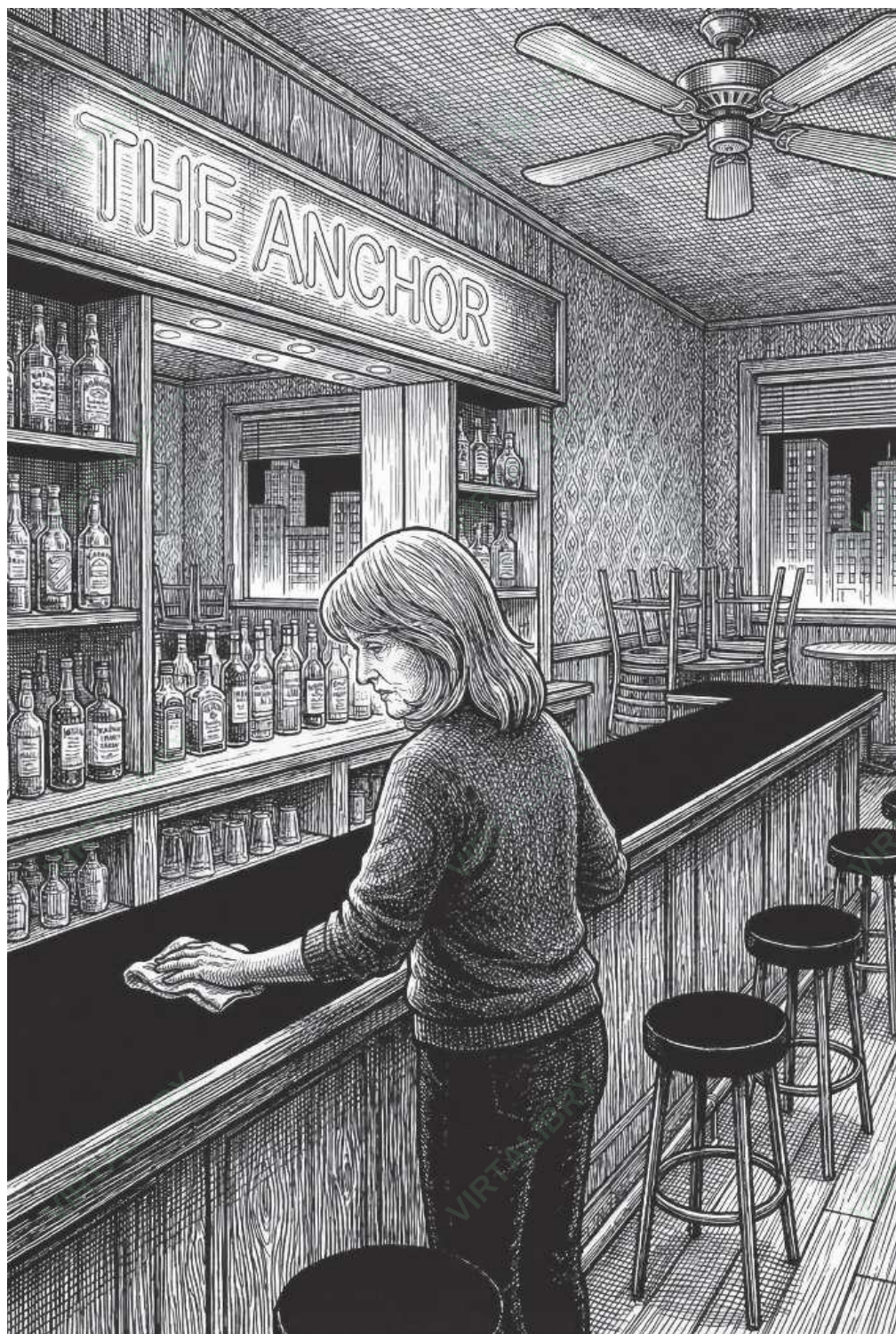
"Yeah," Kelly said, "but she's circling the right waters."

He sipped the coffee, stared at the wall, and felt the chill settle in his gut. The ticket wasn't just a plant; it was an invitation. Someone wanted the department to chase a ghost, and if Kelly didn't get there first, the whole case would sink under the weight of the story Hannah Robertson was already writing.

He closed his notebook, the paper cold and stiff under his hand.

Cover-up, not just a murder. You're in it now, Danny. Don't screw it up.

And don't end up like Ramirez—another case closed, another killer walking free.



CHAPTER 4

JAMES



The Anchor looked like it had never closed for the night, just kept the tap lines open and the lights low until another round of misfits wandered in. Even on a weeknight the bar had a pulse: a hum of blue-collar stamina, four fingers of cheap whiskey, and the constant undertone of burnt fryer oil. James Anderson stepped inside, coat already sucking up the damp, and paused to let his eyes adjust to the smoky amber haze.

First impression: booths in darkness, barstools in half-shadow, and a glass rack that looked like a dental experiment gone wrong. Second impression: every head at the bar noticed his entrance, then returned to its drink or whispered conversation. Locals. Not his.

He catalogued the layout in ten seconds flat: two exits, back door by the restrooms, fire escape through the kitchen. Three men near the pool table with the posture of guys who settled arguments with fists. A pair of truckers by the window, watching the street. The kind of place where union muscle came to drink and gossip traveled faster than a punch. *My kind of room.*

He hung his coat on the one empty hook, took a stool three down from the register, and signaled the bartender with a tap of two fingers. She saw him in the mirror before he moved. Middle-aged,

built like she'd once wrestled siblings for pork chops and usually won. Gray-brown hair in a severe bun, clean white apron, hands that could probably break a nose without spilling the bottle.

Greta Watson, if the rumor mill was to be trusted. Anderson trusted nothing, but he logged the name anyway.

She didn't bother with the small talk. "What'll it be?"

"Old Overholt. Neat."

She poured with the economy of a woman who'd already lost too much liquor to the floor in her lifetime. The glass was heavy-bottomed, chipped near the lip. Anderson liked it more than he should. He drank, let the rye burn its way down, then set the glass aside for a refill.

Greta gave him one, but her eyes were on the door. "You here for lunch?"

"Not hungry." He scanned the mirror behind her: four men in dock jackets, one in coveralls, and a pair of old-timers in matching fedoras at the far end, arguing over a betting slip. Every single one looked like they could bench press a Buick. "Just passing through."

She grunted. "Nobody passes through the Strip without a reason."

He looked at her directly this time, gave her his best noncommittal face. "Looking for a friend."

"Try the phone book." She moved down the bar, wiping at nothing.

He sipped again, watched her in the glass. In a place like this, privacy meant you didn't say a name out loud unless you wanted it run up the flagpole. He waited a full minute, then set his glass down and said, "Eddie Kozma. You see him lately?"

Every conversation within earshot stopped for half a second, just long enough for Anderson to catalog the faces that turned, then turned away. The name had landed. He felt it in his chest: that old soldier's tingle, the one that told you where the tripwire was.

Greta's mouth went tight. "Eddie's not drinking here anymore."

"Where'd he go?" Anderson asked.

She shrugged. "People come and go." Her eyes flicked to the mirror, caught the quick glance of a man in a blue ACD jacket, one

sleeve rolled to the elbow, hands stained with grease. Compact, balding, nervous energy in every twitch.

Anderson followed her gaze. "Friend of his?"

"Ryan," Greta said without looking at him, just loud enough to carry. The man got up, left his beer, and shouldered past on his way to the men's room. The other men watched him go, then went back to their drinks, pointedly not looking at Anderson.

Real subtle, guys. He drank, waited, then followed after a count of thirty.

The men's room was an afterthought: a narrow closet with a single urinal and a sink that barely drained. The trucker was at the sink, splashing water on his face. He didn't turn when Anderson entered.

"You got a minute?" Anderson kept his voice low, conversational.

The man stared at the cracked mirror, then at Anderson's reflection. "Depends who's asking."

"Name's Anderson." He kept his hands in sight, nothing to threaten, just an offer. "I'm looking for Eddie. Or what happened to him."

The man wiped his hands on his jeans. "You a cop?"

"No."

He snorted, a sound equal parts derision and relief. "Then you don't wanna know."

Anderson stepped closer. "I don't care about the union beef. Just need to find him. Or his next of kin."

The trucker looked at him for a long moment, then shook his head. "Even if I knew, I wouldn't say it here." He nodded toward the bar. "Walls got ears."

Anderson let him go, watched as he slipped out the door and straight to the exit, not even stopping for his beer. He waited, counted to ten, then returned to the bar.

Greta was waiting. "You spooked him."

"Seems like he spooks easy."

She didn't argue. Instead, she topped off his glass. "Next time, let me know before you go interrogating the regulars."

"Didn't mean to offend." He glanced at the ACD patch on the man's jacket still hanging on the back of the chair. "You get a lot of truckers in here?"

She leaned on the bar, lowering her voice. "Most of the guys in here pull double shifts. They don't talk about Eddie. Not since last week."

"Why's that?"

She considered, then shrugged. "People talk. Word is, he crossed somebody. Maybe Cameron's boys. Maybe the cops. Either way, nobody wants to be next."

Anderson watched her hands as she spoke... steady, precise, never pausing even as she dried the same glass three times. "You know Cameron?"

She snorted. "Everybody knows Cameron. He runs the docks. Or thinks he does."

"What about Eddie?"

She hesitated, and something flickered behind her eyes—old memory, or old debt. "Eddie was a good tipper. Kept to himself. Didn't have friends, just acquaintances." She set the glass down harder than necessary. "His father used to drink here, back when I first started. Good man. Died owing half the ward money he'd borrowed to keep Eddie in school." She looked at Anderson, and for a moment the bartender's mask slipped. "I told Eddie once, he didn't owe me anything for that. But he kept coming back anyway."

"Anybody ask about him before me?"

She smiled without humor. "You're the third this week."

That surprised him. "Cops?"

She shook her head. "No uniforms. Just guys in suits. One said he was with the city. The other looked like a debt collector."

"Names?"

She gave him a look, as if to say, *if I had them, I wouldn't be here*. "You want another drink or not?"

He took the hint, nursed the whiskey. The bar's mood had shifted; conversations were quieter, and eyes drifted his way just a bit more often. Anderson logged each face, noting who was new, who was a regular, who kept their hands below the table.

The next hour passed slowly, like syrup in January. The two old-timers left, replaced by a pair of younger men in matching work jackets. The talk at the bar was about the Steelers, the price of gas, the mayor's latest scandal, but underneath it was something else; a current of tension, the kind that builds up before a strike or a raid.

He caught a fragment of conversation between two truckers near the back:

"...funny weights, they said. But it's not my problem what the scale says..."

"...Cameron's boys, that's what I heard. Nobody moves nothing unless he says so..."

Greta moved past, and Anderson asked, "You ever hear Eddie talk about his work?"

She eyed him. "You ever hear a dispatcher brag about his job?"

He smiled. "Maybe he found something he wasn't supposed to."

She set down the towel, folded her arms. "You sound like you already know."

He shrugged. "I know he's missing. I know people are acting like he's dead."

Greta's lips tightened. "People go missing all the time. Especially when they ask the wrong questions."

He nodded, let the silence stretch, then said, "Who should I talk to?"

She considered. "If you really want answers, talk to the drivers. But don't expect loyalty. They stick together. And they don't like outsiders."

He finished his drink, left a twenty on the bar. "Thanks."

She pocketed the bill, then said, "If you find him, tell him Greta says hi."

He left the bar, stood in the rain for a moment, watching the neon sign flicker. He thought about the men inside, the way they'd closed ranks at the mention of Eddie's name. Someone had tied off the leak before it started, and now the whole place was sealed tight.

He pulled his coat tighter and started down the block, boots echoing in the puddles. He didn't need a map to know where the next lead would take him.

You wanted the hard cases, Anderson. Here's a river full of them.

He returned to the Anchor after closing, when only the ghosts and the owner stayed behind. The street outside glistened with fresh rain and the glow of the beer signs reflected off the sidewalk like false daylight. Inside, the air had cooled by twenty degrees and the bar was half-lit, neon humming to itself as Greta Watson stacked chairs and wiped down the counter with methodical boredom.

She looked up, didn't bother with a greeting. "You again."

Anderson settled on a stool, slid his hands flat on the lacquered wood. "Place looks better empty."

She kept scrubbing, voice gone soft around the edges. "That's because nobody's left to ruin it."

He waited, knowing she'd speak when she was ready. It took two full passes of the rag.

"You want a drink, or is this another interview?" she asked, not meeting his eyes.

He considered. "Both."

She poured another rye, set it down, and leaned against the cooler. Her posture was less defensive, more like a woman bracing for bad weather.

He didn't bother with small talk. "Eleanor Markham hired me. She's worried Eddie's dead."

Greta's hand tightened on the glass, the muscles in her forearm knotting. "She should be."

He sipped, letting the silence hold.

Finally, Greta sighed. "You want to see what's left of him?" She ducked behind the bar, rummaged in a battered cabinet, and came up with a thick bundle wrapped in butcher paper. It hit the counter with a dull slap.

Anderson peeled the paper back. Inside was an ACD work jacket, canvas stiff with dried blood and god knew what else. The patch on the sleeve was still visible, but the name tag was gone, torn off at the threads. The whole thing reeked of garbage, old beer, and something metallic underneath.

"Found it stuffed in my dumpster Sunday night," Greta said, voice low. "Didn't call the cops. Nobody does that here if they want to keep a business."

He turned the jacket over. The right sleeve was stained nearly black, and there was a tear along the seam, as if someone had tried to drag the wearer by force. A visitor pass, laminated and cracked, hung from the left pocket. The blood had seeped into the plastic and turned the card a sick shade of brown.

He looked at Greta. "Who put it there?"

She shook her head. "Don't know. But I saw Cameron's men in here that night. They never stay past midnight unless something's up."

"Who?" Anderson pressed.

"Two of the regulars. Bennett and McGivern. Bennett runs the early trucks, McGivern's night supervisor." She hesitated. "They were with a third guy. Didn't know him."

Anderson tucked the details away, but didn't write them down. Greta's body language said she was at her limit.

She poured herself a short one, downed it, then looked straight at him. "You want to live long enough to spend that retainer, you'll forget everything you heard tonight."

"Can't do that," he said. "Not for this kind of money."

She almost smiled, but it turned sad halfway. "People who cross Cameron end up in the trash. Like Eddie."

He folded the jacket, careful not to smear more blood on his hands, and slipped it into a grocery bag she provided. The evidence felt heavier than it looked. He wanted to ask more, but Greta was already moving toward the back, locking the office door behind her.

He finished the drink, set the glass down, and listened to the hum of the neon. For the first time in years, the whiskey didn't taste like comfort. It tasted like last rites.

He walked out into the rain, clutching the bag to his chest. The city was silent but for the far-off rattle of a freight train. Anderson watched the lights flicker in the windows of the loading docks and thought about Eddie Kozma—how easy it was to disappear in a place built on muscle and silence.

Easy to vanish, hard to matter. You picked the wrong city, Eddie.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled until the burn hit the back of his throat. He could still see the blood on his hands, even in the yellow glow of the streetlamp.

Time to visit the yard. Someone there had answers, and Anderson was finally in the mood to ask the right questions.

CHAPTER 5

HANNAH



Hannah found the right address by counting broken porch lights. Kozma's building was number six, wedged between a tailor's shop with a sign in two different languages and a storefront that had been promising "new stock coming soon" since the Eisenhower years. The stairwell buzzed like a bee farm, each step flexing under her weight and moaning about it. Inside, the hallway lights flickered like a Morse code only the roaches could read.

She pressed the buzzer labeled "Kozma, E," and heard nothing, which was the expected response for a dead man's apartment. She was about to try the knob when a voice called down from the landing above.

"You looking for Ed?" The accent was pure Monongahela, vowels stretched and hammered into shape.

Hannah craned her neck. A balding man in a paisley robe and slippers, holding a can of Iron City like it was part of his anatomy, leered at her from behind wire-rim glasses.

"He's out," the man said, not moving. "You a friend?"

"Cousin," she lied, doing her best to sound like she'd grown up on pierogies and low expectations. "From Harrisburg. Auntie sent me over to pick up some things."

The man eyed her up and down, let his gaze linger where her skirt hem met her knee. "Didn't know Ed had family. He never got calls, neither." He sipped the beer, leaving foam on his mustache. "You got a key?"

She hesitated. "He told me to see the landlord."

"Yeah, well, you're in luck. That's me." He padded down in his slippers, breath tangy with hops and rot. His scalp was a map of failed transplants. "Name's Mr. Brill. You're a little late, honey. Rent's due Friday, and Ed's behind as usual. But I guess that's your family's problem now." He licked a nicotine-stained finger, slid a battered key from his robe pocket, and held it out like a challenge. "You're not gonna take anything valuable, are you?"

Hannah took the key. "He just said to get his papers. That's all."

Brill leaned in, lowering his voice. "If there's a stereo or a TV in there, leave it. Otherwise, we'll have words."

She let herself in. The lock stuck, then gave with a wet pop. Eddie's apartment was the size of a freight container and smelled like three different kinds of disappointment. A threadbare couch with cigarette burns faced a black-and-white TV set atop two concrete blocks. The kitchenette was an exploded diagram of the four food groups—canned beans, ash, milk in a carton gone solid, and the scent of something in the drain that could probably sue for squatters' rights. A card table groaned under the weight of unopened mail and empty bottles.

She closed the door behind her and let the silence settle. For a second she stood still, just breathing. The walls were thin; she could hear the neighbor's TV tuned to a crime drama. *No irony in this town. Even the wallpaper's on the take.*

Eddie's "bedroom" was a mattress on the floor, half under the window, with a single stained pillow and a blanket bunched at the foot. A desk, really just a plank bolted to the wall, was piled with stacks of paper, most of it held down with mugs or tools. The only decoration was a Polaroid tacked above the desk: Eddie, in better days, arms around two girls in Sunday dresses, all three squinting at the sun.

She started with the desktop. Under a drift of utility bills and

union newsletters, she found Eddie's notebook: a battered spiral, half its pages torn out. The cover was stippled with cigarette burns and ringed with sweat, like he'd used it as a coaster for years. She flipped through; every page was packed with block letters, underlines, and arrows that doubled back on themselves. Most of it read like code. Three entries in, she found what she was looking for.

"X1A—Check with HR. Thurs. See note. If not there, try Anchor."

She kept turning. Halfway through, a chunk of pages was devoted to clipped headlines and column inches, some marked "P-G" in the margin. Her byline leered back at her from last winter's strike coverage. Eddie had underlined "corruption," "kickbacks," "selling out the rank and file" in blue ballpoint. In the margin: "She knows. She has to."

The next section was a chaotic brainstorm of his growing suspicions. He'd scrawled partial license plates, times, and initials next to questions only he could answer. It was a jumble of observations, not evidence: the frantic, exploratory notes of a man just realizing the depth of the rot. The code 'X1A' was scrawled in the margins of several pages, circled and double-underlined each time, a focal point in the chaos.

If this was code, it wasn't subtle. *Amateur, but you get points for effort, Eddie.*

Hannah pulled out her Rollei 35 and, beneath the desk lamp, she started snapping hi-res black-and-white pictures of each significant page from the beginning. She took frame after frame, every page, every coded column. When she finished, she slid the notebook back where she found it, replaced the shelf, and wiped her prints with a rag.

She caught herself tapping the pen against her teeth, a nervous tic she'd thought she'd broken. The air in the room was thick, and she could taste the dust. She wiped her nose and kept searching.

The kitchenette offered nothing but dirty dishes and a magnet with the number for a cab company. The bathroom was even more barren: just a plastic razor, half a bar of Irish Spring, and a toilet that hadn't been cleaned since the moon landing.

She went back to the desk. In the bottom drawer, beneath a scatter of receipts and a gum wrapper, was a small plastic bag. Inside, a collection of matchbooks (dozens, maybe a hundred) from every dive bar and greasy spoon in the Steel City. She sifted through them until she found the red one from The Anchor. The cellophane was still intact. On the inside cover, Eddie's handwriting: "HR—Thurs 2 AM—urgent." *Another one.* Eddie must have written the same message on half a dozen matchbooks, hoping at least one would reach her. *He really tried, didn't he?* She tucked the matchbook in her purse.

There was a knock at the door. She froze, heart somewhere in her esophagus.

"Everything okay in there?" Brill's voice, half bored, half hungry.

"Almost done," she called back, forcing casual. "Just getting the last of it."

She scanned the room for anything else. There, wedged behind the desk, was a manila envelope. It was crumpled, as if someone had tried to hide it in a hurry. She tore it open and found a stack of newspaper clippings, all marked with the same neat blue underlines. At the bottom was a single sheet of yellow legal pad, dense with Eddie's handwriting.

"HR—If you're reading this, they got to me. Check the truck log for X1A. Don't trust Cameron. Tell Eleanor I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes, willing the pressure in her temples to subside. *He meant to meet you, and you let him float face-down in the Allegheny.* The guilt was a live animal, gnawing at her lungs.

She bundled the envelope and the matchbook together. As she stuffed them into her bag, she caught her reflection in the black TV screen—hair wild, eyes feral, not the woman from the press badge but something rawer. *You want truth, Hannah? Try living in it.*

She left the apartment just as Brill was lighting a smoke in the hall.

"Get everything?" he asked, voice low.

She nodded. "Nothing worth pawning, if that's what you mean."

He eyed her purse. "Be a shame if something turned up missing. Cops already said they're not searching the place."

Hannah smiled, flat and cold. "You planning on calling them?"

Brill flicked his ashes onto the linoleum. "Ed was a good tenant. Quiet. Didn't ask for much." He looked her up and down. "You look like you're gonna fix whatever mess he's in."

"I intend to," she said, pushing past him. His arm brushed her shoulder—a deliberate move, not aggressive, just a reminder of gravity.

Outside, the sky had started to spit again, fine needles of rain that clung to her hair and stung her cheeks. She walked to her car in a daze, not bothering to shield herself from the weather. In the front seat, she dumped the contents of her bag onto her lap and ran her fingers over the evidence. The notebook. The matchbook. The envelope, stained with oil and fear.

She opened the notebook to the first page and stared at the blocky script until the letters blurred. "HR—They're watching. Tell the story. That's all that matters."

Her hands trembled, just for a second, before she gripped the wheel and started the engine.

X1A. Anchor. Eleanor. Cameron. She repeated the words until they became a mantra, then shifted into gear and gunned the engine. The car fishtailed in the gravel, the rear window fogging as she accelerated away.

This was her story now. She intended to finish it, even if it buried her too.

The city had rinsed itself of people by the time Hannah hit the street. Rain needled down hard enough to sand the skin off your face, and the wind worked the puddles like a cement mixer. She yanked her collar up and held the bagged notebook close, the evidence heavy as a confession.

The Strip after hours was a different animal. Predators tucked in doorways, prey long since gone to ground. On this block, even the

pay phones had a lean, hungry look. She kept to the curb, boots splashing through oil slicks that glowed under the sodium lamps. Every few steps, she replayed the last ten minutes. Kozma's notes, the matchbook, the envelope. All roads pointed to The Anchor, and someone was laying down breadcrumbs with a shovel.

Papers, files, city bureaucracy. That's your world, Hannah. Let someone else chase shadows in alleys. But the thought didn't slow her down. She could almost smell the story now, ozone and cordite with an undertone of old blood.

She ducked under the awning of a Polish bakery, using the momentary shelter to scribble in her pad: "Kozma—notes confirm whistleblower. X1A = code? Greyhound ticket = red herring?" The words looked childish, desperate, but it was how her brain worked: write it down, make it real, then beat it until it made sense. She added: "City contracts—check permits office. Cross-ref ACD invoices."

She moved on, past the shuttered groceries and the warehouse with broken windows, each one a blacked-out eye. Ahead, the neon of The Anchor bled through the wet like a beacon for lost souls. Hannah slowed, reading the scene. There were two men loitering by the dumpster, their posture tense but uncommitted. She sidestepped them, hugging the wall, and made for the alley beside the bar.

Halfway to the back door, someone stepped out of the shadows.

Medium height, solid shoulders, and a limp that screamed "old injury, new pain." His jacket was too thin for the weather and too dark to hide the fact that his left arm wasn't working right. He cradled it close, the hand flexed into a claw. Rain streaked his face, but it didn't mask the rawness in his eyes.

Hannah's first instinct was pity. A jolt of it, right in the chest. Then she felt the heat rise, fast and involuntary, the way it did when someone else's vulnerability hit her with force. She bit down hard, hating the biology of it. *You're here to work, not play the Good Samaritan.*

She watched as the man staggered against the wall, leaving a dark smear. He paused, looked around, then pressed something into the mail slot by the side door. He had the haunted focus of a man

with nothing left to lose. She angled herself behind a rusted-out van and steadied her camera.

One shot, no flash, the lens catching the arc of his movement and the sag of his jaw. He didn't notice. Or if he did, he didn't care.

She scribbled in her pad: "Anchor. 8:13 p.m., Male, 30s, brown hair, favoring left side, possibly stabbed? Dropped envelope." She snapped two more frames as he rounded the corner, every line in his body broadcasting *getaway*. She had the urge to follow, but her inner auditor vetoed it. *First rule: collect before you chase.*

She waited until the alley was clear, then bee-lined for the mail slot. The envelope was stuck halfway in. She fished it out with a pen, careful not to touch more than necessary. Inside was a single sheet of graph paper, blue lines warped by the rain, words scrawled in block letters:

"X1A—THURSDAY RUN—CHECK THE LOAD"

Underneath: "CAMERON PAYS IN BLOOD."

She closed her eyes, feeling the gears lock into place. It was the same handwriting as Kozma's notebook.

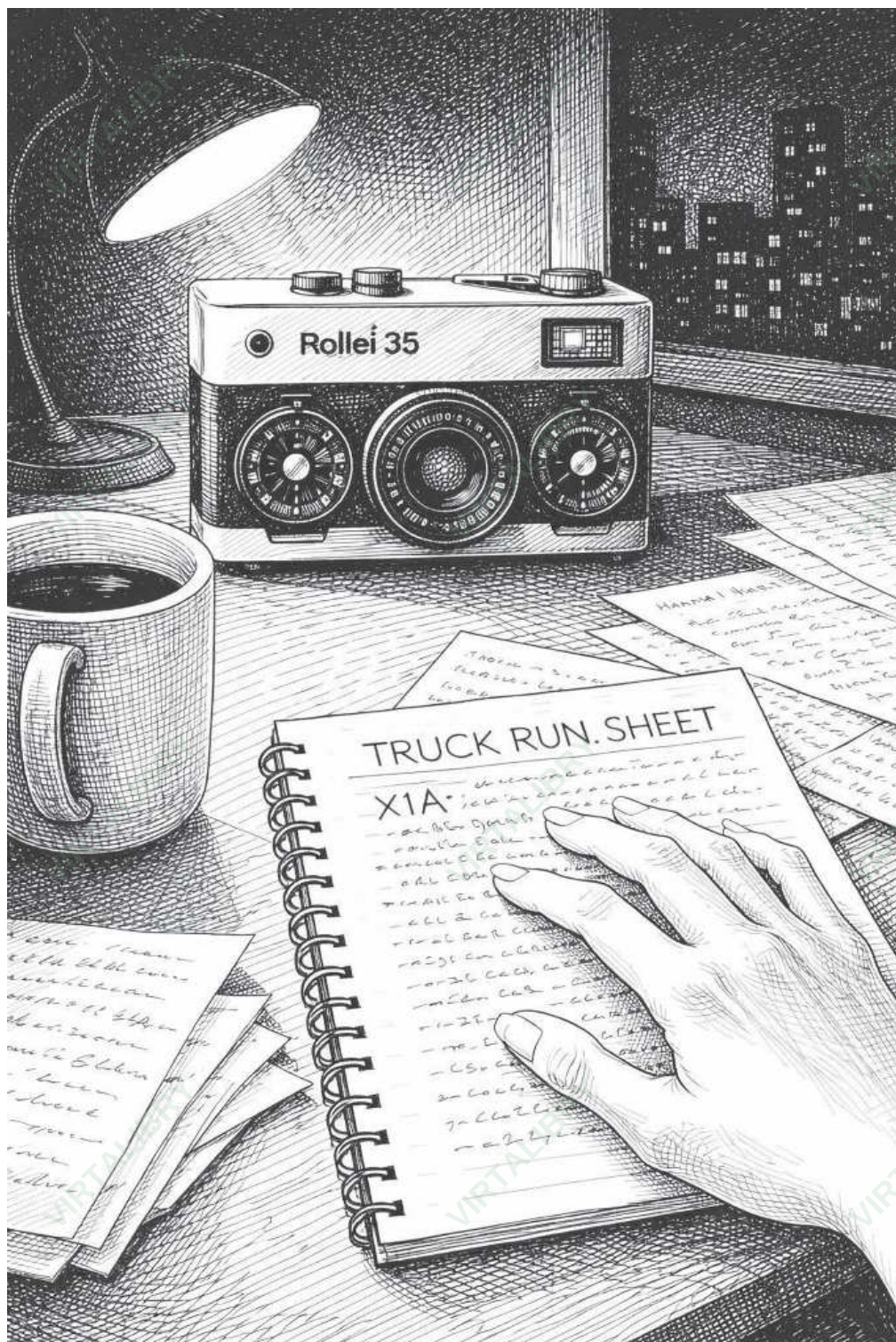
She slipped the paper into a Ziploc, then went back to the main drag and circled the block. The man was gone, swallowed by the city. She checked the frame counter to ensure the film was advancing, then hustled back to the car. Her heart was hammering, but not from fear. It was the velocity of discovery, the high that came with being one page ahead.

Before she slid into the driver's seat, she caught her reflection in the Beetle's window. The rain had turned her hair into a tangle, and her cheeks glowed red from the cold. She looked, for the first time in months, alive.

She wrote one more note, for herself: "X1A = critical. Anchor is nexus. Cameron = target."

And underneath that: "Eddie Kozma tried to warn me. I owe him that much."

She started the engine, turned the wipers to max, and watched as the city shuddered under the storm. Every light looked like a warning, every shadow a promise.



CHAPTER 6

JAMES



James Anderson lay flat behind a splintered barrier of shipping pallets, knees buried in the grit and cigarette butts at the edge of the ACD yard. For the last hour, he'd cycled through the same three positions: crouched to peer through a knot in the slats, kneeling to steady the binoculars, then belly-down to nurse the war wound in his left leg. Every few minutes, he checked his watch, then the yard, then the moonless slice of sky over the barbed wire. He'd traded comfort for cover. The cold didn't help, but it kept his senses sharp.

Tonight's air tasted of burnt diesel and ozone. The yard buzzed with the living death of night shifts—half-lit by sodium lamps, all sharp shadows and long corridors of emptiness. Once, these places ran around the clock. Now, they ran lean: skeleton crews, loadouts scheduled so nobody could try to unionize during working hours. James had seen the future in Vietnam, and it looked a lot like this: automated, indifferent, and wired with enough trip alarms to catch every mistake.

He rolled the camera case open. The lens still had Greta's lipstick print on it, a souvenir from her last refill, and it made him grin until the cut on his cheek reminded him. He set the binoculars

beside the camera, then dialed the Olympus FTL to f2.8 and loaded a fresh roll of Tri-X. Black and white. If the world had color, this was the place it came to die.

He wiped the glass with his sleeve and brought the yard back into focus. Loading bay to the left. Silent, empty. Two flatbeds by the chain-link, tarps ratchet-strapped down tight. Office windows, dark. The only real action was at the far end, by the service entrance, where a security shed doubled as timeclock and doghouse. That was where the traffic would come, if it came.

This is your world, Anderson. Shadows, fences, the muscle, and the midnight. Let the reporter have her documents and her city hall sources. You take the yards.

At exactly 11:18 p.m., a set of headlights stitched the blacktop at the entrance. Low-slung. Muffled. Classic union. The truck rolled up slowly, bumper almost scraping the curb, lights dimmed to a sickly yellow. It pulled past the guard shack and hesitated by the main gate, engine idling with a sound like bottled thunder. James lifted the binoculars. The driver was a small man with a sallow, nervous profile, hands at ten and two, staring forward like a condemned priest. On the passenger side, something bulkier moved. A foreman or a spotter, maybe. Face hidden under a knit cap.

The gate itself had been chained but not locked, just a bit of theatrical security. As James watched, the passenger climbed out and uncoiled the chain, pushing the gate wide enough for the truck to nose through. He caught a flash of the man's face in the lamp: broad, pockmarked, a hard squint in the left eye. Not a union type. This was muscle, borrowed for the night.

The truck eased forward. James scanned the side, noted the ACD logo stenciled on the door. Classic, with the old area code still visible. Then his eye found the detail he'd come for: a welded-on bumper, thick as his wrist, with the initials "RB" etched in the steel. He thumbed the camera awake and fired two shots: one at the logo, one at the plate. The shutter made almost no sound, but to James it felt like a shot in the dark.

He kept watching as the truck backed up to the loading bay and killed its engine. Three men got out—driver, spotter, and a third

from the cab's sleeper. They walked close together, heads down, like they were expecting a sniper. The loading bay's floodlight came on, triggered by a switch inside the door. The men paused, looked up at the lamp, then hustled to the truck's rear.

James noted the choreography. No wasted motion, no arguing, no smoke breaks. They'd done this before. He felt the old familiar tightening in his chest, the one that meant *pay attention or you're next*. He shifted, found a better angle through the fence, and zoomed in.

They rolled open the rear door. Inside: a wall of wooden crates, all the same size, each stamped "MEDICAL SUPPLIES – PRIORITY." Below that, a smaller set of stenciled codes. James made a mental note to memorize the first three. The men grabbed a crate apiece and lugged them to the bay's edge, setting them down with more care than he expected. They didn't stack, just left them in a line. He clicked more frames, catching the faces in the spill of light.

The third man, the one from the sleeper, caught his attention. Compact build, maybe five-eight, with a nervous habit of cracking his knuckles every few seconds. Even from this distance, James could see the way his left eye twitched when he scanned the yard, a quick double-blink like he was counting threats. The man wore a navy windbreaker with a patch on the sleeve. ACD, but with an extra stripe that marked him as something more than a driver. *Smitty*, James guessed, or someone like him. He filed the face away: the squint, the knuckle-crack, the twitch.

The third man went back for a second load. When he reached the end of the truck, he paused, then bent to the floor. He dragged out a blue drum, metal, heavy. Instead of the medical label, this one was blank. Just a strip of duct tape across the top. The man turned, looked straight into the yard, then set the drum on the ground with a practiced grunt.

