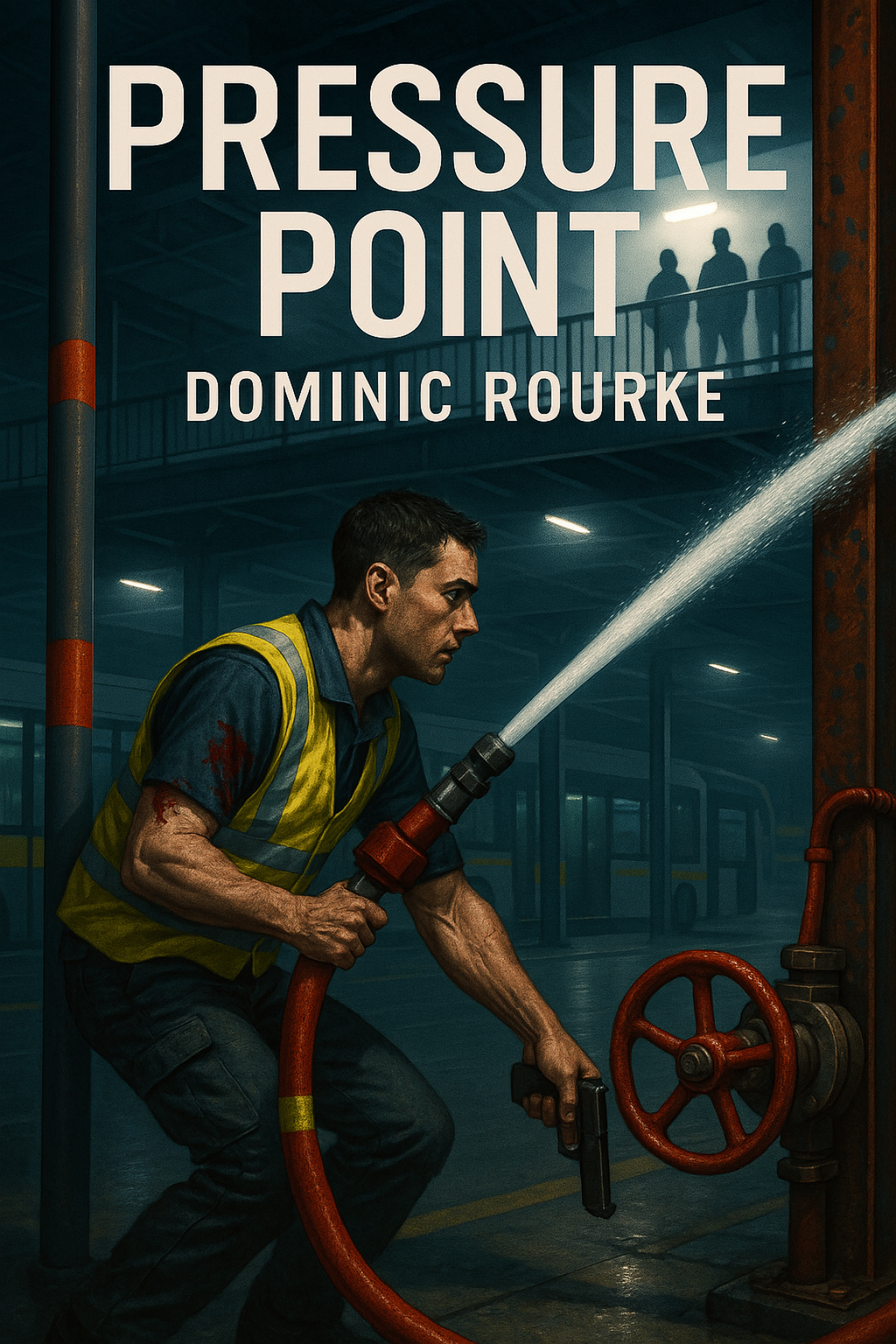


PRESSURE POINT

DOMINIC ROURKE



Pressure Point

by Dominic Rourke

Chapter 1: The First Night

Chapter 2: Lockdown

Chapter 3: The Hiss

Chapter 4: The Ghost

Chapter 5: Hard-Wired

Chapter 6: The Engineer

Chapter 7: First Contact

Chapter 8: Feeding the Wolf

Chapter 9: The Second Man

Chapter 10: Pressure

Chapter 11: The Breaching Tool

Chapter 12: Muzzle Flash

Chapter 13: Zero

Chapter 14: Father

Chapter 1

The First Night

Callum's phone buzzed against his hip as he locked the flat. He pinched it out, thumbed the screen, and listened without speaking. The voice on the other end ran through apologies, a cough, a claim about a stomach bug that came on fast. He watched Leo crouched by the skirting board, tying and retying one lace because it never sat right for him on the first pull. The dinosaur patch on the backpack looked worn to the thread. When the call ended there was nothing left to negotiate.

"Change of plan," he said.

Leo looked up and waited, eyes steady. He didn't ask who had called or why the plan changed; he had learned that plans by themselves didn't hold much.

"You're coming with me. Short night. Quiet. We'll call it an adventure."

Leo nodded once. He stood and swung the backpack on. It slid, he shrugged again to seat it. He didn't smile, but the corners of his mouth lifted a fraction, the sign he used for agreement when he thought an adult needed a sign.

Callum crouched, brought the lace up in his hands, and finished what Leo had started. He compressed the knot with his thumb, tugged, tested.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

They took the stairwell down to the car, feet loud on concrete, echoes that died fast because of the paint and the way the landings turned. The

air was dry. The ring road lifted ahead as a band of light cut by long gaps. He eased onto it, kept the engine easy, pace matched to the emptiness. Orange sodium light from the flyovers marked his knuckles on the wheel. A delivery lorry drifted across a lane with no signal. He gave it space. Leo watched the road, intent.

“We won’t be long,” Callum said.

“What will I do?”

“You’ll help Mira sort some things. Then you’ll rest for a bit in the staff room. There’s a couch that feels like cardboard, but it’ll keep you off the floor.”

“Is it allowed?” Leo asked. His voice had a way of being quiet and still carrying full weight.

“Tonight, yes. With me.”

The interchange sat off the inner loop, concrete and glass, functional. He took the service slip, tapped the indicator twice. The staff bay lay under a canopy with a yellow line that had peeled at the corners. He pulled into it, nose in, and cut the engine. The quiet wasn’t pure; fans moved air somewhere, a low thrum that didn’t stop. He sat a moment and watched the glass face. Leo’s shoes didn’t touch the floor.

“Short,” Callum said, turning to him.

“Short.”

A guard sat in the kiosk with one earbud in. The man looked up, clocked Callum’s hi-vis vest and the cleaner’s polo, saw the kid, and decided not to take anything on. He lifted one hand and made a lazy wave. The barrier arm didn’t move because it hadn’t been down for hours; someone had jammed a bit of gaffer tape under the base to keep the sensor light from blinking. As he passed, Callum tapped the sensor housing with a knuckle; the arm had play and the plastic was warm, deliberately defeated. He took the path on foot, nodded back. Leo kept close enough to touch.

At the side door, Callum held up his key pouch and thumbed through by feel. He touched each item, a sequence that calmed his head more than his hands: staff key with blue fob, flathead with insulated handle, small torch, hex key, spare cable ties. For the check, he flicked the phone's torch on and off; the small torch stayed in the pouch for work that took longer. Everything was where it belonged. He pressed the code into the keypad with his knuckle. The lock clicked clean. He eased the door open one hand's width, checked the hinge gap for free swing, and continued.

The mezzanine air felt dry. LED strips ran along the ceiling and put a clean light on polished concrete. Benches lined a section by the rail and showed scuff marks and dropped gum. Leo moved to the rail and looked down. Callum let him, then touched the shoulder, drawing him back a step without making a thing of it. Below, the lower level stretched wide. Bus bays cut into the slab in evenly spaced lanes with painted bay numbers and docking pads scarred by tyres. The extraction duct mouths sat high with squared grills; when the fans ran later they would pull and push in measured cycles.

Callum marked the stair cores: two within this span, doors painted service green, fitted with crash bars. He stepped sideways, set his back to the wall, and eased along until he had a clean line of sight into the control room. The door to it sat tight, flush with the corridor's line, a small glass panel giving onto a bank of lit monitors and a dark chair. Speaker grills dotted the ceiling along a line that traced to it. Camera domes covered the corners; he ran the arcs quickly, because old habits always wanted this mapped even when it wasn't needed. He checked the guard's kiosk again from here: a man leaning, a head down, eyes closed for a blink that became a longer blink.

"This is high," Leo said, looking over the rail again.

"Good view. You'll stay away from the edge when I'm not here."

Leo's hand found his, not for reassurance but to mark agreement. The skin felt cold and soft and determined. Callum squeezed once and let

go.

“We’ll see Mira,” he said.

The staff room sat off the mezzanine behind a coded door. Callum put the code in. The latch ran smooth enough but the door swung heavy, then light. Inside, a kettle sat on a metal counter by a sink stained a grey no amount of bleach ever cleared. A couch ran under a notice board. The air had a sweet tang from old tea and cleaning solution, and a trace of bleach in the mop heads that had been wrung and left in the yellow bucket.

Mira looked up from the table. Her hair was pulled tight and tied back. A fleeced jacket sat on the chair behind her. A lanyard hung with a bent staff key; the bend had a story he didn’t know yet. The beds of her nails were stained with black marker where the ink got in and never left. She saw Leo and didn’t react beyond that small tightening that meant she had set a new thing to look after inside a night that already had moving parts.

“Alright?” she said.

“Change,” he said. He nodded at Leo.

“Okay, mate,” Mira said to the boy. “You can set up here. We’ve got a couch that’s better than the floor by about ten percent.”

Leo put the backpack down by the leg of the couch. He stood quiet and folded his arms, not to close himself off, but to keep from touching things he wasn’t sure he was meant to touch.

Callum stepped close to Mira, not whispering but keeping it quiet.

“Keep him off the rail,” he said.

“Obviously.”

She reached to a plastic tub and pulled a foil blanket. She shook it once; it crackled. She handed it to Leo and put a juice box on the table.

“Heat if you want it, juice if you want it, nothing if you don’t. You’re the boss of that.”

Leo touched the foil and didn't open it.

"He'll only be here a short while," Callum said, knowing the words as he spoke them.

"Short night?" Mira said. She smiled and let it pass.

From beyond the glass of the mezzanine, a shout came and went. Not anger, more the kind of sound a drunk makes when a phone slips from his hand. Mira's eyes flicked. Callum's head turned to confirm there was nothing new pressing at the door. There wasn't. Leo's eyes cut to the door and the foil in his hands tightened.

"Closer's gone stiff," Mira said, nodding to the staff room door. A metal arm lay on the counter near the kettle, two screws taped to it with cheap clear tape.

"I took it off. The door kept slamming. I wedged it. It'll behave now."

Callum picked up the door closer arm with two fingers and set it down again to feel the weight, the reach, the way it pivoted on the elbow. He saw where the screws had sheared their timber, not from force, just age and repetition. He registered its weight and pivot. A lever. He filed it.

"We'll get maintenance to put it back."

"Maintenance will say they'll swing by next week," Mira said.

Leo eased onto the couch and laid the foil blanket folded across his lap. He didn't open the juice. He watched Callum in a steady way that pulled a reply without words. Callum took his watch off. It was plain and cheap. He put it on Leo's wrist and pressed the strap until the tongue found a hole. It was loose. He adjusted by one notch and pressed again.

"Hold that for me," he said.

"Okay."

"I'll be downstairs a short while. When I come back up, I'll need it."

Leo looked at the watch and then back up. He thumbed the strap, testing the buckle. The foil rustled as he pulled it over his knees.

“If it loosens, one notch in,” Callum said.

Leo nodded.

“I do,” Callum said. “You don’t.”

He stepped to the door and ran the latch, felt the throw, saw the way the catch engaged and how much play there was if someone pulled. The edge of the door had a dent line where something had hit it hard at some point. He set the wedge properly. He didn’t want the door flying in or out when he wasn’t there.

“I’ll be on the lower level,” he said to Mira.

“Shout if you need hands. Or don’t shout and I’ll hear anyway.”

He put his hand on Leo’s head for a second and then removed it because it was a thing he had learned to keep brief. Leo’s eyes tracked him to the door and held him for a beat. Then he stepped out. The latch clicked. He checked it. It held. He took the south stair to Bay 4; the light went to hard white.

The south stair core ran tight with concrete walls painted a colour that had once been called mint in a brochure. The handrail felt cold and solid under his palm. He counted the steps as a way of knowing load and distance: twelve to the turn, twelve to the next landing, eleven more to the spread of the lower bays. He preferred stairs to lifts because stairs told him things about distance and oxygen and options. The lower level opened tray-flat ahead, high ceiling, ductwork heavy overhead, bus bays lined with raised kerbs whitened from rubber.

He kept to the edge. Moving the edge made many problems smaller: less exposure, better read of angles, more control of how and when you were seen. The smell here was a mix of oil, warmed rubber, and the clean citrus bite of whatever spray the daytime crew liked most. He tracked the layout. Bay numbers ran oversized on the floor. Bay 6 held a bus with CNG

stickers and yellow hazard decals along the side by the fuel line housing. He marked it without turning it into more than a note.

He paused under a duct and looked up. The extraction grills were set high and flush, rectangular mouths that narrowed to duct runs and then to vertical shafts. When they spooled, the sound ran steady two levels up. Tonight the cycle sat low. Balanced. Enough to keep stale air moving and keep the temperature within range where it didn't matter if a cleaner moved more than usual. He moved on, soft soles on concrete.

On the east wall a door wore hazard signs in straight lines: yellow triangles, black exclamation marks, red slashes through smoking symbols. The label read fuel control. It sat closed and locked. A sightline back to the stair core and forward along the wall gave you angled cover if you needed to approach the door later. He held the detail and walked past it as if it were boring. He didn't touch the handle because there was no reason yet to touch it and touch added residue that people read when they came behind. At the EXIT near Bay 4, he pressed the crash bar and eased it open to the fenced landing; the chain-link was cold under his fingers. He let the door settle and closed it. Not a viable egress. He updated the map in his head and moved on.

A wayfinding stand had lost a foot and twisted onto itself near Bay 4. The plastic signboard lay edged against the floor, map face up, corner cracked. He stopped. The pole inside it ran solid, brushed steel, ending in a blunt cap. He pulled it free with a twist that didn't make much noise. He felt the weight in his hands, shifted his grip until it lined with his wrist. He leaned it by the south stair door and set the tip into a scrape on the wall where it would sit without sliding. He didn't like to leave things loose on their sides where the wrong person could kick or trip.

At the cleaning store, his trolley sat where he'd left it earlier: grey plastic with locking wheels, two buckets, a bag of rags, a bin-liner roll hanging off a broken hook. He swung the little door on its hinge and checked stock. Gaffer tape, half a roll. Cable ties, a handful in a zip bag. Spare nitrile gloves. Two bottles of cleaner. A scuffed floor sign that never

folded properly and always pinched a finger if you weren't careful. He lifted the gaffer tape, pulled a thumb's span to see if the adhesive had dried. It hadn't. He pressed it back to itself and nodded reflexively. He felt the phone's weight in his front pocket and left it; the small torch in the pouch covered anything longer.

On Bay 5 a wall-mounted handset sat under a slotted grill. The handset had a plastic sticker with numbers written in marker for the staff room and the control room. He picked it up and pressed the staff room extension. It rang twice.

"Mira."

"Lower level," he said.

"Copy." Her voice sounded normal, a layer of noise behind it.

"He's got the watch."

"I saw. He didn't take the juice."

"He will."

"No rush. I'll keep him off the rail even if he remembers it and goes there on purpose to test the line."

"He won't."

"He won't," she agreed.

He put the handset back and stood in place a moment. Through the glass at the edge of the lower level, a marked patrol car drifted past, the blue stripe washed out under the LEDs. The driver's face was pale in the light. He glanced in, saw nothing new, and kept the wheel straight. The car's tyres rolled over a joint in the concrete and sent a small shiver through the frame that he felt more than heard.

Callum pushed the trolley forward a metre and then noticed a scuffed section of concrete near Bay 6: a shine where a wheel had turned and polished the dust into something slicker than it looked, with a few grains of grit drifted into it so footing went looser than it looked. He stood on it

gently and let his boot move. He found the edge where grip broke first and stored it next to the hazard door and the pole. A hazard if you fell without meaning to. A tool if you wanted another man's foot to slip half an inch at just the wrong time.

He worked the run in quiet passes. After the call, he kept to the edge and set the trolley at angles that left lines of sight open. The citrus cut through oil where it needed to. On a return by the east wall, he checked the fuel control door again and read the small text under the icons, then listened a second for anything out of balance and heard only air moving. By the south stair, he pressed a square of gaffer tape to the wall and seated the banner pole against it so it wouldn't slide with bus vibration. The fans held a low pulse. Nothing else moved the needle.

He went back up to the mezzanine after half a run of bays to check the room because when you left your boy with someone else your mind asked for confirmation regardless of trust. He used the north stair, counting steps backwards this time, because the numbers had to match. The staff room door stood as he'd left it, wedge set where he had placed it, latch catching on the frame. Through the narrow glass he saw a sliver of Mira's shoulder and Leo's shoes on the couch edge. He counted three breaths and didn't open the door. He turned and took the stairs back down.

He took the trolley to Bay 7 and thought for a second about his father teaching him to use a wrench in a shed that smelled of oil and damp wood. Pressure clean, pivot controlled, check twice before you commit. One day he'd guide Leo's hand on a chain tool. For now, he worked.

He reached Bay 3 and took a breath. He looked up, then left, right, down. He set points: stair cores, hazard door, camera domes, control room door, patrol car route beyond the glass, his trolley, his staged pole, the slick patch, his son upstairs, the broken closer arm on the counter. If the night stayed simple, all these points stayed points. If the night shifted, lines would grow between them and he would have to choose which to cut and which to tie.

He adjusted his grip on the rag and went back to work.

He didn't hurry, but he didn't waste motion. He moved with the small economy he trusted enough to not think about. He worked until the rag ran heavy with dirt and then flipped to a cleaner fold and kept going. He stepped back, made room for a bus at distance, watched a driver's mirror a second and saw nothing to mark. He breathed in and out, left hand flat on the trolley handle, right hand rested near the pouch, not to reach, just to feel the weight of his own gear. He tasted concrete dust on his tongue and swallowed once.

Nothing obvious changed. Working alone in a wide place, he could tell silence from quiet work without needing to name which he preferred. He checked his steps toward Bay 6 again, toward the line he'd left for last, and set himself against it. Detector LED steady, green. Somewhere above, the fan note dipped and steadied. He logged it and kept on.

Chapter 2

Lockdown

Glass cracked high above him, hard, fast, a single hit that carried. Callum's head came up before the shards let go. The control room's small panel star-patterned, then broke through. A black-gloved fist cleared the jagged edge with a quick sweep of fabric, then the hand reached in and found the handle inside. The door moved against its frame, a pry bar slid between metal and jamb, and the latch parted.

Two men stepped through. Plain dark jackets, breathable trousers, trainers, no logos. One carried a compact ram nested against his forearm. The other held a small torch and kept the beam tight. They didn't shout. They moved in counted steps to reach the panels from the threshold. The chair in there had been empty all night. Now it turned with a shove as one of the men dropped into it and brought his hands to the switches.

Down on the lower level, the sound changed. A heavy, measured thump rolled along the hall as door hardware set. The entrance shutters started. Rails shook. Metal lengths lowered behind the glass at the outer doors, teeth on teeth, a rough, even grind that made voices catch. The shutters dropped until no gap remained from floor to lintel.

Callum was between Bay 5 and Bay 6. He had been working the edge, letting his trolley sit high on the kerb. He watched the control room because he had trained himself to look where the levers were, even on nights that stayed simple. The men inside took their places without any hurry. A bank of monitors lit in a harder white. The camera views clicked one to the next along the top of the array.

Speaker grills along the ceiling came live with a small pop and hiss. A man's voice filled the span. Calm. Balanced. Words the right length. No

dead air.

“Everyone remain where you are. No one touches any fire alarms. No one uses phones or lighters. You will sit low and stay calm. Instructions for a transfer will display shortly. Any interference will bring consequences you can’t carry. No one wants that.”

The last sentence wasn’t a threat in tone. It read as a fact already logged.

Callum’s chest went tight. He moved. South stair. He counted the steps months ago and again tonight: twelve, twelve, eleven. He wanted up there, now, because Leo was up there. He took the line closest to the wall, kept the trolley between him and the open as long as it bought him cover, then left it without looking back. His soles bit the concrete. The crash bar at the stair door hit the pad of his palm and didn’t give. The bar moved; the door didn’t.

He set his shoulder an inch from the hinge side and tested the gap. Nothing. The closing pressure sat dead. Another lock held the throw in place. He couldn’t see the holding face, just felt the solid lack through the frame. He could ram it with the banner pole he’d staged, but not fast enough to buy a life. Not without a way to kill the holding face, and that wasn’t here in his hands.

Up on the mezzanine rail, a shape shifted. A man stood where the curve met the straight. He had a pistol on his belt with a short barrel and a square slide. Holster offset forward of the hip, retention strap loose. He set one foot against the bottom rail and scanned down with a torch, more habit than need. The beam passed over Callum’s corridor once, twice.

The lights changed a half-step later. The bright strips along the ceiling throttled down, every second length dropping to a dimmer state. The grid fell to a low duty cycle that left islands of clear ground and long dark runs between. Cameras still saw; human eyes lost edges. Callum leaned into the door recess and let himself be the same colour as the paint.

Fingers bit the bar. A small creak came from the latch. He let go and edged deeper into the recess. He didn't hit the door again. Hitting would bring the torch back and make a shape where he didn't want one. He rolled his breathing down until his hands steadied. Enough to stop any jump that would make a sound.

He had brought Leo here because the world had turned soft the last few months and he'd believed he could keep it that way for a few hours. He didn't waste time on that belief now.

The speakers popped again. The measured voice returned. "Stay seated where you are. Keep clear of the rails. Keep children close. Phones on the ground, screens down. Lighters on the ground." A beat. "Do not improvise. Sit low. Hands visible."

Callum listened to the transitions in the fan noise. The note was steady but thin. At that setting, the air moved enough to keep people from clamouring about heat and stale breath. He knew how much more could go through those runs and how little it would take to knock the balance over. He checked the fuel control door on the east wall in his head. Hazard signage in a neat row. Angled approach. The south run that would take him parallel to the bays and give him lines to the ends of the station where the valves sat. Service to service. He marked those lines and kept his back to the frame.

At the mezzanine, shadows lay along the open span. Figures came out from the staff room area with hands up in instinctive surrender that no one bothered to correct. Mira moved in the middle of a small knot. Her hair was pulled back tight, and she kept one shoulder slightly ahead to make space for the boy she shielded. Leo, small, backpack strap hauled high, walked with his head down. The foil blanket had been left, sensible; it would make noise. He didn't carry the juice. Mira said something to him without turning her head and he adjusted a half-step closer to her leg.

“Down,” one of the crew said, voice clipped. “All the way. Sit.” He made a repeated pushing motion. “Low.”

People sat. A few slid into cross□legs, the posture from school assemblies. Mira eased down on one hip and put Leo in the crook of her arm. Leo looked toward the staff room door and then down again. The watch on his wrist flashed once in reflected light when the torch came by. In that blink, Callum saw the dinosaur patch pressed against Mira’s side. The strap of the backpack ran in a straight line across Leo’s shoulder. The patch stayed in view while bodies shifted. His grip on the recess edge tightened, then eased, and his breath hitched.

A lower□level roving figure came along the bays with a torch up and his off□hand near his beltline. He checked behind pillars, under benches, the gaps where concrete stepped back. He moved with the expectation of a find and a need to be over it. The beam passed within three meters of the recess where Callum stood. It caught the brushed steel of the banner pole where he’d staged it against the south stair wall. The tape he had set held the angle so it didn’t fall. The man’s beam paused, then moved on. He didn’t want loose gear in his hands unless someone told him to pick it up.

Two moving at ground level, torch cadence alternating; one posted high with a static beam on the rail; one on the switches, posture fixed. Four.

In the control room, the chair faced the monitors. The man in it tilted the top display toward the glass to make it readable from below. White letters filled a black field. The words were simple and plain: transfer, instructions, delay equals escalation. No numbers. No clock. A line at the bottom repeated that no one was to light anything, no one was to tamper with any doors. Anyone moving toward technical areas would be restrained and removed. Someone had built those lines earlier and slotted them for this exact use.

