

FOR MY MOTHER'S LIFE

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Chapter 1

The Test Job

¹ Heat lifted from the sidewalk in waves that made the chain-link look unsteady. The bell had rung, and kids poured through the gates in loose clusters, voices drifting, backpacks sagging. Diego moved along the fence with his head slightly down, hair in his eyes until he pushed it back with the edge of his palm. Dust sat in the cuff of his faded hoodie. He didn't shake it out.

² Javier was posted by the crosswalk sign, one shoe on the curb, one shoe in the street, cap pulled low. The brim hid his eyes until he grinned and tipped it up.

³ "You took forever," Javier said.

⁴ Diego didn't answer. He stopped two feet away, the distance he kept when Javier ran hot. That grin could mean anything.

⁵ Javier pulled his phone from his pocket and cupped it, angle turned from the sidewalk cameras and the campus resource officer posted near the front office. He tapped the screen and it lit. The little speaker crackled.

⁶ "Look," Javier said.

⁷ He didn't want to. He looked anyway.

⁸ The video was shaky. Someone's hand kept drifting into the corner. The camera pointed through a glass door smudged with fingerprints. Inside, two figures in hoodies moved fast. One swung a hammer into a display case. Glass fell in chunks. Another figure came into the corner of the frame and shoved a man against the counter. The man slid down,

hands up, mouth open around words the phone didn't catch. One of the masked figures vaulted the counter with a practiced motion. A drawer hit the floor and spilled coins. The man tried to stand and one of the figures cracked him across the temple with the hammer. He went down. Blood hit the tile and spread. The person recording swore softly and the camera dropped, then steadied again.

9 "Easy," Javier said, voice low. "In and out. No cops. Nobody's a hero."

10 A sour heat climbed the back of his throat. He kept his face still. His fingers found the seam of his hoodie pocket and pressed there, nails grazing fabric.

11 "No," he said.

12 Javier glanced up from the screen, eyebrows pinched.

13 "No," Diego said again. Diego kept his voice even. He watched the figures in the video move. The man on the floor curled on his side, hand at his head, blood on the glass and the white tile, a narrow trail that the phone's camera kept cutting across. The coins glittered where the light caught them. Someone yelled at someone else to hurry. The picture shook. The screen went black.

14 Javier locked the phone, then unlocked it again. He shook his head and smiled small and practiced, the smile he used when he felt disrespected.

15 "You're thinking of your mom," Javier said. "Good. That's the point."

16 Diego didn't move. Behind him, a cluster of freshmen laughed, one kid dragging his book bag on the concrete until the bottom hissed.

17 "No," Diego said. "I'm saying no."

18 Javier rolled his shoulder and kept smiling. He lowered his voice.

19 "Victor's running it," he said. "It's clean. No dumb cowboys. There's a number on this. Enough you stop taking the bus at 5 a.m. for your dad. Enough you don't have to ask your mama to skip anything."

20 Javier didn't say it again because he didn't need to. Diego did the math: the scan, rent, the pink bill with two exclamation marks. Two weeks. Four paydays. He checked what fit and what didn't. His hands flexed inside his sleeves.

21 "It was easy," Javier said again. "That's what this is. Easy money."

22 Diego saw the blood on the tile. He saw the way the hand on the floor had spread and then curled again. If it had been easy, there wouldn't have been that sound when the hammer connected. There wouldn't have been the way the man tried to stand and then stopped.

23 "No job with blood on the floor is easy," Diego said. His voice came out softer than he intended. He took the phone from Javier's hand without thinking, thumb flat over the screen. It was warm. He wanted to smash it and he wanted to hand it back and he didn't do either.

24 Javier's grin held, but his eyes changed.

25 "Victor wants to meet you," Javier said. He said it flat, favor already spent. "He's seen you drive. You were born with hands for it. He wants to talk."

26 Diego read the look. Javier had expected a quick yes and kept asking anyway. It was a little thing. His fingers tightened in his sleeves. Javier's smile dropped a fraction. Diego's grip on the phone tightened.

27 "I'm not meeting him," Diego said. "I'm good."