James fired another shot, then checked his film count. Four left before the reload. He risked a peek above the pallets. The men were talking now, voices too low to carry, but their body language was all business: hands pointing, quick nods, then back to work. It was the kind of silence you only heard when people were doing something they shouldn't.

He scanned left, toward the guard shed. The dog was out, a big German Shepherd, but it didn't bark or even twitch. It lay curled on the concrete, nose buried in its paws, like the night was just another bad dream. James knew the type. Raised on scraps, trained to fear nothing, but tonight it looked drugged or maybe just bone-tired.

At 11:40 p.m., the driver checked his watch, then signaled the others. They closed the truck's rear, then the side doors, then moved back to the cab. The muscle man, the one with the squint and the knuckle-crack, took a last look around, scanning the fence. For a split second, his gaze landed on James's position. James didn't flinch, just slid lower, pulling the pallets closer.

The men got into the truck and idled for a full minute, as if waiting for something else. James held his breath, counting the seconds. On the far side of the yard, a pair of headlights blinked, then cut out. A sedan, no make or model visible, just a dark shape with a driver inside. The truck revved, then rolled forward, following the perimeter to the back lot. The men got out and began moving the crates and barrels into the trunk of the car, two at a time.

This was not invoice fraud. This was something bigger, dirtier, and backed by people who didn't care who got hurt. James shot the whole sequence, burning through the rest of his film. He switched rolls in the dark, hands shaking but steady enough, and got the last shot: the sedan driving off, no lights, into the night.

For a long minute, James just lay there, heartbeat thumping, waiting for the adrenaline to ebb. He cataloged every detail, playing it back like a film strip. The men, the labels, the blue drum, the silent dog. The one with the twitch. Smitty, or whoever he was. *Medical supplies, my ass. That's how you move penicillin.*

He allowed himself a dry chuckle. *Congratulations, Anderson. You just became a witness to a felony. Hope you like the view from under the bus.* He eased up, checked the yard again. Empty, just as it had been, with only the ruts in the asphalt and the cold breath of the dog to say anyone had been there at all.

James packed up his gear and slid back into the alley. He paused at the end, looking both ways before slipping into the shadows. The

city had a way of swallowing evidence, but tonight he had enough to choke a judge. He just had to live long enough to hand it over.

His hip screamed as he climbed the embankment. He fished an Old Gold from the battered pack in his pocket, lit it with hands that only shook a little, and watched the smoke curl into the dark.

Whoever said the camera was a shield never tried pointing one at the mob.

He limped off into the dark, already planning his next move.

He should have run the minute the truck's engine started up. Instead, James lingered, eyes glued to the evidence—the crates, the sedans, the entire well-oiled ballet of midnight crime. He was so intent on soaking it in that he missed the first warning: a low scrape of boots in gravel, too close, too sudden.

Then his left calf cramped, the old wound seizing up like a live wire, and he bit down on a curse. The pain zipped up his leg and out his mouth in a hiss that must have traveled through the pallets and across the yard like a flare. In the next instant, the yard's floodlights snapped on, the beam finding the gap between fence and alley, turning night into surgical theater.

"Hey!" a voice bellowed—maybe the muscle man, maybe just another union ape with a badge for intimidation. James pressed himself flat, heart punching at his ribs, then rolled sideways and bolted for the alley.

Shouts behind him, boots pounding. Not enough time. He crashed through a row of empty drums, arms pinwheeling, camera slamming against his chest. He made the open street, but the men were faster. One caught his arm, spun him into the corrugated siding of a loading dock with a hollow metallic clang. The world went white at the edges.

"You little shit," the man snarled, forearm the size of a fence-post. James felt the breath punched from his lungs, the hot needles of adrenaline jabbing his neck.

He tried to twist away, but another set of hands grabbed him by the collar, slamming his face into the cold metal. He tasted copper and Old Gold, the filter jammed into his teeth. Someone wrenched

the camera strap over his head. The camera hit the ground with a plastic pop, lens shattering. James lunged for it, but a boot caught him in the ribs, then again, and the world got small and tight and filled with stars.

The muscle man crouched, peeled the camera open, fished out the film. "You got a thing for pictures?" he asked, voice thick with contempt.

James nodded, or tried to. "I'm just a tourist," he said, spitting blood onto the man's shoe. "City's got a hell of a nightlife."

A fist, big and bone-breaking, met his temple. His vision tunneled, but his hands worked the body of the camera, fingers searching for the film canister still inside. As the second punch landed, he found it, tore the back panel loose, and palmed the cartridge. The motion cost him—someone kicked his shin, then his chest, and James curled around the pain.

"You want a souvenir?" the man said, and drove his knuckles into James's mouth, splitting the inside of his lip. The blood came hot and sudden, flooding his tongue. For a second, all he could do was taste the memory of war. Dirt, sweat, iron.

He pretended to pass out, slumping boneless to the ground. The men swore, kicked him once more for good measure, then left him in the gutter. He waited for the boots to fade, then cracked an eye and checked the canister. Still there. He tucked it into his sock, then crawled to the nearest alley shadow, his body screaming protest.

He crouched, fighting for air, and looked back toward the yard. The men had gone, but the floodlights still burned, painting everything in harsh white. James ran a hand through his hair, came away sticky with blood and something else. He felt the cut above his eyebrow, the split lip, the swelling around his eye. He checked his ribs. Nothing broken, but everything hurt.

He staggered up, using the fence for leverage. At the corner post, he spotted something: a fresh scrape in the metal, the paint stripped away at bumper height. He remembered the welded "RB" on the truck, the way it had nosed up to the fence. He reached out, touched the raw metal, then followed the line down. There, smeared

on the blacktop, was a dark streak. Oil, maybe, but with a tang that told him blood was part of the mix.

That's how they moved the body, he realized. Or something worse.

He limped down the alley, every step a lesson in pain management, then paused by the guard shed. The German Shepherd was still there, lying exactly as before, but now he saw the puddle of drool at its mouth, the sluggish rise and fall of its chest.

He whistled softly. The dog's ears didn't even twitch.

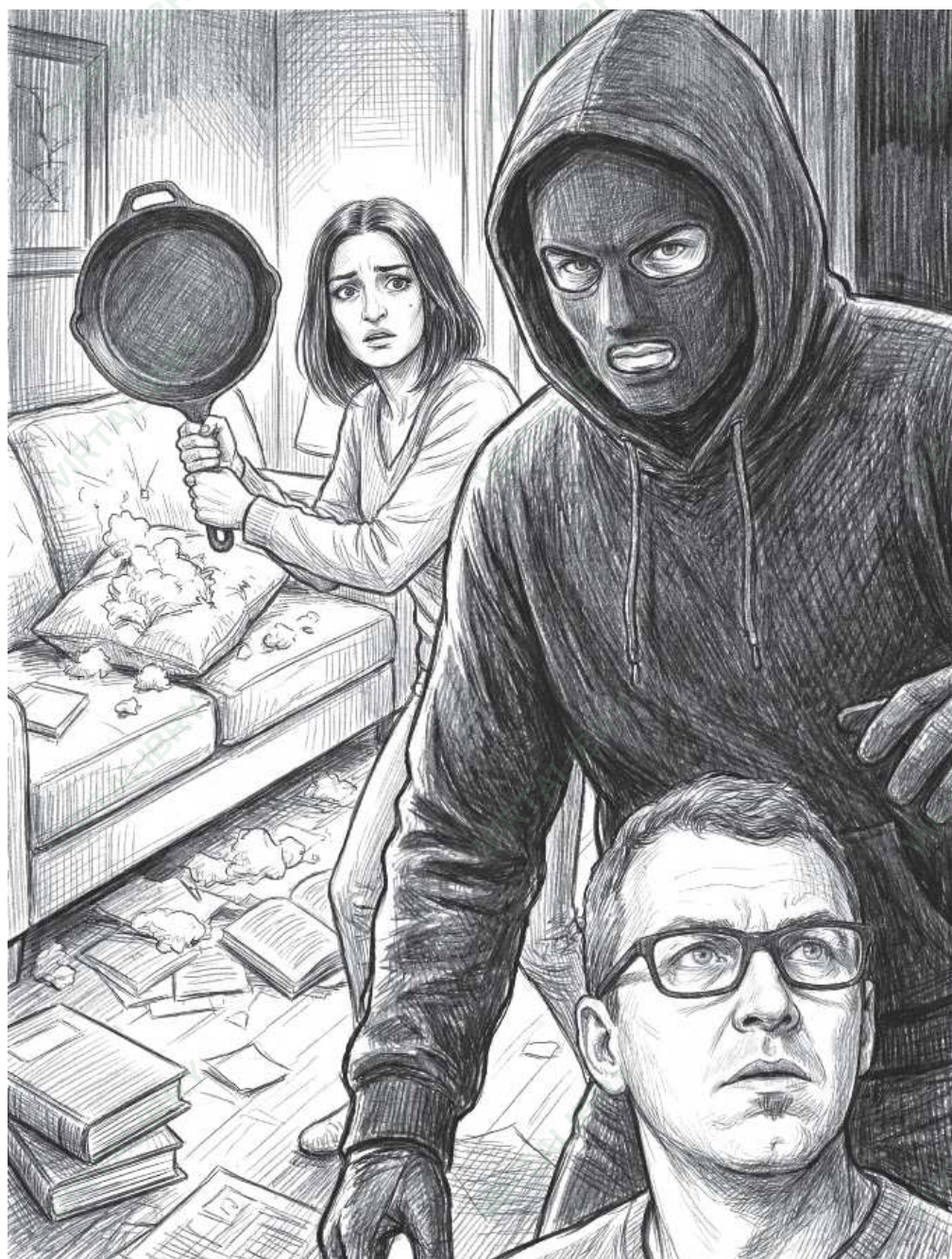
"Drugged," he muttered, or maybe just said to keep himself upright. *Whatever they were doing, it was worth knocking out the only honest guard on the night shift.*

He kept moving, pulling his coat tight against the chill and the panic. By the time he reached the street, his shirt was plastered to his skin with sweat and blood. He checked his pockets: wallet, yes. Eddie's bloody jacket, still rolled up under his arm. The film canister, cold against his ankle.

He blinked, then started walking. Each block took him farther from the yard, but closer to the only destination that made sense.

He needed a place to lay low. Someone who could get the story out before Cameron's men finished the job.

Hannah Robertson. The reporter with the predatory eyes and the sense for trouble.



CHAPTER 7

HANNAH



It started with a single, deliberate thud against Hannah's apartment door. Not the lazy, wandering bump of a drunk, nor the precise triple-rap of a cop. This one had mass, intent, and a wet follow-through that rattled the frame. The kind of knock that gave you two options: answer, or let it bleed out in the hallway.

She was up in a flash, breath caught somewhere between larynx and teeth. Not fear, exactly, but a trained surge—just enough to make her notice the uneven drumming of her own heart. She'd left the lights on in the kitchen, the glow painting vertical stripes up the hallway's peeling wallpaper. In that moment, the whole apartment compressed itself to two rooms, a single story, and the six feet between her and whoever was dying to get in.

She unlatched the deadbolt, bracing her knee against the wall for leverage. When the door swung, the man collapsed onto her linoleum like a dropped marionette. He brought with him the steely reek of blood, sweat, and city gutter. For half a second, she didn't recognize him. Not because she hadn't seen the face, but because she'd never seen it at this angle, slack-jawed and absent of all pretense.

James Anderson. The name fit him even now. His trench coat

was more shredded than tailored, the left sleeve soaked and sticky. Eyes, when they flicked open, carried the same weary interrogation as before, only now the question was, *How the hell did I end up here?* She felt a wild urge to laugh, or maybe to spit, but neither seemed as useful as the immediate problem: keeping the man from dying on her floor.

He tried to rise, made it to one knee, then thought better of it. "Didn't mean to mess up your rug," he managed, voice slurred from the tongue out.

Hannah grunted, sliding her arms under his and dragging him down the hall. He was deadweight, but not dead, not yet. The city's river rats didn't go down easy, and neither, it seemed, did this one.

"You want a hospital?" she asked, more out of habit than concern.

"No cops," he said, using the last syllable to cough a splash of blood onto his collar. "If it's all the same."

She half-dragged, half-steered him into the living room, which doubled as her war room and convalescent suite. The air in here was thick with old coffee and the chemical ghost of darkroom fixer. Every flat surface was covered in either newspapers, books, or some disassembled artifact of modern living: a Smith-Corona, a half-built police scanner, a camera minus its back. She shoved aside a pile of clippings and lowered him onto the couch. He landed with a grunt that was equal parts agony and insult.

For a moment, she just stood over him, breathing in the aftermath. Then she flicked on the desk lamp and did a quick triage. Split eyebrow, caked with blood. Left cheek swelling from something solid. The real prize was under his coat—a fist-sized bloom of red just below the ribs, not arterial, but working overtime to become a problem. The rest was just decoration: road rash, torn knuckles, the kind of shiner that made you want to buy the other guy a drink.

Hannah's hands were already moving, stripping off his coat, rolling up the sleeves, searching for any sign of a weapon. Not that she expected him to shoot her, but the habit was hardwired. *Just once*, she thought, *I'd like to meet a source who doesn't bleed all over my upholstery.*

He watched her with a flat, appraising look, like he was trying to figure out if she was going to save him or sell him for parts.

"You're the reporter," he said, voice soft now, almost respectful. "From the river."

She nodded, pulling a battered first-aid kit from the bookshelf. "And you're the PI who thought it was a good idea to get curb-stomped by union muscle."

He tried a smile, but it hurt too much. "Didn't plan it. They had help."

She snorted, setting out gauze, tape, and a curved needle with a length of black thread. "That's what they all say."

He eyed the needle. "You any good with those?"

She didn't answer, just set her jaw and poured rubbing alcohol over the wound. He hissed, not so much from pain as from the indignity of it. She wiped the blood away, exposing a gash along his side, maybe an inch deep and four inches long.

"Shirt off," she said.

He obeyed, stripping down to the tank beneath. She noted the old scars, the service tattoo, the slight tremor in his left hand. The war had left its mark, but the city had done a better job of finishing what the army started.

"Hold still," she said, threading the needle.

He did, though his eyes never left hers. As she drove the point through skin, she caught his jaw clench, the ripple of muscle along his neck. Some men would have cried, or at least begged for a drink. He just closed his eyes and let her work.

The silence was companionable, broken only by the occasional drip of blood into the plastic basin she'd wedged under his elbow. She tied off the last suture and pressed a pad of gauze to the wound, taping it down with more force than was strictly necessary.

"You're going to need antibiotics," she said.

"I'll settle for whiskey," he replied.

She laughed, despite herself. "Liquor's in the kitchen. If you bleed out on my couch, I'm charging extra for cleanup."

He made it to his feet, only wavering slightly, and shuffled toward the kitchen. She followed, watching the way he moved. *Still*

military, she thought. *Even when half-dead*. She couldn't decide if it was admirable or just another form of stupidity.

The kitchen was worse than the living room. Newspapers were stacked to head height, every inch of counter given over to coffee mugs and battered plates. He found the bottle without asking, poured a double, and downed it in one go.

She leaned against the fridge, arms crossed. "So what brings you to my door, Mr. Anderson?"

He stared into the empty glass, as if expecting it to answer for him. "You're the only one in this city not owned by Cameron. Or at least the only one stubborn enough to keep asking."

She shrugged, not sure if it was a compliment or a threat. "That's what reporters do."

He looked up, eyes sharp now, the pain fading behind something colder. "Eddie Kozma is dead. You know that, right?"

She nodded, feeling the weight of it settle in her stomach. "They pulled him out of the river Friday morning. Ligature, blunt force. The cops are calling it a runaway, but nobody buys that. Not even the coroner."

He grunted. "I found his jacket in a bar dumpster. Bloody as hell. Greta didn't call the cops, just sat on it until I asked."

Hannah filed that away, along with the name. Greta. The Anchor. There were connections here, but none of them made sense yet.

"What about the yard?" she asked. "ACD?"

He winced, reaching for the bottle again. "That's where they got me. Three men, maybe four. Moved like they'd done it before. They were moving crates. Medical labels, but the packing looked suspicious. I took pictures."

She nodded, remembering the canister he'd clutched on her doorstep. "Did you get the film?"

He tapped his chest, then his left sock. "It's in there. I think they got the camera, but not the evidence."

She made a mental note to retrieve it later. "Who's paying you?"

He hesitated, just long enough for her to notice. "Eleanor

Markham. She says it's about money, but I don't think she knows the half of it."

The name landed like a brick. "She's got a lot to lose," Hannah said. "If the foundation goes under, a lot of people end up broke."

He shrugged. "People get dead, too."

She uncrossed her arms, feeling the pressure in her chest again. "You think Cameron killed Kozma?"

He nodded, slow and deliberate. "Or had it done. He doesn't get his hands dirty anymore."

She thought about the union boss, the way his eyes had followed her at the last press event. He was the kind of man who treated violence like a business expense. *You don't get to the top of the heap in this city by playing nice.*

She looked back at Anderson, now slumped at her kitchen table, half his blood on her floor and the other half just waiting to leave. He didn't flinch under her gaze. If anything, he seemed to welcome it.

"Why'd you come to me?" she asked, voice low.

He considered, then answered, "Because you care. You could have left me to rot. Instead, you stitched me up."

She snorted. "I'm a reporter. I need you alive for the story."

He smiled, just a little. "You keep telling yourself that."

She ignored the jibe, grabbed a towel, and started wiping the blood off her hands. The night outside pressed against the windows, the city's heartbeat muffled by cheap glass and insulation. She realized she was shivering, though the apartment was stifling.

He caught the motion. "You cold?"

"No," she lied.

He finished his drink and stood, swaying only slightly. "We need to work together. You've got the press, I've got the clients. Maybe together we get out of this alive."

She considered it. Every instinct said to kick him out, to keep her distance, but something else—a deeper, uglier thing—said he was right. They were already in this, neck-deep, and the only way out was through.

She nodded, once. "I'll make coffee. We start with the pictures,

then the notes. If you're lying to me, I'll make sure the next time you end up in the river, they don't fish you out."

He grinned, or tried to. "Deal."

She left him in the kitchen and went back to the living room, searching for the notebook she'd compiled on Kozma. The truth was, she didn't trust him. But she trusted herself, and that would have to do.

As she set out the evidence on the coffee table: the photos, matchbooks, and scribbled notes, she caught her reflection in the window. Hair wild, face raw. She looked like someone else's idea of a crusader.

But hell, she thought, maybe that's what you need to be.

Behind her, Anderson limped in, already reaching for the next clue. The city waited outside, river-black and bottomless, but in here, the game was just getting started.

She poured the coffee, set it down, and watched as he took the first sip, eyes never leaving hers.

Tomorrow, they would hunt. Tonight, they would survive.

The apartment had gone silent, save for the tick of the radiators and the soft, animal rasp of Anderson's breathing. He sat shirtless on the edge of the couch, bandaged and bone-pale, his left hand wrapped around a mug of black coffee like it might double as a crucifix. Hannah finished taping up his ribs, feeling each one through the thin skin, the body beneath them shivering with fatigue or maybe something closer to withdrawal.

She peeled off the latex gloves, balled them, and tossed them into the wastebasket. "You're good for the night," she said, voice even but soft. "Unless you take another tumble down the stairs."

He almost smiled, but a wince stole the expression. "I'll try to keep upright."

She left him to his coffee and went into the kitchen, gathering the medical debris. The bottle of whiskey sat out on the counter, glinting in the light from the street. She considered a shot for herself, just a little something to sand down the nerves, but

thought better of it. If tonight was a warning, tomorrow would be a war.

She was rinsing blood from the basin when the door exploded. There was no preamble, just the sickening splinter of wood and the slap of boots on old linoleum. Hannah had been in bar fights, covered riots, even ducked a Molotov once, but nothing moved as fast as this. The man was inside before she registered his outline, all mask and muscle, gun up and arm steady.

"On the ground!" he barked, voice muffled through a knit balaclava. He herded her and Anderson into the living room with two jerks of the barrel, the motion almost lazy. "Both of you. Face down."

Adrenaline hit her like a punch, all the air squeezed from her lungs. She went to her knees, hands flat on the sticky carpet. Anderson didn't move, only blinked at the man, then at Hannah, then back.

The gunman advanced, the weapon now aimed at Anderson's temple. "Cameron says back off," he said. Though the words were for them, the tone was practiced. Something repeated to a hundred men before.

Hannah's mind went blank, then white-hot. She scanned the room, searching for a weapon, an angle, anything. The gunman towered over Anderson, boot tapping his shoulder.

"You hear me, Slim?" the man said, leaning down.

Anderson looked up, face all ice and apathy. "Heard you," he said. "But I can't speak for the lady."

The man snorted and turned, and that was the gap. Anderson surged upward, catching the gunman's right wrist with both hands, wrenching the arm sideways. The gun barked, the sound impossibly loud in the little room. Something hot zipped past Hannah's head, slamming into the wall and raining plaster onto her back.

Anderson twisted the man's arm, forcing the gun down, but the man was bigger, meaner, and probably hopped up on something. He threw Anderson into the bookshelf, sending paperbacks and whiskey bottles clattering to the ground. The gun came up again.

Without thinking, Hannah lunged for the stove. She'd left her

old cast iron skillet on the front burner, cold but solid as a brick. She grabbed it by the handle and swung around, running straight at the man as he leveled the weapon at Anderson's head.

She didn't aim, just swung for the fences. The skillet connected with the side of the man's skull, making a sound like a dropped watermelon. He staggered, then dropped to one knee, the gun still in his hand. Anderson saw the opening, drove his fist into the man's nose, then grabbed the barrel and twisted.

Another shot fired, this one into the couch. Stuffing exploded in a cloud of dirty white. The man's grip loosened just enough for Anderson to wrench the gun away and toss it onto the kitchen floor.

Hannah brought the skillet down again, this time square on the back of the man's head. He slumped forward, arms limp, the mask crumpling as his face hit the ground.

The whole thing lasted maybe twelve seconds.

Hannah stood there, skillet in hand, hands shaking so badly she had to set it down or risk dropping it on her own feet. The reek of cordite mingled with the tang of fresh blood, and her ears rang like a cathedral bell.

Anderson staggered to his feet, shoulder leaking red through the bandage. He walked over and nudged the body with his toe.

"Is he dead?" Hannah asked, voice little more than a croak.

Anderson squatted, checked the pulse at the neck. "Not yet," he said. "But he'll wish he was."

They looked at each other, neither sure who should speak first. Then, as if on cue, they both started laughing. It wasn't funny, but sometimes the only option was hysterics.

After a minute, Anderson stopped and bent over, clutching his ribs. "I think you saved my life," he said.

She let herself smile, just a flicker. "Don't get used to it."

He rolled the man over, tugging the mask off to reveal a face she didn't recognize. Pale, doughy, with a mustache that looked as if it had been glued on for the occasion. There was nothing remarkable about him, just the blank, slack-jawed look of a man who had done this before and expected to do it again. But there, on the inside of

his left forearm, was a tattoo: a coiled snake around an anchor; the ink faded but unmistakable. And stitched onto the sleeve of his jacket, half-hidden by the balaclava he'd worn, was a patch: International Brotherhood of Coachmen Local 138, the same logo she'd seen on a dozen union flyers.

Anderson checked the man's pockets, fishing through methodically. "No wallet," he muttered, then pulled out a Coachmen Local 138 card, frayed at the edges, the ink worn away from years in and out of a pocket. The name was smudged, but the first three letters were clear: "VIN."

He handed it to Hannah. She took it, staring at the union logo, the stamped partial name. It didn't mean much, not yet, but it confirmed what they'd already suspected.

"Roll of cash," Anderson said, tossing a wad of bills onto the coffee table. "And a bus token."

Hannah shook her head, not bothering to hide her disgust. "They sent a message."

He nodded. "But they didn't send the best."

She knelt down beside the unconscious man, checking for anything else: another tattoo, a scar, something that might explain why he'd been chosen for this particular errand. She photographed the snake-and-anchor tattoo, the union patch, the slack face. *Insurance*, she told herself. *In case the cops get creative with the paperwork later.*

For the first time, the fear caught up to her, worming its way through the adrenaline. They could have died. She could have died, or worse, Anderson could have, and she'd have to explain to the world how a half-rate PI bled out on her carpet for a story she hadn't even finished writing.

She stood, hands still shaking. "What do we do with him?"

Anderson looked at the body, then at her. "We could call the cops. But by the time they get here, Cameron's people will have cleaned house. And if they know we're still alive, they'll be back. Fast."

Hannah chewed her lip. "So we dump him in the stairwell? Let the neighbors find him?"

"That's what I'd do," Anderson said. "But it's your apartment. Your call."

She didn't like it. Dumping a body—even a living one—felt like crossing a line she'd spent her whole career trying to hold. But she also knew what would happen if they called the police: hours of questions, a report that would leak to Cameron's people before the ink was dry, and a target on both their backs.

"Fine," she said, the word bitter on her tongue. "We move him. But I'm taking his picture first. And if this comes back on us, I'm blaming you."

Anderson almost smiled. "Fair enough."

They worked in silence, dragging the man, still out cold, down the stairs and propping him against the banister. He started to wake as they dropped him, moaning through a mouthful of loose teeth. Anderson knelt, pressed the man's head down, and whispered something Hannah didn't catch. Whatever it was, it made the man go limp again.

Back in the apartment, they stared at each other, suddenly awkward. All the violence and adrenaline had left them exposed, like dogs after a thunderstorm.

Hannah broke the silence first. "You okay?"

He grinned, showing every tooth. "Best night I've had in months."

She let out a short laugh, then sat on the arm of the couch, knees pressed together, hands locked between them.

"Why are you really doing this?" she asked. "It's not just the money."

He looked at her for a long time, then down at his hands. "I used to think if you kept your distance, you wouldn't get hurt. You'd see the pattern, solve the puzzle, and go home. But that's bullshit. There's always a cost."

She nodded. "Eddie called me. He wanted help, but I... I thought he was just another crank. I ignored it." She wiped her nose on the back of her hand, feeling the sting in her sinuses. "Now he's dead, and I get to write about it like it's just a story."

Anderson let the words settle, then leaned back, head tilted to the ceiling. "We can fix it."

She shook her head, but there was a little hope in the motion. "We can try."

A train whistled somewhere in the distance, the sound riding up through the walls and over the silence between them.

"So what's next?" Anderson asked.

"We go to the source," Hannah said. "Eddie's office. If he kept any records, they'll be there. Or at least we'll know what Cameron was trying to hide."

He nodded, slow and deliberate, then stood and flexed his hand. "You drive?"

She snorted. "You think I'm letting you behind the wheel with that shoulder?"

He smiled, and for a second, the scars and blood and everything else dropped away. Just two people, tied together by the worst luck in The Steel City.

She pulled a battered windbreaker from the coat hook and tossed him a clean shirt. "Let's go before the rest of the union wakes up."

He slipped the shirt over his bandages, wincing only a little. "You ever think maybe we're the bad guys?"

She looked at him, then at the mess they'd made. "Only on odd-numbered days."

They walked out together, side by side, into the cold stairwell. The city was still asleep, but Hannah could feel the eyes watching from every window, every shadow.

Before they hit the street, Anderson stopped her with a hand on her elbow. She turned, and he just stared, searching for something in her face. Not a come-on, not a warning. Just the raw, desperate need for another person to understand what it meant to lose, and to fight anyway.

She held his gaze, then squeezed his hand. It was rough, warm, and absolutely real.

"Don't die tonight," she said.

He grinned. "Same to you."

They hit the street at a jog, two battered, bleeding misfits against the machinery of the city. The night had teeth, and so did they.

Somewhere ahead, the truth waited, ugly and unfinished.

But for the first time, she thought maybe they could handle it.

CHAPTER 8

HANNAH



The morning light was unkind. Hannah caught her reflection in the window of the Beetle and winced. The bruise on her cheekbone had bloomed overnight, purple and yellow, and her knuckles were scraped raw from the skillet. Anderson looked worse: one eye swollen half-shut, a fresh bloodstain already oozing through his shirt. Neither of them mentioned it. Some things didn't need words.

The ACD yard slept fitfully, draped in pre-dawn haze and the stink of old gasoline. Hannah followed James along the chain-link perimeter, the toe of her boot skidding on a frozen mud rut. She kept her hands buried in her pockets, more for the comfort than the cold. The whole place radiated a kind of sick anticipation, as if every warehouse shadow was a jaw waiting to snap shut.

They reached a battered side door, barely visible in the sodium spill from a distant lamp. James crouched and flicked his penlight at the lock, revealing a nest of scratches from decades of skeleton keys and heavy boots. He ran his fingers along the jamb, found the spot he'd marked with a thumbnail scrape earlier, then levered the door open with a gentle but practiced pop. No alarm. Just the sigh of hinges left to rot.

"You sure about this?" Hannah whispered. "If we get caught..."

"We won't," James said, though his voice was tight. "But if you want to wait in the car, I won't judge."

She shook her head. "I didn't get beat up last night just to sit this one out."

Inside, the air tasted of paper dust and electrical burn. Hannah blinked away the gloom, trying to make sense of the geometry: an L-shaped corridor, linoleum cracked and yellowed, a wall map of The Steel City with faded pins marking routes long since dead.

James led the way, each footstep a wet click against the floor. He'd switched from penlight to a tiny red flashlight, just enough for them to see but not enough to broadcast their presence.

They kept to the wall, the silence broken only by the far-off clunk of a sump pump cycling in the basement. Hannah's heart juddered like a blown fan belt.

At the end of the hall, they paused outside a glass-fronted door stenciled "DISPATCH - AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY." The shade was drawn, but inside was the faintest green glow. An ancient desk lamp, left burning through the night. James gave her a look, flat and serious, then pushed the door open with his shoulder.

Eddie's desk sat in the back corner, up against a window that looked out over the empty lot. Nothing had moved since his disappearance; the coffee mug, with its brown-ringed sediment, remained front and center, flanked by a pyramid of yellowed invoices. A cheap calendar hung on the cubicle wall, still open to October.

She glanced at James, who nodded to her and began a slow circuit of the perimeter, flashlight beam low and methodical. She moved to Eddie's desk, half-expecting the chair to be warm, even now. The seat was cracked vinyl, ancient and squealing, and it gave a little under her weight. She stared at the clutter, hunting for anything that screamed "confession" or "kill me next."

The top drawer was unlocked, and inside were three pens, two chewed to plastic, and a thick rubber-banded bundle of timecards. She shuffled through until she found the one marked KOZMA, E. The dates ran week by week, Eddie's tight script marking each shift in blue ballpoint. The last card told the real story: Thursday,

November 7th. He'd clocked in at 11:04 p.m., the "IN" column dark and precise. The "OUT" box for Friday morning was empty, a little white tomb.

He never left. Not by the front door.

James's voice cut through. "Desk check out?"

She started, then nodded before remembering he wasn't looking at her. "Timecard's clean except for the day he vanished." She held it up, but he was already moving to the filing cabinets by the wall.

"Copy the run sheets," he said, voice a near-whisper. "Thursday night, Friday morning. I'll cover the back."

She stuffed the card in her jacket and scanned Eddie's paperwork. Most was the usual: schedules, phone messages, a couple of pink slips marked "URGENT" in ballpoint.

From her pocket, she fished a ballpoint pen and made a quick note on her palm. *What did you see, Eddie?*

James beckoned from across the room, his frame barely visible in the shadow. "Cabinet's open. You're up."

Hannah moved to the filing cabinets. The manifest drawer stuck on the first try, metal teeth catching and refusing. Hannah yanked, then cursed under her breath as the entire cabinet shuddered. She shot a look over her shoulder—James barely blinked, still posted at the corridor, but his hand slid to the edge of his coat. She tried again, this time with finesse. The latch gave with a squeal like a strangled bird, loud enough to spike her pulse.

Inside, the manifests were tabbed by week, each thick sheaf a little ecosystem of carbon copies and red-ink corrections. She pulled the folder for November, thumbed to Thursday. The top sheet was fat and dogeared, yet fresh, crisper than the others, the ink dense and uniform. She held it up next to the previous week's copy. The difference was microscopic, but it was there. The Thursday sheet's typeface ran half a shade lighter, and every 'e' wore a tiny black dot at its base: a chipped ribbon or maybe a damaged typebar. She checked the next two sheets. Same defect.

That's not Eddie's work. He always fixed the typewriter. Or swore at it until it fixed itself.

She brought the pages to James. He scanned the headers, then

the footers, then the "e"s. "Someone forged these," he said. "Probably to cover the night shift. See the carbon bleed?" He pointed. "That's a different machine."

"Careless," she muttered, but a flick of vindication warmed her chest. *That's how you get caught, you lazy bastards.*

She shuffled back to the desk and laid the forged manifests side by side. The routes listed were unremarkable, just the usual local shuttles plus one flagged X1A, destination blank. She squinted at the notation: "med supp / bonus." The weights made no sense. Double the average, but the number was massaged with white-out and blue pen, like a toddler's attempt at erasure.

"James, come look at this." She jabbed at the correction.

He came over, close enough that she could smell the aftershave buried under dried blood and adrenaline. "X1A. That's the code from the notebook, right?"

She nodded, shuffling through the memory palace of Eddie's cramped handwriting. "He had it circled, twice. Said to check the load. But this line is all wrong. Who does the paperwork for these runs?"

James shrugged. "If it's not the dispatcher, it's the office manager. Payroll lady, I think."

"Denise," Hannah said, the name surfacing from Eleanor's dossier. "She'd have keys, or access. Probably more than Eddie did."

They stood in silence, each processing the implications. *If Eddie tried to flag this, someone else overrode him.*

James was already looking for Denise's desk, identifiable as the office manager's primary workstation within the dispatch office. He quickly focused on a battered steel desk at the center of the bullpen by the entrance from the dock. He raised the desk lid, revealing neat bundles, mostly pay stubs and a single black-and-white photo from a company Christmas party. A single business card was taped to the back. Hannah reached across and pulled it free. On the back of the card was written: "Jan closet 14B—call for code." Hannah stared at it, then at James.

Denise. Planning ahead. Hoping someone would find this, follow the thread.

I guess Denise was worried for her own safety too, and needed to leave some insurance in case she, too, got 'disappeared'.

"Do you know where 14B is?"

He blinked, then nodded. "West hall, near the dock. It's a maintenance closet."

She snatched the slip and jammed the folders back in place. "Let's go."

They took the long route, hugging the cinderblock walls and ducking under a dead drop ceiling that shed bits of plaster on every step. The hallway here was worse. Moist, smelling of lemon cleaner and something pungent like burnt plastic. At the end, a door labeled "JANITORIAL SUPPLY—14B." The knob was locked, but the cheap steel latch gave when James pressed a library card through the gap.