“Cable those doors,” the calm voice said over the speakers. “Both sides. Use the packs.”

At the mezzanine access near the staff room, a man took a handful of zip tie cuffs, thick white bands with molded catches, and fed them through opposing handles. He added cable ties to the top and bottom through the stanchion gaps for extra tension. Plastic cinched against painted metal, small ridges catching and holding. He trimmed a tail with a short blade and kicked the slack under the bench so it wouldn't trip anyone later. He did the same at the other access points along the line.

“Phones down,” he called. “Screens down, face to the concrete.”

People set their devices on the floor. A woman tried to keep one under her thigh. The crewman caught the attempt with a glance and shook his head. She eased it out and placed it where he could see it. The light grid pulsed low again; the torch beams did most of the work.

A shout came from the far end. Not panic. Work voice. “Six. The one at Six. You seeing that valve?”

A new weight settled in his chest. Bay 6 had the bus with the CNG marks. He had read the decals without touching the casing earlier. Now someone else's habit had put eyes there for another reason. He tracked the line from the bus housing to the east wall again, and then up into the duct level where methane would go if it got free. The detectors were up there. The mercaptan was stronger near the higher voids. One of them chirped once. The LED winked red fast, then held steady again on green. People flinched when it chirped, then went still. The sound cut hard at that height.

The measured voice returned. “Phones down. Lighters down. Anyone lights anything, we make a separate example and the rest of you carry it.”

Mira had her palm over Leo's knee, pressing him to the concrete through her hand. It was a steady touch, not a panic grip. She leaned to speak to the woman on her other side. The woman nodded without looking at her.

The roving searcher on the lower level closed the line toward Callum's recess again. He worked the bays on a slow S pattern, light up and down, then left to right. Callum slid his tongue along the roof of his mouth to wet it and tasted dust. He didn't blink until the beam was past and on the trolley he had abandoned. The man checked the buckets and the bag of rags with his torch beam, then moved on.

Callum lifted his hands and made a tight mask over his nose and mouth for two breaths, then lowered them and ran the back of one knuckle along the frame's edge to map the line. The lock held. He needed another path.

The south side service run would take him toward the east and then throw him out near the valves. The maintenance gallery behind the bays would give him narrower cover and corners that favoured someone who knew how to use angles. He logged which one put him closer to the mezzanine for a fast cut to Leo if he had to swing back. He had to hold both routes in his head without letting either blind him.

A second shout came, closer to the control room. "Screens updated. Bank details there. Get it done." Blue strobes moved across the glass beyond the concourse doors; a faint radio crackle came through the facade. Kit and quiet routes over a rush; gas in the air and a crewman on the rail made the choice.

He slid away from the stair door and cut into the service alcove two bays down. A shelf ran chest-high with a plastic tote nested under a mop head. He hooked a finger, dragged it forward, and found the weight he wanted. Gaffer tape, good adhesive. Cable ties in a bundled handful, the good nylon, not the thin ones that tore under load. Wipes in a foil pack, the seal still tight. Cheap disposable gloves. He pushed the tote back and split the kit between his pockets and the pouch. He rolled three ties into a loop so they wouldn't clatter and threaded them through his left belt loop into a dull ring.

He kept low and ducked back to the south stair. The banner pole stood where he had left it, taped at the tip so it would not slide. He pinched the tape and peeled it slowly so it wouldn't snap and pop. The steel came loose. He took it in his left hand and let the weight settle along the forearm. It wasn't a spear. It was a lever, a standoff, a reach extension. Something that kept another man's blade three feet away.

He moved to the wall hook in the alcove. Someone had left a ring of hex keys there for maintenance, sizes stepped along a curve. He had one in his pouch. He lifted another anyway, smaller, threw it to his right pocket. Different sizes meant different closer boxes. He thought about Mira's arm lying on the counter, taped screws stuck to it. One more tool in the bank when the problem asked for that shape.

Footsteps came hard and quick from the open span. He slid behind a stack of plastic crates with bottle return stickers stuck in layers. He put his back against the wall and made his shoulders narrow. The roving man whose beam had searched his trolley cut in front and stopped within two meters. The torch angled down. Shoes squeaked once against a slick patch where grit had polished the concrete. The man grunted at his own misstep and corrected. He scanned high, then low again, beam slashing across the crates. Callum didn't move. He didn't look at the beam. He looked at the man's elbow so he could see the first decision happen there. The man took the next step and moved on.

Callum waited until the fan note had enough space in it again to carry other sounds. Then he stepped out. A staff door to his left had lost one hinge screw and had a split along the jamb. The closer arm hung at an angle, two screws still holding at the elbow join. Not Mira's. Another. He slid the flathead out of his pouch. The insulated handle felt right. Two quick turns. He held the arm in his palm, tested the pivot, and tucked it under his vest at the waist. It sat flat there with the elbow against his belt. Light, compact, strong enough for a quick pry or to add torque where his hands alone weren't enough.

He lifted his phone and, without switching it on, checked a paint□marker legend scratched beside a corridor turn, east run arrow and a set of letters for the valve room he didn't say under his breath. He pocketed it before it could become a flag. The emergency grid's low duty cycle was all he had. With the order against phones and lighters live and a detector already chirped, he kept the torch dead and stayed low. He avoided scraping metal on concrete or any friction he could prevent, and he kept his pace up while the air stayed within limits. He let his eyes work for the darker angles instead of fighting them. His pace went from walk to slide, foot edge down first to feel where the concrete changed under his boot.

Near the intersection where the service corridor met the run behind the bays, a yellow cleaning sign leaned against the wall, folded wrong so it no longer stayed up when you wanted it to. He snapped it open in one push. The hinge pinched his thumb enough to leave a line. He set it just at the mouth of the turn where the light from the bays made a shallow pool. Not because he cared about someone slipping, that was for other nights, but because it would catch a roving man's eye and pull him a meter off a better line if he came this way again. Small misreads did the work for you if you placed them right. Make a lane, not a line.

The speakers crackled. "Heads down. Stay with the group. No movement from the upper level without instruction."

Mira's silhouette bent over Leo and another kid whose shoes rubbed a soft white patch on the floor. Another of the crew, sleeves pushed to the elbows and a thin scar along one forearm, checked the zip ties at the doors again. He knew what failure near the rails looked like and wanted no part of it.

Callum moved into the south□side corridor. The air was cooler there and tasted of old dust and a little oil. A faint intermittent hiss reached him as he angled in. The light fell away fast. He let the dark surround him without making the mistake of calling it anything else. Hand along the wall, he found the box lines, electrical, water, data, and felt how they

crossed at junctions so he'd know where he was when the sightlines lied. He timed his steps with the far fan pulse. He didn't count them because numbers were a false comfort. He held the picture instead: the staff room above and left, Leo on the floor opposite the control room, the bus at Bay 6, the doors locked, the voice measured and cold, the south run headed east to the valves.

He stopped at a louvered panel and listened. Nothing behind it but still equipment. He eased past. The banner pole lay tight to his forearm, hidden from the open in his shadow. The closer arm pressed flat against his waist when he breathed. In the corridor's second turn, a narrow window cut a slot in the wall. He slid a half-step, raised his head enough to see the lower level through it. The roving man had returned to the trolley and now was probing the bag of rags with his torch beam again. The mezzanine guard had his head up, attention fixed on the seated line, profile lit from the side. The man in the control room sat with both hands on the desk and didn't move much except to push a button now and then. The screens rotated through camera views and the transfer instructions.

A small hiss came from somewhere he could not see, a brief leak, the dry sound of air escaping through a puncture. It was faint. It came and went. He tasted mercaptan on the back of his throat, the false-sweet that said natural gas had been made smellable for people who needed warning they could understand in one breath. The detectors didn't react. Not yet. Maybe that hiss was nothing. Maybe it was the first wrong sound of the night.

He let the hiss register and kept moving because he could not change it from here. He had to get east. He had to get eyes on where those valves actually sat in relation to the bay runs. The corridor sloped a fraction. He felt it in the way his foot took weight.

At the next corner he took a knee, checked for a thin line of light under a door twenty meters ahead, and listened: fans, faint voices, a scrape of plastic against metal somewhere above, the tiny click of a detector relay cycling. No feet near. He set the banner pole against the

wall, lifted it in a slow arc, and rose.

There were other people in the building who could make problems. He would not see them all. He only had to see the ones whose paths crossed his and Leo's. He fixed that truth in place and stood. He went east down the corridor.

He watched his footing over a polished patch, set a yellow sign to pull a sweep off line at a side mouth, and noted a hinge burr on an east door for later. He moved with breath held where the dark opened, then let it go slow so it didn't catch and make a cough. He kept the banner pole aligned with his wrist, not because he wanted a fight, but because he would end one in a single beat if it happened in front of him. Far above the bays, a detector winked red again, then settled back to green. That brief red meant the mix was still shifting. He took the next turn low and fixed on the junction before the valve room door. Reach that, then find the first wheel.

He followed the south□side line to the next turn and took it. The plan held until it didn't. The hiss grew slightly.

Chapter 3

The Hiss

Callum edged the banner pole higher along his forearm to keep it close, brought his cheek to the cool wall, and angled one eye to the gap. At Bay 6, a man knelt under the CNG decal and lifted a small panel with a short hex tool. He didn't speak. He put his shoulder against the bus skin to brace a hand and turned something a fraction. The hiss rose one notch. The hiss didn't belong to the building, thin and steady, air forced through a small leak. The man held position and listened with his head cocked for a count it took to be certain, then eased the panel closed without sealing it.

The detectors up in the void stayed green. Then one blinked red and returned to steady. The man on his knees looked up once in that direction and then to the mezzanine. He stood, rolled the hex tool into a pocket, and moved away without drawing eyes from above. He didn't look down at the panel again. He knew the shape of the sound and what it meant for the rest of the night.

Callum let his head come off the wall and held his breath at full height for a second to test the air. The mercaptan taste came sharp and chemical at the back of his tongue. He could carry it for two slow draws without a cough. When he dropped his chin and got close to the floor-level grilles, his breathing came easier. The difference was enough to log. Stay low where it helped.

A static pop cracked over the station speakers. The measured voice filled the span, the same cadence that had set the rules. No rush. No wasted words. "No one approaches the building. No breach. We've balanced the air in here. You push from outside, you end everyone inside.

That includes your own.” There was no threat in the tone, just a line laid down.

Out by Bay 5, one of the roving men set a small kit bag down in the shadow of a service column and unzipped it halfway. Callum marked the bag’s position relative to the open floor, two meters in from the kerb, then the item inside that mattered: a long-neck igniter, piezo type, the kind used to reach into a recess without singing skin. The man didn’t touch it. He closed the zipper a little and nudged the bag in tight against the column with his boot. Away from the mezzanine. Not because he was squeamish. Because he understood what a spark did when the mix crept high.

Up above, the mezzanine guard put his boot up on the bottom rail and used one hand to press down on the air with a steadying motion. “Lower. Tighten in.” He didn’t shout; he didn’t need to. The torch beam tracked along knees and shoes and flashed off a handful of phone screens lying face-down on the concrete. People compressed without fighting it. Some slid on their hips to make space for others. He made a second pushing motion and bent at the waist, showing them what he wanted without ceremony. Heads dropped another few inches.

An older man near the outer bend of the rail started to rise. He had a hand at his lower back and a tight mouth, a tell seen when pain and panic got twisted together. The guard brought the torch up into his face and stepped close. The older man’s hands came up fast in front of his chest, blocking the beam. He shook his head once. He didn’t speak. The guard set the beam down just above the man’s eyes and laid a hand on his shoulder and pressed down firmly. The man went to his knees and then to sitting with his legs splayed out. He put his palms flat to the concrete and kept them there.

Mira moved during the moment of correction. She slid sideways and tugged Leo by the backpack strap into the space under a bench end, behind the lower crossbar. Leo’s trainers came up and tucked in. His head dropped below the level of adult shoulders. The watch on his wrist

flashed once when the guard's beam moved, a quick, pale rectangle. Mira's lanyard swung and hit her chest. She let it hang and put her hand back on Leo's knee, pressing him gently into the corner she'd made.

Callum let his eyes hold there for a breath, then stepped back from the slot and looked right, east. Floor plates. Painted cinderblock. The corridor bent toward the valve end. Movement on the lower level would pull the rovers back in a sweep pattern in a minute. That bag with the long-neck igniter stayed where it was. The voice had given the outside a line they'd struggle to cross without setting the whole place off. The man on the switches had throttled the fans down to that thin background note and held them there. The gas would climb into the high voids and ride the ceiling where it could. The mezzanine sat under that air. The order to keep the hostages low made harsh sense. The staged igniter matched that rule and set his own: he'd avoid any move that risked a spark.

He kept his face toward the east run and began to move. He didn't look back at the mezzanine. Turning back now didn't get him closer to Leo. It only fed the part of him that wanted to trade control for proximity and call that love. Systems fail; people adapt. He let the friction of the banner pole against his forearm keep his focus.

East run, service side.

He cut two corners without touching paint. The corridor narrowed, then widened by a fraction where it met a branch with a louvered panel. He paused and listened. No steps. The hiss carried clearer along this bend, more distinct against the fan note. He took the branch left because the line of the building shifted that way toward the east wall where the fuel control labels sat. The concrete under his boots changed texture for a short span, smoother from traffic during daylight hours. He shortened his stride there to prevent the squeak he had heard from the roving man before.

At the next turn he found a wall fix that mattered: a laminated fire plan set in a metal frame under a thumb-sized emergency light, the

perspex window scuffed with a hundred careless swipes. Setting the banner pole across his thighs, he freed both hands and took his small torch from his pouch. Wrapping the head in a strip of gaffer tape, he left a narrow slit for the beam. Fingers cupped over that slit, he angled the small light so it bounced off the perspex without flashing into the corridor. Two breaths only, then off. He counted seconds here for routes he would use.

The plan was simple and good. No legend needed. He tracked the stair cores, A and B, against what he'd already walked. Extractor symbols and their duct lines rose and converged, then bled into the main plenum on the roof. He put his fingertip on Bay 6 with the little bus icon and tracked the fuel line run to the east end, into a box labelled with hazard symbols that were clear without text. Above it, a line of cameras overlapped in small leaf-shaped cones. He followed their arcs from memory and found where two fields left a small hinge line between them, three meters wide, covering a service mouth that doglegged. That was a better transition if he had to cross open.

The plan showed a narrow utilities channel burrowing behind the wall line between the service corridor and the lower-level bays. He measured the channel against shoulders and hips, tight, but doable. The line connected at two spots with stamps indicating access. He marked those in his head and then looked for anything that would throw him when he got there in the dark. One access sat behind a stack symbol for crates. He'd be working around an obstacle.

He shifted the taped slit down the perspex to the lower right corner. Street-level vents sat there as small rectangles against the exterior wall. They faced the concourse. The plan called them louvers. If the mix crept that low and the extraction stayed throttled, trace gas would find those openings and slide out to meet the air outside. That added a second perimeter no one out there could see. The blue strobes that skimmed the glass earlier would stay at that distance. The voice inside hadn't been wrong; a push from outside risked setting the whole box alight.

He drew the beam across the control room on the plan. Sightlines from the mezzanine to that door were clean in their own way because there was nothing to hide behind but angles and luck. A direct shot at the operator up there would drive the hostages wild and push someone into a sprint toward an exit they couldn't open. A flail in this air would cost lives. He clicked the beam off and pocketed the torch. He took the banner pole in his left hand again and set the closer arm at his waist so it wouldn't shift when he moved. Control room option closed. Operator on switches; one rover below, one likely above; rail guard fixed. Route east.

He palmed the perspex; cold plastic only. Relay cabinets for the panel runs sat on this line a little further east, he remembered the fresh paint marker he'd seen on an earlier pass near this corridor and the new cable ties on a trunking cover. He didn't need the why yet. He needed the where. From there to the valve bank and the first wheel. If he could choke the flow, the rest of the decisions changed shape. Make a lane, not a line.

He moved out without a light. He counted the quiet clicks of a detector's relay as they cycled somewhere above him, regular and even. Knees bent, spine close to the wall, he traced the box lines with his left hand, conduit, then a vertical break, then a run broader than a hand that carried data. He kept his footfall aligned with the fan's rhythm to mask the softer sounds he couldn't prevent.

Junction ahead. A turn gave him a new view. The corridor opened at a junction. Ahead, the east run continued, dipping slightly before rising again toward the valve end. To the right, a stair mouth climbed in a narrow three-flight stack to the mezzanine level. He took a half step toward the stairs and stopped. Every line in him wanted that route because it put him near Leo. He let it rise and sit there. The last flight came to mind, him walking into the mezzanine guard's static beam. Then the roving lower-level man three bays away heard the first noise and took the angle that gave him a shot. He saw himself prone on a landing with a hole in him and the hours still passing. That path didn't get Leo home; it only fed his fear.

The mercaptan was stronger at the apex of the stair mouth. He took one breath there on purpose and felt the draw pull different, drier, scratchier, a little more resistance. A single ember at this point in the night wouldn't end one person. It would end everyone whose head sat above the height of certain rails and bench lines, and the rest would follow under the collapse that came after. He brought his chin down and held the lower air again.

He reached and curled his fingers around the banner pole. Hard steel against tendon. A simple tool, good for leverage. He put his other hand on the closer arm at his waist and felt the joint where the elbow rotated. Another tool, compact, for when hands alone weren't enough. He needed to make the choice into something he could carry in his body and not just in his head.

"Valve bank first," he said under his breath. The sound was barely above a whisper and still filled the space he had to fill. Saying it made it real. It set the route. Breath stayed tight; the promise meant nothing if they all suffocated or burned.

Pulling a short strip of gaffer tape with his teeth, he tore it clean by the edge because he knew the tape's weight and the way it would part without a sound if you pulled straight. Shoulder against the mezzanine-door leaf, he felt the play in it, then wrapped the tape between the handle and a nearby bar at thigh-height to keep the latch from seating all the way. He pressed once; it held. He eased the tape once; no snap, no scrape. It wasn't elegant. It didn't have to be. It would shave seconds if he needed to come back through at speed with his hands full.

He took the east run, forearm brushing the wall. He lengthened his stride by a little and let the air he took in be enough. Leo would see something tonight that would change how he looked at his father. There was no way around it now. That change would come with him alive, or it would come in a building lit from inside. He picked up pace.

The corridor sloped and then leveled. A small scuff mark on the floor from a rubber wheel told him he was back near traffic used by day crews with trolleys. He used that to fix his position without looking up at any signage. He took the next corner wide so the banner pole would clear quietly and then cut back tight to keep the line. Ahead, the air felt colder for two meters; a vent to exterior ran behind the wall there. He pressed two fingers to the surface. No vibration. The frame stayed steady under load. He swallowed once, got the taste of copper from adrenaline mixing with the artificial stink, and spat dry into the seam where floor met wall to clear his mouth without leaving a sound to carry.

Another slot window cut the wall a little higher than the last. He went up on the balls of his feet, put one hand on the sill, and slid his eyes across the lower level. The man who had cracked the panel on Bay 6 now stood two bays down and spoke quietly into his radio. He used hand shapes as he spoke, two fingers moving, a circle to mean the run, a palm pressed down for low. The kit bag sat where it had been nudged, zip a third open. The long-neck igniter's silver body showed in the narrow gap, long and straight. They were keeping it away from high air and hands that shook. They would only touch it when they chose to end something or when they wanted to show what ending looked like without following through.

Callum checked the detectors again. One winked red and returned to green. Another stayed green. The fans held at their weak setting. The man on the switches would keep it there because he wanted control of the mix rather than clean air. It kept his threat credible and bought him time. It forced the world outside to stay at the glass.

He slid down from the slot and moved on. The corridor kinked left, then right. The paint changed colour at the far turn, from light green to grey-green, a maintenance touch-up. He traced a seam in the cinderblock with a finger and found chipped mortar. A service door sat here, locked from the other side; he knew because the lever didn't move when he squeezed it and the play in the strike was dead. He noted it as a possible

return if the other line failed. He drew a small cross in the dust just beside the frame with the tip of his finger, a mark he would see with a phone torch if he had seconds to decide later.

A light strobe flicked across the far end of the corridor at floor level. Not from anyone aiming a torch down here, this was a reflection from the lower level bouncing off polished concrete somewhere near Bay 4. He paused, hand up, and shifted to the wall. Footsteps above the ceiling, lighter, faster, crossed from control-room side toward the staff room area. He held still and let the building's normal noises come back when the feet moved away. He breathed out once, steadied, and kept moving.

The plan's blind hinge for the cameras came next, a place where two domes' arcs left a seam if you walked at the right distance from the wall. He stepped exactly that line, one pace off the wall to stay between cones, and kept his body inside what he knew from memory. He didn't run. Running drew light; running made heat; heat made sweat that caught dust and turned it into a trail. He walked with a purpose that would still read as service if anyone glanced and didn't stare.

He reached the first access for the utilities channel. The hatch was waist-high and held shut with two quarter-turn latches. He tested one; it gave after he leaned his shoulder into the panel to relieve the tension. The other turned. He didn't pull the hatch away. He left it seated and breathing against the gasket so it wouldn't drop or scrape. He found the recess behind it with the fingers of his left hand and felt the space, narrow with two cable trays down the middle and a pipe fixed to the right-hand wall at shin height. Not a crawl. A sideways slide at most. He closed it again without committing. Not yet.

He took the corridor another ten meters and found the second access. This one had a hand-painted warning about pinch points close to where the trays turned. Good information. He left it alone and kept going because he could hear the hiss clearer now, and that meant he was nearly on top of where the lines ran hard east.

The station speakers cracked again. The voice returned. "We are stable. Do not test that. If someone outside forces a door, there will be no time to correct. Nobody wants to be the one who makes their own city smaller. Keep your heads down." The last instruction wasn't to him. It was to the people under the torch on the mezzanine. It still landed where he was because he was part of the set the voice addressed, whether named or not.

He passed another side mouth where he'd left a yellow sign earlier to pull a sweep off line. It still sat crooked and did the job of being noticed by anyone in the wrong mindset. He let it be and took the bend that would drop him along the east wall's internal side. The smell came stronger again. Not because the gas had pooled low, because the air stirred just enough here to bring more of the scent down to him.

He slowed when the corridor flattened and widened into a dogleg that ran behind the valve bank. The door could wait. He kept the wall and made a slow right that put him behind an electrical cabinet humming at a pitch that stayed below the noise of the fans. He put a palm on the metal skin and felt the dry warmth of load. He looked at the floor and saw the same heel scuffs and rubber streaks he'd found near the earlier corner. That meant service traffic during the day. That meant someone used this bend as a through-line. He stepped with a steady, routine pace and let his shoulders drop a fraction to match.

He stopped at the next seam and listened. Behind the door ahead, a valve wheel would sit in a row of others, each with a guard and a label that meant more to lawyers than to men who spent their lives opening and shutting flow. The hiss had a shape now that he could place within that room, the difference between a feed under load and a bleed on the far side of a minor crack. He'd closed enough valves in older buildings to recognize the distance between a local purge and a line someone had made to keep a threat alive.

He adjusted the closer arm at his waist. The joint pressed into his belly when he breathed. He updated the picture in his head: man on the

switches holding the fans down; one rover below; one rover above; one at the rail. The bag with the long-neck igniter where it had been left, kept away from high air. The outside at the glass, strobes reflecting and doing nothing. He kept the next steps simple: find eyes on the valve line; confirm labels; set a path to slow the flow without drawing sparks. Tools: banner pole as reach, closer arm for leverage. No clean fix. Steps only. He set his grip on the pole and shifted weight toward the hinge.

A light touch of air moved across the back of his hand, a faint pressure shift. He stilled and waited for another sign. Nothing. He lowered to a crouch and checked under the cabinet where the cleaner's dust gathered. A stripe of grit marked where someone had dragged a shoe within the last hour. Not his. The cabinets didn't shift when he leaned into them; they were bolted through. He shifted forward two paces and put his ear near the next door's hinge side. In the pause between fan cycles, he picked up fabric rasp and a small plastic click. A cable tie tail being trimmed short. He stood back up carefully and stepped away from the hinge, not because of fear of the door opening, but because it gave him room to work if he needed it.

He turned around the dogleg and found the place the fire plan had shown for camera coverage. A dome hung above his left shoulder at the point where the corridor narrowed again. He kept to the line under its dead center to remove himself from the problem angles. Gaze stayed level. He let the behaviour carry the choice.