28 Javier's smile went flat. He lifted his chin toward the officer posted near the gate. Light hit the badge and flared.

29 "He doesn't like when people say no," Javier said quietly. "He takes it as disrespect. I'm doing you a solid so it doesn't get to that."

30 The security officer pushed off the wall and walked their way, slow. His belt creaked. The badge plastic had a nick along the edge. His gaze swept faces and backpacks.

31 Diego's fingers moved before his head did. He slid the phone into his hoodie pocket and flattened the fabric. His thumb slipped on the case; heat gathered under the hoodie. The officer's eyes tracked the motion, then went to Javier.

32 "Everything good?" the officer said.

33 "All good," Javier said. His voice went up half a note, casual and practiced.

34 The officer's gaze paused on Diego for a beat, then on Javier, then down the sidewalk. He kept walking. Boot steps faded under the noise of kids moving.

35 Diego's cheeks warmed, not from the sun. He handed the phone back. His palm had left a fog on the screen that Javier wiped with the heel of his hand.

36 "Offer doesn't stay open," Javier said. "There's a window. If you're in, you're in by then. If not, we move."

37 Window. A time limit. His pulse ticked where his thumb met his wrist.

38 A bus braked to a stop across the street. Javier adjusted his cap.

39 "Text me," Javier said. "Don't make me chase you."

40 He stepped off the curb and walked, not looking back. Diego stood until the bus pulled away and Javier was a shape in the light dust hanging behind it. He looked down at his hands. The skin across his knuckles was clean. No cuts. No blood. He imagined soap and water and a sink in their kitchen with a slow drain that left a ring. He wondered how long you got to keep hands like that in this city.

41 He turned toward Dyer.

42 Blue tape strung waist-high, fluttering in the faint breeze the buildings made. Two cruisers sat at angles across the shallow parking cutout, light bars cold. The pawn shop's door hung propped with a rubber wedge. An ambulance idled, back doors open. Neighbors had gathered in a half circle. Some held their phones up, recording nothing.

43 Diego stopped near the curb and kept his hands in his pockets. He knew that stopping made him a watcher. He watched anyway.

44 An EMT backed through the door, one hand steady on the stretcher rail, the other managing the oxygen line. The man on the stretcher had gray hair flattened by a gauze bandage at the temple. His eyes were closed. Blood had dried in a dark smear along the edge of his jaw. Diego knew him before he placed the name. His jaw set; his breath hitched once. Elias Mendez. The man who had once let him and his dad take an extra five for a DVD player and an old drill that barely ran, counting it out slow and neat so they could see his math. He'd always given a straight number. He'd judged you by your eyes, not by your shoes.

45 Mr. Mendez's hand rested loose on the blanket, fingers relaxed except for a small tremor at the tip. Diego saw it and couldn't unsee it. The tremor moved, steady.

46 On the sidewalk, a woman in a pink T-shirt shook her head.

47 "He's good people," she said to nobody in particular. "Gave me a fair price on that TV when my cousin moved out. Didn't lowball me. And now this."

48 A reporter stood near the tape with a mic flag Diego didn't recognize. Her hair was sprayed into place that didn't move in this air. She leaned toward a uniform with a notebook tucked under his arm.

49 "Any suspects?" she asked, voice pitched to be recorded.

50 "Four males," the officer said. "Masks. We're reviewing video."

51 Four. Diego had thought three when Javier showed him the clip. Maybe the person filming had missed one. Maybe Javier didn't know how many were in from the jump. Maybe the count in his head was wrong. He let the number sit. Four men was a crew. Four meant roles. Four meant one more moving part to break.

52 He looked through the open door into the shop. He saw a shelf with sunglasses knocked at an angle, a paper sign that read "No refunds" curling at the corners from the heat, a glass case busted in two big panes with the spidering along the edges where the hammer had bitten. From inside, a faint crunch of glass came under a shoe near the mat. The register drawer lay on the floor with the coin slots exposed. Quarters and dimes and pennies had rolled and found whatever stops they could around the base of a display. He counted, not all of them, just enough to feel the weight. Eight coins near the baseboard. Then three more along the crack where the tile met the mat. He didn't know why he did it. The count sat in his head next to the word window. He didn't want to be the kind of person who made numbers out of blood and metal.