Inside, shelves loaded with cleaning chemicals and spare bulbs. It took Hannah a second to spot the oddity: a panel on the third shelf, behind the Lysol cans, held in place by a single screw. Her Swiss Army knife undid the screw in a trice. The panel wobbled, then slid free, revealing a pipe chase just wide enough to hide a small pouch.

Behind it was a faded navy bank pouch, zippered shut. Hannah pulled it out, hands shaking. She unzipped it to reveal a small black notebook, about the size of a small diary, with no label. She opened the cover. This wasn't like the spiral notebook at Eddie's apartment. That had been personal, scattered. This was a ledger. Evidence. Eddie had known exactly what he was building. The pages were filled with meticulous, organized columns listing dates, run codes, initials, and weights. It seemed like a systematic log of every corrupt run.

"It's coded," she whispered. "Dispatcher shorthand, maybe. Or something he made up."

James leaned in. "Can you read it?"

She squinted, tracing the patterns. "Some of it. The dates line up with the forged manifests. And these initials: MG, DEN. Those could be McGivern and Denise. "Look here: 'X1A-1107-3600-MG-

DEN. Med supp—triple. Real wt: 3600. Manifest: 1200. Diff: 2400.' He was tracking the discrepancy."

James's jaw tightened. "He kept a second set of books. Not for the union. For himself, maybe for Eleanor."

Hannah kept going, revealing page after page of coded entries. There were notes about late-night pickups, cash envelopes, even a few cryptic sketches of delivery docks. In the margins, Eddie's nervous handwriting: "They're on to me. Not safe after hours. HR—if you get this, run."

She swallowed, the meaning landing all at once. "He wasn't stealing. He was building a case."

"Against who?" James asked, but the answer was obvious.

"Cameron. Or whoever was running X1A."

She flicked through to the last page. The entry was new, barely dried when Eddie hid it. "Thursday: McGivern, 2 AM, X1A, med supp—triple. Parked at Anchor. See HR."

She stared at it until the afterimage burned into her retina. *He was going to meet you. That's why he died.*

James rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a battered Instamatic. "Photograph it," he said. "We can't risk taking the book."

She waved off the Instamatic in favor of her Rollei. Her hands were steady now. She took frame after frame, every page, every coded column. The flash made her blind, then left her more alert. Each click was a little insurance policy, a dose of proof to keep them alive.

When she finished, James slid the notebook back into the panel, replaced the shelf, and wiped any prints with a rag. He dropped the matches into a cleaning bucket, then surveyed the hall. Nothing moved, but the sense of eyes remained.

The first sound was a metallic groan from the loading dock—distant, then uncomfortably near. Hannah's hands jerked, nearly losing her grip on the Rollei. She snapped the last page, barely waiting for the flash to cycle. James froze, arm out, palm splayed in a silent warning.

There were voices, too. Not the expected shuffle of a janitor on autopilot, but a low rumble of men, the words muffled by doors and cinderblock. James moved fast, taking the black notebook from Hannah's hands and fitting it back behind the panel, careful to slide the shelf flush. She wiped sweat from her upper lip, mind racing.

If they find us, what's the play?

James tugged her back behind the closet door, just as footsteps echoed down the hallway. Hannah pressed herself to the cold brick, the reek of Pine-Sol and mold burning her eyes. The voices got louder, then stopped outside the closet. Keys rattled. Hannah's pulse hit the roof. James put two fingers to his lips and waited, eyes locked on hers.

The handle turned, but the door only opened a crack. A man's silhouette appeared, backlit by the corridor's jaundiced light. He grunted, reached in for something on the shelf, then left without a backward glance. The door shut with a finality that left Hannah's knees soft. She exhaled, slow and careful.

James waited five seconds, then motioned for her to follow. They stepped out into the hall, hugging the wall all the way down to the main corridor. The voices were retreating now, echoing toward the dispatch office. Hannah could see two men through the glass partition. One was in a blue ACD jacket, the other in coveralls and a ballcap. The first was flipping through the night logs, the second already at the coffee machine. She and James slid past, staying below the sight line, and ducked into a side room marked "FILE STORAGE."

Inside, it was pitch black. Hannah killed her own flashlight, relying on the afterglow of adrenaline and the scratchy blue of streetlights filtering through a grimy window. James's breath was steady, but his hands were fists. They waited, counting the seconds, as the men in the office debated something about last week's overtime.

"Midnight crew's always early," James mouthed, barely audible. "We've got maybe two minutes before they do a walk."

Hannah's hands trembled as she pushed the film advance lever till she felt that satisfying click. She fumbled the camera into her

bag, then ran through the exits in her mind. "Loading dock's closest," she whispered.

James nodded, scanning the dark room for anything that might betray their presence. "On three."

They moved as one, creeping out the door, down the narrow service corridor, and into the shadow of the loading bay. Here, the air was frigid, the concrete sweating from the clash of indoor heat and outdoor chill. The bay itself was empty, just a pallet jack and a pyramid of shrink-wrapped crates.

Halfway across, a third worker appeared, this one carrying a clipboard. He stopped dead, stared directly at them. For a heartbeat, nobody moved. Then James, cool as hell, called out: "Inventory check. Go back to your break."

The man blinked, confusion flickering across his face. "Didn't know anyone was on this shift."

"Just need to update the files," James replied, his voice bored, no hint of nerves. "Management said to do it now."

The man hesitated, but then shrugged and wandered back toward the offices, muttering about "bullshit orders."

Hannah's heart was a caged thing, slamming her ribs. She nudged James. "Let's go."

They crossed the bay to the big roll-up door, but it was chained shut. James surveyed the wall, then found a side exit behind a pyramid of empty drums. He motioned for Hannah to crouch, and together they duck-walked behind the barrels.

A crash exploded behind them. James had kicked over a stack of drums with surgical precision, sending a thunderclap ricocheting through the bay. The sound was a cue. Both workers in the office ran toward the source, yelling at each other about "stupid kids" and "goddamn night shift." In the chaos, James and Hannah slipped out the side door, the cold night air slapping them in the face.

They hustled down the alley, boots scraping loose gravel, not daring to look back until they hit the street. Only then did Hannah stop, doubling over to catch her breath. She peeled the camera from her jacket, hands shaking.

James scanned the lot, checking every moving shape. "Anyone behind us?"

She checked, then shook her head. "All clear. For now."

"Good," James said. "Let's keep it that way."

They jogged two blocks, zigzagging through alleys until the ACD yard was just a distant hum. Only then did Hannah slow down, the panic cooling into something like pride. She finally unclenched her fist.

She stopped under a street lamp, holding it up to the sodium light. "We got it," she said, voice a croak. "Every page."

James looked at her, then at the camera, then back. "You're sure?"

She nodded, a big, stupid grin stretching her cheeks. "I'm sure. But we'll need to crack the code. Match it to the manifests, the shift schedules. It's not going to be easy."

He let out a breath, some tension finally leaving his shoulders. "You did good, kid."

She bristled at the "kid," but let it slide. He wasn't wrong. "We both did."

A siren wailed somewhere upriver, not for them but for someone else, some other poor bastard losing a night's sleep. Hannah tucked the camera inside her jacket, next to her skin. It was cold, but the evidence inside felt like a heart, beating out its own rhythm.

They walked in silence, boots echoing off the empty block, the city still gray and shuddering in its own hangover. Behind them, somewhere, the men at ACD would find the mess and wonder what had been taken, or left behind. Maybe they'd never even know.

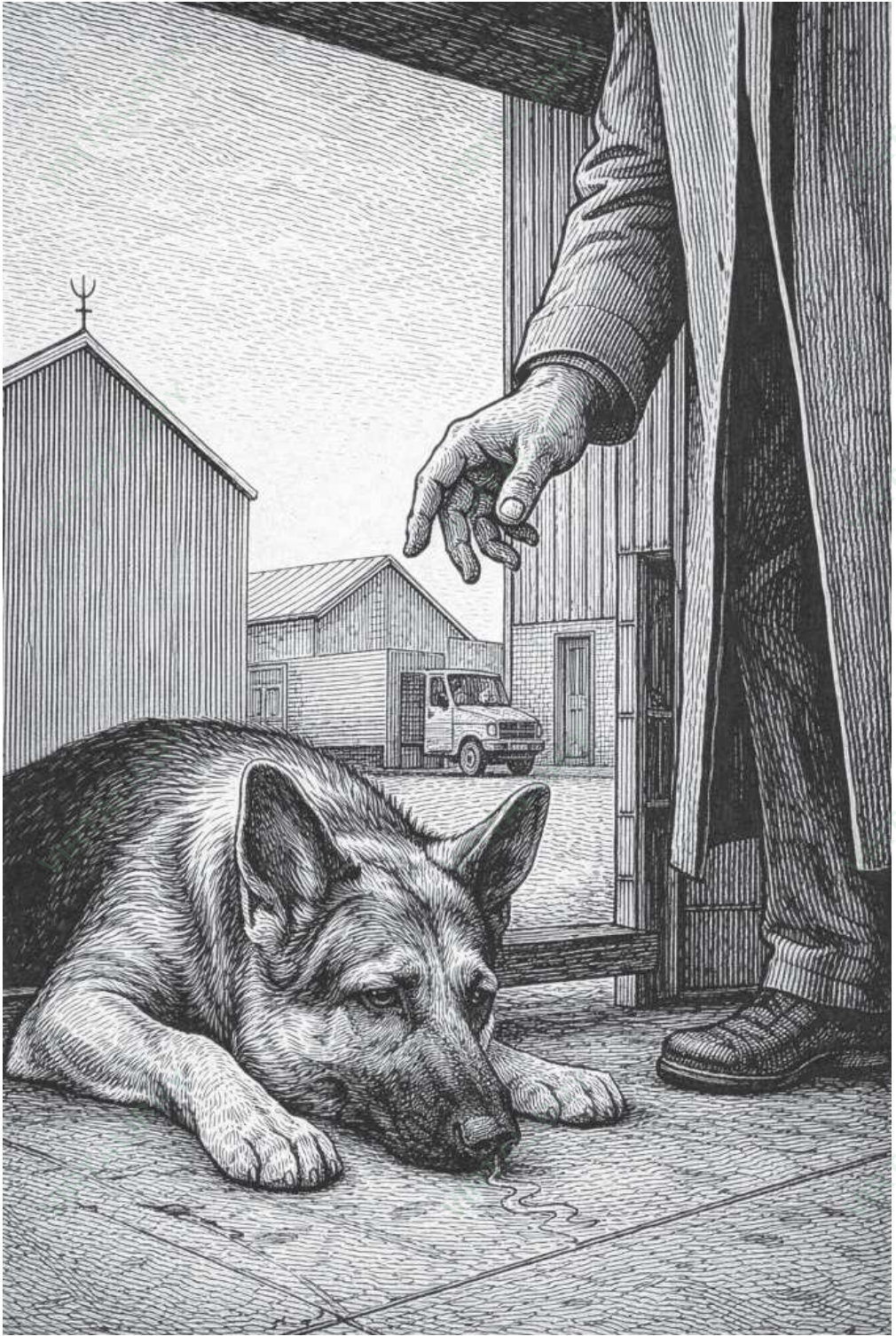
At the end of the street, Hannah paused. "What now?"

James looked at the sky, the first blush of morning turning the clouds to dirty gold. "Now we run. And then we fight."

She smiled, blood on her teeth, and set off at a brisk pace. The evidence thumped against her chest with every step.

Back at the yard, angry voices echoed in the cold, but Hannah barely heard them. She had the truth. It wasn't enough to save Eddie, but it was more than most ever got.

And in a city like this, that had to count for something.



CHAPTER 9

DETECTIVE KELLY



Kelly's first impression of the ACD yard was that it needed a tetanus shot. The entire block looked like patient zero for industrial decay: chain-link fence stitched with wire where men with bolt cutters had left their signatures, concrete scarred by decades of leaky tankers, and a drifting haze that might have been steel mill fallout or the ghost of a hundred burned-out Coachmen.

He parked the Plymouth at an angle that made it obvious he was police, popped the hood for effect, and let the engine tick its slow death rattle. The uniform at the gatehouse noticed him, then flicked a cigarette into the gutter and buzzed the shack's interior with a ring that sounded like a dentist's drill. Kelly got out, pulled his collar up against the cold, and mentally rehearsed the questions that would get him through the day without starting a strike.

The gatehouse was a box of reinforced glass and exhaustion. Inside, the man behind the counter wore an ACD windbreaker and the look of someone who'd seen his share of night shifts. He was thick through the middle, balding but hanging on with sideburns that looked drawn on, and had the deep-set eyes of a man who'd never voluntarily made eye contact with a cop. The tag on his wind-

breaker said "RED," as if the hair he'd lost had merely migrated to his hands and cheeks.

Red blinked once, then reached for the sign-in sheet with a theatrical slowness. "You got a badge, or are you working off the books?" His accent put the "Steel City" right between his molars, gnawing every vowel.

Kelly held up the leather and waited for Red to finish inspecting the photo. "Detective Kelly. I need to ask about your last Thursday. You the regular gate guard on third shift?"

Red set the clipboard down. "If the union's got the hours, then yeah, I was here. That's what the paycheck says."

Kelly let the sarcasm ride. "You remember anything odd about that night? Visitors? Unscheduled trucks?"

Red grunted, which in this city was either a no or an invitation to bribe. "Nobody comes through after ten unless they got a union card or a damn good reason." He picked up the clipboard again, started flipping through sheets with thick, stubby fingers. "Thursday was dead. Rainy. Hugo took two dumps and I spent half the shift reading the sports page."

Hugo, right. The dog. Kelly made a note to check the kennel before he left. "You keep the sign-in logs?"

Red tapped the side of his head. "Logs are for managers. I got a memory like a steel trap."

Kelly eyed the wall behind Red, plastered with faded union notices, a yellowed 'No Scabs' cartoon, and a single thumbtack-driven photo of Red and a German Shepherd, both with their tongues out. "So you're saying nothing unusual happened."

"Nothing that'd make the paper, Detective. You looking for a fight, or just making the rounds?"

Kelly smiled, thin and unfriendly. "I'm looking for a missing person. Eddie Kozma. Worked dispatch, graveyard. You see him come or go?"

Red's lips pressed together, then released in a little sigh. "I saw him come in. Didn't see him leave. But that's not odd: sometimes the night guys crash in the office or head out through the back if they want to skip the morning foreman."

Kelly opened his notebook. "Any reason Eddie would want to avoid being seen?"

Red shifted his weight. "Any reason a cop asks a question three different ways?" He finally met Kelly's gaze, which took more effort than it should have.

Kelly scribbled "avoidant" in the margin. "Who else had access to the yard after ten?"

Red shrugged, then used his whole arm to point down the drive. "Night supervisor's McGivern. He does the rounds: likes to play big man for the cameras. After midnight, just me, him, and the dog."

"And Hugo's your responsibility?"

Red's face softened, just a fraction. "Hugo's a good boy. He's been here since a pup. Guards the dock better than half the guys on payroll."

Kelly tapped his pen. "I heard he was quiet Thursday night. You remember why?"

The question landed. Red looked away, gaze bouncing off the grimy window. "Dogs get tired, same as people."

"Does he eat anything special?" Kelly pressed. "Any treats, table scraps?"

Red's jaw set. "McGivern sometimes brings him stuff. Leftover bones from the butcher. Big ones, marrow inside." He looked at Kelly, then down at his own hands. "That night, McGivern gave him a bone. Said it was a reward for good behavior. Hugo was out cold after, slept through the shift."

Kelly's jaw tensed. "You think that's normal?"

Red's laugh was humorless. "Nothing's normal at this job. You want to see the dog, go ahead. Kennel's by the back gate." He pushed a key across the counter. "Don't let him out. He's good, but he don't know you."

Kelly took the key, made a point of not thanking Red. He slipped out into the cold and walked the perimeter, boot soles crunching on salt and cinders.

Of course the dog was drugged. Next you'll find the coffee was laced and the night supervisor changed his shoes halfway through.

Red took the lead as they cut behind the shipping dock, wind-

breaker zipped to the chin and hands jammed in his pockets like he was bracing for a punch. The kennel area was tucked in the shadow of the repair bay, a cage of chain-link and concrete meant to keep honest men out and honest dogs in. Kelly's boots slipped once on the greasy slab, the surface stained dark with a chemical memory of decades' worth of spilled oil and rain.

The gate to the run was locked with an industrial pad, but Red had it open in a heartbeat. "He's been slow since Friday," Red said, voice softer now. "Didn't even bark at the meter reader."

Kelly stepped inside, took a knee, and studied the animal. Hugo's fur was the color of old newsprint, yellowed around the muzzle and matted with drool down the right side. The dog tracked Kelly's movement, but only with the eyes. Glassy, unfocused, wet with something more than a dog's boredom. Each breath was shallow, chest barely rising.

Kelly reached out, let the dog sniff his hand. Hugo tried, failed, and let his head drop back onto the concrete. "He always like this after a bone?"

Red's laugh was little more than a wet cough. "Hell no. He usually howls for half an hour when McGivern leaves. Thursday, he conked out before midnight."

Kelly squatted lower, looked for signs of injury. Nothing. Just a dog with the life flickering like a bad vacuum tube.

He turned to Red. "What time did McGivern bring the bone?"

Red tapped his watch, a nervous tic. "Shift change. Maybe quarter to midnight. Said it was a treat for keeping the bums off the fence. He was in a mood. Happy, you know? Not his usual self."

Kelly nodded, scribbled it down. "Was anyone else here that night? Any of the drivers?"

Red shook his head. "Just Eddie. He was in the office, working the phones. Place was dead otherwise."

Kelly looked at Hugo, then at Red. "Did you see McGivern give the bone to the dog? Or just find it next shift?"

Red winced. "He handed it through the fence. Hugo damn near took his hand off, like always. But the next time I saw the dog, he was out."

Kelly stood and scanned the yard near the doghouse. No bone in sight: just the usual rawhide, a water dish, and a threadbare blanket. He frowned. "Red said McGivern gave you a bone Thursday. Where'd it go?"

Hugo didn't answer. Kelly walked the perimeter, checking the corners. Nothing. If Hugo was out, then the night was open for anything. McGivern. The name fit. He wrote it in all caps on the notepad, underlined it twice.

On his way back to the gatehouse, Kelly detoured by the supervisor's office. The windows were dark, but the door was unlocked. Inside, the space was a study in arrogance: big desk, leather chair, a Steelers calendar three months behind, and a brass nameplate reading "R. McGivern—Night Supervisor." The walls bore a lineup of union commendations, each one framed and dusted weekly.

Kelly did a slow circuit, looking for anything left in the open. There were two coffee mugs in the trash, one with lipstick, the other with a thick ring of dried milk. He checked the drawers. Nothing but blank forms and a bottle of Bayer, half-empty. The filing cabinet was locked. He made a note to get a warrant.

If you want to bury a secret in this town, wrap it in union letterhead and stamp it "Personal."

Back at the gatehouse, Red was reading a racing form and pretending not to watch. Kelly leaned on the counter.

"The bone," he said. "Where is it?"

Red didn't look up. "Hugo finished it. Nothing left but splinters."

"You sure about that?" Kelly kept his voice flat. "Dog that size, a big marrow bone? Usually takes a week to chew through."

Red's hands stilled on the paper. "Maybe he was hungry."

"Or maybe you cleaned it up." Kelly waited, letting the silence stretch. "McGivern ask you to get rid of it?"

Red's eyes flicked up, then away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Let me rephrase." Kelly pulled out his notebook, flipped to a blank page. "If I find out you disposed of evidence in a homicide investigation, you're looking at obstruction. Maybe accessory after the fact. That's a felony, Red. Union can't protect you from that."

Red's face went pale beneath the stubble. He set down the racing form, hands shaking. "I didn't know it was evidence. McGivern just said to get rid of it. Said the dog was sick and he didn't want the vet asking questions."

"Where is it now?"

Red swallowed. "Dumpster. Out back. But the truck comes tomorrow."

Kelly was already moving. He circled the building, found the dumpster behind the loading dock, and hauled himself up to peer inside. The smell hit him first. Rotting food, oil, the sour tang of old garbage. He grabbed a broken broomstick from the ground and started poking through the mess.

Five minutes later, he found it: a hollowed-out femur, half-buried under a pile of cardboard. The marrow inside was crusted with something yellow, a waxy sheen that didn't belong. He bagged it, careful not to touch the residue.

Back at the gatehouse, Red was waiting, face gray. Kelly held up the bag.

"This goes to the lab," he said. "And if it comes back positive for barbiturates, I'm coming back for you."

Red nodded, not trusting his voice. Kelly pressed on. "Did McGivern mention why he was rewarding the dog Thursday?"

Red hesitated, eyes flicking to the side. "He said Hugo kept some hobo from climbing the fence. But I never saw anything on the sign-in sheet, and the dog don't bite unless you're real stupid."

Kelly didn't smile. "You ever see McGivern argue with Kozma? Or get physical?"

Red's mouth twisted. "That's above my pay grade, Detective. But you ask around, you'll hear stories."

"I'm asking you."

Red looked at the clock, then out the window. "Eddie was too smart for this job. He kept notes, asked questions nobody wanted to answer. If you're saying McGivern had it in for him, I wouldn't bet against it."

Kelly wrote it down. "Last one. Where's McGivern now?"

Red shrugged. "Probably home, sleeping it off. He does the 11-to-7, never stays late unless there's a payroll issue."

Kelly walked back to the car, the wind snapping his coat against his legs. In the front seat, he sat and let the heater struggle against the cold. He pulled out the bone, held it up to the light. The marrow was crusted with something yellow, a paste that shimmered greasy in the sun. Barbiturates, maybe. He'd have the lab check, but his gut already knew.

He made the call to the Coroner's office from a pay phone at the corner, left a message for Krieger to check for sedatives in Eddie's blood and to run the bone for any chemical residue.

McGivern dopes the dog. Eddie ends up in the river. Union says nothing. Even the mutt knows when to keep quiet.

Kelly gripped the wheel, jaw tight enough to crack molars. He had a name, a motive, and a dog who'd never lie to a cop.

Next step was to find out what kind of bone the union man preferred when he wasn't burying bodies.

He put the car in gear and pulled away from the yard, feeling the city's weight shift, just a little, in his favor.



CHAPTER 10

JAMES



Shadyside in November didn't so much welcome a visitor as subject him to a silent pat-down, then decide whether he was worth the trouble. James Anderson trailed the wrought-iron fence around the Markham estate, one eye on the windows, the other on the pruned-to-geometry yews. The air here was different: not so much cleaner as scrubbed of context, every scent filtered through wet leaves, mulch, and whatever passed for old money this side of Fifth Avenue. The only thing that matched the city's weather was the mood.

He checked the address again, the card heavy with Eleanor's perfume. His trench coat felt out of place, like he'd worn work boots to a cotillion. He knocked twice, firm, the way his father had taught him—none of this "ring and run" business.

The woman who opened the door was more fixture than staff. Gray bun, apron pressed to a knife edge, and the gaze of a retired prison guard. She didn't announce herself, just scanned his face and gestured him in with an economy of motion that said *You'll follow or you'll freeze*. The vestibule was a museum piece: marble, brass, and a grandfather clock that ticked with the metronome certainty of an executioner's watch.

"Mrs. Markham is expecting you in the parlor," the woman said, voice smooth as chipped granite. She ghosted ahead, feet silent on the runner, and deposited him at the threshold of a room built for entertaining other people's judgment.

Inside, the air was thick with the kind of silence you could only buy by the cubic yard. Drapes like stage curtains deadened the light, and every stick of furniture had the kind of weight that made it clear nobody here bought on credit. James stood with his hands folded, boots just brushing the fringe of a Persian rug that could have paid his rent for a year.

Eleanor Markham entered like she was gliding on rails. Black dress, pearls, wrists bare but for the tight watch, the face of a woman who'd spent her life learning to betray nothing she couldn't get back. She nodded, took in his injuries with a single sweep, then gestured to a wingback chair opposite the tea service.

"You're early," she said, voice cool but not unfriendly. "I appreciate punctuality."

James sat. The chair groaned under his frame. "Traffic's lighter when the mills cut second shift," he offered.

She didn't smile, but the edge of her mouth softened, just a little. "May I offer you tea?"

He nodded. She poured with the precision of a science experiment, every motion practiced. The cup, when she handed it to him, was bone china—thin enough to break if you looked at it wrong, which was maybe the point.

They sat for a moment, the only sound the slow wind-up of the grandfather clock. Eleanor was the first to crack.

"Your message said you had news."

James didn't bother with preamble. "Eddie Kozma. They found his body in the Allegheny."

The cup in her hand wobbled, just for a second. The saucer caught the worst of it, but a brown rim stained the white. She set both down, fingers splayed to keep them from shaking. He watched the transformation: the society mask slid off, leaving the raw bone underneath.

"How?" she said, voice nearly gone.

He kept it clinical. "Ligature around the neck. Post-mortem dump, likely at night. No defensive wounds." He let that hang in the air, just long enough for her to fill in the blanks.

She drew a slow breath, then another. "You're certain it's him?"

He reached into his battered briefcase, pulled out the plastic-wrapped bundle. "Found this in a dumpster at the Anchor. Bloody, with a visitor badge for the ACD yard." He unspooled the wrap, the jacket looking even worse in the buttery light.

She didn't touch it, but her eyes locked on the place where the name patch had been, the blood stiff in the seams. "He wore that every night. Said the managers never cleaned them." Her voice caught on the word "managers," like it was an accusation.

James wrapped the jacket again, stowing it out of sight. "Someone wanted you to think he ran," he said. "Greyhound ticket to Cleveland, left in his wallet. The ticket wasn't even wet." He watched her face, looking for the tell.

Eleanor pressed her hands together, fingers laced so tight the knuckles whitened. She looked at the rug, then at him. "I'm sorry. I thought this would be safe. I thought if I just kept it quiet..."

"You didn't kill him," James said, flat as a tabletop.

She shook her head, but it was the movement of someone shaking off a chill, not a denial.

The real business in houses like this happened behind closed doors, in studies lined with first editions and trophies that hadn't seen daylight in decades. The maid deposited him at the threshold, then vanished, leaving James to cross the room alone. Eleanor stood at the bar, not pouring a drink but staring at the bottles as if hoping for guidance.

She didn't turn. "There's a decanter if you want it. I don't mind."

He ignored it, settling into a leather chair that felt like it had been tailored for someone with a much higher net worth. He watched her fingers, the way they hovered over a cut-glass stopper,

then retreated, then returned. Finally, she gave in, splashed two fingers of bourbon into a tumbler, and took a seat opposite.

"Did you know," she said, voice papery, "that the first Markham to set foot in Steel Town was a forger?" She swirled the glass, the sound like a clock winding down. "He counterfeited land grants. Sold the same acre to six men, then burned the deeds. The family calls him a pioneer."

James let the story pass, waited.

She exhaled, the first real breath he'd seen from her all day. "I hired Eddie to look into the yard. Not just the books. Everything: shipments, payroll, even the janitors. I thought Cameron was over-billing us. Maybe siphoning donations, but nothing... nothing that would get someone killed." She downed half the bourbon, didn't flinch.

"Why not go to the police?" James asked.

She set the glass down hard enough to leave a mark. "Because they'd turn it into a circus. And Cameron would bury it in appeals. My board would demand an inquiry, donors would vanish, and everything my husband built would be dirt by the end of the year."

She looked at him, eyes dry but haunted. "I told myself it was about protecting the foundation. The truth is, I was protecting myself."

James watched her, noting the way her shoulders hunched, the way her nails dug into her palms. The distance between self-preservation and cowardice was measured in blood.

"He found something," Eleanor said, voice gone thin. "Thursday night, just after eleven. He called me from the yard. Said he'd found a second set of ledgers. Real numbers, not the sanitized ones. He sounded... I don't know. Scared. But proud, too."

She swallowed, then pulled a slip of paper from her dress pocket. She unfolded it, hands trembling.

"Next morning, this was under my door."

James took the note. Thin, high-quality bond. Typewritten, no return address.

"Your little problem is taken care of. Be more careful who you trust."

He turned the page over, held it to the light. No watermark, but the typeface was clean: elite, maybe, or a high-end Olympia.

She closed her eyes, just for a second. "I thought it was a prank. Until you called."

He set the note down, careful not to crease it. "You kept it."

"I keep everything. It's a sickness." She smiled, brittle. "My late husband said I never let go of anything, not even a grudge."

She paused, and something shifted in her face—grief hardening into something older, sharper. "You know, Mr. Anderson, my husband died in '71. Car bomb, they said. Faulty gas line. But he'd been fighting with Cameron over a contract the week before. Same loading dock. Same night shift pattern." She looked at him, and for the first time, her voice didn't waver. "Eddie was working the same route. The same schedule. I didn't see it until last week, when I looked at the old invoices. The same foreman's signature. The same discrepancies. It's like they never stopped."

James felt the pieces click into place. "You think Cameron had your husband killed."

"I think Cameron has been running this scheme for years," she said. "And anyone who gets close ends up in the river. Or in a car that catches fire." She drained the rest of the bourbon. "I should have gone to the police in '71. Instead, I let them bury it. And now Eddie's dead because I was too afraid to dig it up."

She set the glass on the bar, the clink loud in the silence. "That's why I'm telling you this. Not because I want revenge. Because I owe it to both of them. My husband. And Eddie."

James could see the shape of it now: a woman caught in the rip current of her own good intentions, watching as every move she made pulled another body under. He almost felt sorry for her.

Almost.

"Do you want me to keep going?" he asked.

Eleanor stared at the desk, then up at him. "Yes. But not for me." She let the glass fall, the sound lost in the carpet. "For Eddie. For my husband. I should have warned them both."

James didn't answer. There was nothing to say. He'd been warned, too, more than once, and every time he'd ignored it.

She stood, wiped her hands on the hem of her dress, then crossed to the fireplace. Above it hung a portrait of a man in naval dress, painted in that weird style that made everyone look both heroic and constipated.

"He used to say that the city ran on secrets," she said. "That's what kept the steel hot and the river moving. You just had to know who owned which secrets, and how much they were willing to pay for them."

She turned, eyes clear now, the grief crystallized into something harder. "Find out what Eddie found. And if you can, make them pay for it."

James stood, rolled his shoulders, and picked up the note. "I'll try."

Eleanor crossed the room, close enough for him to smell the bourbon and something older. Vanilla, maybe, or the kind of perfume that came in a bottle shaped like a weapon. She put her hand on his arm, just for a moment.

"Be careful," she said. "You're the last person in this city who cares what happens to people like him."

He almost smiled, but the effort cost too much. Instead, he nodded and started for the hall.

James made it halfway to the foyer before he realized he was still clutching the threatening note like a talisman. He folded it, careful as origami, and tucked it into his breast pocket. By the time he turned back, Eleanor was already waiting for him, black dress now covered by a slate-gray cardigan. Her eyes were puffy, but the set of her jaw had changed. The woman who'd lost a war had been replaced by one who was ready to start another.

She beckoned him to follow, then led him down a side corridor lined with photographs: dedications, award ceremonies, each a study in how to look important in a crowded room. At the end was a door with a lock that looked more suited to a bank than a house. She worked the mechanism with steady hands, then motioned him inside.

The room was smaller than the study, lined with glass-fronted

cabinets and a safe embedded in the wall. She crossed to her desk, unlocked a drawer, and pulled out a battered leather portfolio. When she set it down, the thump was heavier than expected.

"This is everything," she said, flipping it open. "Every check I wrote to him. Every note, every appointment. Copies, but the signatures are real."

He leafed through the stack. The checks were for even numbers, always marked as "consultation services." The ledger beside them was more interesting: dates, times, shorthand annotations. "Met w/ Cam. 2/10—suspicious, nervous." "Eddie says inventory off by 30%." "Discussed legal options—none viable."

Eleanor poured herself another drink, but this time the glass didn't shake. "You know what the worst part is?" she asked, voice low. "There's enough in there to take Cameron down. But not enough to keep my board out of the mud. I'd be ruined. The foundation would go under. Everything we built, gone in a season."

She slid a check across the desk. The sum was double his usual rate, plus a comma. The signature was a little larger than life.

He stared at it, then at her. "You trust me that much?"

"I trust that you have less to lose than I do," she said, the hint of a smile almost real. "And that's the only kind of loyalty that matters in this town."

He pocketed the check, then zipped the portfolio shut. The case was suddenly a lot more complicated, and a lot more personal.

"Thank you," he said, and meant it. She nodded, a gesture of truce.

He made for the door, but paused at the threshold. "If you hear from Cameron," he said, "don't answer. Not directly. Let me know first."

Eleanor almost laughed. "He's never called me in his life. He prefers other people to make the threats."

James nodded. "That's what I'm counting on."

In the hall, the maid watched him, expression blank. James imagined she'd seen her share of dead men walking, and probably knew the scent of a suicide mission.

He left the way he came, the city colder now, the air cut with the promise of snow. Back in the car, he set the portfolio on the passenger seat. The smell of leather and old ink filled the space, crowding out the usual smoke and engine oil. At the curb, he paused, reading the threatening note again. The words were meant to be menacing, but all he saw was the banality of power: a warning so bland it could have come from a parent-teacher conference.

You're not cut out for this, he told himself. You solve the puzzle, then hand it off to the next idiot in line. That's the deal.

But he couldn't shake the image of Eddie's hands, stained with ink and dried blood, gripping the ledger like a drowning man's rope. Or the photograph of Mr. Markham, smiling in his naval uniform, dead three years and still waiting for someone to tell the truth.

He thumbed the threatening note, then the check, then the faint imprint of blood left on his own palm from Eddie's jacket. He felt the gears turning. Pieces were in motion, a puzzle that wasn't quite ready to solve itself.

This is what you wanted, he told himself. A job with teeth. And now it's biting you back.

He started the Falcon, the engine chattering with cold. He pulled away from the curb, the note still warm in his pocket. The river always led you back to the beginning, and tonight, the water would be waiting.

He didn't look back, not even once.

Later, in the washed-out privacy of his own apartment, he set the threatening note on the desk and turned it under the lamp. The typeface was clean, but the paper was high rag, a cut above what most secretaries kept in their supply closets. He traced the letters with his finger, memorizing the pattern.

"Your little problem is taken care of," he read aloud, then smiled.

Nobody in The Steel City ever took care of anything for long.

He opened the portfolio, spread the evidence across the table,

and lit a cigarette. The city outside was black and silent, but he knew better than to trust the quiet.

The job was just getting started. And this time, he wasn't the only one in the crosshairs.