Another slot window opened here, lower than the last. He went down on one knee and looked through. This view gave him across the backs of the valves through wire mesh. He adjusted until the labels came into view. The first wheel was where he expected, with a fixed guard that left enough finger and palm room to grip spokes. Beyond it, the walkway for the gantry was visible through a second mesh; one rover had shifted to the gantry. Boots crossed and turned back. Not his problem yet. The problem he could touch sat three meters left of the first wheel, behind a small access the fire plan had called out with a simple square. That access

would get him close to the back of the wheel set. He marked a counting line: two meters from this position to the door, eighty centimeters past the jamb, and then reach.

He dropped his chin, put the steel of the banner pole into his palm in a new grip, and eased back from the slot. One more junction sat behind him, the one with the stair up. He had left the taped wedge on that leaf. It would still be where he'd set it unless someone stopped in front of it and worked out why the latch didn't sit right. The odds were small. He didn't put comfort in odds; he put it in steps taken with a cold head.

The speakers clicked again. "Stay seated. Heads down. You're safer that way." The message tracked the science as well as the threat. It didn't make the night better; it made the problem harder to fix without the operator seeing it coming.

Callum rolled his shoulders down to keep his range of motion tight and quiet. He had choices and none of them were good. Better that than chasing false confidence. He touched the cabinet's earth strap, static risk noted, then set his left hand on the door where the hinge burr he had marked earlier sat and tested for any movement. Solid. He broke the tape he'd used to narrow the torch beam into a smaller piece and wound it around the pole where his grip sat; the cloth back of the tape would deaden any clack if metal hit metal inside the access. Small advantage, seconds saved, noise reduced. He breathed once through his mouth, counted to two, and moved.

Behind the mesh, faint movement showed a man's shadow across the valve bank. Not a patrol sweep; a man posted there as the last barrier before a hand reached the wheel. That changed the shape of the approach by a degree he felt in his knees. He kept low and let his hands learn the door skin's cold again. The mercaptan taste came back hard enough to register, then faded as he lowered. He found a point where his body could hold still without shaking, and he held it until his breath didn't catch.

He had said the words already. Valve bank first. The wedge was set. Hands loaded with the only tools he'd get tonight. He knew what came next in the long sense even if the short steps were uncertain. He tightened his grip on the pole and the closer arm, then rose a fraction and set his feet.

He took the door lever in his left hand with a pressure that wouldn't sound, then eased it down the smallest distance that would move the latch without bringing the whole edge free. The steel travel was clean. He set his shoulder against the leaf and let weight open the gap a hand's width. Inside, cooler air slid across the skin of his forearm. He brought the pole forward. The closer arm pressed into his waist, solid. He stepped through the gap into cooler air and into the space he had to reach.

Chapter 4

The Ghost

He eased the door shut behind his shoulder until the latch seated against the strike plate without a sound. Cooler air touched the skin along his forearm. The hiss came through clearer here, less rebound from open space, more direct from pipe and valve. He set the banner pole vertical, the tip seated in a crack between slab and wall, and worked the back of his hand along the leaf's edge to read any draw.

A faint pull at knuckle height, none at the floor line, stronger at collarbone level. He tore a corner off the sealed wipes packet in his pouch and held it by the corner. The thin plastic moved toward the gap three millimetres then hung. He raised it. The movement increased with height. He lowered it again, slid down a knee's thickness, and the pull eased. That picture matched what he had felt under the bays. He stayed low.

He put two fingers to his throat. Skin cooling. Hands still steady. The stink ran stronger the higher he lifted the strip; near the floor grilles the air eased. He put the tape-wrapped section of the pole along his forearm, kept the closer arm tight against his waist, and looked for light he could use without making any of his own.

A polished duct bonnet ran overhead. In its curve he found a small green pulse that repeated. Dome camera LED. He didn't look up into the lens. He watched the reflection in the duct skin and counted under his breath. One. One. One-two. A minor stutter, then steady again. When the reflection went dark for its cycle, he moved. Two paces and hold. He matched the next pulse and stayed under the centre line where overlapping fields thinned. He kept his shoulder brushed to the cold

frame so his profile read as maintenance in a camera's periphery.

Paint on this stretch had been touched recently; the colour shifted half a tone. Fresh cable ties on trunking brackets. He logged the detail and took the next corner tight, mapping ahead from what the fire plan had shown. The internal east run kinked and gave him a door with a running-man legend angling left. EXIT. He set his palm on the push bar and tested the travel a millimetre at a time. No scrape from the latch. He depressed it fully and eased pressure forward.

The door opened to a small chain-link landing no wider than two paces. A padlocked gate closed the far end, mesh to the ceiling. Outside the glass beyond the mesh, blue light smeared across dark concrete. A draft came at him, cooler and cleaner, and with it a trace of radio from outside that made words into a flat buzz. He checked the hinge sightline, took a breath, and closed the door without stepping out. The gate blocked the route. The landing would funnel noise back into the service space and alert anyone nearby. He shut it and let the latch seat. Not here.

He pivoted right and moved toward the steady hiss. Every turn closed one option and loaded the next. He took stock of the air again at shin height. Better than at waist. He kept his knees bent and his mouth open enough that he didn't pull against sealed teeth when he moved.

The next door was a fire leaf with a damaged push pad. He pressed it and felt no travel at all. He pressed harder. The bar didn't give. He laid his ear to the skin for a fan lull. Nothing moved beyond it. Forcing it would echo through the corridor. He looked down. The wall carried a low hatch with two quarter-turns. The paint around them had finger marks. He leaned in to take tension off the panel and turned the latches with thumb and forefinger. Both rotated. He slid the hatch toward him just enough to get the heel of his hand under the lip, then set it back against its gasket so it wouldn't drop when he went through.

He knelt and fed his shoulders into the tight run. Two cable trays ran down the middle, one higher than the other, and a pipe fixed on the

right-hand wall sat at shin height. He took the banner pole in his right hand and slid it forward along the floor, metal against concrete stuttering once before the taped grip settled the noise. He flattened. Belly on cold slab. He exhaled and let his chest settle. He went under the lower edge of the tray where a bracket rose, turned his head to the left to keep his ear from scraping, and pushed with his toes. The bracket head sat close to his cheek. The tray lip cleared his shoulder by a finger. The closer arm bit into his belt; he nudged it a handspan up so it wouldn't bind. The hiss here sounded duller, not louder. That meant he was still parallel, not on top of the bleed. He came up onto his elbows and slid forward until the space ahead grew brighter by a shade. He touched out and hit open space.

He eased the hatch on the far side open an inch with three fingers, set the pole across the gap, and pushed the hatch back in so the panel pressed on the pole's taped middle and held it. Both hands under his chest, he moved half his body through. One knee found concrete. With a twist, he drew his hips through and cleared. Reaching for the pole, he drew it through without a scrape, then reseated the hatch and turned the latches to lock. One breath through his nose brought metal and the sour fake citrus from a cleaner used here during the day.

He set the pole along his forearm and advanced to the fire door's far side. The push bar worked from this direction. He pushed it out and let it close. Then he took a small cable tie from his pouch. He fed the tie through the bar linkage and around the internal bracket, cinched it until the bar locked outward, and cut the tail with the flat's corner so no flick of plastic would give him away. Anyone following would pull the bar and find it rigid. They'd have to fumble with the tie or commit to the crawl. If they cut it, the bar would spring and ring; either way, it cost them time.

Fan tone rose and fell. He laid an ear to the door skin and waited for the trough. In the quiet he heard nothing at first. Then a footfall pattern through the slab: a weight shift, a pause, a second set less balanced. A clipped burst of static, then a second that lasted a fraction longer. The sound was too muffled for words. Not a problem. Words didn't tell him

what he needed. Shoes scuffed once against concrete, the sound a high, short scrape that matched the cheap sole he'd heard near Bay 6 earlier. He counted their pace, both lines moving slow. He stepped away from the door and kept to the wall.

At the next bend, dust had gathered along the base where the mop hadn't hit in weeks. He dragged the heel of his boot across it diagonally to the left, a mark big enough to catch a light sweep but short enough not to look purposeful. Then he turned right and moved. A searcher would follow it a metre or two off the better line and lose seconds.

Ahead, a grille at shoulder height put a horizontal slot through the wall. Return air. A high detector LED blinked once and a relay ticked. He went to a knee. He took one breath, held it, and leaned forward until one eye could pick up into the space beyond. His view opened across the mezzanine and the open span. A bench line ran left to right. People sat with their hands visible. He saw the staff room door two bays up and the control-room door beyond, glass smashed at the small panel with the jagged edge taped out of the way. A man with a torch paced the rail and ran the beam along shoes and knees. When the torch raised, heads lowered. Mira shifted on her hips with a small, practiced ease and drew Leo another hand-width under the bench, tucking his trainers in tight under the crossbar. The watch on his small wrist lay dark against his skin. Mira's hand stayed on his knee. Her lanyard rested against her zip.

A second man stood at the control-room door, not inside but posted near the jamb, weight even, chin down, hands set low. He watched the corridor mouths without moving much. Callum took the whole picture in and let it fix.

He eased back from the grille. Letting the breath go slow, he moved on. Wall on his left, he cut through a deeper run where the hiss changed to a longer, flatter sound. The concrete felt colder through his trousers. He tested a door handle that didn't move, held, then left it. He came to a shaded space where the corridor widened and a wire-mesh cage sat half open.

Inside the cage: boxes of printer paper, rolls of cloth, a coil of gaffer tape still wrapped in plastic, and a handful of thick white zip tie cuffs with molded catches in a bin with damaged markers. He slid the mesh just enough to reach. He took the tape coil and four cuffs, then closed the mesh by pulling it across until the latch touched the frame without clicking. Narrower profile; quieter on metal. On a hook by the cage door: a ring of hex keys. He took a 3 mm. Right pocket. He checked the tape's glue with a thumb; decent tack. He kept moving along the line and found a staff door with a closer arm hanging by two loose screws at the elbow. Paint around the closer body was split where screws had worked loose. He tried the screws by hand and felt rubbery give. The arm remained fixed to the jamb plate.

He took his flathead from the pouch. The screws parted with pressure. He unwound both and caught the arm in his left hand, then pulled the remaining screw with the screwdriver pinched by his thumb and palm so metal didn't ring when it dropped. He put the screws in his pocket and threaded this second closer arm through his belt behind the first one. Two levers now. Two options. Two lengths. One for torque, one for reach. The joints moved cleanly, no grit in them.

He backtracked three paces to where he had left the banner pole resting against a bracket by the cage and picked it up again. He tested its flex, bending it against his forearm. The steel gave a fraction and sprang back. The tape on the grip deadened the sound when it touched the wall. He kept it aligned with his wrist so it looked like part of his arm at a glance.

A swing door at the next bend worked easy on its hinges. He opened it to check both sides and then closed it to within a foot. He went back to the cage and took a rubber wedge from a bottom shelf. It had been tossed there, dusty but intact. He taped it to the hinge side of the swing door at knee height with a band of gaffer, then added a diagonal wrap to take shear. He pressed it hard so the tape's glue bit. The wedge stuck out proud by two fingers. He put his knee under it and checked for play.

None. Someone running the corner would catch it and go over. Not elegant. Enough. It would slow a runner by a beat.

On a branch line off the corridor, a smaller valve wheel stood at chest height behind a mesh. Not the main line; no mass in the pipe and the guard was different. He threaded a strip of gaffer through the spokes and built a loop big enough for a hand. He pulled it twice to check the glue didn't slip, then let the loop hang. If he needed to take the wheel half a turn fast, he would have it.

He moved on, eyes searching without lifting his head. A red hose cabinet sat at chest height near a door with hazard stickers. Foam gasket around the cabinet door, steel handle, a small glass square punched and taped. The cabinet would feed a hose line with pressure from building heads if the system held. He put it in his head as a tool, not yet a move.

He stopped under a light pool and listened. The fans ran thin. Detectors clicked somewhere high. The hiss stayed steady. He put a palm on the closer arm at his belt, then touch-checked his kit without looking: tape coil left pocket, thick white zip tie cuffs riding quiet against his belt loop, right pocket, 3 mm hex for the closer, flathead reversed in the pouch, banner pole warm from his grip. He let one breath in and out to ease the tightness behind his ribs. Kit set. One pass on the mezz to price the risk, then the relay. He turned right toward the short stair he knew would put him under a grille with a higher view.

Two short flights and a landing that bent back toward the open span brought him to a service return grille at waist height. This return cut the angle on the control-room door. He went to his knees and set one hand on the frame to take weight. A high detector LED blinked once. A relay tick followed. Through the louvers he saw the mezzanine again but from nearer the control room. Mira had not moved far; her body had shifted just enough to put Leo under the bench's lower bar by a fraction more. The boy's backpack strap held high against her hip, dinosaur patch turned outward. He saw the glint of a bent key on her lanyard.

The pacing guard turned at the curve of the rail and walked back, torch angled down. He checked the faces, then the hands. A woman three down from the bench end braced on a seat and started to stand, head turning toward the glass as if the blue light outside might mean something different this time. The guard closed, put a flat hand on her shoulder, and drove her back to the concrete. Not a swing. A controlled push with enough force to make the point. She went down and he stepped away without looking again.

By the control-room door a broad-shouldered man stood with his hands low. Clipped hair, trimmed beard, plain jacket. He glanced at his left wrist out of habit and found nothing there. When his right hand adjusted his cuff it pulled the sleeve back an inch. Faint blue ink lines showed on the skin below the bone: wings and scroll work half gone under laser and time. He didn't scratch at it. He let the cuff fall and set his eyes back on the corridor mouths. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. The man in the chair inside the control room moved a fraction and a monitor tilted again. The top screen still showed the warning text. No numbers.

Mira's eyes flickered past the grille opening. She didn't blink to show she had seen anything. She nudged Leo's trainers another half-inch under the bench and put her hand back on his knee. That was all.

Callum took his hand off the grille. He stayed on his knees for a second. He looked at the concrete until the urge quieted. Not here. Not yet. He slid back until the louvers cut the sightline and stood.

His palm settled against the closer arm at his belt. Not comfort. A tool. The choice it stood for sat clean in his head. He'd walked the line up here because he needed to see Leo breathing with his own eyes. He had seen it. He moved away from the grille and took the turn that spiraled him back toward the east side where fresh paint marks and new cable ties had turned up on older walls. The hiss steadied to a single note. He moved toward it. The relay box area would sit on this line, behind a panel with two clean screws in a scuffed cover and a cable run that looked too new for an old building. Systems fail; people adapt. He went that way

because it might let him turn a lever from a distance without blowing everyone apart.

He passed the door where he had taped the wedge at knee height. It sat proud, tape edges still clean. He slipped past the fire door he had locked outward with a small cable tie and kept moving through the dogleg back behind the valve bank. He slipped under the camera's centre line on the reflection timing he had learned and matched his steps to the green pulse. He moved toward the steady hiss, kept his head low where the air tasted less like fake rot and more like dust, and counted the steps to the next bend in his chest.

A faint click and the speaker grid above the mezzanine popped somewhere behind him. No words reached him here, only the change in the crowd's sound rolling through concrete. He moved faster for six steps and then settled again, shoulders down, elbows close. The corridor closed, then widened into the little pocket where the electrical cabinet hummed. Dry warmth ran through the metal. He went past it and to the door with the paint marker he had noticed earlier on the way in. Fresh cable tie tails had been trimmed clean at the trunking. He ran two fingers over the cut ends. Smooth. Newer than the dust line around them. He had a place to work if he could keep his hands steady and the mix from igniting.

He checked the next door for play on the handle without committing. Solid. He put his ear to the door skin again and waited for the fan lull. A voice worked on the far side and came through as a dull vibration. A foot moved. Someone adjusted weight and the bolts on their belt brushed fabric. A radio clicked once and opened its carrier with a cough. Backing away from the door, he adjusted the banner pole on his forearm so the grip aligned with his wrist. Three steps right to the bend where the store cage sat, then left again, mapping each return until the path to the panel formed clean in his head.

He thought of Leo. He pictured the boy's small hands trapped under the bench bar and the watch face dark. He let the picture sit until it didn't

pull him toward the stairs. He turned it into the weight of the closer arm at his belt and what it would do against a wheel if he had to make it move without a power assist. His fingers pressed into his palm once, then eased. Check twice, move once.

Breathing once, he set his shoulders like when he used to stack on a tight entry with men behind him, sight lines short, noise likely to bring a crowd, and methane aloft making any arc a risk. He went into the darker run where the cable trunking had been touched by hands he wanted to meet on terms he chose.

Chapter 5

Hard-Wired

He took the line by touch first. Fresh cable ties left small white bites in the paint along the trunking clips. The dust beads were disturbed in a narrow path, a smear two fingers wide riding the wall where gloved hands had run. The colour shifted a half tone where someone had overpainted the old green to hide a fast install. He ran two knuckles along the plastic jacket and felt the faint ripple at a staple that hadn't seated flush. New work bent the existing lines. That told him the pace and what to expect at the end.

A detector clicked high over the bays. The LED blinked once. The stink got stronger when he raised his head, bleach-edge over the mercaptan. He lowered again. The air eased by a fraction near the floor grilles. On knees and elbows for three paces, then he rose to a crouch where the corridor widened. Ahead, the trunking kinked at a dogleg and the hum of an electrical cabinet sat at a steady pitch. Dry warmth ran through its casing. He worked past it and stopped at a grey steel enclosure mounted chest high. The screws were clean around the head slots. The key latch sat unmarked, no wire brushing, no rust bloom in the corners. New install into an old space.

He pressed the back of his hand to the cabinet and waited through a fan trough. No static bite. He put his ear against the door skin. Inside: the faint tick of a small relay. Not the building system hum. Different rhythm. He took one breath through his mouth and let it out without sound. No hurry. Check twice. Move once.

The latch took a key he didn't have. He set a strip of tape on the tip of one of the closer arms on his belt. He eased the steel into the seam at the

hinge side where the flex would be kinder. He pressed with his torso against the door to keep the pressure smooth, not a pry. The arm bowed by a little, then gave a steady inch. Old dust smeared from the hinge. The tape muted any scrape. He eased the line. The latch side held. Good. He didn't want it free all at once.

He slid the closer arm out and moved to the latch edge. He set the taped tip under the leaf, kept his thumb close for control, and turned the lever with the smallest change in angle he could manage. A clunk would carry. He had seen crews over-torque a door and pay for it when the metal rang. He kept it quiet. When the line moved under his pressure, he held the arm where it was and used his left hand to feather the latch back and down. The catch nudged past the keeper. The leaf shifted forward a fraction. He controlled the swing in, kept it off the stop, and set the closer arm to one side along the wall.

Inside, someone's tidy hand had built a rig. Colour tape marked the keyed connectors: red for one set, blue for another, a run of yellow tags on the control line. The radio receiver sat at the top right, antenna short and folded. The multi-core bus hooked into it through a terminal block and ran across the panel to a string of boards the size of a matchbox each. Each board had a coin cell taped to it with a wrapped tail feeding the track. No mains feed into those. A separate bundle dropped into the wall cavity through a gland. The labels on that loom were stencilled, not handwritten. He followed two of them with his eyes: BAY 4, BAY 5. Each branch loomed with a small battery pack taped along the run near the panel's base. Power at the edges, logic at the boards. Control in the middle.

On the inside of the door they had taped a cheap timer. No brand name he recognised, rubber buttons rubbed shiny. The plastic lens was cloudy. A tape tab pinned it into a set position: a taped arrow pointing to a single digit on the display. No countdown ticked; whatever value was set would fire an alert or pulse under conditions they controlled elsewhere. Crude. Effective enough. It didn't need to be clever if the rest of the

system did the lifting.

Halfway down the harness, two wires looped out to a two-pin. The pin bore a stamped label: SAFE/ARM. The link in place. A two-second fix if you wanted to make your own life short. He left his hands at his sides.

He crouched closer and read the silkscreen on the main board. The relay sat center-left with an LED. It glowed a steady green. Another board's LED glowed red. He held the back of his hand above the path. No heat beyond ambient. He looked at the entries. A small sticker marked LV CTRL near a pair of small fuses. He leaned back and looked at the trunking again. The crew had run their own line, then used the building's route to mask it. Professional enough to be quick and repeatable.

He glanced back down the corridor. No movement. The camera dome reflection across the duct bonnet pulsed the same pattern he had banked earlier. He checked the smell again at knee height. Better. Head still low, he put his shoulder against the cabinet as if he worked it every night.

He tracked the LV run from the radio module across the fuse pair and into the relay coil. On the far side the bus broke into several keyed plugs that jumped to the next board. Colour-tape and keyed heads would save them when they had to shift the rig into a different building. Nothing here asked for the building's mains. He touched the earth strap with the back of his hand again. Nothing. Safe enough if he kept his hands where they would not bridge anything.

Cutting the building feed would do nothing but risk an arc in bad air. Logic was alive on coin cells. The relay path and radio told the system when to route a pulse. That was the control point. He looked at the SAFE/ARM loop again. Pulling it would change the state of that board. He did not know the order logic. If it registered as tamper, it could close a path he didn't see. He stepped back. False fix.

He put two fingers to his throat and checked the pulse for cadence. Strong but steady. Better than running hot. He put his hand on the closer arm again, not to feel better but to set the tool where he would need it if

the leaf tried to swing back. He slid his palm up along the cabinet door skin and found a small plastic tool clipped there on a short tether: a fuse puller. Hard plastic, designed to grab a microfuse without slipping. He pinched it between finger and thumb. Good. He studied the microfuse labelled LV CTRL. One move. Clean. No spark.

He looked for a tool to keep his other hand safe when he took the keyed plug. Inside the cabinet, a tool clip held a pair of insulated pliers with orange handles. Not fancy. Clean. He touched a finger to the rubber in case the dust hid a cut. No cuts. He set the map in his head. Pop the LV control fuse. Pull the bus plug. Confirm state by indicators. Step away from the urge to do more.

He listened through the structure again. The fans ran thin. A relay clicked somewhere down the line. A second relay responded. Above, the LED blink pattern held. He slid the plastic puller off its tether and raised it to the LV CTRL fuse. He paused with it there and checked his balance. No tremor. He took the fuse and lifted straight up.

The relay LED dimmed. It did not die fast; it wound down from green to a weaker shade and held as the coil bled out. He waited for the relay coil's bleed to finish; no crackle. The red marker LEDs on the boards along the line kept their steady dots. Logic alive. Trigger path dead. Time to move them without noise. He slid the fuse into his vest pocket and set his hand near the keyed connector. He put the insulated pliers on the plug and pinched. He pushed the locking tab gently with his thumb and worked the plug out, straight, no twist. It eased free. He pulled it and held it in his fist without letting the head clack the door skin.

A pop from the speaker grid above the mezzanine came through the concrete as a stray pressure shift. A short hiss followed from the far end of the corridor. Callum froze with his palm open. He held his breath for two counts and listened. The hiss faded. No new relay noise. Whatever the operator had done up there, it had not touched this path.

A flat voice came through a nearby radio. "Hold your line." Not a shout. The carrier stayed open a split second too long and cut. Footfalls transferred through the slab. Weight shifted near the valve end. A second set responded half a beat later. The heavy man turned his hips. A smaller body pivoted with a rubber squeak on the polished floor. He knew the cheap sole from earlier.

"Bollocks. South service. Sweep it." This time the consonant rubbed a little at the end. The way you heard NCOs long after you'd left. Roche.

With the trigger path cut, he shifted from securing the panel to shaping the bend. He returned the insulated pliers to the clip without letting them ring. The plastic puller went back in its holder on the door skin. He closed the cabinet to an inch and kept a finger in the gap so the latch would not seat. He lowered to a crouch and moved two paces to clear the camera's better angle. A yellow cleaning sign stood near the branch mouth. He tipped it gently with the back of his wrist so it lay wrong on the floor. No crack from the hinge. Two short prints in dust faced away from the better line.

The radio crackled again. "Kael, south service. Keep it open." The name hit clean.

Another voice returned, thinner, not nervous. "On it."

He let the cabinet leaf come closed gently until the latch touched. He didn't click it home. A follower would lose a second testing the travel. Back along the wall, he kept the banner pole aligned against his forearm to keep his line narrow. The taped wedge on the swing door at the bend stayed seated when he slid a hand under and shook. Soundless under the gaffer. Good. He moved past.

The hiss down the corridor rolled steady, not growing. The detector up in the void clicked once. The LED blinked red and returned to green. He kept his mouth open a little and took air slow. No sparks. No metal on metal. He ran his palm over the closer arms at his belt, checking both. He had enough kit for the next bend. Beyond that, nothing was certain.