53 "You notice they only come this fast when it's money," a man behind him muttered. He was older, blue work shirt stained under the arms, a grocery bag looped around his wrist.

54 Diego didn't turn toward him. He filed it. It wasn't clean to say and it wasn't completely wrong, and it tasted bitter in a way that wasn't about the police exactly and wasn't not about them either. It was about who gets a response and how quick.

55 A cruiser eased past slow, tires crunching over grit. The officer driving scanned faces, eyes catching on anyone who looked away. Diego turned his shoulders and walked, his pace picking up. He didn't need his face in anyone's notes, even if he hadn't done anything. Especially then.

56 As he reached the end of the block, the EMTs loaded Mr. Mendez into the ambulance. The doors closed with a heavy seal. He pictured the old fridge in their kitchen when it sealed and the motor kicked on. He

hated that his brain returned to appliances in the same moment he watched a man's blood dry on gauze. The reporter angled her mic toward the camera and did a stand-up with the pawn shop sign behind her shoulder.

57 He kept walking. His mouth tasted metallic and dry. His cousin had said easy with that blood still wet. He swallowed. Metal. He kept moving down Dyer toward the bus stop he didn't plan to use.

58 Heat from the walk still clung to his sleeves.

59 The duplex sat two blocks off the main road on a street where the asphalt flaked at the edges into dirt. The front door stuck in summer. Diego put his shoulder into it, then eased it so it didn't slam.

60 The air inside was ten degrees less than outside. The swamp cooler rattled from the window by the kitchen, paddles chopping through water that smelled faintly of algae. In the living room, his mother slept on the couch with a thin blanket over her legs, head tilted against a cushion she'd crocheted years ago when her hands didn't get tired. The scarf over her hair had slid back an inch. A glass of water sat on the coffee table beside a small bottle of pills turned so the label faced away, condensation beaded on the outside.

61 On the kitchen table, under the ceramic fruit bowl with one banana freckled brown, a stack of mail lay. Envelopes with windows. One with red on the top edge. He didn't touch them at first. He put his bag down on the chair with the loose back that shook a little if you sat wrong. He washed his hands at the sink, the drain slow to take the water. He scrubbed harder than he needed to, pressed his thumbs into the lines of his fingers, rinsed, turned the handle tight. He dried with the towel they kept over the oven handle, the terry cloth rough and clean. On the fridge, an appointment card for a scan was under a magnet, a date circled in

blue.

62 He moved the fruit bowl and spread the mail in a fan. He didn't open anything. He read the outside through the windows. Account numbers that meant nothing to anyone who didn't live here. Dates that meant everything. The red-trimmed one said Final Notice and then a date two weeks out. He put the red-trimmed envelope on top and counted fourteen days. He put his hand on it. The paper bent under his palm. It didn't give.

63 A soft cough came from the couch.

64 "Mijo?" his mother said, voice hoarse around sleep.

65 He went to her. He pulled the blanket up to her waist and smoothed the edge even though that did nothing. She blinked up at him, eyes clearing. She took his hand and rubbed his knuckles with her thumb.

66 "You hungry?" he asked.

67 "Always," she said, smiling a little. The smile cost her something; he saw it in the way her cheeks didn't lift all the way. "Sorry. I kept thinking I'd get up and start the beans and then I closed my eyes for a minute."

68 "It's nothing," he said. The word snapped tight in his mouth. He heard it. He hated the sound.

69 She followed his glance to the table, to the stack he hadn't put away fast enough. Her mouth flattened, and for a second she looked like the woman he'd known before the hospital room with the lights that hummed whether or not anyone was there.

70 "Later," she said. "Help me up."

71 He put his hand under her elbow and let her take most of her weight. In the kitchen, he started the burner and put a pan on. He poured oil and waited for it to shine. He didn't have to look to know the stove wasn't level; the oil always ran toward the back. He cracked eggs and dropped tortillas on the second burner on low. The smell of corn and oil

filled the little room and coated his tongue. He kept his eyes on the food. He didn't look at the mail again.