CHAPTER II

HANNAH



The Anchor was closed for business but not for trouble; in the after-hours haze it felt like a fallout shelter for a lost generation. Greta had chained the door and dimmed the lights, leaving the neon 'Open' bleeding red. Lemon cleaner, bleach, and stale smoke stung Hannah's nose; she coughed into her sleeve.

Greta Watson hovered behind the bar, arms folded, watching as James Anderson limped past the pool table and dropped into a corner booth. The vinyl seat hissed, surrendering to a man who looked like he'd just lost a bare-knuckle bout with a cement truck. He patted his chest pocket for a pack of smokes, then remembered the bandages, and let his hand fall to the table with a thud.

Hannah trailed him, camera slung around her neck, the film canister taped shut and riding shotgun in her purse. She'd spent the last twelve hours running on caffeine, adrenaline, and the kind of anger that didn't fade with daylight. Her hands were still shaking, but her mind was diamond-clear.

Greta moved over, poured a short glass of rye, and slid it across to Anderson. He caught it without looking up. "How long we got?" he asked, voice sandpapered by blood and disappointment.

Greta shrugged, eyes flicking to the door. "Cops haven't done a sweep since five. You'll hear them before I do."

"Optimistic," Anderson said, then downed half the rye in one swallow.

Hannah set her bag on the table, unzipped it, and began unloading the evidence like a stage magician with a grudge. First out: her photographs of Eddie's coded notebook, wrapped in a plastic sleeve. Next, the blood-crusted ACD work jacket, its patch still readable under the gore. Then the matchbook from The Anchor, the visitor pass, and finally, a high-contrast photograph of the Greyhound ticket—the punch code mocking her even on glossy paper.

She slid the photo to Kelly. "This is the ticket they pulled from his wallet. Department should have the original in evidence; here's what it looks like if evidence gets lost."

She laid each piece in a careful arc, arranging them so the details would pop even in the bar's yellowed light. Her hands stilled only when everything was in place, the tableau complete.

"You expecting company?" Greta asked, voice a shade lighter than usual.

"Kelly," Hannah said. "He'll show. I left him the message."

Anderson grunted. "You got a death wish, inviting a cop here?"

Hannah didn't look at him. "I've got a story. He's got a case. You want the truth, or you want to die pretty?"

Anderson's smile was nothing but teeth. "Let's hope Kelly likes ugly."

Greta cleaned glasses that didn't need cleaning, her eyes never leaving the door. The only sound was the hum of the fridge and the soft click as Hannah loaded a new roll of film.

At 2:17 a.m., a silhouette filled the window. Daniel Kelly's knock was more of a threat than a greeting, three hard raps that made Greta's jaw clench. She unlocked the door with a flick, then vanished into the back without a word.

Kelly stepped inside, stamping the cold off his boots. He took in the room in a single sweep, eyes lingering just long enough on Anderson's bandages to catalog the damage. The cop's suit was

wrinkled, his tie loose, but his posture was all detective: wary, upright, and ready to bulldoze if the mood struck.

He slid into the booth across from Anderson and Hannah, then stared at the evidence arc with a professional disgust that barely masked his interest.

"Nobody called this in," Kelly said, voice flat. "You want to tell me why?"

Hannah pushed the notebook forward. "Because if I did, it'd end up in the river with Eddie."

Kelly didn't touch it. "You expecting me to believe this is legit?"

Anderson leaned in, favoring his stitched side. "You want to solve your dead dispatcher, or you want to bust us for breaking and entering?"

Kelly's jaw twitched, but he took the bait. He reached for the notebook, flipped it open, and ran a finger down the margin. The coded entries, route numbers, initials, weight discrepancies, were dense but readable once you knew the pattern.

Hannah watched his eyes as he read. He was a slow blinker, the kind who actually took in every line before moving on. She liked that about him, even if she'd never admit it.

After a minute, Kelly set the pictures of the notebook down. "You have a source, or just a fetish for trouble? Where'd you get these?"

Hannah shrugged. "The notebook is still in the janitor's closet of the ACD building, right where Eddie hid it. We didn't want to risk moving it without knowing who we could trust."

Kelly snorted. "Photographs are damn near useless in court. I need the physical evidence if we're going to make this stick."

Anderson nudged the jacket forward, the blood stiff enough to hold a crease. "Try this on for size."

Kelly studied the jacket, then the visitor pass, then the fine spatter on the collar. He glanced at Anderson. "You think this ties to Cameron?"

Anderson's eyes went dark. "I know it does."

Kelly glanced at Hannah, then back at Anderson. "You always so trusting of journalists?"

"Only the ones who save my life," Anderson said.

Hannah smiled, thin and sharp. "You see the X1A codes in the notebook?"

Kelly nodded. "It's a run. Midnight, heavy load, special destination. The 'bonus' notation's cute."

Hannah laid out the printouts of the photos, each one showing a different page of Eddie's hidden ledger. "Eddie was documenting the discrepancies for months. Every time Cameron's men moved something off-books, he logged it here. We've been cross-referencing the route codes with the shift schedules; it all lines up."

Kelly picked up a photo, then set it down. "And you figure the body in the river was the price of admission?"

Anderson's face went tight. "You ever see a man die for math?"

Kelly didn't answer, but the look on his face said yes. He picked up the Greyhound ticket, turned it over, then flicked it back to the table.

Hannah pressed her advantage. "The ticket's a fake. Wrong punch code, wrong serial. It was planted."

Kelly grunted, but his hands moved to the marrow bone in the evidence bag. He held it to the light, sniffed it, then glared at Hannah. "What the hell is this supposed to prove?"

She didn't flinch. "They doped the guard dog, Detective. Thursday night. Ask your friend Red at the gate."

Kelly's face went slack for a half second, then he closed it off. "You got a lab on this?"

Hannah tapped the bag. "Barbiturates. Enough to knock out a German Shepherd for a day."

Kelly set the bag down and looked at both of them. "You realize how much of this is inadmissible? Chain of custody's a joke."

Anderson shrugged. "You want the case, you take the mess."

Kelly's hands balled into fists on the table. He looked like he wanted to deck Anderson, or maybe himself. "You want me to run with this, you start talking. Full. No games. Who else knows?"

Greta's silhouette filled the doorway behind the bar, a silent witness to the confession about to happen.

Hannah looked at Anderson, then at Kelly. "Nobody else. Not yet."

Kelly scanned the room, then leaned in. "You know what happens if this goes wrong?"

Anderson grinned. "We're already dead, Detective. You're the one with something to lose."

The cop blinked once. Then he leaned back, eyes hard. "You bring me anything else, you bring it to me first. Not the press. Not your PI. Me."

Hannah nodded, feeling the adrenaline drain from her spine. "Deal."

Kelly stood, pocketed the bone, and left the rest of the evidence on the table. He paused at the door, hand on the knob. "You ever think maybe you're the mark, not the hero?"

Anderson smiled, eyes flat as river ice. "Every day."

Kelly left without looking back.

In the sudden quiet, Greta appeared, poured herself a short glass, and joined them at the booth. She didn't speak, but her presence was comfort and confession all at once.

Hannah took in the evidence: the empty glass, and the way Anderson nursed his side with a kind of resigned pride. For the first time, she felt like they had a shot.

Not a good shot. But better than most.

The next morning, Hannah was at her desk at the Press when the call came. She picked up on the second ring, expecting Kelly or maybe Anderson with another lead. Instead, the voice on the other end was smooth, unhurried, and utterly unfamiliar.

"Miss Robertson. I hope I'm not interrupting."

She sat up straighter, pen poised. "Who is this?"

"A friend of the city. I hear you've been asking questions about ACD. About Mr. Cameron." The voice paused, letting the silence do its work. "I wanted to offer some advice."

Hannah's grip tightened on the receiver. "I don't take advice from strangers."

"Then consider it a warning." The voice dropped, almost pleasant. "There are people in this city who don't appreciate journalists digging where they don't belong. People who can make things very... uncomfortable. For you, for your paper, for anyone you care about."

She felt the blood drain from her face, but kept her voice steady. "Is that a threat?"

"Just a friendly reminder, Miss Robertson. Some stories aren't worth telling. Some rivers are better left alone." A pause. "I'm sure you'll make the right choice."

The line went dead.

Hannah sat for a long moment, the receiver still pressed to her ear. The newsroom hummed around her, oblivious. She set the phone down, hands shaking, and looked at the notes spread across her desk.

They're watching. They know.

She grabbed her coat and headed for the door. If Cameron wanted to play games, she'd show him what a real story looked like.

But for the first time, the fear was real. And it wasn't going away.

CHAPTER 12

DETECTIVE KELLY



The ACD dispatch office hit you with all the subtlety of a mallet: fluorescent tubes flickering overhead, burnt out in every other fixture, linoleum so gouged and yellowed it looked like a crime scene in itself. Kelly's first step inside was greeted by the shriek of a chair being yanked across tile and the chemical stink of lemon disinfectant failing to mask stale coffee and carbon paper. There was a wall calendar three months out of date, the same pinup model's smile slowly decomposing under the weight of administrative indifference. He checked the badge on his lapel. Still crooked. He moved toward the bullpen.

Behind a battered steel desk, Denise Parker waited. She wore a navy suit with lapels sharp enough to gut a man, and her hair was sculpted into something that would withstand a minor explosion. The only visible concession to personality was a discreet crucifix and a wedding ring whose gold had dulled to the color of reheated chicken fat. She looked up at him with eyes that seemed both welcoming and absolutely uninterested in further human interaction.

"You're early, Detective," she said, her voice all business, with just a dab of nicotine. She set her pen down on a legal pad already

packed with notes, then folded her hands, perfectly parallel, atop the blotter.

Kelly took in the office: a rotary phone, chipped and tan, sat at twelve o'clock on her desk. To the right, a stack of run sheets, Thursday's set rubber-banded and dog-eared, perched just out of line. She'd left the top drawer open, and he caught a glimpse of carbon paper, stained the color of dried blueberries.

He stayed standing. "Thought I'd beat the morning rush. You mind?"

She gestured at the guest chair, which creaked as he sat. The vinyl seat had split, and the foam padding pinched his ass like a cheap date. He pulled out his notebook, but kept his hands in plain sight.

"Thanks for agreeing to see me, Ms. Parker. I won't take much of your time."

Denise managed a smile, efficient and practiced, then glanced over his shoulder as a pair of dock workers shuffled past in the hallway. She was alert to the traffic, her eyes darting every time a voice carried through the thin walls. Not so much afraid, Kelly noticed, as waiting for something. Or someone.

He took a slow breath. "I'm following up on the Kozma case."

The smile vanished. She replaced it with a look that belonged in a sympathy card.

"Yes. Poor Eddie. We all miss him." The line was delivered with funereal weight, but her hands didn't move. Kelly watched her fingers, the way the right index flicked nervously against her ring.

"You were his supervisor?"

She looked mildly offended. "No, I'm office manager. I handle the paperwork, payroll, logistics. Eddie worked dispatch. Nights, mostly. Sometimes I'd see him when I came in early."

Kelly nodded, jotting nothing. "Did you notice anything off about him lately? Unusual visitors, odd phone calls, trouble at home?"

She picked at a cuticle, careful not to break the skin. "Eddie had always been quiet. Kept to himself, but a good worker. Reliable. Except, the last month or so, he'd been... well, he seemed anxious.

Maybe even paranoid. He'd say things about being watched, or that the routes were changing for no reason. I told him to see the doctor, but he brushed it off."

Kelly let the silence build. Outside, a truck gate clattered and a muffled argument in Polish bled through the window. Denise flinched, a micro-twitch, then recovered with a sip of black coffee. The cup rattled, ever so slightly, as she set it back down.

"Any problems with the union?" Kelly pressed. "Management? Anybody lean on Eddie to change paperwork, fudge a run sheet?"

Her eyes narrowed, but she held the smile. "Detective, the only thing people lean on here is the coffee pot. There's nothing to fudge. The system is audited every month. If someone wanted to hide something, it'd have to go past three sets of eyes, including mine."

He pretended to study his notes, then pointed at the stack of Thursday's run sheets. "Mind if I take a look at those?"

She hesitated. It lasted a single heartbeat, but it was there—a stutter in the choreography. Then she nodded, plucked the bundle, and passed it over.

"Standard procedure. You'll see the signatures at the bottom. Eddie's on most of them. His last shift was the 7th."

Kelly flipped through the pages. The paper was thin, the carbon ghosts visible even under the bad lighting. But the real tell was the typeface: every "e" on the page came out filled, a solid black dot instead of an open loop. He glanced at the Olympia typewriter on Denise's side credenza, its "e" key scarred by years of overzealous hammering. Not Eddie's machine. She'd typed these herself.

He looked up, smiled. "You use the Olympia for all the sheets?"

Denise's mouth twitched. "We have two machines, but the Smith-Corona is always jamming. I do the finals on the Olympia. Saves everyone the headache."

He let the air hang, then set the sheets back down. "Eddie's handwriting is in the margins, here." He pointed at the blue ball-point scribble, but Denise barely glanced.

"He was old-school," she said, as if apologizing for the dead. "Made little notes, things to check for later. I always meant to clean

them off, but..." She stopped, eyes suddenly wet. "You know how it is."

He didn't, but he nodded. "Did you ever find anything missing, or off, in the manifests?"

She hesitated again, longer this time. Her knuckles turned pale as she gripped her coffee. "Sometimes there were discrepancies, but that's the nature of shipping. Trucks get loaded wrong, weights get logged after hours. Eddie was a stickler: he'd flag anything, even if it was only a rounding error. I don't know if he was trying to be helpful, or if he was simply...obsessed."

"You said he was anxious. Drinking, maybe?"

Now she brightened, eager to redirect. "He'd been hitting the bottle, yes. I caught him once in the break room with a flask. I told him if it happened again, I'd have to write him up. He promised to stop, but I think it got worse."

Kelly pressed the advantage. "Any idea where he was getting it? Any trouble with loan sharks, or other debts?"

She blinked, then shook her head. "Not that I knew of. His checks were always gone by payday, but that's not unusual around here. The union takes a big bite, then taxes, then you've got nothing left."

He nodded, then leaned in. "You ever meet with Patrick Cameron in person?"

The cup rattled again, a sharp clink. Denise set it down hard enough to slosh coffee on the blotter. She grabbed a napkin and dabbed, the motion jerky.

"I've met Mr. Cameron a few times. At staff meetings, mostly. He's...imposing. But he cares about the company. Keeps people in line."

Kelly watched the napkin soak up the spill. "Some say he runs a tight ship. Others say he's got a temper."

She dropped the napkin, then clasped her hands tight, as if in prayer. "It's a rough business, Detective. Sometimes you need a firm hand. That's all."

He let the implication hang, then switched tack. "Last question.

Did anyone come by the office looking for Eddie after he disappeared? Any calls, visitors, someone asking odd questions?"

She shook her head, but he caught the lie in the flick of her eyes to the rotary phone, then to the door. "No visitors," she said, then "just the police, and you."

He smiled, closed his notebook, and stood. The vinyl chair tried to take his pant cuff hostage, but he shook free. "Thanks for your time, Ms. Parker. You've been very helpful."

She gave a brittle smile, then reached for the coffee again, hands still trembling.

He walked to the door, but paused, hand on the knob. "If you think of anything else, you know how to reach me."

Denise nodded, then looked past him, to the window and the parking lot beyond.

Kelly stepped into the hallway, shut the office door softly, and let himself exhale. The interview had been textbook, but the woman's nerves were shredded. Maybe she was just jumpy, maybe not. He moved to the end of the hall, where the payphone still worked if you kicked it hard enough.

He dialed the operator, asked for the precinct. The connection patched him through to his desk. "Kelly," he said. "I want everything you can get on Denise Parker. Credit history, union membership, calls from the office in the last week. And pull the Thursday manifests. Check for retypes or late edits. We're looking at an inside job."

He hung up, then walked out to the lot. The wind cut through his coat, and the sky had turned the color of a week-old bruise. He lit a cigarette, shielded it from the gust, and watched the office window. Denise didn't look up, not even once.

That's the first time I've seen someone break a sweat in fifty-degree weather. He ground out the butt and made a note to come back after hours. Some things got clearer when the lights went off. So he stayed—cold, quiet, and patient—until the building showed him who it answered to after hours.

The rain started as a whisper on the roof, then grew to a steady percussion section playing just for Kelly's benefit. He sat in the Plymouth with the engine off, heater dead, windshield going abstract with condensation. Every few minutes he wiped the glass with the sleeve of his suit, then checked the rearview for tails that never materialized. Across the street, the ACD building hunched under a halo of sodium light, looking more like a minimum-security prison than the nerve center of the union's night shift.

He let the minutes slide by, savoring the first real stillness of the day. In stakeouts, you learned to read a building's pulse: windows switching on or off, the rhythm of the janitor's rounds, the color of the cigarettes glowing at side doors. He noted each event, giving them names: Nervous Smoker at 6:18, White Collar with the Lunch Bag at 6:24, and finally, the big one.

At 6:43, a Cadillac pulled up, black and waxed like a hearse, the chrome so clean it threw back the streetlights in weaponized arcs. The driver was union muscle: broad, chinless, wearing a suit that must have cost three paychecks, though the cut did nothing for his posture. He parked at the curb, killed the headlights, and took a slow, deliberate inventory of the street before getting out. Kelly made sure his own silhouette was invisible behind the condensation.

The Cadillac man opened the trunk for effect, then slammed it—every move telegraphed, like a shark letting the fish know it had arrived. He crossed the sidewalk in five steps, barely registering the rain, then shouldered his way into the ACD office. Kelly watched him vanish behind the glass doors, then flicked his lighter and sucked smoke into his lungs until it burned. *This is the guy they send when they want it cleaned up before the cops get a sniff.*

Inside, Kelly could see through the lobby's plate glass. Just a hint of movement as Denise Parker stood from her desk. The office was built with surveillance in mind: no curtains, every room open to the street. She must have seen the Cadillac man coming, because her body snapped rigid before he even entered. Kelly tracked her movements: a hand on the desk, the other clutching a coffee cup, then both arms folded over her chest. The man breezed past the security glass and went right for her door.

They talked for a minute, maybe two. Denise never sat, just hovered behind her desk, shifting her weight from foot to foot. Even from thirty yards, Kelly could see her mask break: the forced smile, the bite of her lower lip, the microsecond she flinched when the man leaned in. He said something (a joke or a threat, no way to tell) and she laughed, brittle, mouth open but eyes empty. Then he handed her a small envelope, the color of old bone. Denise took it, turned it over, then slid it into her desk as if it were a loaded pistol.

Kelly watched the rest of the show: the man's casual lean, his fingers drumming the desktop, the slow shake of his head as Denise tried to speak. She'd been rehearsing the lines, but they came out flat. The man took another step, close enough to crowd her back against the credenza. He pointed at the stack of run sheets, tapped the top page, then jabbed his thumb toward the door. The signal was clear. *Get rid of them, or we'll get rid of you.*

After less than five minutes, the Cadillac man left, hands empty. Denise stayed frozen behind the glass, a waxwork of misery and dread. She didn't move until the car's taillights had faded to nothing. Even then, she just sat, staring at the envelope like it might explode.

Kelly scribbled down the Cadillac's plates, then drew a quick sketch of the man's build and suit. He thought about going back in, but decided against it. Denise was cracked, but not quite broken. *Give her a day. Maybe she'll sweat out the truth on her own.* He checked the mirrors one last time, then started the Plymouth and pulled away from the curb.

She's not flipping out of conscience. She's flipping because she knows she's expendable. The second Cameron decides she's a liability, she's in the river with Eddie.

He took the long way home, cutting through the Strip to lose any tail that might have gotten clever. At the first red light, he flipped down the visor and checked his own eyes. Still bloodshot, but clear. He lit another cigarette, inhaled deep, and let the smoke curl out slow.

Maybe I'll get lucky, he thought. Maybe she'll call first. Or maybe the union will finish the job before I can put the pieces together. He didn't like

either option, but it was better than sitting in the dark, letting the rain tap out the minutes until morning.

He dropped the butt out the window, then gunned the engine at green. For the first time all day, he felt a twinge of optimism. Not much, but enough. He'd seen the crack in the armor, and all he needed was a little more pressure to turn it into a confession.

Back at his apartment, he poured a glass of rye, then called in the Cadillac's plates from the wall phone in his kitchen. While he waited for the operator to connect him, he stared at his hands, steady as ever, but with a tremor riding just under the skin.

Tomorrow, he'd pay Denise another visit. This time, he wouldn't ask for permission.

If he had to, he'd bring the whole damn union hall down with him.

CHAPTER 13

HANNAH



Greta was wiping down the bar for the third time that hour, the rag damp with a brown liquid that was half water, half lived-in memory. The Anchor had emptied out for the night: just two dock workers arguing over who would lose the next Pirates season, and a third, unknown, nursing his highball with the dedication of a man expecting absolution. The place felt like a bunker after the war, all flickering neon and the smell of sweat, bleach, and two decades' worth of Lucky Strikes ground into the floorboards. Hannah Robertson sat in the back room with James, their paperwork spread like shrapnel between a chipped coffee pot and a stained Formica table. She was working through her photographs of Eddie's notebook for the hundredth time, the coded entries striping her fingers and etching itself onto her retinas.

She heard the crash before she saw it. A hollow metal bang, then a raw, wet groan that carried over the jukebox's failed attempt at the Rolling Stones. The front door swung wide, admitting a slice of streetlamp yellow and a man whose outline looked wrong. For a second, she thought it was just a drunk, someone from the midnight shift ready to test the limits of Greta's patience. But the way he stag-

gered, the way his hand pressed to his side and left a trailing smear of dark on the glass, said something else.

Hannah stood so fast her chair skittered backward and caught on the torn linoleum. James was already up, rolling the tension out of his neck as if this sort of thing was just another line item on his calendar. They moved to the door in unison, stepping past the kitchen's swinging gate and into the glare of the main room.

Greta was halfway across the floor, arms out, blocking the path of the new arrival. He was compact, younger than she'd have guessed. Twenties, maybe, with the nervous eyes of someone who'd spent a lifetime scanning the horizon for trouble. His skin was sheet-white under the blood, sweat beading along his hairline and pooling in the hollows of his face. He wore an ACD work shirt, the badge half-torn and the sleeve darker with every second. He clutched at his side, fingers digging into the meat there, but it didn't look like he was holding in guts—just blood. Plenty of it.

"Help me," he gasped, but the sound was aimed at the floor, as if hoping to slip past the scrutiny of everyone present.

Greta caught his elbow, guiding him to the nearest stool. "You're bleeding on my floor," she said, voice flat as steel. She reached under the bar and came up with a faded bar towel, pressing it against his side with a practiced hand. Her hand was gentle but immovable, like a vice lined with memory foam. She looked over her shoulder at Hannah and made a quick gesture: get your ass over here.

James beat her to it, crossing the floor in a few limping strides. "Let me see," he said, and the stranger let go just enough for James to peel the work shirt away. The wound was shallow, maybe a knife but not a big one. Not a pro job. Blood welled but didn't spurt, a slow ooze that soaked the cloth and pooled on the wood. The metallic scent cut through the smoke and beer, fresh and bright.

"What's your name, honey?" Greta asked.

"Ryan. Ryan Bennett."

He sagged forward, forehead slick with sweat, and groaned. Greta wedged her hip between him and the bar, keeping him upright.

The two longshoremen had gone silent, watching with the

uneasy interest of men who'd seen enough blood in their lives to know not to get involved. Greta fixed them with a look. "Nothing to see here, boys. Nightcap's on me if you keep your traps shut."

They nodded, turned back to their beer. The unknown at the end of the bar lit another cigarette, hands steady, eyes never leaving the show. *That one's either a cop or a killer. Maybe both.*

"You're going to need a stitch or two," James said. "But you'll live."

"Just... let me sit. A minute. Please."

Greta nodded, then moved behind the bar, pulling the chain on the neon and flipping the sign to "Closed." She dead-bolted the door for good measure. The noise in the bar dropped by half, as if the city outside had finally exhaled.

They walked Ryan to the back room with Greta in the lead, James steadying him at the elbow and Hannah trailing with her open notebook. The kitchen door shut behind them with a sound that felt permanent, like the world outside had been vacuum-sealed. The back room was a study in forced optimism: a poster of Roberto Clemente on one wall, a shelf of cheap whiskey on the other, and a battered table whose Formica had been eroded by so many spilled secrets it was now just a layer of soft wood and stubborn stains.

Greta maneuvered Ryan into the nearest chair, then shot a glare at James. *Fix this*, she seemed to say, *or I'll do it myself*. James got to work, slicing the shirt away from the wound and examining it in the half-light. "It's not deep," he muttered, "but you'll need a suture. Or tape and a miracle."

"Use the whiskey," Ryan said, voice thin but deliberate. He had the look of a man who'd said that line before, but never meant it less.

Greta poured a double, then handed half to James and the rest to Ryan. "For the pain," she said, then to Hannah: "He's your show now, sweetie."

Hannah sat across from him, notebook ready. "Start with last week," she said. "You said you saw something?"

Ryan sipped the whiskey, grimaced. "Wasn't supposed to. X1A runs are bonus pay. Night shift, no questions. You drive, you shut up, you get an envelope at the end."

James wrapped gauze around the wound, hands steady. "How'd you get cut?"

Ryan shrugged, then regretted it. "Tonight, I was making a drop at the warehouse. Some guy tried to jack the crate off the back. Didn't even have a knife, just a boxcutter. I pushed him, he got me, then ran. Didn't even take the crate. Just wanted to scare me, I guess."

Hannah pressed. "But last week?"

Ryan's face went pale again. "We were supposed to drop at the Westinghouse storage, the old one off the river. Me and Tommy. My buddy, other driver. We were ahead of schedule, so we cracked a beer and decided to see what was inside. Just to say we'd done it."

"You opened the crate," Hannah said, her heart thumping with the taste of something big.

He nodded, slow. "Medical labels on the outside, but the bands were new, fresh paint. Inside..." He stopped, eyes darting to the door. "I shouldn't be telling you this."

Hannah leaned in. "Ryan. Whatever you saw, we can help. But you have to tell us."

He swallowed, hard. "Guns. Rifles, looked like. I don't know what kind. Tommy said military. We closed it up fast, didn't say nothing to nobody."

James tied off the gauze, then put a steadying hand on Ryan's shoulder. "What happened after?"

Ryan squeezed his eyes shut. "We heard a car outside. Two guys, suits. Not union, not anyone from the warehouse. They had guns out, not even trying to hide them. I told Tommy to close the crate, but he was too slow. One of the suits. Big one, nose like a goddamn wedge. He just..." Ryan trailed off, shaking his head. "He shot Tommy. Right in the chest. Then turned to me and said, 'You didn't see shit. Next time, you're with him.'"

Hannah scribbled furiously, watching the tremor in Ryan's hands. "Did you go to the police?"

He laughed, a wet, miserable sound. "Who do you think's getting the guns? Half the beat cops in this city are on Cameron's Christmas list. I went home, told my wife I got cut on a pallet, didn't sleep for two days."

Greta poured another whiskey, left it by his hand. "What about Eddie?"

Ryan's face collapsed, and for a second Hannah thought he might faint. "He was the dispatcher. He knew about the runs, but he never said a word. Except the last night. He pulled me aside and said, 'Whatever you do, don't ask about X1A. Just drive.' I thought he was being paranoid."

James's jaw tightened. "Did you move him?"

Ryan looked at him, horror in his eyes. "No. I mean..." He broke off, wiped his face with a trembling hand. "Night Eddie died, I got called in. Special job, they said. McGivern and another guy, tall, blonde, union jacket but not a real driver. They had a bundle, wrapped in tarp, heavy. They loaded it in my truck, told me to drive to the river slip and dump it. Not even subtle about it."

He swallowed, the next words barely a whisper. "I did it. But I didn't know who it was until I saw the paper. I swear to god, I thought it was garbage, or maybe a deer or something. Never touched it, never looked. Just dumped and left."

Hannah put her pen down, voice low. "You knew."

Tears streaked his face now, mixing with sweat and blood. "I knew. But you don't say no to Cameron. You don't say no to McGivern. They find out you talked..." He gestured at the wound, as if that explained everything.

Hannah watched him, weighing every word. "Who was the other guy? The tall one, blonde?"

Ryan shook his head. "Never got his name. McGivern just called him Smitty. But I'd never seen him before that night."

"What about Cameron? Did you ever see him at the warehouse? Or at the yard?"

Ryan hesitated. "Not that night. But I've seen him around. He

comes by sometimes, checks on the runs. Never talks to the drivers, just the supervisors."

Hannah pressed. "So you can't put Cameron at the scene?"

Ryan's face twisted. "I can't put anyone at the scene except McGivern and Smitty. And they'll say I'm lying. They'll say I'm the one who killed Tommy, or Eddie, or whoever. I'm just a driver. Nobody's gonna believe me."

Hannah looked at James, then back at Ryan. "We have photos. We have Eddie's notebook. If you can identify the men in the pictures, we can build a case."

Ryan's eyes went wide. "You got pictures?"

James pulled the envelope from his coat, spread the grainy images across the table. Ryan leaned in, fingers trembling as he traced the faces.

"That's the crate. That's my truck." He pointed to a blurred figure in the background. "And that—that's Smitty. The tall one. He's the one who shot Tommy."

Hannah circled the face, then looked up at James. "We have enough to put McGivern and Smitty at the scene. But not Cameron."

Ryan shook his head. "Cameron's smart. He never shows his face. But he's the one calling the shots. Everybody knows it."

Hannah felt the weight of the moment, the lives and stories balanced on a pinhead. She wrote it all down, not trusting herself to say what she really thought.

We have a witness. We have photos. But we don't have Cameron. Not yet.

She set down her pen, the page already half full with Ryan's confession, and waited for someone to break the silence.

The silence had started to feel sacred when someone tried to break down the back door.

Three sharp, measured knocks, then the rattle of a key in the lock. Greta shot to her feet, body rigid, then gestured for Ryan to keep still. She moved to the door, her footsteps barely more than a

whisper on the linoleum, and checked the peephole. For a second, Hannah thought Greta might bolt the lock, but instead she unlatched it, slow and deliberate, as if she had all the time in the world.

Detective Daniel Kelly stepped into the kitchen, trench coat spattered with rain, the ghost of a cigarette clinging to his lapel. His eyes moved over the tableau: Ryan hunched and bleeding, James perched like a gargoyle on the table edge, Hannah with her notebook still open, and Greta in the doorway, arms folded like she could keep the city out by sheer force of will.

Kelly took off his hat, shook off the water, and set it on the counter. "You folks are hard to track down," he said, voice tired but not unkind. He didn't reach for his badge, but the shape of it pressed through the fabric of his coat, a threat and a promise all at once.

Ryan tried to stand, but James pressed him back with a hand on the shoulder. "You here to arrest us?" Ryan croaked, terror swimming in the whites of his eyes.

Kelly shook his head. "No. I'm here to save your sorry ass, if you let me."

He crossed to the table, moving with the patience of a man who'd seen every permutation of human panic. "I need you to listen, all of you. This thing with Cameron, it's bigger than you think. He's got friends on every floor of City Hall. He's got union muscle, councilmen, and more money than God. If you're not careful, you'll be next in the river."

Greta braced herself against the fridge, jaw set. "So what do we do?"

Kelly glanced at her, then at Ryan. "We build a case. Real evidence, not rumors. Testimony, pictures, locations. I've got people in the Bureau who still care about the job. But we need a witness who can put Cameron at the heart of it."

He looked at Ryan. "That's you, kid."

Ryan's mouth opened, then closed. He fished in his pocket, came up with a handful of sunflower seeds, and started chewing them with frantic energy. "What if I say no?" he asked.

Kelly shrugged. "Then you can take your chances with Cameron's boys. Or the next time you get cut, you won't make it to the bar."

Greta's voice cut through. "You boys done measuring? Because I've got a kid upstairs who's scared out of his mind, and he's not going to wait for you to finish your pissing contest."

Kelly and James both looked at her, then at each other.

Greta stepped forward, her face granite. "He's not going anywhere tonight. He stays here, upstairs. You want to talk, you do it when he's ready."

Kelly almost smiled, but his eyes stayed cold. "You're a tough lady, Greta."

She didn't blink. "I run a bar in the Strip. I have to be."

James finally spoke. "You trust the DA's office?"

Kelly's laugh was dry as chalk. "Trust is expensive, but fear is free. Right now, Cameron's got more fear than trust. We tip the balance, we get a shot."

Hannah watched the dance, her notebook forgotten. "What do you need from us?"

Kelly looked at her, saw the reporter hunger in her eyes. "The story. You have to keep it quiet, for now. If you publish too soon, Cameron will burn every scrap of evidence and kill everyone who talks. But when we're ready, you print everything. You make it public so he can't bury it."

Hannah nodded, adrenaline boiling under her skin. *You're asking me to sit on the best story in the city's history.* "Okay," she said. "But when it's time, you let me know."

Kelly turned back to Ryan. "Warehouse location. You give it to me, I get you out. Witness protection, new name, whatever you want."

Ryan hesitated, fingers tapping the table in a Morse code of panic. He looked at Greta, then at Hannah, then at James, and finally back at Kelly. "Pier 9," he said, voice barely there. "The old Westinghouse storage. They keep the crates in the back, under lock. Every Wednesday, a truck comes in, takes a load, and leaves. Nobody signs for anything."

Kelly wrote it down, eyes never leaving Ryan's face. "You got a badge number for the guard? Any names?"

"Just McGivern," Ryan said. "And sometimes a guy named Smitty, but I never saw his real ID."

Kelly nodded, closed his notebook, and put a hand on Ryan's good shoulder. "You did the right thing."

Ryan flinched like he'd been burned. "Tell that to my wife," he said, staring at the floor.

Greta poured herself a shot, then set the bottle down with a thud. "He stays here," she repeated, voice shaking now. "You go deal with the rest."

Kelly gave her a salute with two fingers. "I'll have a patrol car swing by every hour. You see anyone who looks wrong, call the number on this card." He slid a business card across the table to Greta, who snatched it up without looking.

James rose, rolled his shoulders. "What's the plan?"

Kelly glanced at the ceiling, as if the answer might be written up there. "I get the location to the right people. We hit the warehouse, get the guns, and tie it to Cameron. You stay alive, and don't do anything stupid."

He looked at Hannah, then at the others. "That goes for all of you."

Greta started to herd Ryan toward the stairs, her voice suddenly soft. "Come on, honey. We'll get you patched up right."

Ryan stood, bloodstain spreading wider on his shirt, but this time he didn't fight it. "Thanks," he whispered to no one in particular.