He moved down the dogleg to the return air grille he had used to look across the mezzanine. He didn't risk another look. Not yet. He listened instead. The crowd noise had a new texture in it, the sound of clothing moving when people corrected posture without standing. A voice of authority spoke near the control-room door, tone steady. He heard a reply from farther along the rail. No words. Just shape.

Back at the small swing door he had trapped with the wedge, he set the banner pole under his arm and tuned his weight placement. Right foot on the takeoff point, he tested the grip. His heel found a polished patch. He shaved the edge of it with his sole to leave a mark a light sweep would see. He stepped back, looked once, then moved on.

At the wall talkback panel halfway along the south run, the talk stud had a crack through the plastic and a thumb print ground into the grime where day staff pressed it out of habit. He wiped the stud once with his sleeve, pressed in, and waited for the tiny click that told him the panel had woken. He heard a faint, clean carrier through the grille. He pitched his voice for competence without theatre.

"Transit engineer on the back line," he said. "You've throttled extraction. You'll drown your own if suppression opens. Back them off the rail by a metre. Spray drift will push gas low and pool along the benches."

Static shifted. A flat male voice came back through the system, not over the handheld radio. "Name."

"Q three section night." He kept it simple. "You get them up off the deck by a metre, you get lines of sight again without heads in the worst air. You keep them where you've got them and water comes, you lose control."

"You're not on my roster." The voice lacked heat. The breath under it did not.

“Roster doesn’t matter. Your rigger used the east run. He left his prints in paint. Your boards are live off coin cells. You put mains to the floor, you’ll arc. You don’t want to arc.”

A pause long enough for the man on the other side to read what could be true. He didn’t know what they thought he knew. He only needed one change of posture.

“Location.”

He pictured the wedge at knee height and the slick patch at the corner. “South service bend by the louvre panel with the mint paint. Two mouths east of the dogleg.” He put real words on old paint because liars name things wrongly. “You want eyes on me, send one. Leave your man on the valve end in place.”

The carrier stayed open. In the bleed he heard the burr of a handheld. Roche again, not speaking to the intercom. “Kael, take south bend. Jovan, hold upper. Miles, hold valves. Operator, keep the mix steady. No hero work. Stay off sparks.”

The measured voice returned to the intercom. “You like your own voice, engineer?”

“Not much.” His tone stayed flat. “I like the breathing better.”

Another pause. “You try a trick and I pull one of theirs and make a point.” The sentence held without lift at the end. No bluff. A fact laid on the table.

Callum let his breath ease. “Then don’t make me explain to you how that helps you get what you want.” He let a short beat pass before he finished. “Take the metre. You’ll still control them.”

The carrier clicked. He lifted off the stud and set his palm on the wall to steady himself while the adrenaline spike ran its line and then slid away to the edges. He didn’t look toward the mezzanine. He didn’t need to. He already had that picture fixed. The boy’s shoes tucked under the crossbar. The bent key at Mira’s lanyard. A hand on his knees.

He cut away from the panel and moved low to the corridor where he had set the wedge and studied the polished patch again. He ran a thumb along the edge of the tape and felt the glue still at full strength. He stepped past and set his back against the wall where the camera fields overlapped less. He rolled his shoulders down and let them rest. Loose but lined up for quick range. He took the banner pole into his left hand and aligned it with his wrist so it blended to a quick glance. He put the closer arm within reach on his belt and checked his palm wasn't slick with sweat. It wasn't. Dry enough for grip.

Boots moved at a distance. Not a jog. Measured pace, then faster as a man tried to close ground without making it a run. The sound pattern shortened as it approached the south run. He caught the scrape of rubber over the polished patch he had marked earlier for himself. The sound he had been waiting for from a cheap sole.

Callum didn't move. He let the hunter enter the space so the door fell into the hinge line behind him.

A faint line of dust lay there from old shifts and slips. It wasn't a thing you could see if you weren't looking from where he looked. He watched the weight shift and felt old training set his angles, silent and functional.

He waited until the man's torch beam crossed the head-height brackets for the cable tray and paused there. When the beam started to move again, he took one slow breath to set the beat of his own move against that arc. He didn't try to outpace anything. He timed to it. He didn't yet need to speak. He stayed in the corner where the camera cones had more overlap so his small movements fell into the noise of the system minutely and in ways that didn't read as man first and threat second.

A voice came low in the space. "South bend. Clear." The man had a radio mic under his jaw. He kept the volume down. Professional enough.

Callum let his tongue touch the back of his teeth to get rid of the dry. He didn't let saliva hang. He drew it back and swallowed without sound. He knew how this part would work if the next line landed right. If it

didn't, he would leave the man this corridor and pull him into the next. He didn't put this on chance. He put it on the tools he had and the ground he had prepared.

The relay enclosure stayed where he had left it, latch unseated. The LV control fuse sat in his pocket; the keyed bus plug rode in the pouch.

He worked his path in his head again. If they had redundancy, they would have laid a second control path under the trunking, not in it. He ran his fingers along the wall lower down and felt for a second ripple. Nothing. He checked the base of the cabinet for a second gland. None. The crew had trust in their own workmanship. They didn't wire long in a building they didn't own. They planned and left.

He checked the timer taped to the door skin once. It wouldn't affect the disabled path.

The speaker grids crackled again out on the mezzanine. That would put a flinch into people. He closed his eyes for a beat and pictured the bench line. He forced the image of his boy back under the bench. It wasn't time to lift it. He moved his shoulders to ease the ache across the blades. He opened his eyes. Back to the next line.

He made his way to the junction that faced the dogleg behind the valves and set the tip of the banner pole to the floor. He drew the closer arm out half its length and turned it in his hand so the elbow joint faced the right way. Sorting your kit in a way a part fits your hand mattered here. He'd learned that in tight rooms with low clearance and hard corners.

The radio near the valve side hissed open again. "Negative movement on upper. Jovan holding." Roche's voice in the background kept low, words cut short at ends. "Miles, keep that angle."

He didn't want to hear anything about a hostage on a deadline. He didn't. He already carried the threat in his chest. He looked down to his hands instead. They stayed steady. Good.

He went back to the intercom once more and pressed the stud hard enough to flatten the crack. "You see the meter on your detectors?" he asked, voice level.

A pause, then the same calm tone: "Stay off my system."

"You'll do what you'll do. I only care about kids who didn't plan for your night." He ended the call before the reply made its shape and cut back through to the bend with the wedge.

He pulled back and picked his angle. He went to the relay cabinet, kept the latch from seating with a finger in the gap, and kept the LV CTRL fuse in his pocket for later. Up above, a detector LED blinked red and went to green; the fan note stayed weak. He wiped grit from his jaw, faced the bend, and let the wedge sit ready. Boots again, Kael's, if the man did his own hunting. He set the banner pole along his forearm, slid a closer arm under the belt where it wouldn't bite, and put his palm to the concrete. Weight set. Breath through teeth. He edged his rear foot back half a pace to open his hips. He didn't pray. He worked. A knee met rubber in the doorway.

Chapter 6

The Engineer

A cheap sole scuffed across the polished patch. The beam moved with the man, wide arc first, then tight, as he checked the bracket line along the cable tray. His weight stayed on the balls of his feet. He kept the torch low. A mic sat under his jaw with the foam worn smooth.

"South bend. Clear." He didn't push the volume.

Callum lay long against the cold side of the electrical cabinet, spine parallel to the wall. The wedge he'd taped to the swing door hinge sat two finger widths proud at knee height. Two steps back from it, the polished patch he'd shaved earlier showed the faint sheen he wanted. The banner pole lay along his left forearm, tape-deadened grip under his palm. The door closer arm rested loose on his belt with the elbow joint turned for a fast bar.

Kael moved another pace. Torch up. Torch down. He kept the beam on the space, not the noise. Professional. The light crossed the head-height cable-tray brackets again, then swept forward like a hand feeling for a shoulder.

Callum settled his jaw. He counted the beat pattern he had from the dome camera's reflected pulse earlier: the stutter at the end of the cycle, the narrow dark window he trusted. He waited through it. He didn't blink when the cone nicked the bottom edge of the cabinet skin.

Kael's left foot slid on the polished patch. The rubber squeaked sharp once. Momentum drove his knee into the taped wedge. The wedge dug into flesh. His hip rotated with the surprise. The torch jerked high. Light spiked the duct bonnet, then dropped.

Callum moved. He came up just enough to clear his hips, stepped into the collapsing angle, and set the closer arm across the line above Kael's collarbone. Not a throat crush, high and hard where he could torque without collapse. His forearm locked behind the bar. He pulled back and down with his weight.

Kael tried to shove his head through the gap in the arm to breathe. Callum kept him off the wall so there was nowhere to post. He drove his knee into the outside of Kael's hip, cutting leg power. Kael threw a short elbow that glanced off Callum's ribs. The torch fell. It bounced once and stuck in the taped hinge of the wedge, light pointing into nothing useful.

Kael found a grip on the bar with his right hand and pried at it. Callum stripped the fingers one by one with his left, took the wrist, and pinned it to Kael's own chest. His forearm settled deeper under the jaw now, biceps tight, the closer arm a narrow fulcrum. He felt the shape of the fight change under him. Less rage. More calculation. Then more oxygen hunger.

"South bend," Kael hissed into his shoulder. Air moved across Callum's forearm. The mic didn't catch words. The sound died in cloth.

Callum shifted his mouth to the side to keep from breathing into Kael's ear. He kept the angle. He kept the pressure. He didn't lift for mercy and he didn't slam for spite. He watched the hands. Elbows slowed. Boots skidded, stopped. Weight sagged.

He held through the last stiffening, through the tap of knuckles without rhythm. The body went slack and stopped trying to find angles.

He eased nothing. He counted slow in the old way and watched for breath. No rise touched his forearm. He held past the count, then let the weight settle and eased off.

"Mix is steady," came faint through the slab. The voice held the same calm he'd heard before. He ignored it. He kept his hand where it was.

The wedge tape creaked and settled. Somewhere above, a detector relay clicked. Mercaptan rode the top of his mouth and made the saliva go thin.

He eased Kael down. He did it in a way that didn't ring metal, didn't drop weight into echo, didn't let the torch scrape bright across concrete. He took Kael under both armpits and edged him backward, using his heel to clear grit out of the line so the drag stayed noise-free. He kept the head from bouncing once. The body went limp and stayed there.

The recess sat two paces back along the wall where a pipe run met a cabinet. He'd gauged it earlier for the height and the angle out of the camera cones. Two short pulls and the weight was in the pocket. He rotated the shoulders so a quick glance would read as a man slumped on his side, not staged.

His breathing ran ragged three times, then settled. He worked his jaw to clear the copper taste. He thought of Leo's trainers tucked under the mezzanine crossbar and let the picture be the thing that kept his hands precise, not soft.

He slid his fingers down Kael's jacket. He found the radio at the chest clip and rolled the volume to a whisper; a half-press opened the carrier and closed clean. He slid it under his vest and covered the light.

His hand paused at the holster on the forward hip. Private carry. He eased the pistol free, kept it low, and checked the magazine by feel, then seated it again. He tucked the weapon under his vest at his beltline.

"Hold upper," a whisper on a carrier said in his ear. "Jovan, shift two." Different voice answering with a short "Yep."

He lifted a small burner from the inside pocket; the screen stayed dark under his thumb. He pocketed it. A decoy you didn't need to explain was better than any plan where you had to.

He took a cuff out of his belt loop and fed the catch around Kael's wrists behind his back. He cinched until tendons depressed and bone met

plastic. He trimmed the tail with his flathead and palmed the cutoff bit so it wouldn't show.

He scanned Kael's face for colour and slack jaw. No nostril flare. No chest rise. He left the head where it lay.

The torch Kael had dropped sat wedged against the door's hinge. Callum peeled it free; the collar clicked through a setting under his thumb. He killed it and pocketed it as a secondary.

He checked the corridor line. The wedge tape held its diagonal wrap. The polished patch stayed true. The dogleg toward the valves hummed faintly with the cabinet's load. The detector LED blinked red once and then settled to green. Fans ran low. The hiss held steady.

He flattened in the recess and listened for the high spaces. He wanted to know how long he had before the reposition from upstairs reached pressure here. Voices spoke over the mezzanine in tones he couldn't spell, only mark. Cloth moved. Shoes corrected. A child choked a breath in the way kids did when they were trying not to cry. He pressed the back of his head to the cabinet for one heartbeat, kept that one image short, then raised off it.

He set his palm on the closer arm on his belt. The steel was cold where the tape didn't reach. He smoothed a raised curl of tape flat. "This job includes killing now," he said under his breath.

The radio whispered again in the pocket of quiet. "Operator, keep the mix steady. No hero work." Roche. The cadence put weight behind each word without raising them. He'd heard that voice and those kinds of sentences in sand and concrete both.

Callum put two fingers to the tiny PTT and gave it a half-press again to read the squelch. He released it. He caught the gap in their rhythm and pinned it in his head. When he spoke, he didn't try to pitch too much authority. He built a voice that sounded like someone who needed to be heard and knew it might cost him.

"Movement at upper stair by control side," he said into the radio, quick, breath short to sell the run. "Shadow break on glass."

He cut the carrier before the reply.

Roche came back clean. "Jovan, check the control stair. Miles, hold that valve angle. Operator, confirm internal."

A quiet "On it." Not Roche. The quiet man up top.

Callum kept the radio under his vest and shaded it with fabric to hide any light. He took one more look at the line of Kael's shoulders, at the cuffed wrists, then eased out of the pocket and back into the corridor's breath.

He moved away from the bend and the wedge, staying under the center line of the nearest dome where the cone overlap fell off a fraction. He brushed the wall lightly with his shoulder, a maintenance man's posture he'd been using since the doors dropped. He didn't hurry. He kept the speed that read as someone doing a job he understood.

Behind the mesh at shoulder height, the return-air grille gave him a slice of the mezzanine at an angle. Faces low. Knees drawn in. The torch beam along the rail paused. A woman made a sound. It cut short. A man's voice, the same tone as the chambered calm on the radio, murmured a threat. It didn't carry in words through the grille but it didn't need to. He felt it in how the crowd noise changed shape. He stepped back before the urge turned into a move that would end badly in high air.

"Stay down," Roche said over the speakers, not the radio, this time. "Heads below rail height. Do not test this."

Callum put his fingers to the concrete and held there long enough for the breath to come back under control. He didn't answer. He didn't key anything. He didn't teach a man like that how to guess how close he was.

He went past the staff-room corridor mouth. The door stood closed and braced with two thick white cuffs fed through opposing handles and a run of cable ties up at the stanchion. Tails were trimmed clean. He

touched the plastic curl on one of the cut ends where it had fallen into a corner. He logged their methods again. Simple. Effective. Easy to re-do if he broke it at the wrong time.

He made the gallery mouth and stopped. He checked the smell as much as anything. The fake citrus from a cleaner someone had spilled here weeks ago came up from the floor seam, dry and stale. Mercaptan laid on top of it in a way he couldn't scrape off. The combination told him the air hadn't been stirred by a run lately. Good. He had a patch to cross that would give him seconds he needed.

He slipped into a crouch and moved three paces with his back near the wall, banner pole hand low, the closer arm on the belt where it wouldn't catch. Air moved at shin height. He put his fingertips to the left-hand tray bracket as he passed, counting notches by feel, not number.

At the first pinch point he paused. He pictured the way to use it with someone coming fast behind him. He measured what he would need to make shoulders stick there for longer than a heartbeat.

The radio rustled once under his vest. He didn't turn. He didn't need to. If someone put a beam at the recess, they would see a man slumped and cuffed. If someone called the man's name, there would be no answer. Not now.

A detector's relay clicked high up, almost above his head. The LED blinked red once and went green. Fans held their thin duty cycle. The hiss didn't change. He stayed down.

He reached a small return grille at waist height where he could see the top corner of the control-room door and the shoulder line of the man who had posted there earlier. That man wasn't there now. The chair was. The tilt of the top screen hadn't changed. The warning text still filled it. No numbers. No time. Just the shape of a threat that didn't need digits to

be true.

"Control stair," Roche's voice said on the radio. "Jovan?"

The reply came back after a fraction. "On the riser." Quiet man. Serbian accent in the vowels if you were listening for it. Not much. Just enough.

Callum looked at the grille until his vision blurred, then blinked the sting away. He wasn't tired. He was burning through something he couldn't get back if he wasn't careful. He shifted off his heels and into a proper crouch that wouldn't send a tremor down his thigh when he stood.

He'd used the intercom panel one bend back earlier. Now he stayed off it. He'd had enough of his voice in their system for one cycle. He didn't need to push the luck that had served him so far.

He ran his hand along the wall until he found the paint shift he watched for, old green into grey-green, the line where someone had tried to hide new touch-ups on old surface. He placed himself under the halfway point of the nearest dome again and breathed slow, mouth open.

The weight of what was next didn't sit on him as a thought. It sat as the closer arm at his side. It sat as the burn in his forearms from holding a man until he stopped fighting. He flexed his fingers once and the ache stayed there.

He worked another three paces and listened for the slab to talk back. It did in the ways it could: footfall through concrete from a man above, a bump at the valve end when someone shifted weight on a gantry, the hollow change when a distant door touched the rubber stop. He filed each thing. He didn't hunt for meaning that wasn't there.

At the staff-room corridor mouth he paused again. He imagined Leo's head under the bench behind that door and Mira's hand on his knee and no air moving under his nose strong enough to count. He took that and turned it into the weight he put on his feet. Left foot. Right foot. Nothing else.

He angled back to the dogleg behind the valves long enough to check for any new shape in the sound pattern. Nothing had shifted. Miles still had weight there; a taller man put his boots down with less noise. Different cadence. He'd know it in the dark.

He put his fingertips to his throat once and felt the line of his pulse. Still steady. The work gave you that sometimes. Just a number that wasn't a number, a measure of whether you were still in the center of yourself.

He looked once at his hands. They were steady. He lifted the banner pole, set the tip to the floor, and moved on.

Back where the corridor forked, he paused. He thought of the EXIT door he'd tested earlier with the chain-link landing and the padlock to nowhere, of the draft threading through without a way out. He didn't glance that way now. He kept his eyes on the service run and the utility mouths he could use. He had what he could use in his pockets and at his waist. He had a boy waiting for him to come back from a promise.

The PA crackled once overhead into a space where he could not see. "No one approaches the building," the calm voice repeated for whoever needed it now. "No breach."

He drew the closer arm out half its length and slid it back under his belt where his hand would find it. He counted his steps to the blind seam under the dome. He would pull Jovan off the stair and feed him into the gallery choke. He moved to make that happen.

Chapter 7

First Contact

He lifted his hand into the weak spill from an emergency LED and watched for a shake. Nothing. The fingers sat straight, tendons under the skin like wire, no flutter at the tips. The stillness made his throat tighten more than a tremor would have. His hands stayed steady. Breath even.

Mercaptan sat high in the air. Down low, near the return grilles, his tongue picked up concrete dust, not the egg stink. Detectors clicked above at their slow interval; one blinked red, then returned to green. The fans kept a thin note, held low by manual override.

“Dad.” The word came from a place that wasn’t the corridor. A voice from a bench level with his memory. He pressed his tongue against the backs of his teeth until the sound cut off. He put his palm flat to concrete. Cold steadied him more than anything else.

He angled the pistol at his beltline with two fingers, keeping it tucked under his vest so metal wouldn’t show. He thumbed the magazine base, pressed up and felt spring resistance that read as full. No slide rack. Too loud in these cones. Cap per contact: two. One if placed. No press□check. Accept the first pull dead if it was. He repeated it once in his head and let the words fall away.

Footfalls carried through the slab in a different pattern to earlier. A wider spread. Weight moving in more than one line across the building. No rush. Probes. Roche would test corridors now, not commit one way. That was what he would do with a problem he couldn’t see.

He set a hand to the closer arm at his belt. The tape edge had lifted. He pressed it flat, then tightened his belt one notch so the metal sat hard

against him and wouldn't knock if he turned fast. The banner pole lay along his forearm, grip deadened with tape. He checked the joint where Kael's throat had sat under the bar. His own forearms had a deep ache, skin stretched tight over muscle. He flexed his fingers until heat returned to his knuckles, then let his hands fall to his sides. The bruise would cut grip later. He filed that and moved on.

He slid his back along the cold cabinet skin until he found the seam of lower cover under two dome cones. He took the burner phone he'd lifted from Kael's pocket, woke it without a code, dimmed the screen to the last sliver, and thumbed a number he knew by rote. Leo's. He typed one word: stay. He didn't send a second. He set the phone to mute, vibration off, and tapped send. The screen showed nothing he could read in the dim. He put the phone away and breathed once. It was a gesture. Any phone Leo had was likely on the floor with the others or in Mira's bag before they took it. The message went into air he couldn't control, which meant it could be ignored now.

He rose into a crouch and slid two paces along the wall, letting his shoulder brush the paint so his line read as a maintenance man to a camera arc. The polished sheen at the corner of the cabinet caught the dull green of a dome LED pulse. He timed his next two steps to the dark slice at the end of that pulse, remembering the stutter at the end of the cycle.

At the corridor fork he held still and listened. The fans' thin whirr. A tiny change in air at shin height from a grille. A weight shift through metal at the valve end. And to the west, higher, a scrape that came off a fixed chair leg above concrete. Mezzanine. He pictured the line of benches. The curve of the rail where the straight met it. The control door's broken panel taped away from the jamb.

His boy's trainers tucked under a crossbar. A hand on his knee. He ran a palm along the closer arm at his waist and felt the steel. Choice and lever both.

“Short,” he said under his breath. Not a promise. A requirement. The next fight would be short and on ground he chose.

He moved along the south run on low breath, pausing when a detector clicked to let the relay’s tick die into the noise. The old green paint gave way to a recoat of grey-green. Fresh cable ties on trunking. New work laid in a hurry. He made the bend near the relay box, door leaf still not fully seated on its latch, and kept going toward the upper corridor that ran behind the mezzanine toilets.

He took Kael’s radio out from under his vest and shaded the LED with fabric even though he’d rolled the volume down to a whisper. He half-pressed the PTT to read the squelch and cut it. He waited for a gap he’d learned from their rhythm earlier. He brought his mouth close without touching and let a breath sit in his voice.

“Movement: by the toilets next to the mezz,” he said in a runner’s cadence. “Dark jacket. Couldn’t see hands.” He cut the carrier before any reply could hook his voice.

“Jovan. Toilets,” Roche said in the next breath, calm. “Miles, hold the valves. Do not move.”

“On it,” came back. Jovan. The vowels skimmed flat and economical. No extra words.

Callum slipped the radio back under his vest and moved to the corner that gave him a long diagonal on the toilet corridor mouth. He dug a bin-liner from his pocket, one he’d rolled off his trolley earlier in the night, and snapped a palmful of air into it with small catches of his hands, keeping the noise close to his chest. He twisted the neck, taped it twice, then stuck the tape to itself further down along two folds, making mass from nothing. He taped the bundle once more to hold shape. It wasn’t heavy, but it read as something.

He put the false bag on the floor where someone would find it with a torch and hesitate. A second would do. Two would be better.

He angled around the corner to the door near the maintenance gallery mouth that hung without closing pressure. He eased the leaf out a finger's width until the hinge rasped once against dry paint. The sound carried the way he needed, a thin complaint that would map to a retreat path in a mind under pressure. He let the door rest a handspan off the stop without letting the latch seat. If Jovan shoved it later, it would go loud and eat another breath.

He slid back to the elbow of the corridor and kept his head low as a dome LED pulsed. He timed his sideways step to the dark slice again and put his ear near the wall to listen for the different echo that came with tile and porcelain.

Jovan arrived like a man who had cleared tight spaces before. One boot down smooth, then the next. No heel scrape. A touch on a cubicle door, quick in and out, a short open-close cadence that didn't let anything swing free and squeal. He was fast without rushing. Professional. The beam of his torch stayed low and quick, not up at head height where it would cast a wild arc.

Roche cracked carrier. "Status."

"Negative," Jovan said a breath later. Shorter air. A thin edge where none had been earlier. His exhale clipped; the sweep cadence shortened. Time wasted meant risk, and he knew it.

Callum thumbed the side switch on the radio to off. He counted to the end of the dome's next pulse and moved along the wall the way he had before, shoulder for posture, fingers against paint to track the seam, until he reached the gallery mouth. He kept his weight high on the wall side. Air moved at shin height here. Cool against skin through the tear at his knee. The stale citrus from old cleaner sat near a floor seam. Condensation filmed the tray lip. The hiss from the east end had the same shape as before. Constant, not rising.