72 The front door opened with another shoulder push. It stuck the same for everyone. His father stepped in and stood with his hand on the jamb for a second, short breath, then moved. Diego recognized the day in the way he shifted his right leg a fraction more than his left. Grease was set in dark arcs along the sleeves of his shirt and in crescents near the hem where he wiped his palms when the rag wasn't close or clean. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, flattened from the heat under the cap.

73 "Smells good," Luis said. He put the hat on the bent hook.

74 "You good?" Diego asked. The question had ten thousand answers. He meant all of them and none.

75 Luis rolled his shoulder and then stopped, catching himself from showing it. "Tired."

76 Diego plated the eggs and slid the tortillas with a metal spatula that scraped the pan in a sound he knew drove his mother crazy. She didn't complain. She sat and folded the tortilla in her fingers while the steam rose.

77 They ate in the small space between the table and the wall, knees almost touching. Through the thin wall by the refrigerator, their neighbor's TV ran the early news in a flat voice. The anchor said something about rising hospital costs in the county and a graphic flashed numbers too quick to read. Diego didn't look up. He chewed, jaw tight.

78 Luis wiped the last of the yolk with his tortilla. He set the plate down and looked at Diego.

79 "How was school?" he asked.

80 Diego took a breath. He exhaled through his nose. "Fine."

81 He wasn't thinking about algebra or the shop class teacher who called him "buddy" in the same tone he used with friends. He saw Mr.

Mendez on the stretcher. He saw the little tremor in the hand. He saw blood on white tile that didn't have anything to do with him until it did.

82 Rosa picked up the red-trimmed envelope and turned it over in her hands.

83 "We can call and ask for more time," she said. She kept her voice even, but the way she held the paper showed strain. "Or maybe I skip the scan this month. The last one wasn't that different. We can wait until next."

84 Diego's hand tightened around his fork. The handle dug into his palm. He put it down before it bent.

85 "No," he said. "Te juro. We don't skip."

86 Rosa's eyes shone for a second and then cleared. She nodded once like she'd known he would say that and had asked him so he could say it out loud. Luis looked at the table and then at his wife. He set his hand over hers for a second. He pulled back and stood.

87 "I'll shower," Luis said. "Then I'll look at the bills."

88 He took the work shirt off as he walked down the narrow hall. The bathroom door closed. The pipes banged. The swamp cooler clicked and rattled in a rhythm Diego knew without wanting to.

89 Diego cleared plates and ran water. He rinsed slow, watching the line of each stream curve and go cloudy as it hit the dish soap. His hands moved without his head. He rinsed the same plate twice.

90 Rosa stood and carried the red-trimmed envelope to the little drawer where they kept pens and a notepad and a roll of tape with five inches left on it. She set it inside and closed the drawer.

91 "I'm sorry," she said, but not about the mail. About the room, about the eggs, about being tired. About the way their life had stretched thin without breaking and still felt ready to.

92 "Don't," Diego said. He didn't say more. Words wouldn't change the paper. They wouldn't change the date stamped in the corner that didn't care about anyone's good intentions.

93 They watched a game show for twenty minutes. The host read clues and people rang bells and a woman in a red dress smiled when she said the right word. After a while, the sweat at his temples dried.

94 Later, his father sat with a notebook and wrote numbers and circled them and then drew a line and set the pen down. He rubbed his eyes with two fingers. He stood and kissed Rosa's head and went to bed because he had to wake before the sun and do it again.

95 In the small bedroom, the fan clicked on every third turn. Diego lay on his back and watched the light from the street fall across the ceiling through a gap in the blind. He counted his breaths until he lost track. From the other side of the thin wall, his father coughed once, twice, then quieted.

96 He pictured the date on the red envelope. Two weeks. Paychecks that didn't stretch far enough. A scan his mother didn't want to ask for because she knew what it cost in paper if not in body.

97 Nothing moved without pressure. Not the door. Not the drain. Not the system that sent envelopes with red at the top.

98 He listened to the cooler rattle and counted six more slow inhales. He stared at his hands on top of the blanket. He spread his fingers and then closed them. They were steady. They had been steady on a steering wheel since he was thirteen and his dad had taken him out on the dirt road past the old water tower and taught him how to feel the tires in his palms. He didn't want those hands to touch what Javier had shown him. He didn't want to hand his mother anything dirty and call it help.