Kelly watched them go, then turned to Hannah and James. "You two keep digging, but keep it quiet. If you find anything else, you come to me."

James nodded. "You'll owe us a beer."

Kelly's mouth twitched. "If we survive, I'll buy the case."

He tipped his hat, then left the way he came, the door banging shut behind him.

For a long moment, the room was just Hannah and James, the smell of blood and whiskey and a hint of old, desperate hope.

James poured himself another, then raised it in Hannah's direction. "To the next chapter," he said.

She smiled, then set her pen to the page.

Outside, the city kept breathing, unbroken and unstoppable. But here, for a moment, it was all down to the few who'd decided not to let the darkness win.

She wrote, and this time she made sure it would stick.

But as she finished the last line, a new thought crept in: *Ryan can put McGivern and Smitty at the scene. But not Cameron. And without Cameron, the whole thing falls apart.*

She closed the notebook, feeling the weight of everything they still didn't know.

The case was far from over.

CHAPTER 14

JAMES



The office was less a workspace than a crime scene in progress. Cigarette haze tangled with the amber cone of the desk lamp, each new drag making the air thicker, wetter, harder to parse. James Anderson had stopped counting the hours and the butts: now he measured time in evidence, the slow accretion of paper, photos, and whatever else the city coughed up. It was three a.m., or maybe five. The clock above the radiator had dropped dead after the first bottle, and there was no way he was calling time-and-temperature just to get a voice on the line.

He thumbed open the manila envelope, shaking out the photos Hannah had run off from the last pass at the ACD. Black-and-whites, grainy and overexposed, every page a confession in code. Beside them, a spiral-bound notebook: Greta's personal bar ledger, dense with ballpoint, pages stuck together by a combination of beer, lemon cleaner, and one unspeakable glue. It was the kind of book that could outlive its owner.

James flattened the ledger on the desk, then lined up the photos in sequence. Each one was a snapshot of Eddie's hidden world: route codes, columns of numbers, the same nervous underlining

that marked out the X1A runs from the regular. He ran his finger along the margin, then flipped to the page from Greta's notebook dated two days later. There was a list, handwritten, of envelope pickups: amount, date, a first name or initial. Always the same: "Ryan. 2 AM. Envelope. Special." Sometimes "bonus," sometimes just a crude dollar sign.

He tore off a sheet of butcher paper, the kind used for wrapping meat, and taped it to the wall with masking tape scavenged from the last tenant. Then he started building. Left column: dates, lifted from the dispatch logs and the secret ledger. Middle: the cash drops from Greta's notebook, paired to the day. Right column: a running total of the money, calculated in pencil with the diligence of a gravedigger.

The lines started to connect before he was halfway through. Every X1A run mapped to an envelope delivery, always late, always unreported. Sometimes two a week, sometimes a lull, but never more than five days between them. He paused at the fourth row, tracing his index finger from the "midnight run" to the dollar figure: \$900, listed as "Ryan. For Cameron." He grunted, a sound more cough than laugh. *Not even trying to hide it. The arrogance of the sure thing.*

He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The radiator hissed, then clanged, the heat flickering on and off in an imitation of life. The only other sound was the steady, mechanical tick of the pencil against paper and the wet, involuntary noise his lungs made as he coughed up the last smoke. He was cold, but the back of his neck ran slick.

He lit another cigarette. The lighter shook, a detail he tried to ignore. He went back to the wall and started drawing in the cross-links: whenever there was a "bonus" payment, there was a new line of X1A code in Eddie's notebook. The pattern wasn't just linear: it radiated, branching from a trunk. He realized he'd built a tree, and every leaf was a gun shipment, every limb another man who'd signed off or paid in.

After the sixth iteration, he stepped back, surveying the whole mess. The numbers weren't just numbers anymore. They were a skeleton—a gunrunning operation with every vertebra in place. Six

separate drops before the one that killed Eddie, each one with a payoff, a cover-up, and a delivery to someone higher up. Tens of thousands moved in cash, small bills, through Greta's bar and into the void. All signed off by the initials of men he could now name: McGivern, Smitty, sometimes just "Cam." Never an attempt to obscure, just the raw confidence of men who didn't think the law could touch them.

He put his fist against the wall, just for a second. Not enough to leave a mark, but enough to make the bones shift. *This is what you get for finishing the puzzle. A punch in the chest and a cigarette burn in the soul.*

He reached for the next sheet of paper and started a new column: the names of every man who'd signed for an envelope. There were more than a dozen. Some were regulars at The Anchor, some he recognized from the union hall. Two of them were cops.

He flipped back to Eddie's notebook, tracing the coded entries with his finger. The dispatcher's shorthand was dense, but he was starting to see the pattern: route numbers keyed to shift schedules, initials matched to pay stubs, weight discrepancies flagged with a simple "+" or "-". Eddie had built a cipher out of the tools of his trade: nothing fancy, just the logic of a man who'd spent his life moving cargo and keeping records.

Hannah's photos filled in the gaps. He cross-referenced the route codes with the manifest images, matching each X1A entry to a specific truck, a specific night. The weight columns told the story: official manifests always read light, Eddie's notebook always read heavy. The difference was the guns.

He wrote out the formula on the butcher paper, step by step: Official weight minus real weight equals contraband. Contraband equals guns. Guns equal money. Money equals Cameron.

We've learned the pattern. Now we have to prove it.

He looked at the wall, the matrix of lines and names, and felt the weight of what came next. They had enough to make the case, if they could get the evidence into the right hands. But the chain of custody was a mess, and half the cops in the city were on Cameron's payroll.

We've learned X1A. Now we have to risk everything to use it.

He closed his eyes. For a moment, he saw the river again—the body bloated, the ligature mark black as printer's ink. Then he saw the bar, the blood trail from Ryan, the way Greta's hands had trembled just before she poured the whiskey. He opened his eyes. The sweat was cold now.

He walked to the desk, sat, and started writing a list. Not for himself. He'd never make it out if it was just for him. This was for Eddie, and for Hannah, and maybe even for the city. He got four names in before the pencil snapped. He sharpened it with a paring knife, then kept going.

He didn't hear the knock until it repeated, louder this time, the sound cutting through the wall of smoke. He looked at the door, hand tensing on the knife. He stood, the movement creaky and unfamiliar.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Greta," came the answer, muffled but unmistakable.

He unlocked the door and let her in. She looked like she'd been up all night too. She took one look at the wall and exhaled through her teeth.

"You figured it out," she said.

He nodded, not trusting his voice.

She moved closer, eyes scanning the pattern. "What are you going to do with it?"

He looked at her, then at the wall, then back. "What Eddie did," he said, finally. "Except this time, it's not getting buried."

She nodded, once. Then she went to the desk, poured out the last of the coffee, and drank it black. She didn't ask if she could sit, so he let her.

The radiator clanged again, the sound now more comfort than warning. The city outside was alive, but for the first time in days, so was he.

He went to the wall, taped up the last column, and wrote in bold, shaking letters: "CAMERON."

The world didn't end, but for a second, it felt like it might.

He sat beside Greta, the two of them breathing the same air, the same failure, the same stubborn hope.

Outside, the river kept moving, carrying the city's secrets downstream.

Inside, the numbers waited, ready to change everything.



CHAPTER 15

DETECTIVE KELLY



The rain had stopped pretending and started coming down with intent, turning the windshield of the Plymouth into a Jackson Pollock of city grime and dead bugs. Daniel Kelly sat in the driver's seat, engine idling, collar pasted to his neck, and watched water crawl the glass in erratic beads. The plastic-wrapped copy of Eddie's coded ledger glowed faintly in the sodium arc of the street-lamp above. He'd left it on the passenger seat.

The photographs Hannah showed him weeks ago were damning but inadmissible. He needed the real thing. And a way to get it into evidence without burning his badge. *Do it right, or don't do it at all.* His father's voice, louder in memory than it ever was in person. He'd lived by that line so long it had etched itself into his marrow, dictated every meal, every girlfriend, every moment he'd chosen the badge over something easier. The old bastard hadn't lived to see his son inherit his cynicism, but Daniel knew he'd be gloating from the grave.

His knuckles had gone white on the steering wheel. He flexed them, watched the color struggle to return. The car smelled of wet wool and day-old ash, the familiar comfort of failure. The leather seat, perpetually damp, creaked as he shifted for the thousandth

time. Nothing helped. The ledger was still there, like a tumor in cellophane.

Fruit of the poisonous tree. The Fourth Amendment, a velvet rope at the world's most exclusive club, kept the ugly truth out in the rain. No way to launder this evidence. Not when it came from a break-in, not when it was handed over by a reporter with a fixation on dead men. *They'd chew you up for this, Kelly. The union's got lawyers that can eat a murder charge for breakfast. You go in with this, you'll be lucky to get demoted to traffic. More likely, you'll just hand Cameron a get-out-of-jail-free card and wind up with your pension in a paper sack.*

Captain Briggs had pulled him aside that morning, voice low and friendly, eyes anything but. "You're making waves, Kelly. The union's complaining. City council's asking questions. Maybe it's time to let this one go."

Kelly had said nothing, just nodded and walked out. But he'd felt the threat behind the words: *Play along, or we'll find someone who will.*

And then there was the call from the DA's office. A young assistant, voice clipped and careful, had asked if Kelly had "any new developments" on the Kozma case. When Kelly mentioned the ledger, the line went quiet. Then: "We'll need to see a clean chain of custody, Detective. Otherwise, it's not worth the paper it's printed on."

A clean chain of custody. The words echoed in his head, mocking him. The evidence was real. The case was solid. But without a way to get it into the system, it was worthless.

He closed his eyes, jaw tight enough to make his temple jump. The rain hammered down, steady as a metronome, and for a moment it was all he could hear. Then the memory of Eddie's body rose up, skin like paper-mâché, ligature mark so black it looked painted on. Nobody deserved to go out like that. Not even a sad sack dispatcher whose best hope in life was an extra shift and a cold Iron City.

He thought about his brother, too. Tommy had been a patrol officer in '68, the year the city burned. He'd followed the rules, filed every report, and gotten a commendation for his trouble. Then he'd

testified against a union rep who'd been shaking down local businesses. Three weeks later, his car had gone off the Fort Duquesne Bridge in the middle of the night. The department called it an accident. Kelly knew better.

Tommy played by the rules. And they killed him for it.

Kelly looked at the ledger one last time, then slid it back onto the seat. His hands shook, just a little. He tried to blame it on the cold, but even he didn't believe that. He reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a pencil, and wrote three words on a scrap of paper: "Do it right." He tucked the note in with the ledger, sealed the whole mess with a fresh strip of tape.

The city would never thank him for this, and if he got caught, he'd go down harder than any of the bastards he'd spent his life chasing. But for the first time in weeks, the tension in his jaw eased. He could almost breathe again.

If you're going to burn, burn for something worth the heat.

He gripped the wheel and let the rain batter the windshield, waiting for the moment he could move without thinking about it. When it came, he started the engine, the Plymouth roaring back to life with a sound that was half threat, half plea for mercy.

He had a job to finish. And this time, he was going to do it his way.

He barely registered the knock, at first. It was too soft for the weather, more an apology than a summons. Kelly checked the rearview, then the sidewalk: empty, except for a battered Buick squatting in the crosswalk two cars back, windows fogged to privacy. He wiped his own glass with the back of his sleeve, peered through the wet, and saw Denise Parker pressed to the passenger window, face lit by the spill of the streetlamp. Half her features were lost in shadow, but the rest was panic, frozen and waiting.

He hit the lock, motioned her in. Denise slid into the seat, shut the door fast. A gust of wet air and cheap perfume followed her, strong enough to drown out the old sweat of the car. She carried

herself like a deflated party balloon: shoulders slumped, hands wound together in her lap, eyes darting every direction but at him.

"You picked a hell of a night for a confession," he said, keeping his tone neutral. Denise didn't flinch, but her hands went from shaking to full percussion.

"I—I can't do this anymore," she said, voice low and scraping. She pulled a tissue from her sleeve and dabbed at her forehead, which was dry as dust. "You said I should call if—if I remembered something."

He nodded, watching the way her fingernails gouged at her palms, the nervous tap of her foot against the floorboard. "I remember. What's on your mind, Denise?"

She looked up, eyes rimmed red and so tired they seemed painted on. "You know about Eddie. About what he found." The words came slowly, as if each one had to fight its way out. "He came to me two days before..." She couldn't finish. Kelly let her sit in it.

"Before he died," Denise managed, after a breath that rattled her whole frame. "He said he couldn't bring it home, not with people watching. He wanted me to help him. Said you were the only one in the Bureau he could trust, but..." She faltered, shaking her head. "He didn't trust the police. Not really. Not after what happened last time."

Kelly let the silence stretch. "What did you do, Denise?"

She pressed the tissue to her mouth, voice muffled but clear. "I told him to hide it. The real ledger. I said, 'Put it somewhere nobody will ever look. If you're scared, just leave a note.' I thought he'd chicken out. But he didn't. He put it in the janitor's closet. There's a pipe chase behind the mop rack, just above the third shelf. He told me, the night before. He said, 'If something happens to me, give it to the Detective.'" She shuddered, like the memory was a physical thing trying to crawl out of her skin.

"After he died," she said, hands now wringing the purse strap in white-knuckle turns, "Cameron called me to his office. He was so calm. He said, 'It's time to clean house, Denise. Time to make sure everyone's got the right story.' He made me..." She broke off, voice splintered. "He made me type new run sheets. Fudge the dates,

make the weight match the paperwork. Then he told me to act like nothing ever happened. Like Eddie never existed."

Kelly felt the familiar mix of sympathy and disgust. Denise was a good person, or had been, but she'd been complicit for so long it was like the habit had rewired her nerves. She was trembling harder now, the edges coming undone.

"Why are you telling me this now?" he asked, keeping it gentle.

She blinked, surprise overtaking the misery for a second. "Because it's killing me. Every night, I see his face. The way he looked when he was nervous. The way he called me from the payphone, just to make sure I was okay." She choked on a laugh, ugly and wet. "He was the only one in that place who ever cared what happened to me. Now he's gone, and I'm the reason why."

She dug in the purse, hands frantic, and produced a small brass key. It was taped to a business card, his own handwriting on the reverse: "If lost, return to D. Kelly, Homicide." She peeled the tape with shaking fingers, then slid the key across the vinyl seat, slow and deliberate.

"You want the truth, Detective?" she said, voice steadier now, but dead as old mail. "Go tonight. The janitor's closet, room 14B. You'll find what you need. Then do whatever you have to." She met his eyes, for the first time all night. "Just...put it where it should have been all along."

He took the key, felt the cold bite of metal through the paper. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

She's handing you the gun, you just have to decide who to shoot.

He slid the key into his pocket, careful not to let their fingers touch. "You know what this means, Denise?"

She nodded. "It means I'm done lying. For him, for Cameron, for anyone." Her face softened, a moment of relief passing through like sun behind clouds. "Do it right. That's all I'm asking."

He watched her for a long second, the way her hands finally stilled, the way the air in the car shifted from panic to exhausted calm. "You want a ride?" he asked, more out of habit than hope.

She shook her head. "No. I'll walk. I could use the air." She

opened the door, then paused, half-in and half-out of the rain. "Be careful. You're not the only one who wants this buried."

She shut the door before he could answer, vanishing into the dark like a ghost that had finally found its confession booth.

He sat there, the brass key a hot coal in his hand, and let the truth settle in.

You're not saving the city, Kelly. You're just keeping score until the next bastard shows up.

But for tonight, the score had changed.

And for the first time in his career, he was the one writing the numbers.

The ACD yard at four a.m. was what the city looked like when nobody bothered to keep up appearances. The chain-link fence, slick with rain, sagged along the perimeter like a drunk refusing to walk home. Kelly killed his headlights two blocks out, then rolled the Plymouth the last fifty yards, wheels squelching into the curb like it was quicksand. The wind carried the usual cocktail: hot transformer ozone, diesel, the faint river-stink that seeped into every pore and never really left.

He killed the interior light, checked the glove box for the fourth time: key from Denise, flashlight, latex gloves, a folded-up warrant he'd left unsigned as a sick joke. He patted himself down, hit the sidewalk, and let the cold bite all the way to the bone. The only movement was a barge horn way upriver, and the sodium lamps along the lot cast more shadow than light. He pulled up his collar, hunched down, and made for the west gate, the same route James and Hannah had used days ago.

You're not a cop right now. You're a burglar. Enjoy the role reversal.

The padlock on the side door was a joke: Kelly had seen better security on vending machines. He worked the brass key with gloved hands, careful not to smudge the knob, and let himself into the narrow corridor. The heat inside was off, and the hallway's cinderblock walls wept condensation, each drip audible

in the dead silence. Even the clocks here seemed to tick with caution.

He paused at the intersection, letting his eyes adjust. From here, he could see the outline of Eddie's old desk, still littered with the debris of a man who'd never gotten around to cleaning out his life. He forced himself to look away, kept moving. Denise had said "janitorial," first door past the break room. He passed the wall calendar, three months behind, and the bulletin board still feathered with pink union memos, half of them warnings to "avoid unauthorized overtime." *Yeah, because that's the real crime around here.*

He hesitated outside the closet. It was unlocked, just like Denise said. The smell of lemon cleaner, mold, and ancient dust whacked him in the face as he stepped inside. The space was coffin-tight, lined with buckets and brooms, cobwebs strung like tripwire overhead. He closed the door behind him, flicked on the flashlight, and found the pipe chase right where she'd said. Third shelf, behind a stack of blue shop towels, there was a panel held on by a single screw. He worked it loose with a coin, hands shaking so badly he dropped the panel and nearly brought down an entire row of spray cans.

Behind it: a zippered bank pouch, faded navy, the kind used by grocery stores for cash drops. He pulled it out, heart in his throat, and set it on the mop bucket. Unzipped, it held a small, black notebook, pages already curling with humidity. He shined the flashlight over the cover. No markings, but the weight of it was proof enough.

He thumbed through the pages. The first ten were blank, then the coded columns started, each line a confession. Route numbers, dates, initials. Some pages were smudged, the script faint, but the meaning was clear: every dirty secret, every bonus shipment, every payoff tracked by a dead man who'd known exactly how this would end. The last entry was dated three days before Eddie's murder. After that, nothing.

You're holding the truth, and it's going to get you killed. He nearly laughed, but what came out was closer to a cough.

He zipped the pouch, tucked it under his coat, and wiped down every surface he'd touched. Habit, or maybe guilt. The cold sweat

was running down his back now, soaking into his waistband. His pulse hammered in his wrists, his throat, even the backs of his knees.

He thought about turning back. He could leave the pouch, pretend he'd never found it, and go back to his life. The department would close the case, Cameron would walk, and another body would float downstream in a year or two. *That's the smart play. That's the play that keeps you alive.*

But he kept moving.

He retraced his steps, keeping to the blind spots, until he hit the dispatch office. The place was even more depressing by flashlight: every desk a museum exhibit of personal failure, Eddie's the main attraction. There was a half-full mug of coffee, scummed over, and a yellowed crossword with only the verticals filled in. Kelly ran his hand along the edge of the desk, then opened the bottom drawer. It was packed with manifests and old timecards, a graveyard of the shift work that had slowly ground Eddie down.

He pulled the drawer, shuffled the papers, and slid the pouch in all the way at the back. He packed the manifests in tightly, then closed the drawer, checking the finish for any sign of tampering. There was none. He turned it, then spun it back, just like Eddie always did.

He straightened, wiped his brow with the back of his gloved hand, and took a minute to let his heartbeat catch up to reality. The taste in his mouth was coppery, and he felt the urge to spit, but he swallowed it instead. He did a final sweep of the room. No alarms. Just the sleeping ghosts of every bad decision ever made in this building.

At the door, he hesitated. The urge to look back, to make sure it was still there, was nearly overwhelming. *If you stare at it too long, you'll talk yourself into taking it home and torching the whole mess.* He left instead, moving down the corridor on silent feet.

He killed the flashlight before he hit the outer door, then stood in the dark, listening. Nothing but the slow drip from the ceiling and the river's distant call. He let himself out, locked the door behind him, and stashed the gloves in the sewer grate where nobody would ever care to look.

On the walk back to the car, he was hit by the absurdity of it all. He'd just committed a felony, planted evidence, and violated every oath he'd ever taken. And yet, for the first time in weeks, he felt almost clean. Like he'd finally done what needed to be done, even if it meant pulling the pin on his own career.

You're a fool, Kelly. But maybe you're the right kind of fool for this city.

He slid into the Plymouth, started the engine, and drove away without looking back. The river fog was rising, curling through the alleys and over the bridges like it was trying to erase everything that happened in the night.

But the ledger was there. Waiting for him, waiting for the world. And when the sun came up, the city would have to deal with it.

The sun was up but nobody seemed happy about it. The sky over the Strip was the same color as skim milk, and the river fog clung to the blacktop in clots that made everything look half-dissolved. Kelly double-checked the time. 6:03. He parked the Plymouth in a spot that gave a perfect view of the ACD main entrance. A uniformed kid from Zone 2 trailed in behind him, eyes bright, breath smoking in the cold.

"You ever do a search on a place like this?" Kelly asked, pulling his hat low to keep the drizzle off.

The kid shook his head, nervous. "No, sir. Closest I got was the Bowling League raid."

Kelly snorted, then passed him the warrant, careful to keep his hands steady. "Don't get your hopes up. Nine times out of ten it's a wild goose chase." *Except this time, the goose is already cooked and I'm the idiot with the lighter fluid.*

Inside, the dispatch office was already awake. Four men at the first two desks, all pretending to be busy but really just trying to listen without getting caught. Denise was at her post, hands folded on the blotter, face arranged in an expression of careful innocence. She nodded at Kelly, eyes flicking to the brass badge, then away.

"We're executing a follow-up on the Kozma file," Kelly

announced, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Nobody leaves until we're finished. You got questions, ask them." The uniforms fanned out, one to the loading dock, another to the records storage, a third to the break room. Kelly made a show of searching the manager's office, then circled back to the main floor.

The young cop—Morse, or maybe Morris—stood at Eddie's desk, looking lost. "You want me to start here, Detective?"

Kelly nodded. "Open every drawer. Look through everything. If it's not nailed down, check underneath. Sometimes people get creative."

Morse nodded, rolled up his sleeves, and started the methodical process of rooting through three decades' worth of forgotten paperwork. First the pencils, then the battered Rolodex, then the files. He was gentle, almost apologetic, but Kelly could see the way his hands started to shake once he realized what he was really looking for.

Ten minutes in, Morse hit the bottom drawer. It didn't want to open, like it was gummed up with old gum or secrets. He yanked harder, and the whole drawer lurched free. At the very back, buried under a layer of manifests and union newsletters, was the navy pouch.

"Detective, I think I found something," Morse said, holding up the pouch like he'd just caught a fish nobody believed was real.

Kelly forced his pulse down. He walked over, careful not to betray anything, and took the pouch. "Where was it?"

Morse pointed, jaw slack. "Behind those papers, right at the back. Like someone just stuffed it there."

Kelly unzipped the pouch in front of everyone. The little black notebook was inside, dry and intact. He thumbed the pages, letting the coded entries catch the light. He could feel the eyes of the whole room burning into his back.

He held it up, voice neutral. "Chain of evidence starts now. Uniformed witness?"

Morse swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Kelly bagged the notebook, zipped the pouch, and signed the chain tag with a hand that barely trembled. He handed it off to the

third officer, who in turn brought it to the evidence table by the door.

He turned back to the room. "Anybody recognize this?" he asked, but the question was rhetorical. Denise's face went pale, but she didn't move. The men at the other desks were suddenly fascinated by their fingernails.

"Keep going," Kelly said. "We're not done yet."

They searched another hour, but found nothing else. Kelly wrote up the report, careful to log every step, every witness, every pointless detail. By the time he finished, his hand ached and his eyes felt like they'd been rolled in sand.

He watched as the evidence techs took photos of the desk, the pouch, the office. Every click of the camera was a nail in the coffin of his old self, the one who thought truth was its own defense. He'd made the evidence. He'd staged the scene. And now, with the city watching, he was about to testify to the very lie he'd created.

At least the bastard who killed Eddie might actually see a courtroom. If you can't fix the world, you can still break it in the right direction.

When the uniforms packed up, Kelly lingered in the empty office. The chair at Eddie's desk was still warm from the search, the crossword untouched since that last, lost night. He sat for a second, running his fingers over the edge of the desk, then closed his eyes.

He saw his father, grinning with all the charm of a root canal, and heard the old bastard's voice: "You finish the job, Daniel, even if you gotta lie to do it."

He opened his eyes, signed off the last line of the evidence log, and closed the book with a finality that felt like a gunshot. He rose, walked out.

The city was still ugly. Still broken. But for the first time, he felt like he'd given it a fighting chance.

The door slammed shut behind him, and the ledger—truth, lie, or both—waited in the evidence locker, hungry for justice.

And if they ever find out what you did, you'll be the one in the river.



CHAPTER 16

HANNAH



The wind coming off the river was sharp enough to draw blood. Hannah jammed her hands under her armpits and leaned into the darkness, counting every second like it owed her money. Somewhere behind her, the Monongahela crawled beneath a skin of ice, its surface steaming in the floodlights that ringed the Homestead mill like a penitentiary. Above it all, perched on a stack higher than most city buildings, the J&L whistle tower waited with the patience of a hanging judge.

She checked her watch again. 1:44 a.m. The second hand ticked like a Geiger counter, jumpy and loud in the glove she'd cut the fingertip off for better shutter access. She hunkered down lower behind the iron rail, careful not to brush the chain-link: security here was eighty percent wire and twenty percent guys named Stosh with no sense of humor. On the tripod in front of her, the Leica was cocked and hungry, lens pointed up at the whistle's square silhouette against a sky the color of a two-week bruise.

Her eyes adjusted, and she scanned for the clock face, just visible in the belfry of the soot-blackened St. Stanislaus across the tracks. The whole tableau was perfectly Steel Town: a mill whistle, a

church, and an empty street slicked with chemical rain. *If you wrote this in a script, Hollywood would fire you for realism.*

She counted the minutes out loud, every syllable steaming into the night. "One forty-five. One fifty. One fifty-five." The minute hand on the church clock lagged behind her wristwatch by a good twenty seconds, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the photograph. What mattered was whether the whistle would blow at two, like McGivern swore in his statement, or if it'd play chicken with city time and lose.

This isn't proof of murder, she reminded herself. It's a perjury trap. You catch him lying about the time, you crack the whole alibi. One domino falls, the rest follow.

The union man's whole story depended on the whistle: said it blew at 2:10 a.m., same time his watch stopped, same time he was "dealing with a generator issue" on the south yard. If the whistle was off, the timeline was a joke, and so was McGivern's testimony. And if McGivern's testimony collapsed, Kelly could use the threat of perjury charges to break him wide open.

She'd spent the last week drowning in onion-skin affidavits and clippings, her apartment a graveyard of coffee cups and cheap ball-point pens. Half the city wanted McGivern's word to stick. The other half wanted him tarred, feathered, and sent to the workhouse. Hannah wanted leverage, which in this town was the rarest bird of all. So she set the alarm, drank a thermos of near-toxic instant, and hit the sidewalk while the rest of the city pretended to sleep.

At 1:52, the generator shed on the far side of the stack flickered to life. Yellow light, the shade you only get from bulbs they stopped manufacturing in the Eisenhower administration. She could just make out the shuffle of boots around the door: a man in a navy parka, collar up, pacing like he was rehearsing a lie. With numb hands, she nudged the small lever freeing the frame counter, then advanced the film.

Her mind cycled through the setup. McGivern's statement (sworn under penalty of perjury, notarized, all the trimmings) said he'd been outside from 1:45 onward, prepping for a scheduled shut-

down. He claimed the whistle blew at 2:10, just as he finished resetting the panel, and that's when his wristwatch stopped. The church clock, the generator room, the whistle tower: three elements, one shot. If she nailed the photo, there was no walking it back.

This is what you do, Hannah. Documents, sources, timing. Let Anderson chase shadows in alleys. You build the case on paper, and you tear it apart the same way.

She checked her notes, red pencil scribbled down the margin of a page torn from the back of her phone book. "Two a.m. Whistle. Church clock must show two." She'd synchronized her watch with the operator at midnight this morning, the woman's voice flat and unimpressed: "At the tone, Eastern Standard Time will be one forty-two and thirty seconds. Beep." Hannah lived for those beeps. They never lied, and they didn't give a damn about unions, cops, or city hall.

She stamped her feet, waiting for feeling to return. Nothing. Just pins and needles and the slow, creeping dread that comes with knowing the whole case might hang on whether a seventy-year-old whistle could keep time better than a man with three decades on the payroll. She was about to risk a second look at the generator room when a shadow peeled away from the far fence. Big, slow, deliberate. Definitely not Stosh. She held her breath, counted the steps. The shadow paused, lit a cigarette, and let the ember glow just long enough to show a face she didn't recognize. Probably a foreman, or maybe a night owl who liked to watch things burn. She snapped a quick shot, just in case.

Back to the main event. One fifty-nine. The hand on the church clock crawled up, hit the top, and stayed there. No chimes, just the distant, metallic clang of a loading gate and the pulse of her own blood in her ears. She checked the Leica's exposure, adjusted the focus, and watched.

Nothing happened.

She waited, neck tight, lungs full of air that felt like it'd never come out. Still nothing. The church clock was holding at two, stubborn and perfect. She clicked another frame.

Then, at 2:03, the generator room's lights snapped off. Silence, except for the wind and a dog barking somewhere deep in the Flats. Hannah flexed her fingers, desperate for sensation, and checked the church clock again. Two-oh-five now, and still no whistle. She felt her stomach drop.

McGivern said 2:10. If the whistle's late, he's home free. If not, we sink the bastard right here on Neville Island.

The wind shifted, carrying a new wave of sulfur and river mud across the tracks. Hannah gagged, but kept her eye on the camera. At exactly 2:08, the stack erupted with a blast so loud it rattled her molars. She hit the shutter three times in quick succession, catching the column of steam, the church clock, and (if the gods of journalism were finally on her side) the man in the parka covering his ears in the generator room.

She exhaled, a full-body shudder, and let herself grin for the first time in weeks. *You're toast, Ronny. Smoked and served.* She packed the camera, cradling it like a newborn, and ducked out of sight as the shadow by the fence started moving again.

The walk back to the Beetle was pure adrenaline. She was up the embankment, over the rail, and across three blocks before the fear caught up. She replayed the shot in her mind, the freeze-frame of the clock face and the plume of white against the dark. No way to fudge that. No way to say your watch died at 2:10 when the whistle hit at 2:08, church and all.

Two minutes. That's all it takes to break an alibi. Two minutes, and the whole house of cards comes down.

She slid into the car, teeth chattering now that the rush was gone. She flipped the heat to max and pressed her forehead to the steering wheel, trying to force her brain to remember every detail. The second she unclenched, the pain came: fingers numb, toes burning, calves spasming from two hours of crouch. She laughed, then hissed as the nerves rebooted. *Next time, wear the wool socks, genius.*

The Beetle rattled to life, gears grinding in protest, and she let the city spool out behind her as she headed for Polish Hill. The streets were dead, except for the garbage trucks and a couple of delivery guys who looked like they'd lost bets with Satan. At the top

of the hill, the sky was just starting to go purple, the kind of color that meant a miserable, cloud-choked sunrise. She parked behind the Ukrainian church and hauled her gear up three flights of stairs, the Leica's strap digging a groove in her neck the whole way.

Inside, the apartment felt like a different planet: warm, musty, and full of the soft, inhuman glow of streetlights sneaking past the blackout curtains. She dumped the camera on the table and peeled off her gloves, wincing as the skin came away raw. She wanted to hit the bed and not wake up until the next century, but she had a job to do.

The darkroom was a closet, the only ventilation an inch-wide gap under the door and a cracked window she'd taped over for light leaks. She flicked on the red bulb, hands moving by instinct: film out, canister loaded, developer poured. Hannah had done this a thousand times, but tonight her hands shook so badly she almost missed the funnel. She cursed under her breath, then started the timer.

The minutes crawled. The only sound was the slosh of chemicals and the distant, rhythmic thud of her own heart. When the timer buzzed, she poured out the developer, rinsed, and peeled the negatives free. Even in the faint light, she could see the shot: church clock, two-oh-eight, and the steam plume splitting the night in two. She held the strip up, let the image burn into her brain.

This doesn't prove McGivern killed anyone. But it proves he lied under oath. And once Kelly has that, he can break the man in half.

She set the negatives to dry, then thumbed the phone's rotary dial with a hand that still trembled. She dialed the operator, asked for the time, and synched her watch again. 3:02 a.m. She felt the exhaustion hit all at once, heavy as a blackout curtain.

She let herself sag into the kitchen chair, feet throbbing, head buzzing with the aftermath. The city would wake in a couple of hours, and with it, the beast: union reps, lawyers, cops who wanted her crucified, and the endless, grinding machinery of a city built on secrets. But for now, she had proof. She'd caught McGivern in a lie, and with any luck, she'd nailed the bastard to the wall.

She poured a cup of cold coffee, sipped, and spat it back. *You could swim the Mon in this stuff. Or use it to take the finish off a coffin.*

She laughed, then set the cup down. She'd sleep later, after the prints were made and the evidence copied six ways to Sunday. If the city wanted to come for her, it could get in line. She had outwaited worse.

As she turned off the red light, she paused. For a second, the world was perfectly, mercifully still.

Then the mill whistle howled again, a mile off but clear as gospel. She grinned, and let the sound carry her all the way into tomorrow.

When she finally got home, the warmth felt borrowed and the chemicals felt honest. The apartment reeked of stop-bath and fixer, a hard chemical scent that didn't bother apologizing. Hannah sat at her kitchen table, bare feet curled under her and a towel wrapped like a noose around her hair, fingers still tingling from the developer. On the chipped Formica, she'd laid out the night's evidence in military precision: a strip of still-damp negatives, half a dozen prints blotted dry on the radiator, a single sheet of onion-skin tracing paper, and a red Sanford pencil with the point gnawed down to a murder weapon.