He dropped into a crouch and slid into the gallery until his knee touched the pipe he knew to expect at shin level. He kept his hip off the

tray bracket by a finger's width, pushing his spine into the wall so his profile was small.

He turned the radio back on and half-pressed the PTT for a clean carrier pop. Short. Not long enough to hold. A breadcrumb.

He held still and counted four breaths.

He let his mind hold the picture he had set: Jovan turning from a dead end without a target, hearing the hinge squeal where a door had moved, catching the carrier pop in the same direction. He would follow the trail not because of a mistake but because it was the only thing that made sense. Make him choose your lane.

He watched the green pulse reflection on a polished duct bonnet catch the corner. When the pulse went to dark he slid a hand along the banner pole, felt the gaffer holding fine, and set the tip to concrete without letting it click.

A sound came from above, distorted by the route it took through metal. Not words, just a shape of noise that matched a child who had reached the edge and let sound out. The hair on his arms prickled and his jaw set so hard his molars buzzed.

"Down," Roche said over the speakers this time, smooth. "Heads below rail height. Do not test this."

Callum opened his mouth and closed it again without speaking. His tongue sat hard against his teeth. He breathed out through his nose and kept moving deeper into the narrow run where air pressed cooler at his shins. He locked his jaw and timed four breaths. He didn't answer Roche. He didn't tell a man like that anything he didn't have to.

He reached a point in the gallery where the tray bracket notches changed from three, spaced evenly, to a longer gap. He put his fingers on the metal and mapped it by touch. Here, a shoulder would catch. Here, a man would have to turn his hip to clear. At his calf, the banner pole pressed into the wall as he tested a lever angle that would turn a thigh

into a stop if he needed it. He planned a hand on a collar, a bar across the upper chest, a twist. Short work. He sat with the knowledge that his hands could do it without the pistol and didn't let that frighten him away from using the pistol if needed.

The staff room corridor mouth lay around the next L where he had seen it earlier, braced shut with two white cuffs and zip ties worked through a stanchion. When he passed, he looked once, long enough to check tails were still trimmed clean and the bindings were tight. The bent key on Mira's lanyard bobbed in his memory where a light had caught it. He didn't go closer. He would not trade the gallery choke for a look that had no use now.

He thumbed the radio on again and listened for their rhythm. Roche's orders ran with the same flat ends he'd used all night. Calm statements. He waited for Roche's cadence to flatten, counted two spaces, then moved the sighting up the stairwell. He let his borrowed voice in.

"Shadow on control stair," he said, making breath sound where none was needed. "Just now." He cut carrier.

"Jovan. Control stair," Roche said after the fraction he used to make sure he wasn't talking over someone. "Miles, hold that angle." The second instruction came without a lift in tone. It was not a request.

"Moving," came from Jovan. No complaint now. The vowels sat harder. He had a task and that would thread him near this gallery mouth in the quickest line.

Callum turned the radio off again as the fan note dipped once at the duct and settled deeper into the pinch, staying in the gallery, opposite the call, so Jovan would have to cross his angle, body angled so any incoming torch would get coat and wall first.

He took the pistol in his right hand, muzzle down, index out along the guard. He didn't bring his finger in. He drew the closer arm with his left and set the elbow joint to the place above a collarbone he aimed for. Short and high, not a crush to the throat. He switched his grip back to the pistol

and laid the closer arm across his thigh where his hand could find it in half a beat.

On the slab, light footfall tapped through concrete at a cadence he now knew. A man who didn't plant heels. Someone who let his weight live high so he could move without the sound of surrender in the step. Boot rubber brushed the left wall; weight high, wall-side bias. The pause and adjust of a man scanning. Jovan.

Above, near the control room, a chair leg rasped again. The top monitor still threw a glow. He could see the corner of the tilt through the waist-height grille he'd used before if he craned, but he didn't. He watched the seam where light from the corridor would brighten the edges of the gallery mouth.

He thought of the fire hose cabinet near the hazard-stickered door; a stream could take feet in a corner, not in this air.

He drew the banner pole back a hand's width so the tip wouldn't clack when he moved. He rested the pole on his thigh with the grip tape catching fine. He breathed in and out twice and tasted dust. The ache in his forearms sat like weight along the bones. The burn would serve when he needed to hold hard and then let go.

The LED on a detector blinked red somewhere up in the void. The relay ticked a half-beat later. A detector clicked once; the mercaptan taste sat flat. Air stayed thin at shin height, not gusting or pulling. The hiss from the east held steady with no new bite.

He waited. Not passive. Ready in a way that used nothing extra and promised nothing. The pistol settled into his hand like a tool he had used before and chosen not to use since. Leo's face cut across his vision not as a plea but as a simple fact lying under all the rest. He set it beside the steel at his belt and made a shape he could carry.

He caught the first flick of moving light in the corridor outside the gallery. A low torch sweep that stayed on knees and edges of walls, clipping a tray lip once. No broadcast. No voice. A man doing his job well.

Callum leaned his head back a fraction, so if the beam licked the corner it would catch the curve of his skull tight to the wall and not the line of his eye.

The beam lifted and flattened across the mouth of the gallery. It paused. Then moved off the edge and down. Jovan stayed low. Good practice.

Callum didn't speak. He didn't move until the beam fell away again and boots touched closer to the pipe. Two steps. Then a stop. A small inhale that he heard only because he was counting sounds now. The pistol stayed low and heavy at his thigh. The banner pole lay across his lap. The door closer arm waited where he had set it.

He fixed the geometry in his mind one last time. If Jovan came in with his shoulder, catch the upper arm with the bar, twist the chest across the pipe, take the pistol if Jovan drew, two shots if he had to, don't let the body bounce. Short.

He kept one hand free in case the fight turned before the pistol mattered. He wasn't going to let angles and noise set that outcome. He would pick it.

Above, the speaker grid clicked. Roche's voice stayed even. "No one approaches. No breach. Hands where I can see them."

Callum didn't answer. He pressed his tongue to his teeth again and let the air in his chest sit. He had made the lane. He would not create a line.

He listened. The footfall reset just outside his angle. A small turn of boot rubber on concrete. Weight shifted. A breath. Then another. The first shoulder broke the plane of the gallery mouth.

He moved nothing yet. He let the shoulder come one hand-width more. He watched the gun hand, empty, low. He registered the position of the man's belt and the possible placement of a holster under the jacket line. He prepared to do the work he had chosen.

He held there, the urge to go sat against the calculation to wait half a second longer so the fight would belong to him.

If he drew, two shots. If not, the bar first.

Everything he could hear said he had it.

He kept still. And he waited for the next step.

Chapter 8

Feeding the Wolf

Callum kept his cheek near the wall where cold paint cut a line across his skin. The gallery mouth sat three steps ahead, a rectangle of darker air where the corridor bent out to the east runs. He'd waited as the shoulder hung in the gap. It withdrew. The beam slid off the corner. Boot rubber turned on concrete and moved past toward the stair. He stayed still until the steps settled, then edged back off the pipe.

He had Kael's radio under his vest, the LED taped off by fabric, the volume rolled low. He kept his hand over it to block any light or shape. Up through the return grilles came a scatter of sound: a cough pressed low, fabric rasping on concrete, the click of a torch collar. The fans stayed on their thin note. A detector relay clicked somewhere above and the single LED blinked red then went back to green.

He took the radio in his palm and brought it to his mouth without lifting it from the shade of his vest. He pressed a thumb to the microphone hole through cloth and folded his fingers over his knuckles to distort the path. He kept the words short. No extras.

"South plant side. Movement."

He released the key before any reply could latch his voice. He felt his own pulse through the heel of his hand. He counted one breath and nothing changed. Another breath. Then Roche came back, calm and flat.

"Hold valves. Miles, check south plant. Quick look. Return."

A second voice, deeper and unbothered. "On it." Miles. A man who could take a door face-first and still keep a count in his head.

Callum slid the radio back into the vest. He changed nothing about his posture, because cameras flagged irregular movement. They picked up the odd shift, not the one a man could do for hours. He moved his hand to the taped banner pole laid along his thigh and drew the tip out and low until it touched the floor with weight but no click. He angled the pole toward a wall-mounted lens glass, a dull half-circle above a doorway in the side run. Passive infrared. He raised the tip to the height of a man's arm and swept past the lens once. The strip light above the short run clicked once, then ramped to the higher setting. Not full, just the brighter step that meant movement in a zone.

He let the pole settle. He breathed through his teeth and listened. Overhead, near the valve bank, a heavier cadence changed by one step. Metal took weight and then released it. The slab carried that shift into his bones. Miles had moved. One man off a fixed position gave him a narrow chance. He timed it against the fan's note. On the net, one breath of quiet; a clipped tone. Then Roche spoke.

"Negative on south. Back on the valves. Do not leave your angle again."

Miles gave a short tone in reply. No words. A man who did not overuse sound. The footfall at the valve end returned to its earlier pressure. Callum looked at the seam of shadow on the floor and knew that line was closed again.

He slid the radio off with a thumb on the side switch. He did it because if he left it live he would use it again from habit, and he'd get greedy with it. One more call and he would push it too far. He kept his mouth closed and clicked his tongue against his teeth once to wake himself back into the moment.

The speaker grid above the mezzanine cracked and carried Roche's voice. "Up. Stand. Count. Move in. Heads under rail. Hands where I can see them." No anger. No shake. The words came clipped.

Wood skidded and bench legs rasped the floor. A woman hissed at a child. A man's breath broke then was held. Callum pictured the rail where the curve met the straight. He pictured how people would try to stand and would push back at the rail, and how a crowd like that shifted in surges if no one steadied it.

Then he heard it clearly through the grille to his left, not a thought that reached him from years back but a sound in this space: "Where's Dad?" Small voice, flat in fear. Not a cry. A question with nowhere to go.

His jaw locked. He put his teeth together and the pressure ran up his scar to his temple. A tight pull bit at his calf; he flattened his foot and it passed. He took the radio again, already off. He set the plastic into his own ribcage just hard enough for the pain to fix him in place. He breathed once and let the breath go. He thanked Mira without speaking because he could hear her answer in the next sound: "Shh. Right here." The hand on the knee. The bent staff key hitting her zip.

He moved away from the grille on a knee and forearm, staying low where the air tasted of dust instead of the egg stink up high. He kept his palm on the concrete for the cold. His fingers brushed a line of paint where old green turned to newer grey-green. He stored the blind seam distances in his head and used them, crossing under one dome while the next pulse dimmed.

He reached the fork that would put him into the upper corridor behind the mezzanine toilets if he went left. He stayed in the service run instead. The call he had made worked once. He wouldn't get it again. Roche had felt the risk and put Miles back on his post. Trying it again would expose the trick. The next move needed different ground.

He stood into a crouch and rolled his shoulders without lifting them. His belt cut a notch into his waist where he had tightened it earlier to stop the closer arm from knocking if he turned fast. He checked the tape edge on the closer arm by touch.

The corridor opened to the right then turned tight left toward the east. He stepped with small feet and kept his head down. The mercaptan sat higher, a stale push near his ears. Down low, near the return grilles, his tongue found concrete. He swallowed and it cut the taste. The fans held their thin duty. The detectors clicked high then went quiet. He let those small sounds fix his timing and kept his mind on the corridor, not on the voice behind the grille.

He worked back along the south run until a waist-height grille gave him a slice of the mezzanine. The slice broke across the edge of a bench and the corner of a pillar. He could not see faces. He could count legs. The voice on the speakers ran a stand-and-count, then pushed them down again tight under the rail, one line, close. The guard at the rail kept his light low and held it along knees. A teenage breath raced at the edge of control. Too fast. Too shallow. The pitch of it said the chest would go hard then shut down if no one helped.

The man at the rail did not step in. The voice on the speaker did, colder. "If anyone goes down I make an example. Do not go down." A clean threat with an outcome stated and no performance in it. The teenage breath smoothed. The cost had been set. Fear can do the work. Callum hated that it worked and liked that it worked, both at the same time.

He tracked Mira by the lanyard flash and the shape she made when she leaned. She moved in front of a small form under a bench crossbar, keeping her body between a torch angle and the gap below. She spoke once at a woman further down the line. "She needs to sit." Firm. Not panicked. "We avoid a fall at the stair mouth if she sits on the end there."

The guard at the rail angled his head toward the control room. The speakers answered. "One bench. Keep it tight." That reduced a different risk: a stumble at the stair mouth could knock others.

The guard at the rail cycled a door at the end of the line to push the crowd nearer the control room. The hinge squealed once. Mira reached

out and put her fingers on the door leaf in the exact spot where you could float it with a palm and take all the swing out of it. The leaf hung there for a count of one beat and then closed, cutting a sightline for an instant. The guard's torch darted to the hinge and back.

He clocked her calm and moved. He slid past the end of the grille and crossed a short span under a camera cone where there had been no cover before. He didn't hurry and he didn't slow. He kept his shoulders at the right height to read as a maintenance man on a standard walk between service points if anyone saw a sliver of him through the gap. He held the banner pole against his forearm to pass as issued kit.

On the far side, he touched the steel of a door leaf. The latch sat fat in its keep. He stood the banner pole on its tip and fed it under the bottom edge until he had a little lift. He kept the shaft tight so the door moved with it. He eased the leaf until it touched his pole and then eased more until the latch tongue stood proud of the strike plate. He kept that line until metal weight settled and held. He tested with two fingers, pressing and releasing the edge. The latch did not seat. The latch tongue stayed proud; the gap held. He withdrew the pole with a low scrape of tape on paint and re-aligned it along his forearm.

He looked once back toward the grille. The crowd noise had gone small again. The teenager's breath had reduced. An older man had sat and kept his hands on his thighs. Mira eased Leo another hand-width into the shadow under the bench with one finger to his shin to make the move read as nothing. A chair leg near the control room rasped an inch. The top monitor's glow lit a shoulder and a cuff.

He worked away. He did not watch pieces he could not change.

Down a narrow branch off the main run, he found a utility door that had been slamming when the building flexed under use. He opened the leaf a fraction and tested the closer by pushing and letting it take the weight. It wanted to snap shut. He put his shoulder against it and kept the door where the closer arm was extended halfway. He took a 3 mm hex key

from his pocket and found the adjustment port by feel. He turned a quarter against the drag and brought the speed down. He gave it back another small turn to soften the last 10 degrees of swing. He let the leaf go and it came in slow with no slap. He nodded once to no one and closed it again.

He slid a rubber wedge under the leaf near the hinged side and ran gaffer over it, two wraps horizontal and a diagonal over the top to take shear if someone kicked the bottom edge. He worked the door twice. It closed against the wedge with the latch tongue held off. It wouldn't lock. He set the tape edges dead flat with his thumb so nothing peeled if fingers caught them.

He tore a strip of gaffer, folded a point at one end, then tore and folded again to make a simple arrow. He set it ankle-high on the skirting board, adhesive pressed hard into the old paint. He stepped back and looked at it from knee height. Small enough to be missed by a searcher. Clear enough for Mira if she got this far and needed a human chain cue.

The mercaptan hung heavy up near the ceiling void. He kept to the floor draw by the return grilles. Cold air touched his shins where the duct work took in. Detectors clicked in a steady rhythm. The fans held a low note. He kept moving east.

The hazard stickers on the door skin changed tone in the low light. He touched them without looking, steady. The hose cabinet sat beside that door, red steel with a foam gasket. He slipped his fingers under the lip and eased it open without the metal edge tapping back. Inside, the folded hose lay heavy. He ran his palm along a length and felt the firmness that meant charge. He put his thumb and forefinger on the brass coupling and read the temperature there. Not hot. Slight chill at the coupling. He touched the feed valve and tested the wheel for play. A quarter turn of stiff movement came and he stopped there. No squeal, no ring. Good. He ran the hose end toward the cabinet mouth to confirm line length would reach the gantry support. It would.

He closed the cabinet to the gasket without letting the catch snap. He took the banner pole in his hand and laid it across a door frame to test for a ringing point. Nothing. The tape on the grip deadened the contact. He laid the pole across his thigh again. Forearms hurt where pressure had lived earlier. He could still hold a tool.

A low sightline through a mesh panel gave him the room as it matched the plan on the wall. Valves in a row. Pipes separated by guards. A gantry overhead. On that gantry, a tall man with corded forearms, hands near the rail, body set to an angle he could hold for a long time. The man wore a dark jacket with nothing to catch a camera. No logos. There were gloves clipped to his belt. He held nothing in his hands and still read armed. The line from his hip to his jacket edge carried the bulk at the belt that said where his weapon sat.

Callum took in the bolt positions along the near support. Four in a line. Spacing regular. Nuts showed a thin ring of rust bloom at two washers where water had sat. The heads at those two points had a tighter line of orange across them that said the thread might give under shock and water pressure. He recorded the position relative to a small run of overspray paint on the beam and a scuff at the base plate. He fixed those two in his mind as the place to strike hard.

He eased back from the mesh. He gave himself more distance than he wanted because space would keep him alive. He took three steps on the camera seam where two cones overlapped. He waited out a pulse and took two more. He put his palm on the wall once to touch cold. He moved away from the door to the hose cabinet and into the bend where the electrical cabinet gave warmth against his left side.

Under his vest, the radio stayed off. He wouldn't risk it again on this approach. The man up there would feel a change if a line moved in the wrong place. He would work with the hose, not the radio. Water could move metal; a call couldn't.

He crouched. The ache in his forearms sat there and he left it. He brought the closer arm out of his belt and set the joint to the notch where it would fit the spokes on a valve wheel when the time came. He put it back under his vest with the tape end flat so it would not peel.

He kept his mouth closed. He let his head turn just enough to shift a stretch down his neck, then brought his eyes level again. Above, a chair leg scraped. The top screen's glow lit the edge of a man's jaw by the control-room door. The speaker grid clicked.

"Stay tight," Roche said. "No one moves. No one approaches."

Callum kept his eyes on the corner where the valve room line began. He swallowed the dryness in his throat. He thought of the wedge under the utility door and the taped arrow low on the wall. He pictured Mira's hand on Leo's knee and the watch on the boy's wrist. He pictured the hose valve and the bolt line and Miles' boots on that gantry. He did not let himself picture what came if he swung the hose and missed.

He took a longer path back toward the upper run to keep the camera arcs predictable and stayed low where the grilles drew in air. He did not pass the staff room corridor mouth. He had seen the cuffs and cable ties run through the stanchion and how clean the tails were. Nothing had changed there. He would not change it until he could do more than pull zip ties and choke another lane. He passed the door he had propped with the banner pole and put his fingers on the edge. The gap held, the latch off seat by the pole's thickness. He moved on.

The toilets corridor still showed the decoy bag he had built out of a bin-liner. It sat where he had left it, not kicked aside. He didn't pick it up. If it had taken one man's attention for a second earlier, it would take another's later. He left it.

The hiss from the east stayed at the same pitch and volume. If anyone had opened that bus panel again, the sound would have changed. It had not. The detectors blinked red in ones and twos and went back to green. The fans stayed on manual override. The small presence of a bleach edge

in the air told him the cleaner he had smelled in this run had not moved. No one had sprinted past him without leaving a trail in his head.

He let himself look once through a return grille directly toward the control-room door. He saw a partial profile of the man posted there. Broad shoulders, head lowered, chin tucked. A cuff pulled back from a wrist that showed a blue line of ink that had never been fully removed. Wings and scrollwork that meant the kind of life Roche and he had both lived. Not the same, but adjacent. He filed that under the list of things that let him predict what the man would do next.

Callum stepped away from the grille and came back to the bend where the electrical cabinet sat. He put his fingertips under the cabinet's edge. The small pain kept him on task.

He continued east.

At the hazard door near the hose, he crouched into the plinth angle and checked the gantry. Miles hadn't shifted. Weight on the rail, set for a long hold. Holster forward of the hip, a fraction high. The near support ran four bolts; two washers showed a thin rust ring. Those two marked the strike.

The speaker grid above the mezzanine popped. "No phones. Heads down. We finish without incident if you behave."

He eased the cabinet latch and set the hose head into his palm without spilling the fold. The line felt firm with standing pressure; the brass coupling held a slight chill. He cracked the feed only a fraction and got smooth resistance, no squeal. The pattern collar rolled smooth, no grit bind. He closed it and set the head back without letting metal ring the edge.

He slid into the bend by the warm face of the electrical cabinet and settled there. The closer arm sat ready under his vest. Ahead, the bolt line sat at his angle and distance. Hiss from the east stayed steady. Grip dry. Breath timed. He held still and waited for the count that would start the run.

Chapter 9

The Second Man

He'd come back to the gallery to clear the seam before the valve run. The arm came first, jacket seam, a wedge of elbow, and then the torch cone cut into the gallery mouth and held steady on the floor line. The second man brought the pistol up with the light tight and shallow. He cleared the pinch in segments, not with a sweep, using small angles and short steps. The muzzle stayed parallel to the tray lip, then lifted a hand's width as he leaned in.

Callum had his spine on the wall, knees folded under him. Kael's pistol lay low over his thigh with his finger indexed on the guard. The door closer arm rested across his left leg, joint set to a notch that would bite a collarbone if needed. His palms were dry. He watched where the wrist met the light.

The light paused. The pistol lifted another fraction. The man's boot slid an inch on grit and stopped.

Callum took the pair.

The first shot cracked hard in the narrow run. The second followed before the echo came back. His weapon flashed once, a high white chip nicking off the pipe lip above Callum's head. Dust and cold flecks hit his face; propellant burned his nose. The pipe showed a bite where the metal had been shaved.

Heat went up his left forearm, not from flame but from one sharp cut that spread as a line under the sleeve. He felt wet press through fabric. His grip on the closer arm slipped and then he had it again. He didn't look at the arm. He looked at the hands ahead of him.

The pistol dropped and clattered on concrete, skidding into the bracket shadow. His feet folded, hips hit, shoulder struck the pipe, head snapped sideways and then settled against the tray face. No sound followed except the faint run of grit under the dropped torch as it rolled and came to rest against the hinge of the gallery mouth.

Callum held his breath and listened past the high ring in his ears. Fans ran at a thin note beyond the gallery. A detector clicked high and then went quiet. He could still hear Roche's voice in memory-count cadence, but the speakers were shut in this run.

He kept the pistol on the man's chest line and pushed his heel out to meet the fallen gun. The sole found metal. He drove the pistol away under the lip of the bracket with a short kick and then moved two paces on his knees, keeping his body behind the tray line. The closer arm dragged a smear of blood off his sleeve as he set it down and then picked it up again.

The man's face sat in the short triangle of light from the torch. The jaw hung and the tongue lay behind the teeth. There was no chest rise. A dark patch spread under the shoulder where cloth met concrete. The air near his mouth showed nothing. Callum didn't wait to see a flutter. He wasn't going to put his fingers on a carotid and let his hands slip on more blood in the tight space. A shallow breath held, then passed.

He set the door closer arm across the man's chest and used it to lever the body over enough to get both hands under his armpits. The forearm flare bit hard when the muscles loaded. He dragged once, short. Twice. A third pull got him into the dark seam beside the tray bracket where a glance wouldn't pick a body in that angle. The torch put light down along his boots and then a shoulder, but not his face. Good enough.

A high squeal pressed in his jaw more than his head. He forced a deep breath through his nose. Copper taste at the back of his mouth. He counted the pulse in his throat with a thumb and got back to steady in three beats.

He dropped the closer arm into the notch behind his belt and put his hand to the pistol. The magazine sat with weight. He pressed the base with a thumb and felt the spring stiff and high, then released it. He wasn't cycling the slide here. He accepted what the first pull might be and moved on.

He took Kael's radio from under his vest, rolled volume to a whisper until the squelch couldn't be heard beyond his mouth, and pinched the mic through cloth. He angled it toward the gallery mouth and keyed carrier for less than a breath. Residual sound, boot rubber on grit, a faint metal scrape, shot echo fading in concrete. He let it go and killed the radio. No words. Only noise for whoever counted the sounds.

The pistol went flat against his thigh while he tore his sleeve low with his teeth and left hand. The jagged cut in fabric went past the blood line, but he didn't care how it looked. He pressed the cloth to the graze and leaned his forearm against the wall to hold pressure without hands. It soaked fast and then eased. He took one strip of gaffer from his pocket, tore it once against his knee, and ran it across the sleeve to hold the folded cloth against the cut so he could keep his hand for work. The tape settled with a dull pull on hair through the fabric; that meant it would stay.

He lifted the pistol, thumbed the magazine release just enough to feel the catch, then seated it again. Palm to cold concrete to reset his own pressure. He looked back at where the man had gone still. The body lay turned slightly away with the spine against metal, the shoulder low, the legs in a shallow bend that hid the holster line. From outside, through the mouth, it wouldn't show as a body unless the torch went straight in. He left it there.