99 He knew what he wanted didn't matter much to the kind of deadlines stamped in red.

100 He turned on his side. The fan clicked. He let his hand hover over the phone on the crate by the bed, then pulled back. He tasted metal. He pictured the date on the card. Fourteen days. He closed his eyes. He slept in short stretches.

Chapter 2

The Offer

101 Heat pressed over the lot as the sun slid lower. Diego's breath went shallow and sweat gathered in his hoodie. He followed Javier through a chain-link gate that someone had cut and wired closed again. The wire ends were sharp and rusted. A hand-lettered sign on plywood said NO PARTS PULLED AFTER FOUR in thick black marker. It was past four. He'd told Javier no yesterday. He came anyway so it wouldn't turn into disrespect.

102 Rows of car bodies sat stacked two and three high. A forklift beeped in the far corner. A small dog slept under a dented hood propped on a cinder block. The air smelled like oil and baked rubber.

103 Javier walked easy, shoulders loose, cap low. He knocked once on the frame of a prefab office shed, then kept moving toward a patch of open ground cleared between two piles. Diego saw two men standing there before Javier raised a hand. Standing sent a message, no chairs, no shade. He pushed his hair back with the side of his hand and let his palm fall.

104 Victor was thicker through the chest than Diego had expected. Boots scuffed and solid. Faded tactical pants, a canvas belt, a watch with a face that caught the light. A line of scar tracked along his jaw. His eyes stayed steady on Diego without any move to greet him.

105 The other one leaned against a stripped door half-set on a drum. Angel had a flat face with sharp cheekbones, a toothpick in the corner of his mouth, and a jitter in his knee that didn't match his still shoulders. His hands were nicked; the left thumb nail was torn low and looked tender. He watched without blinking much.

106 Javier stopped a few feet off and turned his chin toward Diego.

107 "This is him," Javier said. "Diego."

108 Victor's gaze slid to Javier for a fraction, then back. He didn't offer a hand.

109 "What are you good at?" Victor said.

110 Diego tasted dust. He swallowed and found his voice.

111 "Driving," he said.

112 Victor's mouth moved at the corners but didn't turn into anything soft. "Driving what?"

113 "Anything with a wheel," Javier said quickly, a little too quick. "He's got hands."

114 Angel's knee bounced. His toothpick made a small click on his teeth. "We hiring from the school now? Child labor."

115 Javier smiled, then stopped when Victor didn't. Angel's eyes stayed flat. The air tightened around the three of them. Diego saw how the words worked here. A joke wasn't a joke. It was a tool.

116 "Driving," Victor repeated, testing the word. He stepped in a half pace. "You late to school today, Diego?"

117 "No."

118 "You late anywhere?"

119 "No."

120 Victor's attention didn't flick to Javier to check. He was measuring Diego, not the answer. "There's a job already locked. Timed. Window, six minutes, give or take. We run clean. Your cousin says you handle pressure." His glance flicked to Javier and back. "People say a lot."

121 Diego's jaw tightened. He kept his hands quiet by his sides. The lot rang with a single hammer strike from somewhere behind a stack. He saw the watch on Victor's wrist again and thought of a second hand moving.

122 "We do a test first," Victor said. "You move something from A to B on my clock. If you can't follow, you're done. If you can, you get in the rotation."

123 "I'm good," Diego said. The words came out clean. "I'm not in."

124 Javier breathed in and opened his mouth. Victor didn't look at him. The corners of Victor's eyes didn't change at all. His face didn't have to move to close. It just did.

125 Angel's knee kept bouncing. The toothpick turned. "He's got a mouth, at least."

126 Victor stepped close. The gap between them was two inches and then one. His hand came up, palm open, and pressed against Diego's shoulder with a short shove, nothing that would leave a mark. Enough to test balance.

127 Diego rocked back and caught himself. He didn't stumble. Heat climbed his face and throat. His shoulders set, then eased a notch, private. He made his hands still. He breathed through his nose once.

128 "He stands," Victor said to nobody. "He says no."

129 "Proud of that?" Angel said around the toothpick.