The room was lit by a bulb so cheap it made everything look jaundiced. Above the spread, her corkboard bristled with old clippings, yellowed index cards, and at the center, Eddie's photo, cropped from a union picnic group shot. He was the only one not laughing, his eyes pulled off-camera like he already knew the punchline was going to cost him. She caught herself staring at the photo every time her mind hit a dead patch. *If you're waiting for me to get soft, don't bother, Kozma.*

She started with the negatives, flipping them over the lightbox until her vision went stripey. The first frame caught the plume of steam erupting from the whistle tower. The next, the church clock's hands locked at two-oh-eight. She lined them up, stabbed the red pencil at the second image, and circled it hard enough to tear the

paper. For a second, she just sat there, heart banging out Morse code in her chest. *You got him. You finally got the son of a bitch.*

The tracing paper was already half-filled with a timeline: her own handwriting, blocky and uncompromising, listing out every minute from 1:45 to 2:15. She slotted the printouts in sequence, drew arrows from the generator shed (lights off at 2:03) to the tower (whistle at 2:08), then double-underlined the gap. At the bottom, she wrote, "McGivern sworn statement: whistle at 2:10, watch stopped. See attached. PERJURY."

She reached for her notes on the affidavit, the page so worn it was starting to dissolve at the folds. "On the night of 11/07, after completion of generator maintenance, the whistle sounded at precisely 2:10 a.m.," he'd said. "At that moment, my watch stopped, as verified by the time clock in the yard office." The time clock was another lie, but it didn't matter now. She'd hung him with his own testimony, and with luck, Kelly could use it to crack him wide open.

This is leverage. Pure and simple. Kelly puts McGivern in a room, shows him the photos, and watches him squirm. Either he talks, or he goes down for perjury. Either way, the wall starts to crumble.

She flipped to the next print. A shot of the generator doorway showed a blurry parka-wrapped silhouette bracing against the blast. She scribbled a note, "Possible witness? Cross-check with shop log." She didn't trust luck, but she trusted redundancy, and a second pair of eyes on the scene would be gold if the case ever saw sunlight.

Half an hour passed, maybe more. She forgot about the towel, the cold, the way her left hand had ached from gripping the pencil. She was nowhere except in the case, peeling back the layers like a surgeon. At some point, she realized she was muttering, voice low and unkind: "You can't fix a city by lying for it. You can only bury the bodies a little deeper."

By 4:30, she had the timeline pinned and every photo labeled in black marker. She checked the prints one last time, then started stacking the evidence into a manila folder, careful not to smear the ink. She felt the fatigue building behind her eyes, but ignored it. This was the part nobody ever told you about: the high of the hunt, followed by the long, slow comedown where the case tried to

bury you alive. She'd been through it enough times to know the drill.

At the end, she stared at the folder for a long minute, then spun around and dialed the station from the rotary phone mounted crooked above her radiator. The line took three rings to pick up. Kelly's voice on the other end was gravel and cigarette, a little more resigned than usual.

"Detective Kelly."

She didn't bother with preamble. "Your supervisor's pet witness just perjured himself."

Silence. Then: "Who is this?"

"It's Hannah. The whistle at J&L went off at two-oh-eight. Not two-ten, not even close. And the church clock agrees. I have photographs." She let the words drop, one at a time, like pebbles off a roof.

She could hear the scratch of pen on paper, a low grunt, the static of Kelly's mind turning over. "You're sure?" he said. The question was insult and invitation both.

"I staked it myself. Camera, clock, everything. You want the negatives, I'll drop them off at Evidence myself."

A second of dead air. "You realize you're accusing a union supervisor of perjury. You ready to stand on that?"

Hannah pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling the ache radiate up to her temples. "I was born standing on it. You know what this means for McGivern, don't you?"

He exhaled, a sound that came from somewhere deeper than lungs. "Yeah. It means I can break him."

"Not just break him. Leverage. You put him in a room, show him these photos, and tell him he's looking at perjury charges. Either he flips, or he goes down. His choice." She didn't care that her voice was starting to rise; the hour was so late it was early, and she was done pretending at civility.

Kelly's tone softened, just a hair. "You got a safe place to keep those prints, Robertson?"

"Safer than City Hall," she said, glancing at the old Folgers can under her sink where she stashed the real stuff. "But I'll make a copy

and send it to the paper, just in case."

"Do it," he said. "And don't go anywhere until I call you. Things are going to move fast, now." The line went quiet. For a second, she thought he'd hung up.

She took a breath, ready to slam the receiver, but then: "Thanks, Hannah. I mean it."

She almost laughed. "Don't thank me, Detective. Thank Kozma. He's the one who got me up at two in the damn morning."

Kelly's chuckle was a rasp. "He'd appreciate that." Then he hung up, abrupt as a verdict.

She replaced the receiver, fingers stiff and slow. The adrenaline was wearing off, replaced by a weird, fluttery sense of dread. She stared at the table, the folder, the onion-skin notes, and felt it hit: she wasn't just the observer anymore. She was in it, up to her neck, and the only way out was through.

She stood, stretched, and shucked the towel from her hair. She caught her reflection in the kitchen window—face pale, eyes ringed with exhaustion, but smiling. Not the "smile for the press" kind, either. The real thing.

She padded over to the radiator, peeled up the last of the photos, and tacked it to the corkboard right beside Eddie's face. The two-oh-eight shot. For a moment, she let herself believe it would actually make a difference.

The city outside was waking, or trying to. She poured herself a glass of tap water and drank it down, cold and sharp as anything the river could throw at her.

She pulled out the typewriter, rolled in a fresh sheet, and started hammering out the lede:

"Exclusive: Witness timeline collapses in Kozma murder cover-up. See page A1."

She typed until her fingers ached, until the sun started to gnaw at the edge of the curtains, until she could barely see the keys through the grain of her own fatigue.

When she finally stopped, she looked at the clock. 6:22. She thought about sleep, but only for a second.

Instead, she took the manila folder, tucked it into her battered

messenger bag, and headed out. She'd promised Kelly she'd sit tight. But the world was already moving, and she was damned if it would leave her behind.

In the hall, she heard the echo of the mill whistle, distant now, but still carrying. She smiled, then shut the door and let it ring all the way down the stairwell.

CHAPTER 17

DETECTIVE KELLY



The interview room at Zone 5 was designed for slow death. The overhead lights flickered like a dying fish. Daniel Kelly sat at one end of a steel table, elbows squared, a notepad in front of him. The cinderblock walls had once been painted green, but most of the color had gone to war with the decades and lost.

McGivern entered under escort, looking exactly like a man who'd been up all night and then forced to put on a clean shirt for his own execution. The union jacket didn't fit so well around the gut these days, and his face was florid with a sleepless red. He scanned the room, noticed Daniel, and gave a wary nod.

He didn't bother to sit until Daniel gestured. The chair moaned under McGivern's weight.

"Detective," he said. The word had a bite to it, like he'd already tasted the end of the conversation and wanted to get the flavor out of his mouth.

Daniel offered nothing back, just tapped his pen twice and then laid it flat. For a full minute, nobody spoke. That was the real secret of interrogation: the suspect always talked first.

McGivern blinked, then rolled his shoulders, an old boxer's feint. "I asked for a union rep. I don't see a union rep."

"Reps don't start until seven," Daniel said, voice flat. "You want to wait, or you want to get this over with?"

McGivern looked at the ceiling, then at the table.

"Let's get it done," McGivern said.

Daniel slid a manila folder onto the table. Three pieces of evidence, fanned out like a losing hand. First, a copy of the lab report on the marrow bone. Second, a strip of black-and-white photos: Hannah's whistle-tower shots, each stamped with the timestamp in the corner, big as an alibi and twice as damning. Last, a sheet from Eddie's coded ledger, a forensic blow-up of the handwriting and route codes.

He didn't say a word as he arranged them. McGivern watched, but kept his hands tight together, fingers laced until the knuckles went white. Daniel made a show of straightening each sheet. The only sound was the cheap plastic of the pen as he clicked it, once.

"You want to explain these?" Daniel asked. He didn't bother with an intro.

McGivern grunted. "Looks like paperwork. You boys love your paperwork."

Daniel pointed at the lab report. "That's not paperwork. That's a murder weapon. Or accessory, if you want to get technical."

McGivern's eyes flicked to the page, but his jaw stayed set.

"You want to walk me through your Thursday night, Ron?" Daniel said. He let the man's first name ride, let it do a little damage.

"Same as always," McGivern replied. "Night shift. Got in early, checked the manifests, did the rounds. Dog was out, like usual. Left around two, maybe quarter after."

Daniel waited for the lie to finish echoing off the cinderblock. Then he picked up the whistle-tower photos and spread them across the table.

"You swore under oath the whistle blew at two-ten," Daniel said. "That's what your statement says. Notarized, witnessed, the whole nine yards."

McGivern's face tightened. "That's what happened."

Daniel tapped the timestamp on the photo. "This was taken at

two-oh-eight. Church clock in the background says the same thing. You want to explain how the whistle blew two minutes before you said it did?"

McGivern stared at the photo, jaw working. "Clocks are off all the time. You know how old that equipment is?"

"The church clock's been accurate for forty years," Daniel said. "The photographer synchronized her watch with the operator before she went out. You want to bet your pension on a two-minute margin of error?"

McGivern's hands started their tap-dance: thumb over thumb, then the drumbeat of index finger against pinky. The man was losing grip.

"Here's the thing, Ron," Daniel said, leaning in. "Perjury's a felony. You lie under oath, you go to prison. And this photo says you lied."

McGivern's eyes flicked to the door, then back to the table. "I didn't lie. I told you what I remembered."

"Then your memory's a problem," Daniel said. "Because right now, I've got enough to charge you with perjury. And once that charge sticks, the DA's going to start asking what else you lied about."

He let the silence stretch, watching the sweat bead on McGivern's forehead.

"You want to spend the next five years in Rockview, that's your choice," Daniel said. "Or you can start telling me the truth, and maybe, just maybe, we can work something out."

McGivern's jaw set. "I want a lawyer."

Daniel shrugged. "You can have one. But the second you lawyer up, this deal goes away. I'm offering you a chance to help yourself. You don't want to take it, that's on you."

McGivern looked at the photos, then at the lab report, then at the coded ledger. His hands were shaking now, the tremor visible even under the bad light.

"What do you want?" he said, voice a whisper.

"I want the truth," Daniel replied. "Who dosed the dog? Who

told you to look the other way? And I want to know who was in the yard the night Eddie Kozma died."

McGivern closed his eyes. When he opened them, something had changed. The fight was still there, but the engine behind it was dying.

"It was Cameron," he said. "He told me to do it. Said there'd be a special delivery, and the dog needed to be quiet for a few hours."

Daniel felt the crack in the dam. He didn't move, didn't even blink.

"What kind of delivery?"

McGivern shook his head. "Didn't ask. You don't ask with Cameron. You just sign off and keep your mouth shut."

Daniel let it hang, then pointed at the coded ledger. "You ever see this before?"

McGivern nodded, slow. "Eddie's log. He kept notes on every run. He was a pain in my ass with that thing."

"You ever doctor any manifests? Run sheets?"

A long silence. "Yeah. Sometimes. They'd send me the numbers, I'd sign. If you didn't, they'd just find someone else who would."

Daniel waited. "You sign off the Thursday run?"

"Yeah," McGivern said. "But I didn't move the crate. I never touched it."

Daniel flipped to the last page of the folder, Eddie's timecard for his last night alive. He set it on the table.

"Eddie punched out at one-forty-six. What happened next?"

McGivern's jaw worked, but nothing came out.

"Who was in the yard with you?" Daniel pressed.

McGivern hesitated, then: "It was Smitty. Tall guy. Cameron's enforcer. He was there after one, but I never saw him on the clock."

Daniel jotted the name, even though he already had it.

"He ever bring anyone with him?" Daniel asked.

"Sometimes a kid. Blonde, thin. Looked scared shitless, but did what he was told."

Daniel let that ride for a minute. "You see Eddie after one-forty-five?"

McGivern shook his head. "No. I went to the office, did paper-work. When I came out, Smitty was gone, so was the crate."

"And Cameron?"

McGivern hesitated. "I didn't see him inside. But he was there. Outside, in the black Lincoln. Didn't come in, but watched the whole thing. You could feel it."

Daniel gathered the papers, stacking them slowly. "You ever see Cameron handle things himself?"

A pause, then: "Not usually. He had people."

"But this time?"

McGivern exhaled. "He was there. That's all I know."

"You know what happened to Eddie?"

McGivern's voice cracked. "I heard he took off. That's what they told us. But I knew it was bullshit."

Daniel closed the folder, then stood. He let the silence fill the room. McGivern didn't look up.

"You ever want to work again, you stay available. Someone from the DA's office will call you. You don't talk to anyone else. Not the union, not Cameron. You got that?"

McGivern nodded, but didn't move.

Daniel stepped to the door, then paused. "You did the right thing, eventually."

McGivern laughed, but it was the sound a man made when there was nothing left to lose. "Yeah," he said, "but too late to save anyone."

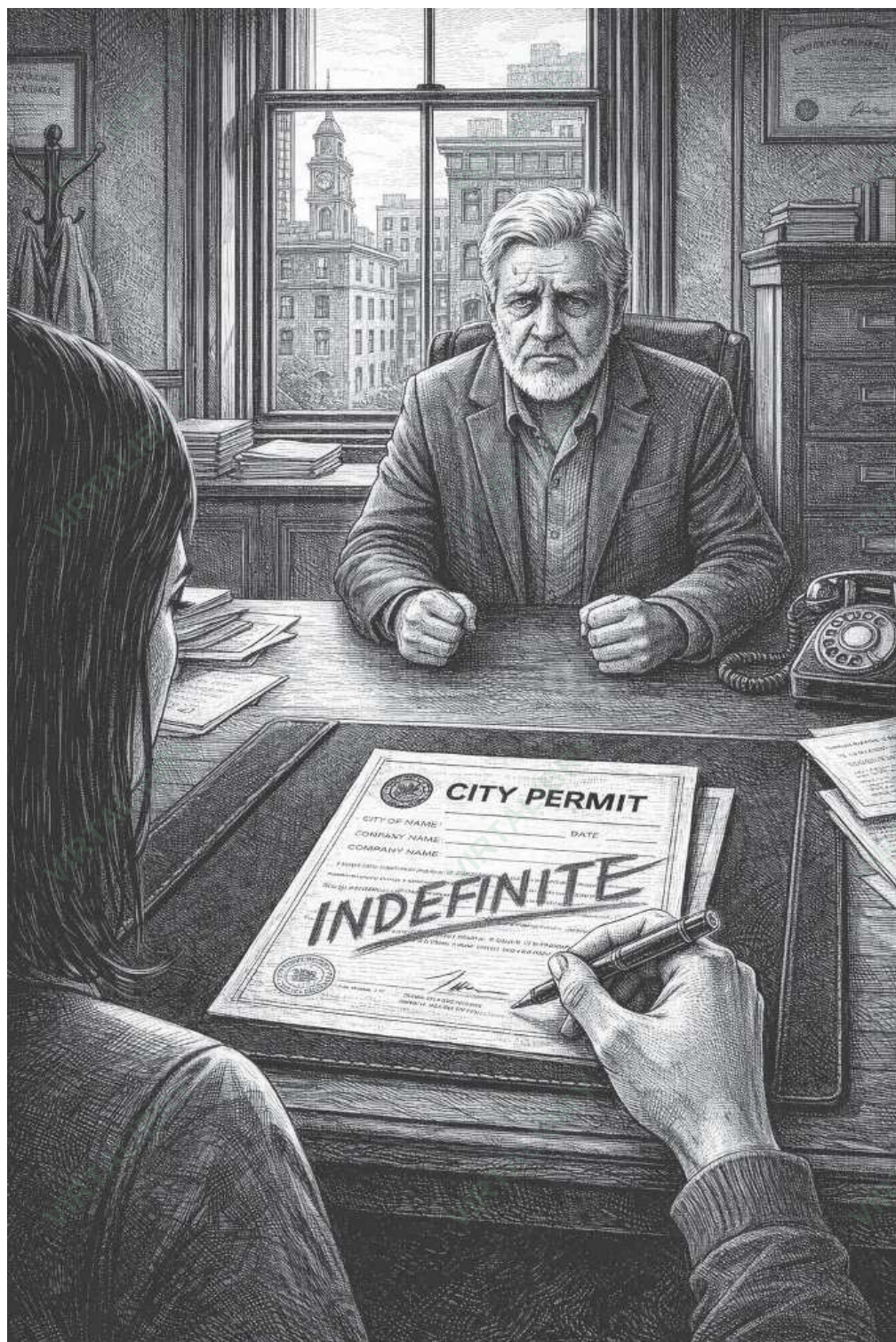
Daniel opened the door and left him there, alone in the freeze, sweating out the last of his loyalty.

That's what it takes to break a man in this town. Not the law. Not the threat. Just a photograph and the knowledge that the lie won't hold.

The hallway was warmer, but not by much. Daniel trudged it, letting the confession settle over him like river mud.

McGivern gave up Smitty and Cameron. But he's still holding something back—I can feel it. The kid, the crate, the timing. There's more to this than he's saying.

One domino down. Two more to go.



CHAPTER 18

HANNAH



On Saturdays, the City Hall Records Room felt like a mausoleum for lost causes. The air in the sub-basement hung dense with disinfectant and old tobacco, and the only light came from rows of flickering, jaundiced fluorescents, which made even healthy skin look embalmed. Hannah Robertson arrived with her boots still wet from the slush outside, a file of Eddie's codes in one hand and her Leica in the other, feeling more like a graverobber than a journalist.

The main desk sat under a yellowing acoustic tile, the type that killed conversation and hope in equal measure. The clerk behind it wore a polyester shirt the color of boiled cauliflower and a tie that, even in 1974, was a cry for help. He was mid-thirties, puffy from a lifestyle heavy on American cheese and nightcaps, and had the eyes of someone who'd seen two layoffs and a mid-level bribery scandal but survived both by ducking.

She hit him with the smile she'd perfected for bureaucrats: all teeth, no warmth. "Records retrieval. Pre-1972 labor permits. I need the original files, not the microfilm."

He didn't move. "It's Saturday. We process Monday-Wednesday, unless you've got a court order or a subpoena."

She dropped a business card on the counter. "It's a murder investigation. That work for you?"

He slid the card back with a fingernail, eyes flicking from her badge to her boots and back. "Nobody told me homicide was coming down."

"I'm not homicide," Hannah said. "I'm the press. But if you like, I'll call the precinct and get a detective down here in the next hour. You want to explain to him why you stonewalled a public records request with a corpse attached?"

He looked past her, as if expecting someone with a real badge to appear and save him. The only thing behind her was a war zone of metal shelving and a distant, grumbling custodian.

The clerk exhaled, the sound flat and resentful. "Form seven twelve," he muttered, then shoved a carbon-copied slip her way. "Fill it out. I'll see what's in the vault."

She wrote in block letters, pressing so hard the carbon paper bled through. When she handed it back, the clerk squinted at the details, then at her, then disappeared into the stacks, feet squeaking on tile. Hannah leaned on the counter and thumbed through her notes. At least half the city's criminal infrastructure was built on the assumption nobody would bother to do the paperwork. The other half ran on the knowledge that, even if you did, the bastards would lose it on purpose.

Five minutes. Then ten. The clock above the door might as well have been counting down to nuclear winter. She checked the time, then scanned the walls: union-shop placards, a photo of Mayor Hegarty shaking hands with someone who, by now, was almost certainly in jail, and a bulletin warning "All Record Requests Will Be Processed In Order Of Receipt—No Exceptions."

The clerk returned lugging a gray cardboard file box, sweat already soaking the neck of his shirt. He dumped it on the desk with a grunt. "Earliest permit logs. You want the next box, you'll have to wait."

"I'll manage," Hannah said, already peeling off the lid.

Inside: a blizzard of onion-skin forms, most with corners foxed by age or misfiled back on themselves. She started with the ledgers,

skipping the ones that didn't match Eddie's list of dates. Every few sheets, a carbon duplicate. Every fifth page, a typo or correction in blue ballpoint. She worked fast, cross-referencing each run with Eddie's coded notes. The codes were there, tucked into the margins like stains: X1A, S1B, and the rest of the alphabet soup that had made up the ACD's late-night menu.

She flagged a set dated six weeks before Eddie's death. Special Permit—Strike Exception. Her pulse tapped faster, and she fished out the folder, careful not to tear the brittle tab. The permit inside was a template, mass-duplicated but with the names hand-filled in at the bottom: "American City Dispatch," signed by "P. Cameron, President," and countersigned by "M. Young, City Councilman." The block for "End Date" was scratched out, overwritten in thick red pencil: "indefinite."

Hannah looked at the clerk. "Where's the supplement file? Any amendments or complaints?"

He hesitated, then went to a battered credenza and yanked open a drawer. A tumble of loose memos, mostly stamped "Received" and then ignored. She pawed through, sorting by date. There: a half-sheet, memo style, from Cameron's office, requesting "perpetual renewal of Special Permit for labor action duration." Paper-clipped to it, a single page on city letterhead, dated the week Eddie went missing. The amendment was hand-typed, initialed "M.Y." in block capitals.

She felt the heat rise in her chest. "You ever see anyone else pull this kind of permit?"

The clerk shrugged. "Usually it's a one-day, maybe a week. This... this is politics. You can get away with anything if you sign enough copies."

"Anyone else complain about this?" She stabbed the red "indefinite" with her pen.

He shook his head. "Nobody in this town wants to go up against Cameron. Or Young."

She set the papers down and flicked open her camera. The Leica's shutter was a wet click in the silence. She snapped every page, holding the lens steady even as her hands wanted to shake

from the realization: The whole thing was aboveboard—on paper. Which meant any fallout landed on the signature, not the operation.

She slid the permit, amendment, and Cameron's letter into her own folder, then looked the clerk in the eye. "You ever get subpoenaed, you say you never saw me."

He blinked, then nodded. She could see the calculation happening behind his eyes: if this broke bad, he was safe either way.

"Take your time," he said, and vanished back to the main office, closing the door behind him.

Hannah spent another half hour combing the files, but nothing else stood out. She checked her notes, then ran a line under the date of Eddie's disappearance and the permit amendment: a perfect match.

The sun was still low and sickly when she left the building, but the cold air had a bite that made her feel awake for the first time all week. She walked fast, boots clacking on the concrete, the folder clutched so firmly her fingers ached.

She was smiling, but it wasn't the kind the world got to see.

It was the kind you wore when you knew you had them cornered.

Marcus Young's office was on the third floor of City Hall, tucked behind a frosted glass door with his name stenciled in gold. Hannah didn't bother with the secretary. She just walked past the reception desk and knocked twice, hard.

Young opened the door himself. He looked exactly like the press photos: lacquered hair, teeth so white you could mistake them for a dental ad, and a suit that managed to split the difference between aspirational and loaned. He blinked at her, then arranged his face into a politician's smile.

"Miss Robertson. I wasn't expecting you." He didn't move aside.

"I wasn't expecting to be here," Hannah said. "But I've got some questions about a permit you signed. Mind if I come in?"

His smile flickered, but didn't die. "I'm afraid I'm quite busy today. Perhaps you could schedule through my office..."

"It's about the Kozma murder," Hannah said. "And the special strike permit you signed for Patrick Cameron six weeks before Eddie disappeared. I've got the paperwork right here."

The smile vanished. Young glanced over her shoulder, then stepped back and motioned her inside.

The office was smaller than she expected, crammed with filing cabinets and a desk that looked like it had been inherited from three predecessors. Young settled behind the desk, hands folded, face arranged in an expression of careful innocence.

"Miss Robertson," he said, voice smooth as oil. "I sign hundreds of permits a year. You can't expect me to remember every one."

Hannah slid the permit copy across the desk, the red "indefinite" bleeding through the top page. "This was authorized under your name. Two months before a murder connected to ACD. You want to explain how a routine strike permit gets extended past the law?"

Young's eyes flicked down, then up, then down again. "That's a standard process. The City often grants grace periods during labor action, especially when it affects essential services. There's nothing unusual here."

"Really?" Hannah tapped the amendment date with her pen. "This is the same week Eddie Kozma disappeared. And it's the only permit in the file with 'indefinite' scrawled in by hand. The only one amended without a public hearing or council minutes."

Young drew a slow breath. "I'm sure if you check the records, you'll find a perfectly reasonable explanation..."

"I did check," Hannah cut in. "There is no explanation. Unless you count the fact that Cameron's union was bundling donations to your campaign at the same time."

The color in Young's cheeks went from tan to hospital-sheet pale. "I don't know what you're implying, but I won't tolerate accusations..."

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Councilman. I'm just asking questions." Hannah leaned in. "But if you'd rather I ask them in print, I can do that too."

Young's hands tensed, the knuckles going white against the desktop. He glanced at the frosted glass door, then back at her.

"What do you want?" he said, voice low.

"I want to know who leaned on you," Hannah said. "And I want to know what Cameron promised in return."

Young was silent for a long moment. Then he exhaled, the air going out of him like a punctured tire.

"You have to understand the unions in this city," he said. "They have a way of getting things done. If you're running for office, you either play along, or you never get out of committee." He wiped a hand across his brow. "Cameron's people came to me. Said they'd bundle donations. Clean, above board. All I had to do was sign off on a routine paperwork thing."

Hannah stared. "And you didn't ask what they were moving through the city at two in the morning?"

He looked at the desk, lips pressed to a tight line. "You don't ask. That's how you survive in this town. I figured it was just more of the usual: overtime, maybe a side delivery for the bar. Nobody told me it was tied to anything...violent."

"So you signed a blank check for Cameron and hoped he wouldn't use it?"

He bristled, then shrank again. "I had no choice. You ever try to say no to those people? You don't last."

Hannah watched him melt, the candidate's shine draining away until there was nothing left but a desperate guy in a sweat-soaked shirt.

"You realize this is going to come out," she said. "And when it does, the best you can hope for is to go on the record before someone else drops you in it."

Young ran a hand through his hair, the lacquer no match for real fear. "If I cooperate, will you...?"

"I'll print the truth," Hannah said. "You want a deal, talk to the DA. But you're not getting a clean slate from me."

He looked at her, and for the first time she saw the recognition in his eyes. Not respect, not even mutual understanding. Just the cold, animal knowledge that the world had stopped spinning in his

favor. "There's something else you should know," Young said, voice barely above a whisper. "Cameron's not the only one. He's got partners. People higher up, in the city, in the state. If you think taking him down ends this, you're wrong. There'll be someone else. There always is."

Hannah felt the chill run down her spine. "Who?"

Young shook his head. "I don't know names. Just rumors. But Cameron's operation. It's not just union business. It's connected to something bigger. Contracts, construction, maybe even the police." He looked at her, eyes hollow. "You pull this thread, you might not like what unravels."

She let the silence stretch, then pulled out her notebook. "Write down everything you know. Names, dates, anything you've heard. And I want it today."

He nodded, then went to work, the pen scratching out a timeline of his own destruction.

You could almost feel sorry for him. But then you remember what happens to the city when these assholes win. And that's the only feeling left.

Hannah sat back, watching the man unravel. Young's confession was a start. But his warning rang in her ears. Cameron was just one head of the hydra. Cut it off, and another would grow in its place.

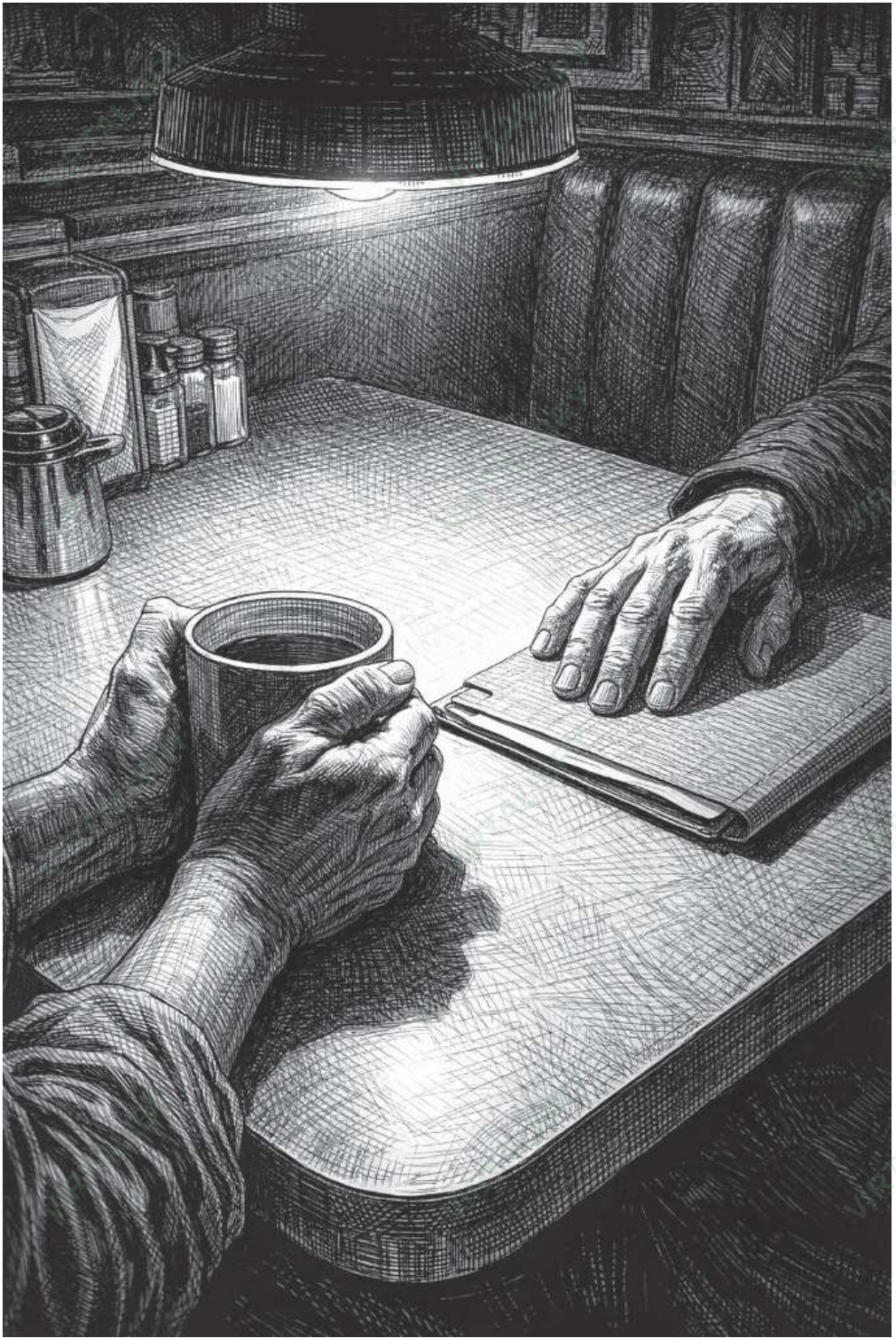
She allowed herself a hint of a smile, and waited for Young to finish writing his own obituary.

When he was done, she took the pages, scanned them, and tucked them into her folder.

"You'll be hearing from the DA," she said. "And Councilman? If you're thinking about warning Cameron, don't. I have copies of everything. And I'm not the forgiving type."

She left him there, alone with the ruin and the evidence, already thinking two moves ahead.

The city outside was cold and honest. Hannah inhaled it like oxygen, and didn't look back.



CHAPTER 19

JAMES



The Strip's version of a breakfast crowd consisted of three: one man asleep on the Herald's comics section, a waitress who ran the place on instinct and grudge, and Denise Parker, compact as a knot of guilt in the farthest booth. The diner's lights hummed with the wattage of depression. James took the measure of the place from the doorway. No tails, no union muscle pretending to eat a stack of pancakes. Just Denise, hunched over a mug, both hands in a death grip around a manila folder. The vinyl under her seat was pocked and splitting, a little like the skin at her cuticles.

She saw him coming but flinched anyway when he slid into the booth. "I'm not waiting long," she whispered, the voice meant for him alone. Her hands shook, and not from caffeine.

He ordered a coffee, black, without taking his eyes off her. Denise's hair was neat, face scrubbed raw, but the skin below her eyes had gone mottled and bruised. Someone had cried all night and then reapplied the war paint. She refused to look up, instead tracing the rim of the mug with a thumbnail, like a record stuck on a bad song.

"Didn't think you'd show," James said. The waitress poured him

half a cup, then shambled away. The sound of the pot hitting the table was louder than it should have been.

"I had to," Denise said, still tracing. "After this, I'm not coming back. You know that, right?" Her gaze flicked up for a heartbeat, wet but already shutting down again.

James shrugged. "You were never here, anyway."

She barked a laugh at that. "Yeah, but now it's official." She drew the manila folder closer, a shield against the world. "You want to know how we did it?" She meant Cameron and the rest, but mostly herself.

He said nothing, just sipped his coffee, letting the silence fill up with her need to confess.

"It started small. Always does." She kept her voice down, but the shame cut through the hush of the place. "He'd bring me a time-card, ask me to adjust the hours, just so a man wouldn't lose his benefits. Said it was a kindness." She risked another glance. "At first, I believed that. Then it was pay stubs. Then accident reports, sometimes with blood still on them." Her hands shook harder, rattling the mug on the Formica.

James watched her coldly. He wanted to feel something—rage, pity, hell, even disgust—but all he could muster was the flat hum of recognition. It was always a kindness, until it wasn't.

"You know about the ticket," she said. "Greyhound to Cleveland. Everybody knows now. But nobody asked who made it."

He did, with his eyes.

She fished in the folder, hands trembling. Produced a slip of heavy blue paper, official as a death certificate. "I used to work the second window at Grant Street on weekends. Before the office job. It's easy to steal a blank, if you know the shift manager and the punch code." She laid the ticket on the table between them. "Before anyone called the police, Cameron said it'd be best to plant it. Let people think he'd skipped town. I still had my old Grant Street punch card and knew how the tickets looked."

James picked up the ticket. The perforations were too clean, the edges still crisp from the punch. "You put it in his wallet?"

Denise nodded. "That night, while his things were still in the office, I slipped the ticket into his wallet. I used the office punch, They'd never match it to the depot." She wiped her nose, angrily. "I thought I'd puke, but I did it." She wiped her nose again. "I knew what it meant. That they'd say he ran when he didn't. I killed him all over again, just to save my own job."

The old man at the counter coughed, then slumped lower over his paper. The waitress reappeared, topped up both mugs, and vanished before Denise could even acknowledge her. The world had reduced itself to the booth, the slip of blue paper, and the soft, hissing confession.

"Why tell it now?" James said.

Denise closed her eyes, took a breath. "Because Cameron's cutting me loose. I heard it from one of the drivers. He's telling people I was the one who talked to the cops. That I'm the leak. They're setting me up to take the fall." Her voice cracked. "I'm not going down for him. Not anymore."

James set the ticket down, folded his hands over it. "You ever see the man who came to Hannah's apartment? Big guy, snake-and-anchor tattoo on his forearm. Union patch on his jacket."

Denise's face went white. "Vince. Vince Terrio. He's Smitty's cousin. They use him for... jobs. Things that need to keep quiet."