He slid on his knees toward the mouth, eyes level with the lip where the torch rested. The beam formed a weak wedge. He lifted it and killed it with a twist, then pocketed it lens-down next to Kael's torch. He didn't want a bright spot moving on the walls while he moved.

Keeping to the floor draw where air moved in through the return grilles, he passed the mouth of the gallery in three small steps, staying on the blind hinge line where two cameras overlapped so the overlap left a seam of reduced coverage. At the corridor elbow he paused with his back to the paint seam. Forearm pressed to the wall to keep the cut quiet, then he set off along the service run toward the east.

Behind him the space stayed quiet. No radio call. No name in his ear. Just the fan note and the click of a single detector two runs over.

Two steps back to the mouth. He looked once more at the body. No chest movement. Jaw slack. The shape stayed still in the angle. A throat touch would waste seconds and smear him with blood. He dragged the pistol deeper with his heel until it sat under the bracket's first lip, placed awkwardly, catch turned into metal. Even a long reach wouldn't get it clean without giving up balance.

The man's belt pouch carried spare weight. Callum worked it open with a finger and thumb, kept metal from clicking, and eased the magazine out. He didn't rack the slide on his own pistol to swap. With the spare in his palm, he tested the notch and feed geometry by eye and touch. The cut and the stop looked right. He pushed the top round down and felt the spring. Light resistance. Not full. He turned it and took a fast count on witness holes, then pressed his thumb on the top round again to read height. Half, maybe a little over. Good enough. He put it in his left cargo pocket where it would sit against the outer seam, baseplate forward.

His ears still rang. The pitch widened, then steadied. Fans came through under it and the slab echo pressed under his jaw. He rolled his shoulders carefully to keep the forearm from firing. The deltoid pulled at skin caught by fresh blood and tape. He eased a breath through his teeth

without sound and kept the movement small.

He shaded Kael's radio under his vest and brushed the volume up until a voice was barely audible. Roche: calm cadence, no fat on the words.

"Upper, status."

Silence.

"Jovan, call it."

Nothing.

Jovan, then.

He waited for the next order. It came steady.

"Miles, hold. Shifting valves." A breath. "Operator, mix steady. No sparks."

Callum rolled the volume back down to a whisper and then off. He pictured the gantry and the bolt line he had marked, the overspray tag, the small rust on two washers, the scuff at the base plate. He pictured Miles' weight on the rail and the holster set slightly high and forward.

If Roche took himself toward the valve bank, even if he didn't seat there yet, the next frames would happen at that line. The plan moved there whether anyone wanted it to or not. The hose had to work. A frontal gunfight in that space would be a coin toss and a gas risk.

He pressed the pistol's base into his belt to feel the weight and counted without numbers: the magazine he carried, now down two; the spare half-magazine from Jovan; and the unknown chamber. He locked the count in his head. He would not fire blind.

He knelt at the gallery mouth and tore another strip of gaffer. He folded it into an arrow with a tight point and stuck it ankle-high on the skirting at the corridor side. Not the same wall as the first marker, not the same placement. A person moving under instruction would see one, then the other, and follow without question when it mattered. A searcher

would miss both unless their light was at ground level and they were looking for it.

He stood into a crouch and moved off along the run, keeping to paint seams and old scuffs that marked where coverage dropped. His shoulder brushed the wall to pass as maintenance. He took two steps in each dark slice of the dome LED pulse without looking up to watch it. He knew the rhythm now by how the space felt on his skin.

The forearm throbbed once. He kept his elbow close to his side and did not adjust again.

Air stayed clearer at shin height. The mercaptan stink concentrated near the voids; down low the draw pulled air across the grilles. He held his mouth open and breathed shallow and even. He stopped once at a waist-high grille and listened. Above, wood rasped at the mezzanine benches. Someone coughed and stopped it. The guard's light ticked along the rail and went still. The speaker grid popped but words didn't carry into this run.

He moved again. The hazard stickers near the hose cabinet came up on his left. He didn't stop there yet. He pushed deeper east and took the long angle so he could see out through the high glass before he committed to the next move.

The exterior cut across his field of view through a seam of glass at the end of the service corridor. Blue strobes ramped and dropped on the concourse. Visors reflected the lights in squares. People moved in pairs, then froze, then moved again. A shield's edge glinted and went dark. A man's hand rose and pointed and then came down. Glare on the glass smeared the scene until his eyes settled and picked out shapes one by one.

A weak amplified call came through the façade and faded. It wasn't a command, just a check of how the space carried. It cut off. No follow. No one pushed noise after that; the group stayed back. The spark hazard kept them back and tools holstered.

At street level, at the vent louvres, a scrap of a leaf caught in the frame moved unevenly. Not wind. The concourse enclosure kept air movement low. The movement came then stopped, then came again. Inside-out draw through the vents. Trace gas pushed out and dispersed in a thin wash; it wouldn't show unless someone held a flame to it. Someone at the wrong place could do that without thinking. A cigarette in the wrong hand. A phone torch under someone's chin while they tried to see a text. His pace quickened, then he forced it back.

One team outside reached for a case and then put their hands at their sides when another pair made a short chopping gesture. The case went back to the ground. No one wanted to be the idiot who put an arc near the glass. He watched a shape at the edge of the group tilt a head toward the vents and keep eyes there for a long breath.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall for one breath and let weight take the line off his forearm. The ring in his ears pressed into his back teeth, then eased to a steady tone. His fingers went numb and then came back. He closed his eyes and opened them. The floor was still under him. The wall was still cold.

He turned away from the glass and back into the corridor. The hose cabinet stood where he had left it, the gasket edge making a thin dark line against red. He opened it with his fingers under the lip and eased the nozzle into his palm. The line felt firm. He cracked the feed a fraction to test and closed it. He took one step back and measured the door to the valve room from his cover.

Three paces if he took it straight. Four if he stepped left and worked the angle he wanted first. The near support's bolt line sat at a point he could hit with full pressure if he made the corner cleanly. He set his feet twice, testing for slip. His boots bit clean on the concrete.

He took the door closer arm from under his vest and set the joint into the notch he had found earlier that matched the valve wheel spokes. He checked the tape end that held the padding and pressed it flat again. He

returned the bar to his belt where his right hand would find it without thinking.

He looked down the corridor toward the sound of the hiss. The note and volume hadn't shifted since he first heard it. That steadiness meant the threat still sat where the men wanted it. The detectors above clicked with no pattern he could read. He kept his breathing fixed to his own count, not to their pulses.

Palm to cold concrete one more time. He thought of the watch strap lying dark against Leo's skin under the bench and the boy's legs tucked in tight with his knees against his chest. He thought of Mira's bent key tapping her zip when she calmed him and floated a door for a beat to make a gap for him to cross. He put his focus back on the next steps and kept his route simple.

He set the pistol under his vest at his beltline so the grip sat where his hand could find it. He laid the banner pole along his forearm to use as a standoff if he needed to make a catch at the door edge. He wrapped his left hand around the hose nozzle and felt the small pull under the gaffer at his forearm when the skin stretched. It would hold.

He took two breaths and made them even. He stayed in cover and held the line to the valves.

The gantry stood as before: Miles at the rail, weight set for a long hold. His holster sat forward of the hip, the grip canted; gloves hung from a clip at his belt and did not move. He did not look down. He had no reason to. He nudged the volume up. Roche's voice came through in his pocket. Miles didn't shift.

"Hold your angle." Roche's cadence stayed steady. "No one approaches. Operator, confirm internal."

A murmur, too low for words, came back through the concrete from the control-room side.

Callum kept his shoulders low and his head down. He measured the bolt line again, the two with the thin rust bloom, the small orange scrape on the head. The overspray mark sat steady. He put the hose head into his palm and refolded the lay so it would pull clean from the cabinet. He rolled the collar to a tight stream and closed it again.

His ear ring shifted, a small drop in pitch, then held. He flexed his left hand once and the tape cut his skin again to let him know he could still feel. He didn't let go of the nozzle to test the blood. The sleeve had stuck to the cloth. It didn't matter.

With the outside of his right hand, he touched the wall and then took it off again. He pictured the hose line's curve as it came out of the cabinet, the angle at which it would strike the bolt line, the rebound he would see off the support plate. He pictured Miles reacting to a hit that wasn't a shot and moving his weight just enough to lose posture.

The street beyond the glass showed blue again and then dimmed. No more amplified calls. A cluster held. No one ran. No one tested the doors. The louvres at the street level held their faint movement. Outside, after a short chop signal, hands came off a case and stances held; visors angled toward the vents.

Feet set on dry concrete. Nozzle lifted to the angle he'd picked; collar tight. Closer arm indexed at his belt for a clean take. A held breath to fix his line. Then he moved.

Chapter 10

Pressure

Haze at the ceiling. Mercaptan thick up there. Clearer down low where the floor grilles drew.

Callum held to the bend by the red hose cabinet and watched for small shifts through mesh and pipe gaps. The hiss from the east end held steady. Detector LEDs blinked red one at a time, then went back to green. The fans kept their low note under manual override. Mouth open to ease the dryness, he let the cold air at shin height do what it would.

A shape crossed the gap at the valve-room entrance and settled behind the stacks. Broad shoulders. Plain jacket. Chin set. The cuff lifted and showed a line of old blue ink at the wrist before the sleeve fell again. Roche slid in with clean cover, not crowding the door, not giving a straight line to anything. He checked once on the gantry and then faced in, weight even behind a valve body.

Above, Miles stayed high. Tall frame at the rail. Holster forward. Gloves clipped to a belt. No logo. No wasted motion. The gantry gave him a straight line on the door and a diagonal across the wheel set. He did not look down.

Roche spoke low into his handset first, then the PA carried two words through the space. "No sparks." The handset near the machinery clicked back to the belt. He did not repeat himself. He didn't need to.

Callum's left forearm burned under the tape where the graze sat. The cloth had stuck. He flexed his hand once to test grip and felt skin pull against adhesive, then let it go. He pressed his free palm flat to the cold cabinet edge to keep himself present. The plan stayed simple: water first,

then a shot only if he owned the angle.

He slid the banner pole down by his shin, out of the way.

He brought the cabinet door open by a finger under the lip and took the nozzle head into his left hand. The lay inside was clean. The line felt full with standing pressure. The brass coupling held a slight chill. He rolled the collar to a tight stream and cracked the feed a fraction to check resistance. Smooth. No squeal. He closed it.

Through the mesh panel he traced the near support one more time. Four bolts on the line, two with rust bloom at the washers. Base plate showed a scuff he could use for aim. Overspray on the beam marked where the factory paint had been cut by a cleaner's hand at some point. The two rust rings made the better spot. He fixed that in his head and let everything else go.

On his belt, under the vest, Kael's pistol sat where his right hand could take it with one movement. He pressed the base of the magazine. Spring was still high. He carried the count from the gallery: down two. Unknown chamber by choice. He wasn't going to cycle anything here.

He drew two breaths at his rhythm. Knee touch on floor, then heel, to test grip on concrete. He mapped Roche's cover again by sound: clothing rasp near a valve guard, one shallow breath he could only hear because he was listening for it. Miles above stayed still. When Roche spoke, he kept it quiet enough that the words had to be placed by context rather than volume.

"Hold it. Minimal shots," Roche said to his man above, not raising the tone. "No one leaves their angle."

A footfall on the gantry rail sounded and then settled. Miles shifted an inch and stopped. Not a sweep. Not a lean. Just reset pressure.

Callum looked once through the waist-high return grille to the mezzanine slice he had used for bearings all night. The top monitor glowed in the control room. A jaw line at the jamb cut past and a shoulder

blocked and unblocked a fraction of light. Down the rail the guard's light didn't move. The line of knees remained tight, a dark strap on a small wrist. He didn't lift himself higher for a better look. Leo stayed low, head below the rail. He had already marked the shape that mattered. He let it be and pressed the grille edge with his fingers to bring his focus back down here.

"Valve bank first," he said under his breath again, just air through teeth. Saying it made his body obey.

He set the nozzle in the pit of his left elbow to carry without a clack and flattened the tape edge on the door closer arm under his vest with his right thumb. He aligned the bar's joint to the notch he'd found that matched the spokes on a valve wheel. It would be later. Not now.

The hiss held steady. The fans kept their note. He made his line.

He moved. The cabinet opened on a hinge noise no one would hear over the fans. Hose lay out with a pull that fed clean from the fold. Nozzle up and collar tight. Feet set on dry concrete at the angle he'd chosen.

He opened the valve a half turn. No squeal. Water loaded the line hard. He took the recoil in his shoulder and wrist, locked the nozzle, and drove the stream at the near bolt line where the rust rings sat.

First strike went high and skated. The water cut across the plate and struck the beam. It slapped back in droplets and turned to a hang at the top edge of the guard. Wrong.

He took one step in, dropped the nozzle a hand's width, corrected his wrist. He sent the jet into the lower seam where the plate met the base and felt the impact come back through bone.

The washers rasped against the bolt heads in a sound that carried up the support. The plate scoured. The gantry shifted by a small measure as

load moved. Not much, but enough that the rail line didn't sit where it had. Water pooled under the frame; he set the next step to dry concrete to keep purchase.

Miles dropped to a knee to catch it. He kept the muzzle of his pistol inside the rail shadow, but the shift put the round of his right shoulder past the clean line. He had to reach to keep balance. That reach gave space.

Callum cut the water without shutting the feed fully, let the nozzle hang by the hose weight, and put his right hand to the pistol at his belt. He took the grip and took the edge of the doorway at the same time. The graze tugged under the tape as the wrist set.

A small tremor in his forearm steadied before the press. He held the breath to the press. He put the front sight where the cloth line curled into the hollow of Miles' shoulder and pressed once.

The shot hit. A grunt cut through the rail line. Miles' pistol spat a return shot a fraction late. It cracked off the concrete near the doorjamb and sent a jolt into a tendon in Callum's forearm through vibration alone. Dust lifted. No bright strike on metal. No sparks.

"Hold it!" Roche's voice cut hard across the machinery but stayed controlled. "Minimal shots. Hold your sector." Cloth rasped once. The gap shifted a fraction.

Callum had already moved back to the post. He lifted the nozzle again with his left hand and put the stream back on the bolt line, lower than before. The sound carried up the support into the frame. The platform moved through a few more degrees as pressure walked the metal. Bolts at the base creaked and settled. He kept the stream on until he felt the change in recoil when the line of force shifted into a softer push that meant give rather than deflection. Then he cut it again and let the nozzle dip.

Miles' arm flailed once as he tried to pull back to the high corner. The tilt worked against him. He put a hand out to catch the rail and slipped.

Callum leaned again. One round. He placed it where the upper arm met the lat and pressed a second time, clean and controlled.

Miles went over on the platform and disappeared behind the rail. His pistol clattered across the grate and bounced. A low sound came out of him from the belly and stopped. No movement followed on the gantry line.

Callum's ears rang in the close space. The pitch rose and then settled into a steady tone. He indexed his finger along the guard and pulled himself flat to the post again. He let the nozzle head hang. The hose bumped the cabinet heel once and then lay quiet. Pain pinched along his left forearm where the tape pulled sweat and hair when he moved.

Two shots added to two. Four down. He fixed that count. He didn't try to draw the top round with a thumb through the ejection port or pull the slide. He kept the unknown where it was.

"Operator," Roche said, not shouting, not whispering. "Internal steady."

A murmur came back through concrete from above the control-room side. Words didn't carry, only the shape.

Callum closed the feed and folded the hose in two loops without ringing the metal tip against the cabinet lip. He left the head on the floor with the pattern collar tight and the valve shut at the cabinet. He stayed at the post for two breaths until the water in the line stopped its small movement.

He leaned in far enough to mark what had changed. The gantry tilted a little. The guard up there was gone from the rail. A glove hung from the clip and didn't sway. The near bolts looked clean but the washers carried fresh scours. The base plate had moved a fraction against the paint. The line to the valve wheels now had no overhead cover. Miles was a non-factor; three moves to the main wheel held.

Roche still sat behind machinery. The gap he used to view the door was penny-wide. Enough to see movement, not enough to take a clean shot unless the target stood up.

No one else showed. No searchers ran past down here. The mezzanine slice stayed in the same pose. He nodded once and set his foot over the threshold.

Into the room. Low.

The air held the same stink higher up. Down at the floor his throat worked easier. He moved the way he'd taught himself again in tight rooms: knees forward, weight on the balls of his feet, hand ready against machinery edges to push without overbalancing.

Valve bodies rose at his right with fixed guards that left room for fingers and a palm on spokes. Pipework ran back to the wall and into a grid that rang with small ticks as cooling cycles changed with the air movement. He put a pump frame between himself and Roche's last position and stayed there for two breaths.

A shot pinged through a thumb-width opening and snapped concrete off the far jamb. Knuckles of grit tapped his jacket and slid to the floor. He flattened without going prone and let the edge of the valve body take the line that had just been cut through the space where his head had been.

He looked left. The main wheel sat two stacks over. Its label matched what he'd seen on the plan: line designation, arrows, stamped plate with small dents at two positions on the rim. Spokes wide enough to take the door closer arm joint. Exactly as he'd measured in air earlier with his hand. A short guard rail ran in front of it at knee height. He could cross to it in three moves: around this frame, past a pump body, then the final shift across an exposed patch at the knee rail. He pictured the taped loop

on spokes and the bar for torque. Later. When the room allowed it.

He brought the pistol closer to his chest with his right hand and let the muzzle track low until he had a reason to lift it. He didn't try to guess where Roche's eyes were; he counted distances and surface changes under his hand instead, then shifted left behind the next set of valves until he could see the edge of a boot sole through a broader gap two stacks over. If Roche moved, it would show there as a change in pressure and scrape. It didn't move.

Above, a single sound came down from the gantry that was not a footfall. A breath with weight under it. Not loud, but not quiet either. Then nothing. If Miles had a hand on anything, it didn't make noise against metal now. Callum held that without letting it change his next move. The man was a non-factor unless he made himself one.

"That was clean," Roche said. Not a shout. "Water on bolts. Didn't like the look of that."

Callum kept his body still and his breathing in rules of three. He didn't give the voice anything back.

"You won't get to that main wheel," Roche said. "Not with the room the way it is."

The words weren't bravado. They were a read. He let them sit and kept his own plan inside the feeling at his palm where it touched metal. Count the load. Count the steps. Fix the route. Don't answer.

He slid on his knees to the next frame and put his left hand against the floor to catch while his right brought the muzzle to waist height. He didn't go for a sight picture. He waited for a shoulder or a wrist to show through the gap and held two breaths. Nothing came.

He glanced at the base of the pump. The paint had been rubbed by boots. That meant whoever had held this corner before had moved through here in a rush at some point. That would be different now. Roche hadn't rushed all night. He wasn't going to start now.

The detectors above clicked once. One LED blinked red and went back to green. The note of the fans didn't change.

Callum stayed low and shifted right again, taking a new angle on Roche's probable line. He could see a thin slice of sleeve between two bodies now. The cuff rode up when a forearm lifted and settled again when the hand went back to the weapon. He didn't take the shot. The line ran too close to a guard. He wasn't going to put a round into metal here.

He rolled the pistol back against his chest and kept it there, ready to lift into an open line without a quarter-second of extra movement. He kept his own breath steady and still didn't see the face.

He swallowed dry and let his tongue settle against his teeth again. Held the wheel two stacks away in his head and didn't let that image blur.

Roche spoke one more time, still in that even way. "Used to be good men who did this. That's fair. That valve doesn't turn without me saying so."

Callum didn't speak. He moved a hand's width to the right along the base and brought his knee forward until he felt the floor seam under it. The seam would mark his next push. He kept the noise in his breath lower than the fans and waited for any sound that would mark the other man's footwork.

The hose lay behind him with water weight out of the line, the head at rest. The door closer arm sat under his vest with the taped pad flat. The taped gaffer loop he'd built hours earlier on a smaller wheel still sat ready in his head, not yet on the metal here.

The next movement would be small and would carry cost. He set his jaw and moved to find the line.

Weight on his right foot, he slid the left under so the next shift would be quiet. No extra breath. No click against metal. Hands clear of anything that might ring. The pistol stayed at chest height, muzzle a finger's width off his own leg.

A shadow filled the gap. The cuff moved and held. Air changed by a hair; that told him where the weight went. Front sight settled on the space and he held for the cue.

Grit under his left knee made the next push risky, so he slid the grains aside with his shin and fixed again. Sweat under the tape soaked in; the pain sharpened and set his pace.

Roche shifted, no tell most would catch, but the weight change was there. Shoulder moved half an inch; muzzle came to the cut before the shot could. He still held, committed to the move already chosen.

The main wheel sat two stacks over. He would not leave it open and walk back upstairs without trying. Any outcome that had him walk out later had this step in it.

He moved on the next breath.

The platform above stayed quiet. For one second he had only breath and a gap. Roche put a single round through the space where Callum's shoulder had been a heartbeat ago; it hit the pump body and threw a tiny chip that tapped his jacket and dropped. He closed on the next frame while the small echoes still rang in the metal and moved under the noise.

He set his knee behind the guard rail that fronted the main wheel and marked the slight change in the air: more mercaptan up high, easier down low. Palm on the rail, he felt smooth paint that would carry his weight without noise. He checked his count out of habit, four down, unknown chamber, spare in the left cargo; a swap would cost noise and

seconds, then slid his right foot to the seam, lifted the pistol into the shallow angle that would take anything that offered, and gave himself no space between needing to fire and firing. The bar joint would seat in the spokes; the taped loop waited in his head. Between one breath and the next, he settled into the rhythm he had used all night: check twice, move once, then hold for the sign.

Above, outside the room and beyond the glass, blue strobes washed the exterior and faded. Nothing changed inside. No one shouted from outside. The street vent louvres carried the same irregular movement he had seen earlier. The space inside stayed as it had from the start: methane up, clearer air down; metal where he put his hands; flesh where he chose to shoot.

He kept that in place and did not let himself think beyond the wheel.

He moved his knee off the seam and set his hand on cold steel again.

The next decision was there, not complicated, only hard.

Four down. Three moves to the wheel. No clean line.

Chapter 11

The Breaching Tool

Haze hung high, the stink worse in the voids above the stacks. At floor height the air cut colder across his teeth. Detectors clicked one by one and a red LED winked, then each returned to green. The fans kept their low note. The hiss at the east end held steady.

Callum stayed low against a pump frame and counted surface changes rather than gaps where a shot might live. He had slid back from the knee rail after that round through the gap, putting more steel between him and Roche's cut. The gantry still sat at an angle. A glove hung from a clip up there without movement. He closed one hand around the pistol grip and pressed the other to the floor to mark the seam through his knuckles. He kept to his own count, not to the fans.

He brought his weight forward a fraction and eased to where he could just read the gantry post. Not enough to show a shoulder. Enough to catch a fragment in the wet skim across a painted base. A boot edge showed in the gloss, shapes broken by the water track.

Alive.

He edged another hand's width and peered up past a guard lip, risking the smallest lift. The angle was poor but he caught a rise and fall where rib met jacket, shallow and irregular. A wet breath came out between teeth and caught. Then nothing.

He held that picture without moving farther. He wouldn't climb. He didn't need to. The man had gone down and stayed down. That was all he needed until the room changed. Valve first; he still had to move under Roche's angle.

On the floor, near the support base where the hose spray had scoured the paint off the washers, something dark lay close to the plinth. The pistol that had clattered and bounced. It must have come off the grate and skidded. The wedge of the catch sat canted against concrete.

He went lower and slid a boot under it without letting metal ring. He hooked it against the edge of his sole and pushed it under the first run of pipework. The pistol scraped once and disappeared behind the pipe leg where even a long reach would fail. Not for him. Not for the man above.

He moved back to the frame and let his shoulder settle against cold metal. The tape under his vest tugged the hair on his stomach where the door closer arm's padded end sat trapped between cloth and skin. Pressing the edge flat, he let the discomfort sharpen the next move instead of dull it.

He eased his left forearm in close and pressed a thumb into the taped cloth he'd used as a pad, feeling for fresh seep or heat. The sleeve clung. When he flexed his fingers the tape bit and he read the pull as a line of pain that stayed local. He could still close a fist. He could still hold aim. Good enough.

He took the retained magazine from his pocket by touch, baseplate forward, and set it in his thigh crease for a beat. With the pistol close to his chest to avoid a clack, he thumbed the release. The partial slid free into his hand without hitting the floor. He trapped it against his palm with his little finger, kept it, and brought the spare up. It seated with a small push. He did not touch the slide. He kept that unknown by choice. By feel, it still had enough weight to keep. He stored the partial in his cargo pocket baseplate forward so he could find it again by feel. Half-weight. Both placed, then move.