130 Javier shifted. "Victor, "

131 A horn sounded by the gate. A car rolled in slow, a silver coupe with faded tint and a rattle that didn't match its shine. The driver eased it to a stop and let it idle. Mateo stepped out wearing a clean T-shirt and clean sneakers. He smiled when he saw them, a small grin held easy, outside the tension by choice. A faint citrus cologne came with him.

132 "My bad," Mateo said, hands up, palms empty. "Traffic." He wasn't dusty. He glanced at Diego with an older cousin's casual check-in. Not too much interest. Enough to count.

133 Mateo's grin didn't go anywhere. He looked Diego over and then the space between Diego and Victor. He stepped that direction but not

too close. "You're Diego? Heard you got calm hands." He flashed a look at Victor, then back, keeping both in view. "It's nothing big. A wheel and a clock. They talk big. It's simple."

134 Diego saw the translation for what it was. A way to make saying yes feel like saying maybe. His hands were steady. He set his shoulders and shook his head.

135 "No," he said.

136 Victor kept his eyes on Diego. "You're a kid." Then he turned to Javier. "Get real friends." His voice stayed bored.

137 Javier didn't answer. His cap shadowed his eyes. He blew air out through his nose and pulled it back in, steadying.

138 Angel gave one short laugh.

139 "We're done," Victor said. He stepped back. The shift in space read end of meeting more than anything he said.

140 Mateo gave Diego a small shrug that could mean anything. You'll come around. You'll wish you had. Good luck. He reached into his pocket and then thought better of it with Victor standing right there. He ran a thumb along the edge of his phone without taking it out, then dropped his hand.

141 "Take him home," Victor said to Javier. He didn't look back to see if Javier obeyed. He didn't need to. "If his answer changes, we'll know."

142 The easy way he said it put a chill in Diego's chest. They didn't need his number. They knew his cousin. They knew his street. In this part of town, knowing one thing got you three.

143 Javier turned. Diego followed him past the office shed, past the dog that woke and watched with one eye. The forklift beeped again. Somewhere metal clanged and stopped.

144 At the gate, Javier lifted the cut wire with one hand and held it until Diego stepped through. He let it fall. The wire ends snapped back

and made a quiet sound.

145 "You shouldn't have come if you were going to say no," Javier said.
Not angry. Tired.

146 "You said he wanted to meet," Diego said.

147 "He did. He won't forget that you told him no to his face."

148 Diego set his jaw without meaning to. He didn't want that to show. It did anyway. He looked down to stop looking at Javier and then lifted his eyes. He didn't have words that would fix the air between them, so he said nothing.

149 They walked to the street in heavy heat. Javier's car had a cracked windshield, a sunstrip peeling at the corners. He unlocked it and didn't offer Diego a ride. Diego didn't ask. The engine coughed when Javier turned the key, then settled. Javier looked past Diego down the block, then up again.

150 "Delivery window's still the window," Javier said, and pulled away slow without watching to see whether Diego turned left or right.

151 Diego stood for a count of three. He turned toward Dyer and started walking.

152 Rosa tried to stand and reached for a glass at the sink. Her fingers lost it. The glass fell into the steel basin and tilted. The sound wasn't loud but it was wrong. Diego was two steps away. He reached and got an elbow in his hand. The elbow didn't give him anything to hold. Her weight slid. Her knees folded under her in a way that wasn't a choice.

153 "Ma," he said.

154 Her eyes opened and didn't focus. He lowered her to the floor so the edge of the counter didn't hit her back. The floor was cool through his

jeans. She tried to say his name and air stuttered out instead. He could see the pulse in her neck. Fast.

155 "Luis," Diego called. He didn't raise his voice often. He did now.

156 His father came from the bedroom with his shirt half on, still damp from shower steam. He took in the scene in one sweep, Rosa on the floor, Diego holding her shoulder, the glass at the bottom of the sink with a smear of water still moving around it.

157 "Car," Luis said. He grabbed his keys from the hook and jammed his feet into shoes without socks.

158 They got her upright between them and moved her through the sticking door. Her feet skimmed the threshold. The air outside held heat that felt old, stored in the ground. The street was quiet. Someone's radio was a thin sound through a window.