James filed the name away. "He work for Cameron directly?"

"He works for whoever's paying. But Cameron's the one who sent him that night. I heard McGivern talking about it in the break room. Said they needed to 'send a message' to the reporter." She shuddered. "I didn't know what they meant until I saw the papers."

James nodded, slow. "You willing to say that to the DA?"

Denise looked at him, fear and fury warring in her eyes. "If it keeps me out of prison? Yeah. But I'm not going to be a martyr. I've got a sister in Ohio. I'm going there as soon as this is over."

"Witness protection?"

She laughed, the sound bitter. "They promised me that. But I don't trust anybody anymore. Not the cops, not the DA, not you."

James didn't argue. "What else do you know?"

She hesitated, then pushed the folder across the table. "It's all in there. The copies, the old run sheets, even the logbook I kept in case I ever needed to... I don't know. Start over."

James slid it into his satchel without looking. "You did the right thing, eventually." It sounded hollow, but it was the only condolence he had left.

Denise's hands went still, the first time all morning. "I wish that meant something," she said. "But it doesn't, does it?"

He started to answer, but she cut him off. "You think Eddie forgives me?" Her eyes finally met his, and the naked pain there startled him.

James looked away, out the window. The sun was crawling up over the warehouses, lighting the street with a sickly optimism. "I think if he could, he'd just want you to not make the same mistake again."

She nodded, and for a second, she looked almost peaceful.

The bell over the door jingled. Two men in cheap suits and cheaper haircuts stepped in, eyes scanning the room and landing on Denise. She saw them, too. No panic, just the resignation of someone who'd been waiting for this moment her whole life.

"That's my ride," she said. She stood, smoothed her skirt, and gathered her purse. At the edge of the booth, she paused. "Don't let them bury me, Mr. Anderson. Even if they want to."

He didn't answer. She didn't expect him to.

She walked to the door, the men in suits falling in behind her. At the threshold, she stopped, squared her shoulders, and turned back. The fear was gone. All that was left was the stubborn dignity of a woman who'd decided, at last, to be necessary for something else.

James watched her disappear down the street, the folder heavy in his lap.

He sipped the rest of his coffee. It was cold, bitter, and perfectly honest.

Just the way he liked it.

James preferred the company of steel and glass over people. At least they didn't lie to you or ask for favors they had no intention of returning. But the Markham place was something else: prewar brick, set back from the Shadyside sidewalk, every detail expensive without advertising it. He buzzed at the gate, half-expecting to be left standing in the drizzle, but the intercom squawked before he could blink.

"Come in," said Eleanor's voice, brittle and sharp.

She met him at the door herself, no maid, no security, just the woman in yesterday's cashmere and a bun that had lost its will to fight. Her eyes were ringed with fatigue, but her mouth was set as if she'd filed it to an edge.

"Upstairs, please," she said, leading him to the study. The wood paneling looked real, not the kind of veneer they used in new construction. Every surface gleamed, but the air inside had the closed, musty feel of a room meant to impress the dead more than the living.

James laid the folder on the desk, next to a pyramid of family photos and a crystal clock that ticked too loudly for the size of the room. He opened the satchel and took out the necessary: a sheaf of legal statements, a set of high-grade photostats, and the copy of Denise's confession. The documents were already flagged with sticky notes, each spot needing Eleanor's signature or initials. Her pen, a fat gold-barreled thing, rested in its cradle beside a blotter. It probably cost more than his car.

She sat, smoothing her skirt as if it mattered. "Is this all of it?" she said, not looking at him.

"It's what the DA needs," James replied. "You don't have to do this, but it'll make the next part go faster."

She nodded, face slack with exhaustion. "Let's get it over with."

He slid the first page across: a sworn statement acknowledging the private payments she'd made to Eddie. Her hand hovered, then shook as she signed. The scratch of the nib sounded like it was etching the confession into the wood itself. James watched, clinical, as she worked down the stack, each page another piece of her old life dissolving.

At the bottom, he placed the anonymous threat note. She didn't touch it right away, just stared. "I almost burned it," she said. "I thought if I did, it would make all of this... not real." She pressed her palm to her mouth for a second, then initialed the margin with a tiny, perfect EM.

Next was the memo about Cameron's foundation manipulation. She read every word, lips moving silently, then signed with a flourish. "He made it seem like it was for the greater good," she said, not looking at James. "The money would help more people if it stayed in the right hands. I told myself that, every time I moved a decimal, or signed off on another audit."

James nodded. "That's how he gets them."

She shot him a look, equal parts acid and gratitude. "You don't have to be polite, Mr. Anderson. I know exactly what I did."

She signed the last page, then leaned back, eyes closed. The silence was total, except for the tick of the crystal clock and the slow, purposeful breaths she took between each page. When she opened her eyes, they glimmered, but the tears stayed put.

"He died because I was afraid to go public," she said, voice flat as the Allegheny in January. "I won't hide behind money again."

James left that hanging, because there was nothing to say.

She gathered the pages, stacking them with a surgeon's precision. Before he could pack them away, she reached for her left hand. The wedding ring, platinum and diamond, came off without a fight. She stared at it for a second, then placed it in the top drawer of her desk, closed the drawer, and left her hand resting on the wood as if she could feel the difference already.

James slid the folder into his bag, stood, and buttoned his coat. She didn't rise, but watched him, eyes like flint. "You'll let me know how it ends?" she said.

"I don't think it does," James replied.

Eleanor almost smiled. "That's the first honest thing anyone's said in this house for years."

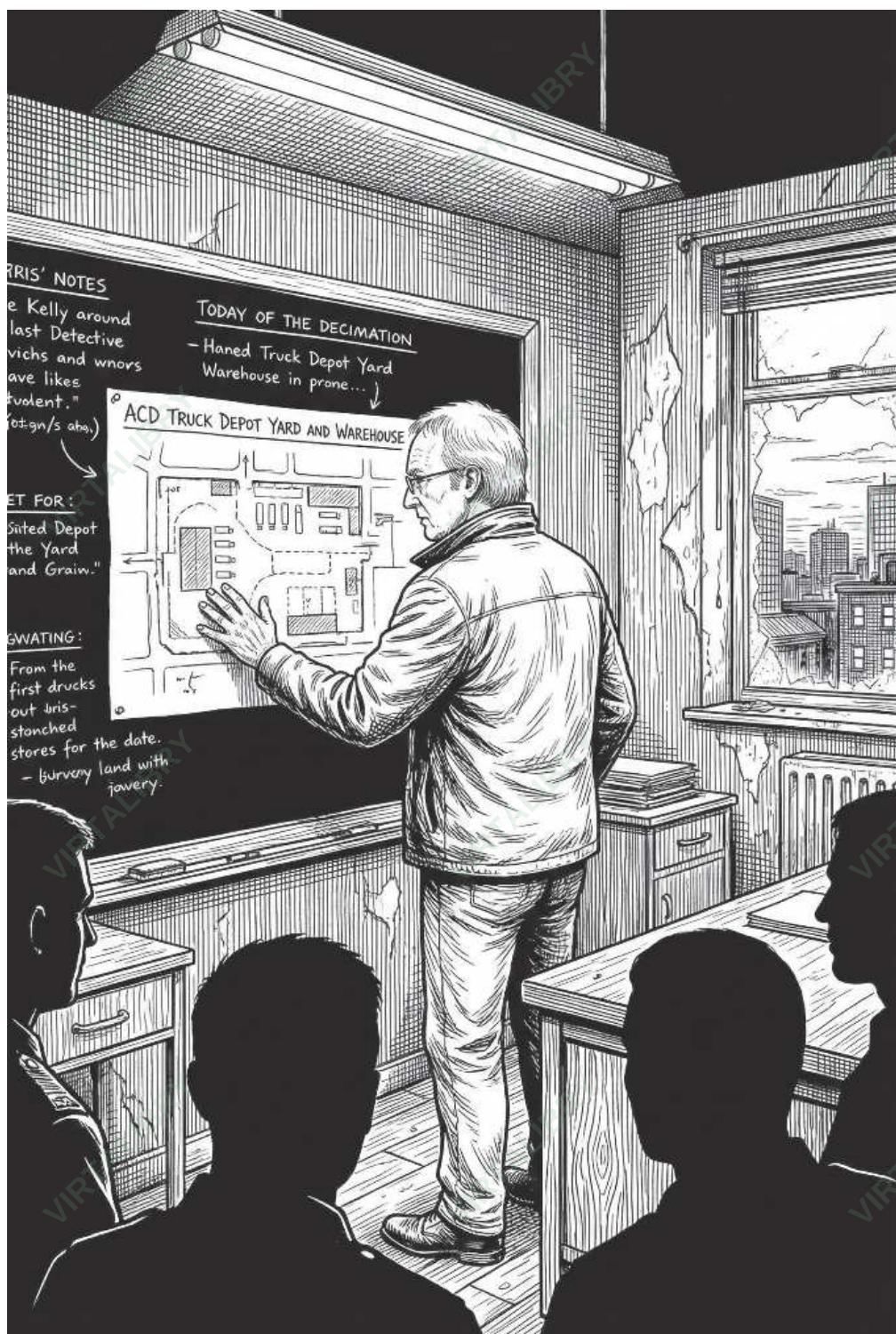
He nodded, then took the stairs down two at a time. The air outside was wet and clean, and his ribs ached from the movement.

At the corner, he looked back. Eleanor stood at her window, one

hand on the glass, watching the street with the expression of a woman who'd just stepped out of her own life and wasn't sure if she wanted to go back.

James kept moving, the signed statements heavy at his side.

The world didn't care. But he did, at least for now.



CHAPTER 20

DETECTIVE KELLY



The briefing room was a humid box, thick as a steam bath and twice as hostile. Daniel Kelly stood at the far end of the table, the plastic cuffs of his shirt blooming with sweat. On the scratched metal slab between him and the room, he fanned out the DA-stamped warrants. In the back row, men perched on folding chairs, slouched and wary."

At six a.m., coffee and gun oil stung the air. Kelly had worked homicide for eleven years and never felt a squad this keyed on nerves.

A hand-drawn layout of the ACD yard, done up on butcher's paper with a red Sharpie and a hangover, was taped to the chalkboard behind him. Next to it, a blow-up of the riverfront warehouse: the actual address circled in ballpoint, as if the pen could hold back what waited inside.

He started the way his father used to—no greeting, no preamble, just straight into the wound. "We're going to hit the ACD yard and the Cameron warehouse at 0600. No advance warning. No squad cars at the perimeter. We go in heavy, we come out with what we need, and nobody walks unless I say so." His voice rang off

the cinderblock, crisp, controlled, but the words themselves felt like old bread.

They watched him. He met their eyes: Rowinski, still stiff from an old firefight; Webber, tired and tight-lipped; Morales, narcotics turned homicide. All of them had the look. Nobody here was a rookie.

On the table, the warrants waited. Next to them, a tray of orange plastic earplugs, and a box of latex gloves that was half-empty, maybe half-used. He picked up the first sheet. The edge caught on a hangnail and drew a bead of blood, but he kept his face still. Nothing in this city bled without a fight.

He read the warrant numbers aloud. "One, two, three. ACD office, the attached shop, and the warehouse. We clear the yard first. We do not split the team until we have the main office locked down. Rowinski, Morales, you take the loading dock. Webber, you're with me on the second story. Geller and Matey, you hold the west gate and watch for runners. Anyone else, you lock the perimeter and don't let a goddamn thing move without my say-so."

Rowinski raised a hand, more finger than arm. "We expecting union backup, Detective?" The word "backup" came loaded. Like he meant mobbed-up shooters with a grudge. Kelly nodded. "Expect whatever gets you home alive. Cameron's got at least two men on the night shift, both ex-military, neither afraid to use a twelve-gauge. The dog's still down, but I wouldn't bet my lunch on it. If you see a runner, call it in before you go hands-on. I want this clean. No stories for the morning edition, not if we can help it."

The men grunted, which in this room was agreement. Morales shifted in his seat, knuckles pressed white against the clipboard. "What's the play with Cameron?" he said.

Kelly tapped the desk, once for punctuation. "He's on the property. In the yard, or maybe the warehouse. We take him alive. That's the order from the DA, from City Hall, and from me. If he wants to go out with a headline, let him, but nobody in this room is writing it for him."

A few heads dipped, just a hair. Kelly felt the sweat working its way down his ribs, pooling at the waistband. He tried to ignore the

way his chest tightened when he looked at the clock. Two hours to go, and already the world was spinning faster than he could grab it.

He moved to the chalkboard, uncapped the Sharpie, and jabbed at the first map. "Entry here, at the north gate. It's a weak point. Chain link, padlocked, but nothing you can't cut. Rowinski and Morales sweep the first two buildings. I want every office, every closet, every crawlspace clear before the rest of us step inside. Webber, you're with me. We hit the dispatch office, grab any paperwork, and bag the evidence before it goes in the shredder or the furnace."

He didn't have to say what happened if they were wrong, if the evidence wasn't there. He'd spent a week bending the rules to get the paperwork through, and if the ledger didn't match the bodies, the whole case went up like flash paper.

He saw it in their eyes: the awareness that this wasn't a routine run. It wasn't even about Eddie Kozma anymore. Not really. Now it was about who controlled the narrative, who walked away with the city's last ounce of faith in its own badge.

A thin, rat-faced patrolman in the back row raised a hand. "If there's guns on site, what's the use of bringing them in alive?"

Kelly looked at him, then at the room. He could feel the line between law and war tightening under his feet.

"Because we're still cops," he said, voice like a tire iron. "We bring them in, and we let the courts sort the rest. That's how we win."

No one spoke.

"After the yard's clear, we roll to the riverfront warehouse. Two units, all radios live. If you see a third party, you back off and call for backup. If you see Cameron, you call me. I want him breathing. The DA wants him talking. Nobody takes a shot unless there's no other choice."

He looked at each man, one by one. Not a single one held his gaze for more than a second. Good. It meant they understood.

He set the marker down, wiped his hands on a rag that looked like it'd cleaned a thousand engines, then pointed at the warrants.

"If you have a problem with this, now's the time to walk. After this, nobody gets a say."

Nobody moved. That was a problem, too, but one he could handle.

He cleared his throat. "Last thing. This doesn't get to the press, not until the DA's ready. There are reporters sniffing around. You see a camera, you turn away. You see a reporter, you send them to me or to Captain Eddings. We do not leak. If there's a leak, it's on my head, not yours."

He closed the folder, the sound sharp as a slap. "That's it. Check your kit, check your radios, and meet back here at zero-seven-thirty. Rowinski, you ride with me. Morales, you get the bolt cutters from the garage. Webber, you bring the evidence bags. Geller and Matey, check the cruiser for the battering ram. We're not getting locked out again."

The men stood, chairs scraping. Some moved with purpose, some just floated toward the door like they were being pulled by the gravity of what waited outside.

He watched them go, then looked at the table. The warrants were already starting to curl at the corners, the signatures in blue ink fuzzing out at the edges. He gathered them, careful not to leave a print, and slid them into the battered manila envelope.

The clock on the wall ticked, a dry, inhuman click. He felt the heat in his face, the sweat in his collar, the sour aftertaste of whiskey and fear mixing at the back of his mouth.

"This isn't just about Eddie Kozma anymore," he said, but this time it was to himself, the echo bouncing off steel and glass and years of bad precedent. "We've got a union boss running guns through our city. We do this clean, we do this right."

He stood there for a minute, just him and the hum of the lights, then went to check the bolt cutters himself. He wasn't going to trust anyone else with the first crack at the chain.

If you're going to go down, might as well be swinging.

Down the block from Zone 2 station, a battered Volkswagen Beetle sat parked too far from the curb, engine off but two figures visible in the front seat. The car's interior was a mess: cigarette butts jammed into the ashtray, a folded city map stained with coffee, two thermoses of something that might once have been called coffee. The windows were fogged, but Hannah had cracked hers enough to keep an eye on the convoy.

She'd gotten the call at 5:47 a.m.—Kelly's voice, flat and careful, just three words: "Penn and 23rd. Eight o'clock." Then the line went dead.

He's covering his tracks, she thought. Or he's giving me the story. Maybe both.

She watched Daniel emerge from the station, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold. He looked smaller than she remembered, folded into himself, but the way he moved told her everything she needed to know. He wasn't scared. He wasn't even tense. He was just cold and tired and ready to finish what he'd started.

James sat beside her in the passenger seat, eyes flicking between the rearview and the side mirror like he was waiting for a tail that would never come. He'd barely spoken since she picked him up, just grunted and climbed in, the Zeiss binoculars already in his lap.

"You see it?" she said.

James nodded. "They're loading up. Next five minutes, they go."

She checked the exposure settings on the Leica, then reached for her notebook. "You think they'll find anything?"

"If they don't, we'll know," James said. "If they do, we'll know sooner."

Hannah watched the line of unmarked Plymouths, exhaust curling up in slow, greasy spirals. She thought about what Young had said. "Cameron's not the only one. There's something bigger." She didn't know if that was true, or just the desperate spin of a man trying to save his own skin. But she knew one thing: whatever happened in the next few hours, the story would be hers to tell.

This is what you do, Hannah. Documents, sources, timing. You build the case on paper, and you watch it play out in the real world.

James was thinking differently, she knew. He was scanning the buildings, the alleys, the rooftops. He was thinking about exits, about how a man like Cameron might slip the net if the cops weren't careful. He was thinking about the guns they'd found in the warehouse, and the men who'd be guarding them.

That's his world. Shadows, muscle, the criminal edge. Let him have it.

She raised the Leica, focused on Daniel. The man's face was pinched, eyes sunk back in his skull, but the set of his mouth was pure iron. She took three shots, fast, then let the camera hang from her neck. "He's not bluffing," she said. "Not today."

James lowered the binoculars. "You ever think about running?" he said.

She smiled, small and real. "Only when I want to see who's chasing me."

A car door slammed, sharp in the stillness. Daniel climbed behind the wheel of the lead Plymouth, Rowinski beside him. The radios all clicked at once, a chorus of static and code numbers, then the convoy started to move. Slow at first, then gaining speed, each car pulling away from the curb with the deliberation of a tank formation.

Hannah shot three more frames, the wipers on the VW smearing the world into a wet, gray blur. James kept the binoculars up, scanning the buildings, but nothing moved except the police. It was like the city had gone numb, the only living thing the beast of old metal and muscle heading toward the river.

Daniel's car took the first left, then another, the whole line vanishing into the mist as if it had never existed. The last cruiser paused at the intersection, lights off but engine roaring, then turned and disappeared.

Hannah let out a breath she hadn't meant to hold. She reached for the tape recorder tucked under the seat, pressed the record button. "Convoy leaving Zone 2 at seven twenty-four. Heading west on Penn. No escort. No backup." She let the tape run, then snapped it off. "It's on," she said.

James lowered the binoculars. "You ready?"

She smiled again, sharper this time. "Always."

The VW's engine coughed, then caught. They pulled away from the curb, slow and careful, trailing the convoy by just enough distance to avoid the obvious. Behind them, the sun tried to break through, but the city didn't give an inch.

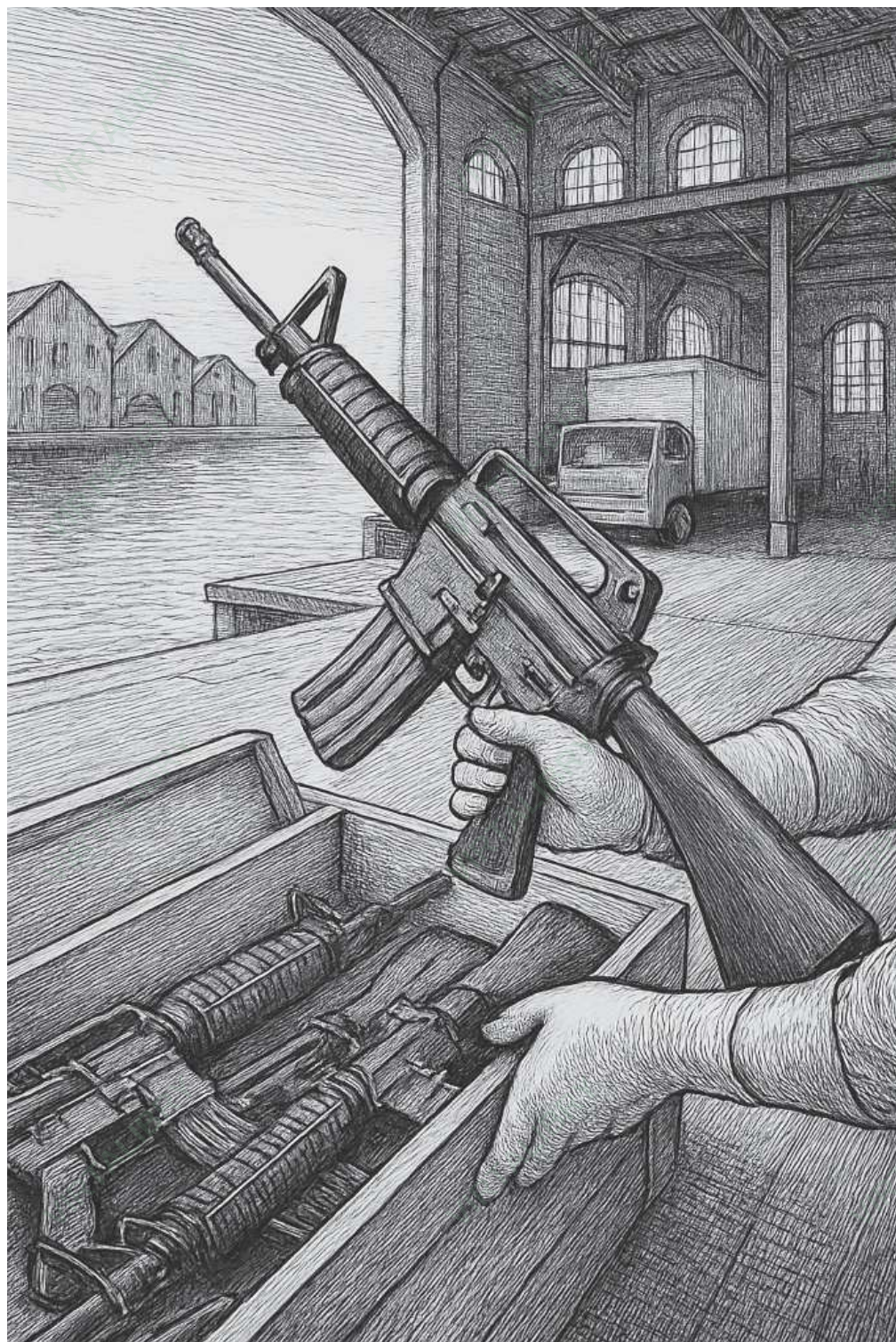
Ahead, the river waited.

Whatever happens next, the story goes with me. That's the only thing that matters.

She checked the Leica one more time, then focused on the road. James watched the mirrors, jaw tight, hand resting on the door handle like he might need to move fast.

The city was cold. But it was alive.

And for the first time in a long time, so was she.



CHAPTER 21

DETECTIVE KELLY



They hit the yard at 6:01 a.m., just as the river fog started peeling off the concrete in strips. The city hadn't woken yet, but the yard was wide awake. Shift change, or near enough, with three ACD trucks idling in a neat row like docile cattle. The gate was supposed to be locked, but Rowinski took it with one blow, the bolt cutters biting through the chain. The gate buckled inward, metal teeth scraping the curb, and the yard's alarm lit up the morning. Someone's cursing voice. Not a siren.

Daniel's squad moved as one, boots crunching gravel, weapons high, and radio squawks bouncing between the buildings. Morales split off to the loading dock, Geller and Matey posted at the west fence to block escape. Daniel took Webber and the office crew, cutting a line straight for the cinderblock dispatch building at the heart of the yard. Every sense was on redline; his pulse pounding so loud he could barely hear the barked commands.

They were barely twenty steps in when the first complication hit. A whistle—sharp, metallic, the kind you heard at the docks—split the air from somewhere near the repair bay. Daniel caught the signal a half-second before the response: two men in ACD jackets

sprinting for the back gate, and a third disappearing into the warehouse, the door slamming behind him.

"Runners!" Geller shouted, already pivoting.

Rowinski and Matey took off after the two at the fence, but Daniel's eyes stayed on the warehouse. That was where the real prize waited. Or the real ambush.

The real mess started near the shop bay. Daniel caught movement. He saw a man, quick and hunched in greasy coveralls, sprinting for the cab of the nearest Mack. Morales went wide, but the man was already reaching under the driver's seat. Daniel's chest tightened. He saw the shape of the weapon a second before the kid's hand closed on it. Not a shotgun. A nickel-plated .38, the kind that looked good in a glove box and bad in a murder file.

The kid's hand came up, wild and off-balance, but Morales closed the gap with a flying tackle. The gun barked once. The sound was impossibly loud in the morning air. Daniel felt the wind of the bullet snap past his ear. The .38 clattered to the asphalt, skidding under the truck's oil pan. Morales pinned the man's arm behind his back, yanked the other hand to join it, and the click of the cuffs was louder than the screaming that followed.

"Clear!" Morales barked, dragging the kid to his feet.

Daniel's heart was hammering now, the close call still ringing in his skull. He forced himself to breathe, to scan the yard. Drivers were on their knees, hands on heads; a parts runner sprawled on his back, eyes shut tight, like if he wished hard enough he'd disappear. The only thing still moving was the river, a low brown trickle behind the fence, indifferent to the human drama on its banks.

The radio crackled. Geller's voice, breathless: "Two down at the fence. Third went into the warehouse. Lost him in the back."

Third man. That's the problem.

Daniel signaled to Webber. "Office first. Then we sweep the warehouse. Nobody leaves until we find him."

Inside the dispatch office, the air was thick with the smell of coffee, cigarettes, and the perfume of a thousand carbon copies. At the center, behind a heavy steel desk, sat a man who could only be Patrick Cameron.

He was already in uniform: suit, tie, hair lacquered to a shine. He didn't stand, didn't even reach for the phone. He just looked at Daniel, eyes blank, as if the morning raid was nothing more than a routine delivery gone to hell.

Daniel kept his voice low. "Mr. Cameron. You know why we're here."

Cameron let the words hang, then flicked a glance to his left. A big man in a union windbreaker, standing like a bodyguard. Daniel noted the move, then set his hands flat on the desk.

"Show me a warrant," Cameron said, voice like broken glass.

Daniel produced the paper, slid it across. "Signed by Judge Hammond, countersigned by the DA. We're seizing all manifests, run logs, and on-site assets. You can call your lawyer when we're finished."

Cameron didn't even look at the warrant. "You realize who you're screwing with, Detective?" The words were calm, but the knuckles on the man's left hand had gone white.

Daniel didn't answer. He nodded to Webber, who started boxing up the desk drawers with the efficiency of a man who'd spent his life separating other men from their secrets.

The bodyguard tensed, but Daniel met his eye and shook his head, just once. Not today. The man's jaw worked, but he stayed put.

Cameron leaned back, laced his fingers, and stared at the ceiling. "I hope you like being unemployed, Kelly. Or maybe you want to go back to walking a beat on the South Side. That'd be a good fit."

Daniel felt the insult, but let it slide. *You want me angry. You want me to slip. Not happening. Not today.*

The radio crackled again. Rowinski's voice, strained: "Detective, we got a problem. The warehouse. There's a false wall in the back. We can hear movement behind it."

Daniel's jaw tightened. "Hold your position. I'm on my way."

He turned to Cameron, watching the man's face for any flicker of reaction. Nothing. Just the same blank, confident mask.

"Stay with him," Daniel said to Webber. "If he moves, cuff him to the desk."

He crossed the yard at a jog, the cold air burning his lungs. At the warehouse entrance, Rowinski and two uniforms were stacked by the door, weapons drawn. The interior was dark, lit only by the yellow spill from the loading dock.

"There," Rowinski said, pointing to the back wall. "We heard footsteps, then nothing."

Daniel moved forward, slow and careful. The wall was sheet metal, painted to match the rest of the interior. He ran his hand along the seam until he found it. A recessed latch, hidden behind a stack of empty pallets.

He signaled for silence, then yanked the latch.

The panel swung open onto a narrow corridor, barely wide enough for one man. At the end, a single bulb swung on a cord, casting wild shadows. And beneath it, crouched and wild-eyed, was the third runner—a young man with a shotgun leveled at Daniel's chest.

"Drop it!" Daniel shouted, the command echoing off the walls.

The kid's hands shook, the barrel wavering. For a long, frozen moment, nobody moved.

Then the kid's eyes flicked to the corridor behind him: an escape route, maybe a door to the river dock. Daniel saw the calculation happen in real time.

"Don't," Daniel said, voice low and steady. "You run, you die. You put the gun down, you walk out of here alive."

The kid hesitated, then let the shotgun clatter to the floor. Rowinski was on him in a heartbeat, cuffing his wrists and hauling him upright.

Daniel let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. *Too close. Way too close.*

They swept the rest of the corridor, finding nothing but dust and a rusted fire escape that led to the riverbank. The door was still locked from the inside. Nobody had made it out.

Back in the office, Webber had the safe open. The manila envelopes inside were thick, rubber-banded, and labeled in Cameron's own blocky script: "X1A—STRIKE RUNS," "BUN-

DLES—MISC," "LEGAL—PERSONAL." Daniel felt the shape of the conspiracy in the weight of the paper.

He turned to Cameron. "You're under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, arms trafficking, and about a dozen counts of payroll fraud. Anything you say can and will be used..."

Cameron cut him off with a bark of laughter, sharp and echoing. "You think this is gonna stick? You think anyone up at Grant Street gives a rat's ass about some dead dockworker?"

Daniel shrugged. "We'll see what the judge thinks."

Cameron's smile flickered, then hardened. "You know, Kelly, I always wondered how you'd play this. You're not as clean as you think. That ledger. The one you 'found' in the janitor's closet. Funny how it turned up just when you needed it."

Daniel's blood went cold, but he kept his face still.

Cameron leaned in, voice a whisper. "I've got friends at City Hall. Friends who keep records of their own. You push this, and maybe those records find their way to Internal Affairs. Maybe they find their way to the papers. You want to play hero, Detective? Let's see how you look when the city sees how the sausage gets made."

For a long moment, the only sound was the hum of the fluorescent lights.

Daniel reached into his coat and pulled out a second envelope: the backup warrants he'd prepared the night before, signed and sealed, covering every angle Cameron might try to exploit. "You think I didn't plan for this?" Daniel said, voice flat. "You think I walked in here without insurance? These warrants cover every piece of paper in this office, every bank account tied to your name, and every man who ever signed off on one of your runs. You want to play games, go ahead. But the only thing you'll accomplish is making sure the Feds get a piece of you, too."

Cameron's mask slipped, just for a second. A flash of real fear behind the bravado. Daniel signaled to Webber, who snapped the cuffs on Cameron, then the bodyguard. The latter—Smitty—tried to twist, but Daniel already had a grip on his shoulder, squeezing just hard enough to let the man know he was serious.

Smitty looked at Cameron, then at Daniel. For a second, some-

thing flickered in his eyes. Not loyalty, not fear. Something closer to exhaustion. "He promised us pensions," Smitty muttered, almost to himself. "Said we'd be set for life."

Daniel didn't answer. There was nothing to say.

They walked Cameron and the muscle out into the yard, past the kneeling men and the stinking diesel. Every pair of eyes followed them, some with fear, some with a kind of animal glee. The boss was in cuffs. For the first time in years, maybe ever, there was a crack in the world.

As they loaded Cameron into the back of the cruiser, Daniel caught a whiff of the man's aftershave—sharp, expensive, totally out of place in a yard like this.

Cameron locked eyes with him, dead and hard. "You're making a mistake, Detective. You don't know how this city works."

Daniel let himself smile, just a little. "I do now."

He shut the cruiser door, then stood for a moment in the exhaust and the noise, watching the rest of the squad finish the job. The radios were alive, the zip of static a pulse that matched the beat in his chest.

One down. A hundred more to go.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, then turned to Webber. "Next stop: the warehouse."

Webber nodded, already moving.

Daniel took a last look at the yard. Still shuddering, still reeling from the shock. For a second, he felt the world slow, the air stilling around him.

He let himself savor it, just for a breath.

Then he followed his men into the next war zone.

The warehouse clung to the river's edge like a growth, its corrugated skin streaked with fifty years of rust and neglect. Daniel's team approached through the loading bay, boots slipping on a film of oil and last night's rain. Inside, the lights buzzed and flickered, illuminating row after row of wooden crates, most stenciled "MEDICAL SUPPLIES—PRIORITY." The place reeked of river mold and

ammonia, but beneath it was the metallic tang of something more dangerous.

Webber started at the closest stack, worked a crowbar into the seam. The crate split with a reluctant groan, shedding splinters onto the concrete. Daniel stepped in, watching as Morales and Geller wedged the lid off the next one. The moment the top came loose, the world changed. Neat rows of M16 rifles filled the box, each one cradled in packing straw, the barrels glinting beneath a thin film of Cosmoline. A tag on the nearest read, in block letters, "FOR USE ONLY—AUTHORIZED DELIVERY."

Morales let out a low whistle. "Jesus. There's enough firepower here to take half the city."

Daniel nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He picked up one of the rifles, felt its weight, the machined smoothness of the handguard. The serial number had been filed off, the metal left raw and pitted. He could smell the gun oil, sharp and acidic, cutting through the warehouse funk like bleach.

"Get the ATF on the horn," he said, handing the rifle back to Morales. "And start the photo log. Every crate, every weapon. We'll need a truck to haul this out."

Geller worked his way down the row, popping crates in sequence. Every box was packed full. Rifles, magazines, bandoliers of ammo, even a few sidearms wrapped in waxed paper. Daniel watched the men work, the methodical rhythm of evidence collection clashing with the panic rising inside. *Cameron was never just a union boss. He was building an army.*

The radio crackled. Rowinski's voice, tense: "Detective, we've got company. Black sedan just pulled up to the east gate. Two men in suits. They're flashing badges, but I don't recognize the make."

Daniel's stomach dropped. "Hold them at the gate. Don't let anyone in until I get there."

He crossed the warehouse at a jog, the cold air burning his lungs. At the east gate, Rowinski and two uniforms were squared off against a pair of men in dark overcoats. One held a leather badge case open, the gold glinting in the morning light.

"Detective Kelly?" the taller one said, voice smooth and prac-

ticed. "I'm Simmons, Commissioner's office. We've got a call from the Mayor. He's requesting you stand down pending a review of the warrant."