Looking down, he found the brushed-steel banner pole along his shin where he had left it in close. It gave length and reach. It also read as metal when it knocked anything and would cost him later if he clipped a guard. He slid it to the side with two fingers until it rested along a base where

water pooled; he let it go. The floor took it without a ring.

He held still and listened for Roche. Not for words. For cloth, for breath, for that small skin-on-metal sound that gave away impatience. Nothing. Only the air systems and the hiss remained.

He studied the nearest surfaces. A strip of stainless on a guard caught a sliver of something and then lost it when the fan throb shifted. A gauge face showed a dull oval without detail. The water in the scoured channel on the plinth gave him the best look at shapes above, but the angle died out after a meter.

He lowered his head again and set his pistol on a line that would rise straight if he needed it. He slid to the next frame, knee by knee, moving when an LED winked and the click masked his cloth. It was the same room with fewer weapons in it. The main wheel sat two stacks over behind a knee rail with clear spokes and a stamped plate with two old dents at the rim. He had measured those dents in his head earlier, the gap between them just wide enough to catch the joint of the closer arm when he committed to torque. Not now. Later.

He checked that the door leaf he had left ajar on the way in still read as a dark line rather than a bright slice. It did. He brought his attention back to the wheel. No one else moved. He kept the control end in mind as he had last seen it before he came in, jaw at the jamb, a light on knees at the rail, and stayed on the work.

Chest against cold steel, he counted his breathing in threes. With a finger set to the seam, he traced his path: across, past the pump body, cut left for the knee rail, then the wheel. He flattened his shoulders more. He kept his forearm tight to the floor where the air was cooler at shin height.

He moved.

The guard lip took his forearm weight and his knee slid on grit. He picked the grains out of the seam with his shin and set it down again without a sound. The pistol stayed close to his chest, muzzle a finger's width off his jacket. He didn't press forward to meet a shot. He waited for

the next cue, breath, cloth, a small air shift.

A breath with weight under it came down from the gantry, then stopped. He checked his earlier conclusion about Miles, took it as stable, and let it go. Roche stayed silent. Machines ticked as thin metal cooled. Detectors clicked again with no pattern he could read. He held position and timed the next move to his pulse.

Valve bank first.

He eased his weight onto his right foot and brought his left knee under him to get the smallest shift he could. He edged along the frame with his shoulder scraping fabric on steel by a hair and stopped. Sweeping the stainless strip again with his eyes, he saw nothing he could use.

He reset his grip and committed.

He needed Roche to show a line. No one showed a line without a prompt in a room like this. The scoured base around the gantry support had left a scatter of metal. Not much. A washer fragment. A short screw. A burr from the plate.

He found a nut or a bolt head no bigger than his fingernail near the plinth and pinched it between forefinger and thumb. A soft cloth tick against casing came from the far slit. He slid it into his palm, leaned to the edge of the frame and flicked it outward across a gap where the sound would read as movement. It ticked against two surfaces and settled.

A shot came back sharp and fast. It hit a panel and shaved a crescent off the edge. Grit and a sliver of paint came down on his sleeve and bounced to the floor. No bright flash. No fire. The warning on the speakers earlier still held both in check: no sparks.

He brought the muzzle up into the line of the sound and pressed one back on instinct and training, not anger. His round thudded into casing.

The dent showed he had been off by a hand's breadth. The sound went along the steel and faded.

Silence again.

He breathed once and slid to a new notch against the base. Direction cues diffused in steel and sheet gaps. The thin gaps between stacks made every small displacement hard to place.

There. A change he couldn't see. Weight moved low in the space. Not a step. A slow take and a slow set. Roche had shifted along his line to a second slit.

Callum eased right and let his eye find the knee rail by the wheel he'd set as objective. He kept it high in his mind and didn't let Roche pull him off it for a shot he didn't own. If Roche was where the weight said he was, Callum wouldn't see him until the muzzle was already in the cut.

The next cue was not sound. It was pressure. The available gap narrowed to a slit and a held breath. The breath stopped. The muzzle was already in the cut.

The shot hit him hard.

It punched through the thin sheet edge beside his cover and took his right shoulder where the deltoid met the joint, a hand's width back from the collar. The impact spun him half around. His teeth came together and he kept the noise in his mouth. He drove the pistol hand down to keep the muzzle from slewing and let his left forearm catch the floor. The muzzle dipped; he pinned it to his ribs and reset. The pain went white and then red and then to a stable heat that radiated down his arm. He felt wet where the jacket met skin. He pressed his right upper arm in toward his body and the pain forked and then settled to a beat he could ride.

He slid back behind the pump body without dragging the muzzle on metal. His shoulder knocked a valve guard and he felt the transfer of force in the plate rather than heard it. He put his right hand flat against his chest for a second to test what still worked. The joint moved. The arm

lifted if he forced it. Grip on the pistol stayed live when he told it to close. Functional.

He ran his left hand along his right sleeve and found the wet line. He pinned the cloth with his thumb to create a momentary pad. There was no time to tape anything. It would stick to blood and sweat and then tear. He needed the hand.

Spine set against the frame, he let the next breath climb up to where it would steady his sight. He let his vision widen by an inch and ordered the positions: the drooped edge where the panel had been hit, the slit where Roche had just taken his shot, the small distance between them where metal gave way to air. He shifted to the pad of the trigger to keep a tremor from dragging the shot. When blood tracked into his palm he wiped it once on his trouser seam and reset the grip. He set his upper arm against his ribs and biased recoil left with stance.

He edged his muzzle toward a deformed edge near the droop. If he put one long that way, he wouldn't hit metal first. He did the maths from the dent and the chip and the time between muzzle in the gap and contact. He would err to the safe side with his aim.

He kept the gun close, moved his elbow a fraction, and let the front sight settle on a place that existed half in reality and half in his head. Then he waited for a breath. Not his. The other man's. He had caught that rhythm once already. He let the fans' note fall away long enough to find it again.

A breath came. It was small but it belonged to a human chest and not a vent. He squeezed.

The round took metal at the edge and then went through air where he had wanted it. He didn't hear an impact he could take to mean flesh. He heard a body panel vibrate and a small change in the sound off the other man's cover.

He stayed down and did not shoot again. Two when prompted, no chaser. Going outside that rule would expose angles he couldn't solve.

Two breaths. Then the rail.

Chapter 12

Muzzle Flash

Same slit. Same angle. Two breaths. He held the line before he moved. He kept the muzzle low and the sight line tight. The deformed sheet edge ahead of him showed where the last round had shaved metal. The slit to Roche's right had narrowed. The breath on the other side was human and small, pulled in through teeth and held too long.

He put his upper arm against his ribs and let the pain in his shoulder settle into a steady line under the skin. The pistol stayed close, front sight set on a space that wasn't fully visible, only credible from what the metal revealed. Two shots. Through the thin. No chaser unless he owned it.

He took the cue from a fan click and let the noise mask the first break. The trigger moved under his finger without a hitch. The pistol bucked into the grip and leaned the wound hard. He didn't let it drag. He sent the second round before the shifted air in the gap settled.

A return shot came in the same breath. The strike scraped along his right side where rib met jacket seam and burned across the skin. Fabric split. Heat and wet opened along a line as wide as his little finger. Shallow. It didn't blow through. He caught his teeth and held the noise in his mouth and stayed down.

One of his rounds had hit something that wasn't casing. The sound didn't travel along steel. It stopped in a body. A grunt came back. A weight hit the machinery and slid. A weapon knocked once and then held.

He didn't rise into the angle. He moved in rules he trusted. Knees forward. Hand to floor. Two short shifts along the base to change his relationship with the slit, left of the dented sheet by a hand's width. He

looked for the tell. A wrist. A barrel. A shoulder trying to buy a line. Nothing clean. Only an elbow shape pressed to the casing and the brief show of knuckles flattening and then slipping.

Counting in threes, he moved on the first. Using the knee rail, he broke the low angle that had cost him blood and slid left a half span so any muzzle brought to the cut wouldn't find him where he had been. He lifted the pistol to where centre mass would live if a chest came up from the slump.

The pistol in Roche's hand twitched. He couldn't see the eyes. He saw the attempt: forearm dragging a weapon up off a thigh to bring a front sight on line. Slow. Forearm stalled; fingers didn't close. Muscles didn't go.

Callum stepped the half pace offline he had set in his head and pressed one. No pause to read any face. No second guess. The round went in on the line between sternum and gut. The round struck deep. The body made a sound that wasn't a word and then lost structure again.

He stayed on the gun. He watched the weapon in Roche's hand. Fingers lost pressure in stages until the pistol lay in the loose hinge where thumb met palm. He held for the long breath he could afford. The hand gave up the last of it. The pistol slipped. It bumped a bracket, turned twice, and stopped with the catch canted against concrete. No lift at the chest in the gap. No rise at the throat. He reset his grip and moved the muzzle to the next cut.

He didn't go for it with his hand. He kept the muzzle where it needed to be and toe-pushed Roche's pistol under the low pipe run until it lodged beyond the leg. No clean reach for anyone on either side.

Air shifted up high. Not from movement. From the east end where the bleed sat. The hiss still ran steady. Detectors clicked in ones and twos and each red wink went back to green. The fans held their thin note and didn't climb yet. The stink stayed high. Down here it was bearable if he kept his mouth open and his face out of the hot line near the panel slits.

He listened above. The glove still hung on a clip at the gantry rail. Fabric scuffed the grate once and stopped. The wet breath he had caught before didn't come again. He dared one glance at the wet skim along the painted base under the gantry post. No new shapes broke it. The boot edge he had used as a gauge earlier didn't shift.

He checked the pain along his side with a quick hand. The cut followed the line of the rib and had opened only the top layer. No deep burn. The blood that came into his palm was shallow and glossy. The big wound in his right shoulder pulsed under it in a separate rhythm that could take his grip if he let it. He didn't let it. He pressed his upper arm in until the pain settled.

He slid the pistol back into his chest line and let his eyes travel to the two dents on the main wheel's rim he had measured in the air with his hand earlier tonight. Spoke spacing sat under his fingers. The joint of the door closer arm would seat into that rim. A tape loop he'd build would let his weight carry the last quarter turn. Water pooled on the floor under the near support where the hose had done its job. The scoured washers on the gantry base still showed fresh metal where paint had gone. The platform above held to the slight tilt he'd given it.

Valve first.

He kept to low air and moved his knees forward. The knee rail that fronted the wheel took his palm without squeal. A shoulder brushed the guard to fix his position by feel rather than sight. He pivoted at the hips and kept the muzzle where it needed to be while his eyes wrote the path across the floor, frame, pump body, knee rail. He counted surface changes instead of time. He had enough.

He crossed the last strip of open floor fast and quiet. No shot came. No muzzle reached through. A breath he didn't own whispered through a gap behind him and then ended. He held on that and didn't give it a second look. He had done enough in that part of the room.

He brought his pistol hand down and tucked the weapon under his vest at his beltline where it had lived since he took it from Kael. Cloth trapped the grip against his beltline, a poor draw but a clean carry. It didn't matter. He needed both hands now. He put his left palm on the main wheel and felt cold cast under the tan of old paint. It had a rough bite to it that would take skin if he slipped at the wrong moment.

Pain came before he turned anything. It pulsed at the joint and sent a line of hurt into his chest when he let his right hand join the wheel. He didn't yank. He set his feet, took up the play against the shaft and leaned until the wheel gave the first of what it would give; dried paint cracked at the rim. It moved. Not much. Enough to show it would move more if he worked on it with patience and force.

He needed the loop. He didn't want to fight the wheel with skin and muscle alone. He dropped his left hand to his pocket and stripped a length of gaffer by feel. The tape came away with a dull rip that didn't carry. He made a strap in the air, pressed the sticky back on itself and threaded it through the spokes. He tightened the loop until it sat snug across his palm and didn't slip on paint.

Feet set again, he leaned his weight into the loop while his right hand held a spoke to keep the wheel from jumping back when he took breath. Pain went deep in his shoulder. His hand flared and shook and then steadied while the wheel moved one notch at a time.

On the speakers, nothing like words came. A keyed mic somewhere up at the control room popped twice. A short chime came through the grid and repeated once more. Then the channel went dead again. No speech. It didn't change his work. It set his pace. He kept the loop tight.

He slid the door closer arm out from under his vest with his right hand. The padded end scraped his skin and took a few hairs with it. He kept his hands steady. He rotated the joint to the notch that matched what he'd felt in the dent. He tested the fit against a spoke and found it clean. No play. No ring. Arrow sat under his thumbnail.

He seated the joint into the rim between the two small dents, fed the tape loop over the bar, and let his weight come through legs, hips, and back instead of through the shoulder alone. The wheel moved. It resisted. It moved again. Paint powder came off under the tape. The hiss at the east end didn't change for a long breath. Then it dropped a fraction hardly bigger than a shrug. It was enough.

He kept pressure through the bar and used his left hand to gather another half turn on the loop. Every time he moved he had to reset the pain into its lane. He didn't want to look at his shoulder. He didn't need to. He could see what he needed to see at the floor: a darker drip pattern that wasn't there when he started, spreading irregularly under his right elbow. It didn't change what the wheel required from him.

He worked the bar and loop again. The wheel advanced in small increments; the shaft tugged back. He pinned it and held. The hiss changed without a pause this time. It lost edge. It lowered until it sounded only in the corners of the room instead of across the space. He felt air move differently across his teeth, colder now, less tainted.

He kept going. He didn't put the tool down. He didn't test a seal with his ear or waste a hand on a panel. He closed until the wheel wouldn't go any farther. At the stop the shaft kicked once and then settled against the end of travel. He stayed with it for the length of one long breath and part of a second, making sure it wouldn't creep.

The hiss thinned to a whisper and then stopped. Only machine noise remained; the bleed was gone. Detector clicks came closer together at first and then stretched out. High-mounted LEDs held green for longer and the single red wink didn't show in the first count he gave it. He didn't trust the count. He trusted the shift in the fans.

The extraction note that had been pinned low climbed. It didn't roar. It didn't rush. It rose just enough to change the way breath left his mouth. A new vibration ran through the soles of his boots, a floor-borne hum; a damper clanked once and new air was pulled across the ceiling voids.

Someone at the panel had adjusted, or a preset had reasserted itself once the line pressure came back into range. It didn't matter which. It held where he needed it.

Both hands on the wheel, he eased off a fraction to see if it would creep. It didn't. Fingers came off the spoke; it stayed where he'd put it. A second test with the loop. No movement. He let the bar go and the wheel held.

He pulled the tape loop from the spokes and stuck the free end to the rim so it wouldn't drop and read as litter while he moved. He slid the bar back under his vest and pressed the padded end against his skin. It tugged again. He let it.

He looked at his shoulder because he had to. The entry through his jacket sleeve under the shoulder line had left a grey-black ring around the hole where paint grit and powder residue had settled in the fabric. Blood made a run down the inside of the sleeve and came out at the seam where the stitch had split under the torque. The line along his ribs from the graze had smeared through his shirt and caught on the waistband. He pressed the heel of his left hand into the worst of it and the pain went sharp and then settled where he could carry it.

Behind him, something small hit the gantry grate and slid. Not a weapon. A glove. The one that had hung from the clip let go and moved until friction took it. He listened for breath from up there; no breath carried through the metal. He still didn't put a foot on the ladder. Not yet. He checked the floor for Roche again though he didn't need to. The shape at the base of the machinery hadn't changed. Roche's pistol was still under the pipe leg. The work now was air.

From above along the mezzanine, a child's voice came quick and thin and was hushed at once. Breath left him once; then he set his feet. A bench rasped against the rail.

Chapter 13

Zero

The wheel didn't creep. He tested it once more with a thumb and the edge of his hand and felt nothing shift under the skin of paint and cold cast. He slid the door closer arm back under his vest. The padded end pulled hair again. He left the tape loop stuck to the rim, a quick handhold if anyone tried to undo his work.

He raised his head a fraction and took in the room without lifting into bad air. No hiss now. Fans produced a deeper note than before. Detectors showed green longer. The pooled water along the plinth lay without a ripple.

He let his right arm hang to ease the joint, then brought his hand to his beltline and worked Kael's pistol free from under his vest. The grip was slick. He wiped it on his trouser seam and kept the muzzle low, parallel to the floor. He scanned the floor around the wheel and the nearby frames: no new cable, no taped blocks, no unfamiliar boxes wedged in shadows. He opened and closed his mouth once, tasting oil and metal and old dust without the mercaptan burn.

He took three slow knee-steps left and leaned his weight into a pump frame to settle the shoulder. Pain held along one edge of the joint and stayed level. He followed visible runs of conduit and pipe, eyes moving from fastener to fastener, from base plate to guard lip. Any false work would show as wrong paint, fresh tape, a cable tie in a place it didn't belong. He saw none of that. Only what had been here when the night started.

He tracked a line of fresh scours along the gantry support where the hose had done its work. The washers had clean rings now instead of

bloom. Above, the platform stayed at an angle. A glove that had slid after he shut the valve rested against a grate rib. The boot edge he had used as a gauge still marked the same point.

He swept the area where Roche's pistol had been toe-pushed. The weapon remained under the pipe leg where he had lodged it. No new reach marks. No shoe scrape. Roche's body lay with the face into metal and blood draining along a base channel. No rise at the ribs. No lift at the throat.

He adjusted his stance and drew a breath shallow enough to carry air near the floor. One more sweep for anything rigged, panel screws out of place, a hinge pinned with tape, a cheap timer stuck to a skin. He found nothing new. That left one live piece above him.

He set the pistol tight to his chest and dragged his gaze up without giving the gantry a full line on his face. He didn't need to see all of Miles. He watched the edges of things instead. The wet skim under the post. The shadow under the rail. The shape that wasn't the glove.

"Miles," he said. Voice low. Flat. "You still with me."

A breath came back, ragged and hard to place. The tilt hid the man's angles. Blood ran along the grate line and dripped at a steady rate. One hand flexed and then stopped.

"I'm here," Miles said. The words came tight. "Shoulder's bad."

Callum's eyes went back to the floor. The pistol Miles had lost when the gantry listed was still out of reach where Callum had put it, deep under pipework behind a leg. He could have left it there and walked, but men did strange things with last chances. Better to make that last chance smaller.

"Listen," Callum said. "You move to reach anything and I end it. Or you sit still and breathe. Those are your lines."

No bravado came back. Just the dry rasp of a throat and a small shift of weight that failed to gain anything.

“Fine,” Miles said. “Not moving.”

Callum kept the pistol close and stepped to the edge of the doorway he had left a dark line. He picked up the brushed-steel banner pole from where he had laid it along the base. It came up clean with no ring. He slid a hand to a zip tie cuff at his belt. Thick white plastic. Molded catch. He kept another behind it in case the first didn't sit.

He didn't climb. He went to the post under the platform, found a slot in the grate where the rail ran above, and fed the cuff with a finger pressed to the end so it wouldn't fall free. He used the pole as a guide, lifting the cuff on the pole's tip until the loop sat around the rail upright. He eased it over by feel. The catch turned in the right direction. He kept the tail down where his hands could work it. The tail slid off the pole tip; he re-fed it, wrist turning to keep the plastic from tapping steel.

“Miles. Hands through the gaps. Rail's in that loop. Bring your wrists together and hold them there. Do it slow.”

A breath in. A long pause. The man did the maths on his own. No crew voice. No leader. A shoulder that wouldn't take weight. A pistol two meters away and blocked.

“Yeah,” Miles said. “Alright.” His hands appeared in the grate spaces one at a time, awkward with the tilt. He found the loop by touch and worked his wrists into it against the rail upright. “Here.”

“Turn them so the bones stack. Palms in.”

He listened to a small rustle where sleeve met grate. Miles got there. Callum hooked the tail with the pole's tip, trapped it with the crook of his wrist and fed it through the catch. He pulled until the cuff took. The plastic creaked. Miles hissed once and then set his jaw. The pull woke his shoulder; he kept the breath in until it passed. Callum gave the tail a final hard draw and left it. He took the second cuff and repeated the feed around a lower run of the rail so the hands wouldn't slip. He cinched that one too and left the tails long so they would be harder to undo later without tools.

“Done,” Callum said. “Stay against the rail. If you try to stand you’ll peel skin.”

Miles let out a long breath. “Copy.” He wasn’t a talker even flat on a slope. He knew how to behave when he’d lost.

Callum didn’t go soft around it. He moved back to the floor, slid the pole into the crook of his elbow with the pistol still close inboard, and listened for anything new in the space. Nothing. Fans lifted air. Detectors clicked wide apart. The relay hum on the cabinet near the corridor bend sounded the same as it had before, a steady single pitch without spikes.

He crouched beside the main wheel one last time and pressed a knuckle to the stamped plate next to the spoke. Cold. Solid. He tugged the rim a fraction against the stop. No motion. He glanced to a smaller wheel on the same line. On the smaller wheel, the pointer sat hard against its stop. The paint where the pointer met the mark had a tiny chip nicked out of it from long use. Nothing in either picture looked loose.

He shaped his lips around air while the copper taste receded. The shoulder throb sat just behind the joint, a steady pressure that climbed when he let the arm move too far from his ribs. Manageable if he moved clean. Costly if he didn’t.

He slid the pistol back under his vest, grip trapped against his beltline, and touched the radio under his clothing. He shaded the LED and rolled the volume up a notch. No carrier. He pressed the push-to-talk and kept it short.

“Internal,” he said, voice flat. “Gas is choked. Roche is down.”

He released. The radio stayed dead. No return. No challenge. He waited two breaths and keyed again.

“Repeat. Gas is choked. Roche is down.”

Silence. The carrier didn’t even burp. Either they had gone, or the ones left knew the line that kept them alive now didn’t run through this handset.

He let the radio hand fall to his thigh and moved back toward the door he had left on its wedge. The hose coils sat where he had put them. Nozzle on the floor, pattern collar tight. He checked the cabinet valve, felt the handle. Shut. Clean. He closed the steel door on the cabinet until the gasket met frame and left it just short of the latch to avoid a click.

He turned in a slow half circle and fixed images he might need later: the clean rings on the washers at the gantry base; the glove on the grate rib; the tape loop on the main wheel; the pistol lodged under a pipe leg; the dead weight behind the casing; the man tied to the rail above. Check twice. Move once.

He went through the valve-room door into the service run, eased the leaf closed against the taped wedge so it wouldn't seat. The corridor air read colder on his teeth than the room he had left. Less stink. More oil. The fans' note was steadier here.

He pressed the heel of his hand into his right shoulder until he found a point he could carry, then shook his fingers once to clear numbness. He pulled the hem of his vest away from the wound line where the fabric was sticking and let it fall back so the pistol grip sat where he could find it without looking. He put his left palm against the corridor wall and let the cold into it.

He made himself still long enough to catch any other movement coming his way here. No footfalls. No carrier pops. No metal ticks beyond the normal run of machines. No feet under frames. No movement on the run.

A pace off the wall beneath a dome's centerline, he moved, as before.

At the stair door he pressed the bar. The latch slid without scrape and the hinge gave a single knock. Cooler air moved across his face.

The climb back up increased the pain in his shoulder with each flight. It did not ease. He kept his left hand on the rail to take most of the work and kept his right arm close to his ribs to stop the joint sliding around. Any reach past the midline spiked the joint. Every few steps he wiped his palm on his trousers so blood wouldn't slick the rail and send him down in a stupid way after everything else, and the ring from earlier shots stayed with him.

The taped wedge under the utility door he had adjusted earlier still held the latch off the strike. The door rested against the wedge without locking. The tape edge he had flattened under his thumb sat flat. No peel. The door closer he had slowed with the hex key eased the leaf shut without slap. He nodded once and kept moving.

The first ankle-high arrow he had folded from gaffer tape remained at the skirting on the left. The corner of one fold had lifted slightly at an edge where air moved, but the shape still read as an arrow pointing the right way. He let it be. The second arrow he had set near the maintenance gallery mouth sat farther in, on the opposite wall; it, too, held its shape and placement.

His ribs ached where the shallow graze ran under his shirt. Every time he pulled for a bigger breath it caught and then eased. He kept to small draws and moved air across his teeth.

The corridor changed light a fraction as a strip stepped up and down at some distance. He paused and listened. No footsteps came with it. The motion sensor could have been tripped by air movement or a drift of heat from a door being held elsewhere, or by nothing he could name. He watched for a second beyond what he would in a cleaner hour, then took his next step anyway. No fix came from stopping in a line that had been safe all night.