Daniel felt the blood drain from his face. "This warrant was signed by Judge Hammond. It's valid."

Simmons smiled, the expression never reaching his eyes. "The Mayor's office has concerns about the scope of the operation. We're asking you to pause until those concerns can be addressed."

Daniel looked at Rowinski, then at the warehouse behind him. Every minute they waited was another chance for evidence to disappear, for Cameron's allies to spin the story.

He thought about the ledger, the chain of custody he'd bent to make this raid happen. If the Commissioner's office started digging, they'd find the cracks. They'd find him.

But he also thought about Eddie Kozma, floating face-up in the Allegheny River. About the men and women who'd risked everything to bring this case to light.

"No," Daniel said, voice flat. "The warrant stands. If the Mayor has a problem, he can take it up with the DA."

Simmons's smile flickered. "You're making a mistake, Detective."

"Maybe," Daniel said. "But it's mine to make."

He turned his back on the Commissioner's men and walked back to the warehouse, the weight of the decision settling into his bones.

The ATF was calling in a truck, the uniforms were tightening the cordon, and Daniel caught sight of the unmarked car parked by the gate—Ryan Bennett inside, flanked by two detectives. His hands were locked together in his lap, knuckles white, jaw set so tight it looked wired shut. Daniel walked over, rapped on the glass. One of the detectives popped the door, and Daniel leaned in.

"You ready?" Daniel asked.

Ryan's eyes flicked up, wary, but he nodded. "Yeah. Let's get it over with."

Daniel signaled the detectives to bring him in. They walked him across the yard, keeping a careful grip on the man's elbows. Ryan moved like he expected to be shot at every step, but he never tried to

run, never looked back. When they reached the warehouse, Daniel led him to the open bay.

"Take a look," Daniel said. "Recognize anything?"

Ryan's face went slack, eyes roaming the racks and crates. He swallowed, hard, then pointed to the second stack. "Those are the ones I moved last week. Smitty had me load them onto the blue Kenworth, the one with the bent bumper. Said it was going to Jersey."

Daniel made a note, then pointed to the handguns. "What about those?"

Ryan hesitated, then nodded. "Saw them. They kept them separate. Only the union guys touched those. Never let us near them unless we were driving."

Daniel could see the fear in the kid, the way he flinched at every loud noise, every shout from outside. But Ryan kept talking, kept pointing out the trucks, the drivers, the routes. He did it because he had to, or maybe because he knew this was his last chance to make the city right.

"You did good," Daniel said. "This will help put them away for a long time."

Ryan managed a ghost of a smile, then sagged against the wall, letting the adrenaline drain out of him.

The process went on for hours. The ATF logged every crate, Daniel and his men swept every inch of the warehouse, and Ryan identified every truck and face he could remember. By midmorning, the yard was swarming with uniforms, reporters gathering at the fence, and the first wave of federal agents loading evidence onto a waiting flatbed.

Daniel stood by the river, watching the operation unfold. The water looked the same as always—cold, brown, moving east like nothing had changed. But Daniel felt the difference in his bones. For once, the current was on his side.

He took a last look at the crates, the evidence, the men who'd risked everything to bring it to light. He'd won this round. There would be more, always more, but for now, he let himself believe in the victory.

Back at the car, Ryan waited, arms folded, head down. Daniel nodded to the detectives. "Take him to the safe house. He's earned it."

As they drove away, Daniel turned back to the warehouse, now a crime scene in every sense of the word. He knew the next fight would come soon, but he was ready.

This city never gave up its ghosts easy. But at least today, one of them had been laid to rest.

CHAPTER 22

HANNAH



The newsroom at the Steel City Press was built for chaos. A warren of battered metal desks jammed together in unpredictable angles, the air a permanent haze of cigarette smoke and toner dust. It was seven p.m. but the place was running on the electricity of deadline; phones ringing in quick, angry bursts, the clack of typewriters spitting out copy with the violence of a gunfight, and at the center of it all, Hannah Robertson hunched over her desk, hands stained with pencil lead and newsprint, eyes narrow as razors.

Her workspace looked like the aftermath of a one-woman arson: clipped photos curling in the heat from her lamp, strips of red grease pencil tagging paragraphs for deletion, and a yellow legal pad with notes so frantic she'd torn the top sheet nearly in half. She'd spread the evidence across her desktop with all the subtlety of a war crime: a glossy 8x10 of Eddie's corpse, neck scored with a tidy ring of bruises; James's nighttime surveillance shots of the ACD yard with the ghostly streaks of midnight semis backing up to the dock; a stack of photostats showing page after page of route codes, circled and cross-referenced until the numbers blurred; and a thin sheaf of city permit memos, signed by Councilman Young in a hand that screamed too desperate to be real.

The rest of the office orbited her at a safe remove, like they could smell the ozone coming off her.

Her phone rang, hard and insistent. She snatched it up before the second ring.

"Robertson."

"You got five?" said the city editor, his voice a gravelly bark from the far side of the newsroom.

"If it's not about the strike, you're wasting my time."

He grunted. "It's about your source. And something else."

She hung up without another word. The walk to the editor's bullpen was short but performed at a speed just shy of running; people moved out of her way, not quite looking her in the eye. The glass walls of the bullpen held in the cigarette smoke but nothing else. The city editor was waiting, a manila envelope already on the desk in front of him, unopened but radiating trouble.

He pointed at the chair. She ignored it and stood, arms crossed.

He pulled a face. "Sit, Robertson. It's not a goddamn duel."

She sat, but not in the way he meant.

He pushed the envelope toward her. "Cameron's lawyer called three times today. Said he'd sue us, sue the union, sue your dead grandmother if we printed a word of this without a retraction. And I just got off the phone with the advertising department: two of our biggest accounts are threatening to pull their business if we run this story."

Hannah felt the blood rise, hot and stupid. "You know it's true. We have the run sheets, the timecards, the whistle tower photos. If Cameron's name was on a stick of dynamite, you'd call it a candle and light it anyway."

He didn't smile. "Don't get clever. Just open it."

She tore the envelope open and dumped its contents on the blotter. A glossy headshot of Eddie, the kind you took for a union ID, and a thick packet of copied documents. Arrest report, 1967: "Drunk and Disorderly—Strip District. Fined, released." A yellowed hospital admit sheet with "alcohol intoxication" underlined in red. A handwritten note, dated last spring, from an old shift supervisor: "Kozma's been showing up late, not sure he's

sober." And, at the bottom, a single-page "memorandum" typed on ACD letterhead: "To whom it may concern—We regret to inform you of Edward Kozma's resignation due to his inability to manage personal issues. Attempts to provide assistance were rebuffed." Signed in looping blue ink: "Patrick Cameron, President."

Hannah let the pages sit. She'd seen this maneuver before, but it still burned. "They're smearing him as a drunk. That's the play?"

The editor leaned back, hands locked behind his neck. "It's the play. And it's not even a bad one. He's got a record, and I've got four guys on the phones who say Kozma was on the bottle the last year. We can print your story, but if you want to pin this on Cameron, you'd better have more than a couple of greasy union logs and a midnight phone call from a dead man."

She shot him a look. "What's your angle, here? I file the best copy you've seen in two years and you want me to write a eulogy for the union thug who killed him?"

His eyes went dead flat. "My angle is not getting this paper sued into bankruptcy. Legal's already got cold feet: they're talking about softening the language, maybe pulling Cameron's name. And upstairs, there's pressure coming from places I can't name. You want to go after the union, fine. But you pin it to the rogue employees—McGivern, maybe Smitty if you can get the detectives to say the word. But you don't go after Cameron unless you've got a photo of him with a gun in his hand and a signed confession in the other."

Hannah stared at the packet. "If we print this, we're burying him twice. Once in the river, and once on page A3."

He sighed, then gestured with two fingers. "I liked Kozma. Hell, my cousin played cards with him every week. But we don't get to write fairy tales here. You want him to be a hero, then make him a hero. But don't stick the knife in Cameron unless you're ready to twist it with both hands."

Hannah sat for a long second, watching the smoke curl around the ceiling tile. She wanted to scream. Instead, she stood, gathering the packet and folding it once, hard, until the edge went white.

"I'm not backing down," she said. "If you want timid copy, wrap

it under sports. And if legal wants to cut the story, they can explain to the DA why we buried evidence in a murder case."

He almost grinned. "Then write it like you mean it. Just be ready to bleed for every line."

Hannah left the bullpen, the envelope heavy in her hand, and strode back to her desk. She let the city editor's words roll around her head. *Bleed for every line? I'll bleed for the lede, the nut graf, the damn jump page.* She fished a cigarette from her bag, lit it, and exhaled with a satisfaction that bordered on religious. The newsroom's tempo surged, and she slipped into it, hands already moving for the typewriter.

The phone rang. She almost ignored it, but something in the ring—insistent, personal—made her pick up.

"Robertson."

A pause, then a deep, syrupy baritone. "You running my name in the paper tomorrow, Miss Robertson?"

She recognized the voice. Cameron himself, the old bastard. She let him wait.

"I'm running the facts," she said, voice flat.

"You run my name, and I'll see you in court by lunch. I'll see your paper in court, your editor, your publisher. We've got nothing to hide, but we will not be slandered by some..." He caught himself, then let the threat bleed into the silence.

"By some what, Mr. Cameron?"

"By some reporter who thinks she knows how this city works."

She let him hear her smile. "I know exactly how it works, Mr. Cameron. I've got the names, the dates, the permits. And when the morning edition comes out, so will the truth."

He laughed. "You do what you want. But you be careful, Miss Robertson. You're not the first to try this. And you won't be the last to regret it."

She hung up before he could finish.

Her hands shook, just a little, as she reached for the next page.

She glanced around. Nobody had noticed the call, or if they had, nobody cared. She'd always liked that about the newsroom. Nobody cared what you did, as long as you filed it before the presses rolled.

She punched out another draft, then another, each one angrier than the last. She let the facts pile up, then rearranged them to punch through the fog of bullshit Cameron had spent a lifetime weaving. Every time she felt doubt creep in, she looked at the photo of Eddie's battered face and remembered: *He died for a reason. I'm not letting them write him off like a bad debt.*

By ten, she had a story. By eleven, she had a front page.

She stapled the drafts together, then marched back to the bullpen. The city editor was in the same chair, a new cigarette glued to his bottom lip. But this time, he wasn't alone: a man in a rumpled gray suit sat in the corner, a legal pad balanced on his knee.

"Legal," the editor said, by way of introduction. "Hawkins, from the fourth floor."

Hawkins didn't stand. He just looked at Hannah with the expression of a man who'd been asked to clean up after a bomb.

"Miss Robertson," he said, voice dry as chalk. "I've been reviewing your copy. There are some concerns."

Hannah dropped the drafts on the desk. "Read it. Then tell me what you want to cut."

Hawkins flipped through the pages, lips moving silently. Every few seconds, he made a mark in red ink. A word circled, a phrase underlined, a whole paragraph crossed out.

"You can't use Cameron's name in the lede," he said. "Not without attribution. And this section—" he tapped a page "—where you say he 'ordered' the cover-up. That's actionable."

Hannah's jaw tightened. "He did order it. We have witnesses."

"Witnesses who are cooperating with the police in exchange for immunity," Hawkins said. "That makes them interested parties. Defense counsel will have a field day."

She looked at the editor, who shrugged. "He's not wrong."

Hannah took a breath, forced herself to count to five. "Fine. I'll rewrite the lede. I'll soften the language. But Cameron's name stays in the story, and the facts stay on the record. If legal wants to kill the

piece, they can explain to the DA why we buried evidence in a murder case."

Hawkins hesitated, then looked at the editor. The editor stubbed out his cigarette and nodded. "Run it. But every word goes through legal before it hits the press."

Hannah gathered the pages, feeling the weight of compromise in her hands. It wasn't the story she wanted to write—but it was the story the city would get.

She went back to her desk, rewrote the lede, softened the accusations, and sent the copy to legal. By midnight, the presses were rolling, and the front page was hers.

She sat in the empty newsroom, the hum of the machinery vibrating through the floor, and lit one last cigarette. She thought about Eddie, about the truth they'd managed to save, and the truth they'd been forced to bury.

They'll remember him, she told herself. Maybe not the way I wanted. But they'll remember.

The presses ran until dawn, and the city woke to a headline that would change everything—and nothing—all at once.

CHAPTER 23

JAMES



The nursing home was three miles and a thousand years from the river. Its lobby looked like a dentist's waiting room mated with a mid-tier bus terminal, all faux-wood paneling and vinyl benches bolted to the floor. The receptionist gave James a badge and a look that said: Good luck. Most visitors brought carnations or discount chocolates. James carried only a manila envelope, thick and battered, crammed with the kind of paperwork nobody ever wanted.

The hallway was a tunnel of smells: antiseptic, boiled vegetables, something sweetly rotting under both. He passed a TV lounge where six ancient faces blinked at cartoons that had outlived their last sponsors. The place ran on inertia and state checks. You could almost hear the clock grinding its teeth.

At the end of the hall, Room 23A. Hand-lettered on the door: MRS. KOZMA. Below that, in black Sharpie: "Knock and enter, hearing impaired."

Inside, the old woman sat by the window in a wheelchair that looked older than James. The sun was shining hard, but she squinted through it, eyelids stitched with purple veins. Her hands

were folded in her lap, knuckles swollen to the size of walnuts, skin stretched thin and spotted. She wore a cardigan with pearl buttons and a dress that might once have been blue. Her hair was wispy and wild, a gray dandelion puff, and her face was all sharp angles, the nose a monument to bad genetics and worse luck.

James cleared his throat, loud, then louder. She didn't turn, so he knelt beside her and put the badge in her sightline. "Mrs. Kozma? My name is James Anderson. I work with the police."

She looked past him, then at the wall, then back. He saw confusion, then a flicker of something else: hope, maybe, or the last vestige of suspicion from a woman who'd lived through every double-cross the century could muster.

"Police?" she said, voice papery but strong. "Are you from the city? Did I miss a payment?"

He almost smiled. "No, ma'am. It's about your son. About Eddie."

The name made her face soften, just a notch. "You found him?" Her eyes went shiny. "He called last month. Said he was in trouble but he'd be back for Christmas. He always says that."

James sat on the edge of the radiator. It burned through his coat, but he didn't move. "We did find him," he said. "He..." He stopped, ran a thumb over the envelope. "He died trying to fix something, Mrs. Kozma. Something big."

She blinked, once, twice, the lashes trembling. "He was always fixing," she said. "Even when he was small, always had to make the toys work. Never liked to play with them, just make them work." She looked out at the city, the little slice of it visible through the smeared glass. "Did he suffer?"

James swallowed. "No. It was quick."

She nodded, but he could tell she didn't quite believe him. *Nobody ever believes the lie, but they always ask for it.*

He set the envelope in her lap. "This is for you. It's from the city. It's... back pay. For the work he did."

She pawed at the string tie, fingers fumbling. He helped her, tearing the flap so it hung open like a wound. Inside, a stack of

money orders, bundled with a rubber band. She stared at them, lips pursed. "It's a lot," she said.

James shrugged. "He earned it. More than that, but—this is what's left."

She held the stack to her chest, eyes closed. The sun caught her face and made her look translucent. "He was always good," she said, voice drifting. "Not smart, maybe, but good."

James nodded. "He tried to do the right thing, even when it was dangerous."

She glanced at him, sideways. "Are you married, Mr. Anderson?"

He shook his head.

She tapped the envelope. "Then you don't know. You never stop waiting for them to come back, not ever. He was a sweet boy. Too trusting. His father was the same. That's why I have to sit here now." She tried to laugh, but it turned into a cough that racked her whole body.

He stood, unsure. The room felt smaller, the air brittle with old pain and microwaved dust. "If you need anything..." he started, but she cut him off.

"I need nothing," she said. "He did his best, yes?"

James nodded again. "Yes, ma'am. He did."

She pressed the money orders flat against her leg, as if afraid they might float away. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she blinked them back. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Thank you for telling me yourself."

He didn't know what to say, so he bent to shake her hand. She gripped his fingers, birdlike and desperate, then let go.

On his way out, she called after him, voice suddenly strong. "You're a nice young man, Mr. Anderson. Don't let this city change you."

James kept his head down as he walked the hall. The smell of boiled vegetables was gone now, replaced by something sharper. It took him three doors before he realized it was grief.

He sat in his car for a while, hands on the wheel, staring at the dashboard. *Some scars don't even break the skin.* He waited until the

feeling passed, then started the engine and drove back to the city, where the only reward for trying was more of the same.

The precinct basement was colder than the street, and twice as dead. James followed the chipped steps down, every echo a reminder of just how much the city valued its own secrets. The overhead fluorescents flickered in sequence, painting the room in sickly green stripes. The air smelled like mildew, gun oil, and the hot dust off the back of a furnace.

Daniel and Hannah were already there, flanked by a kingdom of cardboard evidence boxes and three folding tables jammed end-to-end. On the tables: rifles tagged with red plastic, a scatter of ledgers, a pyramid of city permits, all anchored by a coffee cup ringed with fingerprints. James took in the room in one sweep. This is where you came to bury things. Or to dig them up, if you were lucky and had the right warrant.

Daniel's tie was a loose noose, his sleeves rolled above the tattoo line. He sat with both hands on the table, fingers drumming a slow, nervous code against the top of Eddie's coded ledger. The paper was open to the last page, where Eddie had started a tally but stopped at four. Above them, the hum of the city filtered down as a faint vibration, as if the whole building was daring the three of them to finish the job.

"You want the list?" Daniel said, not looking up.

James shrugged, slid a chair sideways to Hannah. She nodded once, pen poised over a notebook so battered it might have survived World War II. There were no greetings left for days like this.

Daniel cleared his throat, voice flat as a ruler. "Cameron's going down for murder one, conspiracy, and weapons trafficking. The DA's already got the charges prepped." He tapped the ledger. "McGivern's rolled, gets accessory after the fact, obstruction, and a shot at parole if he testifies. Ryan Bennett's going to the state pen, but it's reduced: he's a cooperating witness, so five years, maybe less. Denise Parker walks, full immunity, but she relocates. Eleanor

Markham won't be charged, but she's persona non grata with every board on the East Coast. Marcus Young resigns Monday, faces an ethics inquiry and probably loses his pension."

He let the list fall, like a shovel dropping onto a coffin lid.

"What about the ledger?" Hannah asked, voice low. "The chain of custody?"

Daniel's jaw tightened. "The DA's not asking questions. Neither is IA—for now. But if Cameron's lawyers start digging, it could get ugly."

James watched Daniel's hands, the way they never stopped moving. You could see the current running under the calm. All those years of learning not to flinch, and it still came out in the hands.

Hannah wrote without looking up. "It's neat," she said, voice so low it barely made it across the table. "Does it feel neat to you?"

Daniel's jaw ticked once. "No. But it's done."

James scanned the evidence again, let his eyes drift over the rifles, the run sheets, the city permits with the forged signature in bright blue. It all looked so clean, after the fact.

"What about you?" James said to Daniel. "IA still sniffing around?"

Daniel's face went blank. "They're always sniffing. But the brass wants this closed. They'll run interference."

Hannah looked up from her notebook. "And when 'for now' runs out?"

Daniel didn't answer. He just looked at the ledger, the evidence, the men who'd risked everything to bring it to light.

James let his gaze travel the table. Every item was a piece of Eddie's final days: each tag and number, each half-dried signature. He wondered if the man had known how much of his life would end up labeled, boxed, and filed in the bowels of a building that didn't even know his name.

He looked at Daniel, at the way his shoulders stayed squared even as the rest of him wilted. Then at Hannah, who seemed smaller and sharper in the cold light, her eyes flickering between the two of them like she was counting cards.

"Good work," James said, finally. "For what it's worth."

Daniel's hand twitched. "It's never worth what you pay for it."

They left the evidence right where it was, every piece waiting for the next cold case, the next cop, the next reporter. James followed them up the stairs, each step another shovelful of dirt on what had been the city's best secret. When he looked back, the basement was dark again, the hum of the fluorescents drowned out by the closing of the door.

CHAPTER 24

JAMES



The Markham house on Summerlea had the look of a place recently vacated by its own myth. Even the rain, typically kept at bay by gutter guards and dignified stonework, was seeping through the brick today, pooling in the joints of the front steps and painting everything a shade darker than it needed to be. James let himself up the walk, still favoring the rib that refused to heal, and rang the bell. The chime was muted, a funereal echo in the vestibule, and for a long moment he considered leaving before anyone answered.

But Eleanor was punctual as ever, opening the door on the second ring. She wore a blue suit that could have bought his entire wardrobe three times over, but the fit was slightly off, as if tailored for a thicker world. Her hair was precise, makeup minimal but expertly placed, every surface controlled except for the skin at her neck, which had gone sallow and papery since his last visit. She held the storm door between two fingers, but the diamond ring was gone.

"Mr. Anderson," she said. The voice had a crackle under it, static that hadn't been there before. "Please. You're early. That's fine."

He let himself in, wiping his feet on the Persian runner out of

habit. The entryway had been scrubbed clean of family photos; only the umbrella stand and a narrow bench remained. No music, no background chatter from the kitchen staff. Just the buzz of the air handler and the faint, ever-present Steel Town mildew.

Eleanor led him through the living room—unused, the white cloth still on the piano—then up the carpeted stairs to her office. At the landing, she paused, as if remembering what the next line of her script should be.

"They took me off the Foundation board," she said, not looking at him. "Last night, after the paper went to print. That makes eight boards and counting. I'm sure there will be more."

James nodded, following at a safe distance. "They'll come around. If not, there's always Florida."

She barked a laugh, brittle and mean. "Can you see me in Boca Raton?"

The study was a fishbowl of mahogany and glass, every shelf organized to the millimeter. On the desk, three stacks of papers: the first a sheaf of typed letters, each one on heavy foundation stationery; the second, a set of legal documents with color-coded flags poking out at intervals; the third, a single-page memo with a photo of Eddie clipped to the top.

She gestured to a chair, then perched herself on the edge of the desk, knees angled for maximum poise. "I thought you'd like to see this," she said, pushing the first stack toward him. "They're setting up a memorial. For Edward. The Board voted at five this morning. It was the least they could do."

He picked up the top letter. It was pure PR, four paragraphs of "tragedy" and "loss" and "our enduring gratitude to the brave men and women who make this city run." The language was so sanitized you could have eaten off it. He set it down.

"They'll match donations from the union," she continued. "And I'll be covering the rest, of course. Quietly."

"Of course," he said. The sarcasm was dry as dust.

She didn't rise to it. Instead, she slid the second stack toward him, her hands trembling so lightly that only the edge of her nail betrayed it. "That's the paperwork. The endowment's in his name,

but the money goes to a river cleanup project, and a college fund for any children of ACD employees. They drew the line at reparations."

James flipped through the pages. The signatures were all there, blue ink bleeding at the sharpest loops. "You do this for him, or for you?"

She looked at the wall, the tightness in her jaw almost daring him to say the next thing.

"Both," she said. "If I'd acted faster, if I'd gone public..."

He cut her off. "Then they'd have killed him anyway, but maybe with a bigger headline." He watched her process that, the way her lips pinched together, the way her left hand found her right wrist and squeezed.

"I'm not asking for absolution, Mr. Anderson," she said, softer. "I just don't want to be a ghost."

She picked up the third stack: the memo with Eddie's photo. "I found something in my husband's files," she said, voice low. "A letter he wrote before he died. He knew about Cameron's operation—not everything, but enough. He was going to go public, but he never got the chance."

James looked at the photo of Eddie, then at Eleanor. "You think that's why your husband was killed?"

She nodded. "I didn't want to believe it. But after everything that's happened—after Eddie—I can't pretend anymore. My husband died because he tried to do the right thing. And so did Eddie. That's why I'm doing this. Not for absolution. For the truth."

She opened the bottom drawer of the desk and took out a thick envelope, banded with red tape. She placed it on the blotter and pushed it toward him.

"Your fee," she said. "Plus a bonus. For the bruises."

He let the envelope sit. "You don't owe me that much."

She scoffed. "You saved my life. Or at least, my reputation. Same thing, in this zip code."

He pocketed the envelope, feeling the weight of the money and the dirt in equal measure. "You know, Eddie probably would have hated all of this. The ceremony. The speeches."

She smiled, a slow, bitter curve. "He was a strange man. You

know what he said to me, the first time we met? He said, 'You can't trust the river, but you can trust the tide.' I never understood it."

James did, but he wasn't about to explain. He stood, testing the weight of his own body, and felt the pain in his ribs set the tempo for the rest of the day.

At the door, she paused, hand on the knob. "You think it matters? The money. The fund. Any of it."

"Matters to someone," he said.

She nodded, then opened the door.

As he left, she called after him, voice clear but stripped to the bone. "He died because I was afraid to go public. I won't hide behind money again." The sound of it lingered on the landing, echoing off the marble and glass like a warning.

Back in the Falcon, James let the heater run until his hands stopped shaking. He took the envelope, counted the bills, then stripped off half and slid them into a blank deposit slip. He addressed it to the Kozma Memorial, c/o the new endowment, and licked the flap shut.

It wasn't justice, but it was the closest thing the city ever offered. He drove the rest of the way home with the radio off, the rain working over the windshield in a steady, unbroken hiss.

On the corner of Liberty and Main, he dropped the envelope in a mailbox, then watched the traffic for a long time, trying to convince himself it would make a difference.

The fifth-floor conference room at Zone 2 had never looked so antiseptic. Even the city's best efforts to buff the stains from the terrazzo couldn't chase the memory of last week's blood out of the grout, or the stink of old nicotine off the ceiling tiles. But for today, the janitors had gone nuclear: the floor sparkled, the cinderblock walls wore fresh government green, and the podium's flag stood two inches taller than regulation.

Daniel stood at attention, collar starched, tie cinched up to the point it threatened to garrote him. He could feel sweat pooling

between his shoulder blades, trickling in slow, deliberate motion all the way down his spine. The badge pinned to his breast—detective sergeant, not that he believed it yet—gleamed with the precision of a laser.

His wife, Allison, sat dead center, hands folded tight on a patent-leather clutch. She wore a navy dress that didn't quite suit her but screamed "promotion day" from every well-pressed seam. Daniel caught her eye, just for a second, and saw the smile: genuine, proud, so big it threatened to spill off her face. He tried to return it, but his own mouth was stuck somewhere between grimace and poker face.

Commissioner Edson took the podium. "Detective Kelly led the task force that cracked the most significant arms trafficking ring in city history. He pursued the case with integrity and valor, despite overwhelming odds and personal risk."

Daniel felt his throat tighten, not from the words but from the memory of how he'd gotten here. The ledger, the witness, the sleepless week playing god with evidence and hoping the house wouldn't catch fire before he could douse it.

In the third row, two men in plain suits watched the proceedings with the focused indifference of snakes eyeing a mouse hole. Internal Affairs, freshly rotated from the Hill District. The taller one scribbled in a spiral notebook every time Daniel's name was said. The other, a pockmarked little man with a permanent squint, never stopped watching Daniel.

After the ceremony, the taller one sidled up and blocked his path.

"Congratulations, Detective Sergeant," the man said. His name tag was plastic, the kind that bent if you looked at it too hard. "Hell of a case you closed."

"Just doing the job," Daniel replied. His voice was neutral, not friendly, but not quite hostile.

The man smiled. It looked like it hurt. "You got lucky with that ledger. Not everyone would have known where to look." He leaned in, just a fraction. "But you did."

Daniel sipped the coffee, kept his hands steady. "Good tip. Lucky break."

The shorter man, still squinting, joined in. "Heard the DA's office was impressed. Said you made it look easy."

Daniel shrugged. "Nothing easy about it. Just took the time."

The taller one's smile died on his face. "Time. That's the thing, isn't it? Everything comes out in time." He held Daniel's gaze for a beat, then broke away, leading the squinter out the door.

Allison found him at the window. She kissed his cheek and held onto his arm. "You did it," she said. "You really did."

He wanted to tell her about the ledger, about the two days he'd spent deciding whether to put it in the evidence locker or drop it in the river with the rest of the city's conscience. He wanted to tell her that the only reason he wore this badge was because he'd chosen the lesser evil and prayed no one would ever call him on it.

Instead, he just pulled her close and let the warmth of her body chase the chill out of his bones.

On the way out, a senior detective pulled him aside. "Watch your back, Kelly. IA's been sniffing. They're not gonna let this one rest, not with the press it got."

Daniel nodded. "I heard. But the brass wants this closed. They'll run interference."

The old man shook his head. "You don't get it. The only thing the brass cares about is the next news cycle. Once the city moves on, you're just another name in the file."

Daniel wanted to laugh, but didn't. "I'll keep it in mind."

As he walked out into the bright, honest daylight, the only thing Daniel could hear was the faint, unmistakable rustle of a file folder being opened, somewhere deep in the bowels of the building, his own name printed in triplicate on the tab.

And he smiled for the cameras, never letting it reach his eyes.

CHAPTER 25

JAMES



The 16th Street Bridge was built for men who couldn't sleep. That morning, it belonged to James and the wind. He leaned on the railing, elbows digging into a crust of ancient road salt, and stared down at the Allegheny through gaps in the crumbled road surface. The water looked black, like it was sucking in the dawn and drowning it for sport. The city extended in a blanket of yellow light and corroded steel behind him, but the river had the last word, as always.

His ribs throbbed, a three-day echo of the ACD yard. A souvenir, he guessed, from men whose paychecks depended on forgetting the past. The cold didn't help. Every gust sliced through his coat, stirring up the stink of refinery exhaust and wet cardboard from the market below.

Somewhere up the valley, a mill whistle cut loose, thin and far, like a ghost call. He watched the oil slicks spin on the current, catching stray glints from the mill lights upriver. On the far bank, a pair of garbage bags rode the flow, caught for a second on a broken piling, then slipped under and were gone.

The bridge stood empty, closed for repairs. James had jumped the barrier an hour ago, seeking the rare quiet this city never

offered. He'd counted five trains along the riverfront, tracked their headlights until they disappeared across the Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge into old Allegheny City, then stopped caring.

He heard her boots before he saw her. Hannah stopped three paces short of the railing and eyed the man's profile, the jaw stubbled and sallow in the weak light.

"Six months," she said, voice flat as the water below. "That's how long it'll take for the city to forget he ever existed."

James didn't move. "That's generous."

She let the words hang, then stepped to the railing. "You disagree?"

He shrugged. "This town's got a memory like a goldfish. I give it three weeks, tops." He paused. "Except for the people who can't afford to forget."

She smoothed the newspaper in her hands against the top of the railing. "I made him a martyr. But he's still just a story. Not even a good one."

James didn't answer. She could see his eyes now, reflected in the river's shifting skin.

"You hear the news?" she said, softer. "There's a new name floating around. Somebody called Garetti. Union guy from the North Side. Word is, he's already talking to Cameron's old contacts. Setting up shop before the body's even cold."

James snorted. "There's always another one."

She nodded. "That's what I told my editor. He said it wasn't a story. Not yet, anyway."

A gust of wind lifted the corner of the paper, rattled it against the ironwork. She pinched it tight.

"The case is still shaky," she said. "Legal's worried about the ledger: the chain of custody. If Cameron's lawyers push hard enough, the whole thing could fall apart on appeal."

James turned to look at her. "You think that matters? To anyone?"

She met his gaze. "It matters to the ones who have to live here."

He let his chin drop, stared at the water. "Then I guess we keep watching."

She folded the paper, tucked it under her arm. "I should go."

He nodded but didn't move.

She turned and walked off the bridge, the cold biting through her coat, her breath marking her passage in little clouds. She didn't look back, but she could feel him standing there, a man welded to the city by nothing but stubbornness and pain.

The wind picked up, and for a second she let herself believe that maybe, just maybe, the river would remember after all.

The city didn't offer much in the way of closure. After Hannah left, James lingered at the railing, tracing the path of a sandbar that jutted into the current like a drowned limb. The sky was bleeding out, the clouds torn and smeared by the morning's first attempt at light.

He was about to go when he heard her boots again. This time, she stopped right next to him, her coat brushing his sleeve.

"Hey," she said. "I forgot to ask."

He turned, the motion stiff. "Yeah?"

She took a long time to find the words. "Was it worth it?"

James let the question hang, then flicked the butt of his cigarette into the water. "That's not really the point, is it?"

She snorted. "I thought you'd say something like that."

He rolled his shoulders. "Nobody gets what they want out of this town. You just hope to stay above water." He watched as a dead carp spun past, belly up, white and obscene against the black. "And if you're lucky, you take down someone worse than you before the current pulls you under."

She smiled, the curve of her mouth flat and resigned. "That's your definition of victory?"

He shrugged. "It's the only one I can afford."

They stood in silence, the city waking around them. Trucks rattled over the far span, the first buses coughed diesel into the air.

"You want terrible coffee?" she said. "I know a place."

He hesitated, then nodded. "Sure."

They walked off the bridge together, boots thudding in sync, the

cold snapping at their heels. The city unspooled ahead, dirty and alive, indifferent to the men and women trying to keep it from eating itself.

As they reached the far end, James looked back at the river one last time. It was still there, still rolling, still hungry.

He followed her into the city, the lights flickering above, the river humming below, and the faint, impossible hope that maybe this time, something would stick.



What the river takes, it keeps; what the city loses, it never finds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garrick Steva stumbled into authorship in his seventies, after decades of successfully avoiding the writing life. A fixture in western Pennsylvania (where he claims the fog inspired his noir sensibilities), Steva once earned an English Literature degree, proving early on that he was destined for a life of pondering commas and the existential angst of fictional characters.

Later, he acquired a Master's in Information Science, a move he describes as "trying to make sense of the world through data, after failing to do so through fiction." The combination proved dangerous, equipping him with both the vocabulary and analytical skills to finally put pen to paper.

In his youth, Steva proudly carried a Teamster's Union card—and would like to emphasize with a completely straight face that he "never saw one hint of corrupt practices." When pressed on this point, he adjusts his glasses and mutters something about the statute of limitations.

His literary DNA contains unhealthy doses of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, whose hard-boiled detective stories he devoured as a boy. He also harbors an unapologetic fondness for Leslie McFarlane's adventure tales and admits that Agatha Christie's influence "follows him around like a suspicious character in a trench coat."

The Last Dispatch represents Steva's first published work, arriving after what he calls "roughly seven decades of watching the long grind of being alive." He welcomes this late-career pivot with equal parts surprise and amusement.

ALSO BY GARRICK STEVA

Series:

Low Water in Three Rivers

Book 1: The Last Dispatch

Book 2: A Taste of Treachery (coming soon)

Visit me at

GarrickSteva.com to

- Sign up for notification when the next book is released
- Leave feedback