At the tight corner by the electrical cabinet with the steady hum, he slid his palm across the warm face to mark the bend and listened. The hum stayed in one note. No change. With the cabinet's hum at his back,

he headed for the stair core that led up to the mezzanine and the control-room corner.

On the first landing, the old mint paint had been overcoated to grey-green months ago; the different sheen still caught light at a different rate. Dust tracked where men cut corners on that landing when tired. He took the center to avoid noise, remembering his own count from earlier: twelve to the first landing; twelve again; then eleven. He never relied on numbers alone, but his feet found them without thought now.

On the rise to the second landing he heard a brittle crack carry through the structure. Not near him. Not above the valve end. Out toward the façade. Glass, not a shot. Controlled. The kind of crack that came when someone taped a pane and then took a corner out with the right tool. He pictured visors and caution and a man with a gloved hand steadying a frame. They had waited while methane pooled in the high voids. Now the air inside had changed and the risk outside had shifted enough for them to start making a door somewhere far from the east end.

He kept climbing. The stairwell smelled of paint, old cleaner, and a faint trace of the thing he had taken away downstairs. He wanted water and couldn't have it yet. He wanted his right arm to stay where he put it. He pressed his upper arm tighter into his ribs and kept it there.

He passed a return grille at waist height and slid two fingers along the top slat as he had done all night without thinking about it, a habit that also served as a check. Cold at the slats meant draw to the duct. Draw meant the system was doing what it was supposed to do now. He took that with him for the next flight.

At the corridor mouth that led to the staff room, the bindings were still in place. Two thick white cuffs through opposing handles, additional cable ties choked tight to a stanchion, tails trimmed clean. He rubbed a fingertip over a plastic curl on the floor where someone had cut one of the tails earlier in the night. Whoever had set that had known to make it awkward to undo without a blade. He had no blade. The flathead in his

pouch would get through eventually and make noise he didn't need. Not yet. Later.

"Still tied," he said under his breath. No one to hear it. Saying it kept the check clear.

He went on, counting only surface changes under his boots: smooth tile edge, paint seam, the grate at a drain, then concrete again. The sound under his feet changed when the slab had more mass under it. He used that change to pick where to put weight so it stayed quiet.

The speaker grilles stayed silent; no clicks, no chime. In the silence, each brush of a shoe and each short breath sounded off the hard surfaces. He placed people by that sound.

He stopped once where a door leaf he had set ajar earlier still read as a dark line and put his ear to the gap. No new movement. He eased his shoulder back from the jamb, letting the pain flatten out to something he could keep working with.

He shifted the pistol at his belt with his left wrist to stop the grip from rubbing the wound, then left it alone. Hands clear. From straight on, no print showed under the vest. No black shape to set people off when he came back into their world.

The last half flight told on him more than it should have, and not just from the shoulder. The forearm he had torn earlier started to cramp under the tape. He flexed fingers to push blood back in and to keep grip when he would need it for something that mattered more than a rail.

He set his left palm on the rail where the paint was scuffed to metal from a hundred other hands. He stepped up the last three in a measured way and stood at the mezzanine access door he had looked at so often from behind grilles that he knew every mark on it. He filled his chest with cold air carefully so the rib cut wouldn't flare, then let it out slow. Once. Enough.

He put one hand to the handle, kept his right arm tight to his body, and pressed the leaf open into the light.

The mezzanine wasn't the same shape as it had been when he last saw it from below. People had shifted inside the limits they had been given. Knees moved closer to standing. No voice drove them now. A torch at the rail lay out of a hand. The control-room monitor still threw its pale glow. An arm lay wrong near the control-room jamb. Wood at a bench scraped as someone adjusted for blood that had returned to their legs. A small wrist with a cheap watch sat in the dark line under the bench crossbar where he had counted it in his head all night, fingers flat to the floor. He could have picked that strap out of a thousand, but he didn't take his eyes there yet. No sidearm near the wrist.

He stepped through, shoulders low, hands open, the pistol grip unseen under cloth. He put his back to a column where a camera cone wouldn't detect movement and set people off and let the new air from above touch his face.

"Don't run," he said in a voice set for rooms like this. "Don't stand yet. Keep it slow. Keep heads down for now. It's better, not perfect." He looked toward the control-room door once. The arm hadn't moved. The glass panel still had the tape that had been slapped across it hours ago to safe the jagged edge.

A woman pulled in a long breath and then checked it. Someone whispered a name that wasn't his. Someone else said "thank you" to nobody in particular. None of it mattered as much as the small space under a bench where denim met metal, where trainers had been tucked in, where he had seen a strap with a dinosaur patch held tight against a thigh when the torch had moved along the rail. He didn't let himself look there yet. Work first. Then his son.

He angled his head enough to register the mezzanine guard position without fixing on faces. The short-barrel pistol with a square slide that had watched the line through the night did not point at anyone now. The

hand that had carried it wasn't on it. In the glow from the monitor at the control room he thought he saw an arm lying wrong for purpose. He did not move to that arm until he had the space under control and made sure no other weapon could rise before he did.

He let air go out of him until the shoulder's tightness settled back to a level it held when he gave it the right angles. He made his wrists visible. He moved the way you did when the next step decided whether people panicked or didn't.

"Stay with me," he said. "We're going to make this safer. Not rush. Not shout. Not yet."

He kept his eyes on the corner of the bench where a curl of tape had lost its stick and lifted from the wood. He had something more important to look at. Not yet. Another breath. One more step to ease the tension that had held them for hours.

A tempered pane out beyond the glass façade cracked in a controlled way again, far enough away that no one flinched here. Responders outside were still doing their work. He didn't look at them. Their line didn't run through him. His belonged here.

Half a step to his left took him around the column's edge so he could see down the rail and put his shoulder where it wouldn't scrape. The joint bit and then let go.

"Alright," he said, and his voice changed without getting louder. "Alright."

He lifted his chin the smallest amount and let his eyes drop to the space under the bench.

The watch strap sat where he knew it would sit. The small hand near it was open and steady. The boy's hair had fallen into his eyes the way it always did. The head was turned so one ear faced out. In the dim he could see the place on the ear where a scab had been the week before from a playground fall. He knew the scale of that head. He knew the amount of

breath that chest could hold.

His hands stayed open and steady. His stance held.

“Leo,” he said.

A small face turned. Eyes found him. He didn’t bring the pistol out. He didn’t take his hands off the angles that would keep the next seconds clean. He didn’t step forward. Not yet. He kept the space calm by not taking it too fast.

“Stay there,” he said. “I’ve got you.”

He kept his hands open and low and let his breaths come slow. He hadn’t finished. Not while people were still in a place where one bad sound could break them. He gave the shoulder a small roll to seat the pain where it could sit.

He stepped further into the mezzanine and felt solid floor under his boots. The arrow marks below remained clear. The cuffs and ties at the staff corridor stayed in place. Outside, responders worked their side. For now he held this one.

“Listen,” he said to the nearest pair of eyes. “He’s safe. You’re safe. No one lights anything. No phones. Not yet. We go steady.”

Detectors stayed green. The fans kept their deeper note. He didn’t hurry it. He just stood where he needed to stand while his son watched him the way he always did, and the air turned cold and clean across his teeth.

Chapter 14

Father

A hard series of taps came from beyond the glass, spaced and exact, then a dull strike. Tape had gone down earlier; now the pane released along those cuts and the top section came free in two pieces. Edges were lifted out and handed off. Fragments dropped into a bundled blanket, not onto the floor. A team in dark kit came through single file and formed the shape they always formed when they took the floor without bumping panic.

They stayed away from the east end. Away from the hiss that had been there and the risk that remained in everyone's head. Two in front, one high with a shield, one rear at an angle. No shouted warnings. Just short words and hand signals that read the same in any language: hold, eyes on, move.

Callum stepped farther into the open. Both hands up and open. He kept his shoulders low so the joint would not jump. He set his boots where the polished concrete scuffed from earlier sitting gave grip.

"Friendly," he said. "Staff. Hands only." He kept his chin level and showed the empty palms again before he risked any kind of point. He touched his jaw with knuckles and lifted it the smallest amount toward the bench line where the small wrist and the watch strap lay in the shadow line.

From below, distant machine noise and the steady fan note made other sounds hard to pick out. The tight geometry at the control-room end remained the same. No one on the mezzanine could see through the machinery to the valve room. No one here could see the shape facedown behind the casing. The fight at the east end had happened out of this

sightline and it stayed that way.

The point man at the new opening sighted on Callum and held him there. He was sized for this kind of work, visor up enough to show a jaw set to neutral. The muzzle didn't waver.

"Pistol under my vest," Callum said. "Right hand. I'll place it and step back. Slow."

Elbows close. Wrist outside his waistband so the hand stayed visible. He lifted the hem enough to show the grip without a flash. He hooked two fingers on the rear of the slide to keep the trigger hand open, eased it free, muzzle down, and set it on concrete. He stepped back two shoe-lengths, hands up.

"He's staff," Mira said, voice steady, breath still too fast. The bent key on her lanyard showed when she lifted her hand to make herself bigger without standing.

The point shifted his stance a fraction and set weight into his back foot; his index finger stayed on the frame, but the muzzle stayed trained. A second voice from the wedge said, quiet and in work tone, "No movement on upper. Mezz secure. Lower east unknown."

Callum kept his hands up and his gaze at the officer's jawline, not the weapon. "Permission to move to the boy," he said. "Under the bench. Straight line. No hands."

Two breaths. Then a nod. Small and enough.

He went in a straight line he could defend under any review. He kept to the lane he had checked with his eyes moments before, not near phones or metal. He crouched onto one knee at the bench and the joint jarred the way it always did when he forced it. He eased his forearm across his knee to spread the load, then lifted his hands and opened them so Leo wouldn't mistake the posture for work.

"Hey," he said. "Stay steady."

Leo's eyes flicked to the pistol on the floor and then to the wet line down the outside of his father's sleeve. He didn't ask about the blood. He looked at the watch on his wrist, then back to Callum's face.

"You stayed low," Callum said. "Good lad."

He made space with his arms and Leo slid from under the crossbar and stepped into him without looking at the officers. The boy's weight came light first and then full as he gave it. Callum put his left arm around him and let the right sit still, pressed to ribs so it wouldn't slip. He didn't say anything more. The only other sound at that height was a woman taking a single long breath and releasing it halfway.

One of the officers moved to the abandoned pistol, touched it with the toe of a boot to turn the slide away, then kicked the weapon to a clear patch. Another covered the control-room door and the arm that lay wrong by the jamb.

"Heads down," the rear man said to the group nearest the rail, not loud. "Stay where you are for the minute."

Callum kept his face next to Leo's hair and looked past the boy to what mattered next. Ignition risk was lower now, but he kept the same rule. He watched for hands moving where they shouldn't and for anyone who might stand too fast and pull others with them. The earlier lines that had held them in were still there on the floor. He had told them not to rush and they hadn't.

Air on his teeth was cold and clean. High-mounted LEDs above the bays stayed green longer when they blinked at all. The fan note stayed deeper. The hiss at the east end didn't come back.

He didn't go to the control-room jamb yet. That would be work for someone else with safer hands and a different job. He kept his own hands where they needed to be: steady and easy for a child to read.

The wedge spread along the mezzanine in short segments. No one ran. A pair peeled off to the stairs and took a look down toward the lower level, using the inside of the rail for cover so if anything came up they would meet it with angle and not panic. Two more worked along the benches with quiet words and open hands, asking for phones to stay down and to move in small groups.

“We’ll come to you,” a woman in a green jacket said to the far end where the teenager had earlier lost his breath. “Stay seated until we steer you. Then up slow. Small steps. No pushing. Hands on the bench in front. Good.”

Callum eased back to a sit on the floor with his back to the bench leg. Leo settled against his side under his left arm the way he had done when he was smaller on cold mornings after a bad dream. A medic dropped to a knee next to them and opened a simple pack. No fuss. The man looked for permission with one quick glance.

“Pressure only,” Callum said.

The medic nodded and used a clean dressing over the soaked patch and tape to tighten it. His hands were quick and firm and didn’t dig. He offered a fold of foil and Callum took it and tucked it around Leo first, then over his own thigh. The medic indicated a low stretcher waiting a few meters away.

“No,” Callum said. “I’m upright or bench height. He stays with me.”

“We’ll be back,” the medic said, and meant it as information not a fight.

Mira reached them as the medic rose, touched the uninjured side of his shoulder with two fingers, then snatched her hand back when she felt the heat under the fabric on the other side. Her eyes flicked to the staff corridor mouth and the tied handles.

“Still tied,” she said.

Callum nodded to the utility door he had slowed and wedged earlier. "Closer's slowed, 3 mm hex on the adjuster," he said. "Latch sits off the strike. Wedge's under the hinge side. Two arrows. One near the gallery mouth. Ankle height. Left wall first, then right. Follow the arrows. Make a lane, not a line."

She took that in, then looked down at Leo and the foil. She leaned down so her face was even with his.

"Told you, didn't I," she said. "He's here."

Leo swallowed and nodded. The foil crinkled. He kept his hand on the watch strap and held it still.

"Are they gone?" he asked, barely loud enough.

"It's done for now," Callum said. No detail. No story. Just what Leo needed.

A uniform with a notebook stepped in and caught Callum's eye.

"Name, please," he said.

"Callum Haines. Night cleaner."

"You came from where?"

"One deceased in the valve room," Callum said. He indicated the corridor with his chin. "South run to east end. Relay box dogleg, then valve room. Hose cabinet by the hazard stickers. Main wheel two stacks in. You'll find a tape loop on it. Two pistols kicked under low pipework, one under a bracket in a gallery. Nothing wired that I saw after I pulled control at the relay. There's a bag with an igniter at Bay Five. Kept away from the mezz. Jamb at control room still has an arm down."

The man wrote fast. "We'll walk that when safe. Don't move until you're told. Anything else live in there?"

"Negative," Callum said.

The officer's eyes moved once at the mention of the relay and then went back to neutral. He nodded and moved on with his list.

Messages moved along the wedge efficiently, without drama. A radio angled low carried the basics: "Valve seated. Extraction steady. Detectors holding green." A few shoulders lowered by degrees. A woman near the rail put her forehead on her hands for two breaths and then lifted it again and sat straighter. A man who had looked ready to cry earlier just looked at his feet instead and stayed still.

Leo checked his watch one more time, then slipped his fingers under the strap and tugged it. He held it out.

"Here," he said.

Callum took the watch with his left hand and then put it straight back, closing Leo's fingers over it and pressing his hand to his chest.

"Keep it," he said. "We're not done with it."

A torch beam tracked along the glass panel at the mezzanine edge and caught a white line in it that hadn't been there before. Not a break. A hairline running two hand-widths at the corner where stress had gone when bodies had been pressed together for too long. Someone marked it on a pad and drew a box with a pen where it sat. A manager would have to order a replacement. Until then it would show what had happened.

At the control-room door, an officer crouched and looked at the flat hand near the jamb. He didn't touch the body yet. He watched the fingers for the amount of time that mattered. They didn't lift. He reached inside, pinched the pistol he could see in the glow of a monitor by the serration on the slide, and pushed it away until it was clear of reach.

"Control is cold," he said over his shoulder.

From below, a call came in a steady voice: "Harness ready at gantry." Another voice answered with equipment and a time.

Callum kept one arm around Leo and one arm still. The foil around them rustled whenever the boy's breathing changed. He watched people

stand in twos and threes when told and cross short distances onto safer ground. They moved together, deliberate. All night had been orders. These steps were theirs.

A man in hi-vis came up the last few steps from the safer entrance and stopped where the new wedge had spread out. Radio clipped at his chest, pen ready. He didn't shout or flail at anyone. He listened to a short run of words from a woman with a radio and then asked one thing: "Any gas left high?"

"Trace only," she said. "Fans up. Valve seated. We're staying off sparks until the tests read clean over a span. East end remains no-go for non-essential."

"We'll close," he said. He said it flat, an order to himself as much as anyone else. He looked toward the valve end where he couldn't see anything but knew enough anyway and swallowed.

On the net: "Recovery phase."

Callum heard parts of the talk that followed when people moved and the sound in the space changed. It covered the only things that mattered now: where to move people, how to handle the bodies, who held the handset to speak to whoever had to be told next. Later, he caught pieces that looked forward. Manual access to the valve line would be tested. Protocols would change for who could cut the speakers and from where. Cameras would be looked at by someone who understood coverage cones and blind seams better than the supplier who had put them in.

At the east end, a technician in gloves took an isolation wheel in both hands and turned it a notch against the stop to feel the seat. He marked it with a wax pencil while another wrote a number on a tag. No commentary. The job was to confirm and record the state, not perform.

A woman two benches down put her hand on Mira's arm and said, "Thank you," her voice rough. Mira nodded, eyes still on the small boy now wrapped in foil with the man who had told her it would be an easy night.

The officer in the green jacket who had spoken earlier about standing to move reappeared, and with her and one of the wedge men a human chain formed at the bend by the staff corridor. Hands on elbows, weight shared, speed steady. The older man with the low-back pain was brought to his feet between two bodies and moved off the line along the route Callum had set. The slowed closer didn't slap, the taped wedge kept the latch off the strike, and the ankle-high arrows read correctly even with tired eyes. A hand passed his weight to the next.

Leo's head turned under the blanket so his mouth was near Callum's ear. He kept his voice low.

"Did you do all of it?"

Callum pictured the tape loop on the rim, the men who would never get up, and the living man upstairs whose wrists pulled against plastic. He pictured the small scuffs he had made in dust to turn another man the wrong way and his own right hand where dried blood had stiffened the hairs.

"No," he said. "A lot of people did their part. None of it was clean."

Leo nodded once. He pushed his face into Callum's shoulder and held there.

A responder from the wedge crouched again, this time with a different notebook and a calmer tone, and waited for a small gap. When the beat came he said, "When you're able, we'll need you to walk the route with us. No rush. After you're looked over properly."

Callum nodded. He didn't take his eyes off Leo when he did it.

Outside, a bus backed away with its route lights off. It waited for a glove signal, then pulled out.

When the medic came back, he cut the old tape from Callum's shoulder and replaced it with a cleaner wrap and a tighter band. He checked the ribs with a hand that didn't poke and then the left forearm where cloth and gaffer held a pad in place. He didn't ask what had happened. The bandage did its work and Callum's hand shook once, a small tremor that ran out through his fingers when he released the tension he had kept for too long. The ring in his ears hadn't gone. It would ease outside, away from fans and metal.

From the lower level, a steady call carried: "Valve room: one deceased. Gantry: one alive, restrained. Gallery: one deceased. South bend: one deceased in recess." He knew all of that already from memory. Hearing it said in that tone fixed it to this room.

Mira crouched again on his left. She looked worn from the cold and the hours. She set her hand flat on the floor next to him and made a small circle with her thumb, steadying herself there.

"You still have that bent key," Callum said.

She looked down at her lanyard and huffed once in a way that wasn't a laugh.

"Always," she said.

He tightened the foil around Leo's shoulders. The boy's eyes had stopped tracking the room and fixed on the middle distance where exhausted children watched things that weren't in front of them anymore.

"You did what you had to do," Mira said.

Callum looked at his right hand where blood had dried, then at the pistol on the floor where the wedge had left it. He kept his hands away from it. He let his left hand rest on Leo's back and kept it there until the boy's breathing slowed and stayed slow.

The manager in hi-vis came back once and asked a question about a door by the staff room that wouldn't open even with the cuff tails cut because someone had fed plastic through the opposing handles. Mira

pointed him at the wedge route. He took two steps in that direction, then stopped and turned back and did the thing a decent manager did at the end of a night.

“Names,” he said, and waited until she said hers. He added Callum’s to his pad with a line under it. No comment. No promise. Just a line that would make it into the paperwork that came.

As the wedge kept shaping people off the rail, a woman who had helped with the older man came over and knelt on her heels so she didn’t tower over the boy. She held out a scrap torn from a bus timetable with a number on it.

“For later,” she said to Mira. “If anyone asks where the line went, or if you need a statement partner.”

Mira took it without looking at it and tucked it into the cuff of her sleeve.

Callum’s eyes ran once more across the space that had been theirs all night. The torch on the floor by the rail that had been the guard’s lay where it had landed. The wrong-lying arm by the control-room jamb was being handled now by men with gloves. The cracked white line in the glass at the corner registered as a fact that would persist. The rest of the pieces , the hose cabinet door eased almost closed, the cleaned washers on the gantry base, the tape loop on the main wheel if anyone ever went down there to look , were out of sight from here, but each one sat where he had left it.

He put his forehead down for one second on the top of Leo’s head because he hadn’t had that second yet and took it now that he could. Then he sat up again and kept his eyes open, because until they walked out of this place there was always the chance that one more thing could go wrong, and he would not be the man who missed it.

They brought coffee in paper cups and water in small bottles for anyone who could swallow without choking. Callum didn't drink. The smell was wrong in his mouth. He held the bottle for Leo and let him take it in sips between the edges of the foil.

A responder with a clipboard asked for any devices on the floor near the bench line. Phones were kicked inward to a pile without anyone leaning out. A young officer crouched to pick them up one by one with a pinch on the edge and stack them in a clear tub. Screens stayed dark. The earlier rule about no light stayed even with the gas gone. Habits built under threat were slow to change.

An older woman at the far bench started to cry quietly when an officer put a foil blanket around her shoulders and it crackled. The officer kept a hand on the blanket so it would stop making that noise. The woman steadied and held the corner of the foil in her fist.

A man in a suit without a tie walked around the outside of the wedge and studied the floor for marks. He stopped at the cracked glass and followed the line of the stress with his finger without touching. Then he went to the control-room door and stood looking in while two officers finished what had to be done there. He didn't ask questions. He watched and walked away.

Someone came for a short word with Callum. He wore plain clothes and an ID wallet on a chain. He looked past Callum at the boy, then back again without softening.

"You have injuries we need to log. Then we'll need your route. We'll pace it and mark your touches. We'll want to understand the relay cabinet and what you did there. And the valve method," he said.

"Later," Callum said.

"Later," the man agreed. He crouched so he was the same height as Leo and didn't speak to him. He just waited there for a breath and then rose and left.

Radios kept the recovery steps in plain tones. No one on the mezzanine spoke to that.

Callum sat there with his son and let his shoulder throb until it steadied. The ringing sat in his head; pushing at it would only make it louder. Grooves cut by the tape strap lined his knuckles. He flexed his fingers; they still closed.

He didn't let his mind run the fights again, kept it here in this bright strip of concrete, this boy in his arms, this foil doing its work.

Mira sat back on her heels after a while and rolled her shoulders after being in one position for too long. The bent key swung once and then lay still again. She reached out and touched Leo's hair where it fell into his eyes.

"You okay, mate?" she asked.

Leo nodded.

"Yeah," he said.

His voice sounded smaller than it normally did and that was fine. Voices would return later.

"We'll walk you out soon," she added, more to herself than to them.

"We'll go slow," Callum said.

She stood and walked two steps and then came back, brow drawn. She looked down at him and the boy and said, "I'm not forgetting this. I'm not forgetting you."

"You've done enough," he said. It wasn't a brush-off. It was a fact.

He sat with Leo while the room finished its work. The wedge stayed working. The civilians kept making small lanes and holding one another's coats so no one got lost. The manager stood at the glass and spoke to someone on a phone and nodded and wrote a number down and underlined it. A technician came up from the east end with a small metal tag and put it in a bag with a label. No one put on a voice for any of it.

They did the next piece and then the piece after that and they kept doing that until there were no pieces left to do for now.

When it was time to stand, Callum pressed his left hand into the floor and lifted. The new tape pulled under his shoulder, a brief tug. The medic moved in without making a fuss and set a hand under his elbow, and the officer with the notebook went to the rail to block a woman who wanted to help and didn't know where to put her hands so she wouldn't make it worse. Leo rose with him and kept hold of his shirt where the seam was worn. The foil slid off their knees and onto the floor. A man bent and picked it up and folded it without being told. He passed it back.

"Thanks," Callum said.

The man nodded. He was nobody Callum knew. He had done the right small thing at the right time.

They stepped into the lane that had been made and followed the arrows he had put down. One on the left. One on the right. Exactly where he had said they would be. The slowed closer took the door through its last ten degrees without a slap and the latch stayed off the strike because the wedge stayed where it had to stay. The corridor air was colder and cleaner on his teeth than the room they had left. He drew it in. Leo's grip tightened at the seam of his shirt.

At the mouth of the staff corridor, Mira caught up and walked beside them. She didn't say anything. She matched her steps to theirs along the corridor.