159 Diego eased Rosa into the back seat and lifted her legs in. Her hand closed weakly around his fingers once, then loosened. He closed the door and ran around. Luis started the engine and it caught on the second turn. He drove with both hands, his shoulders higher than usual. The light at the corner was red; he stopped and then went through when the cross street stayed empty. There were no sirens. The streets were empty while they moved.

160 At UMC, the sliding doors opened and the air inside hit cool. The smell was disinfectant and plastic. A woman in a blue top at the desk looked up and then down at a keyboard and then up again when she saw Rosa.

161 "We need a chair," Diego said.

162 A triage nurse came around with a wheelchair, calm and practiced. She spoke to Rosa first, then to Luis, then to Diego, her voice low and even. She took blood pressure and pulse and nodded once to something only she understood. A second nurse wheeled Rosa through double doors while the first one stayed with them and pointed at a

clipboard.

163 "I know," she said. "Just the basics for now. If they order imaging, we'll talk about that."

164 Luis reached for the pen and signed where she pointed. The forms asked for the same information three different ways. He wrote carefully, printing in all caps the way he always did when he wanted it to be legible to a stranger. Diego gave the birthday when asked, the address, the number that they had memorized years ago.

165 A clerk at a second window called them by last name. Her nails were short and clean, her badge on a lanyard that had frayed at the end. She clicked through screens and read out a script about authorizations and deductibles and the difference between emergent and non-emergent. Her voice didn't have malice in it. It didn't have room for anything but policy.

166 "We need to do imaging," the triage nurse said, stepping back into earshot. "Doctor's ordering a CT."

167 The clerk nodded and angled the monitor. "For non-emergent imaging, per policy, the deposit due at time of service is \$1,200."

168 "How much?" Luis asked.

169 "One thousand two hundred dollars," she said, the same cadence as the rest.

170 Luis's jaw set.

171 "We can set a plan," Luis said. His voice didn't rise. It never did here. He held the edge of the counter in a way that kept his hands from showing too much. "We always pay."

172 "Plans are for balances after coverage and authorizations," she said gently. "If it's emergent, they do it and we bill. If not, it's up front."

173 "Is she emergent?" Diego asked.

174 "The doctor will decide," the nurse said. "She's stable right now."

175 A monitor behind the desk kept a steady beep. The word stable didn't match it.

176 They sat in molded chairs with metal legs. The light overhead hummed. A TV on the wall played the local news with subtitles on. A photo of a pawn shop filled the screen, then shaky footage from a phone. His breath hitched. The camera angle was wrong. He knew that corner. The reporter's mouth moved around words Diego could read and didn't want to. The caption said INVESTIGATION CONTINUES.

177 Names weren't spoken. Four males. Masks. Reviewing video. The familiar phrases moved around a man on a gurney and a glass case.

178 Diego's phone sat heavy in his pocket. He pressed his thigh against it until the edge hurt. Under the light, his knuckles looked older; he turned them over. A small cut at the base of the thumb where the shovel in their yard had pinched three days ago when he moved dirt that didn't need moving. He opened and closed his fingers.

179 A security guard made a slow walk along the length of the waiting room. He was middle-aged with a soft belly and a belt full of keys. He nodded at Diego without challenge. Just a pass. Even so, the uniform made his chest tight. He pushed his hair out of his eyes.

180 The double doors hummed open and a doctor came through with a chart. She was calm and efficient, her words clipped and exact.

181 "She's stable," the doctor said. "We adjusted meds. I want to get a CT in the next hour."

182 "When?" Diego asked. His voice was level. It hit a point and stayed there.

183 She glanced toward the intake desk without moving her head much. "When payment clears."

184 Luis looked at the floor and then at his son. He took a breath, stood, and walked back to the clerk. He spoke in a low voice that didn't carry across six feet of tile. He made one short, measuring gesture. The

clerk shook her head and then typed and then shook her head again. Luis rubbed at his jaw once and nodded, then came back.

185 Diego stood and walked to the hallway to get four feet of space nobody else needed. The wall was cool. He leaned the back of his head against it and let it hold that part of him. Diego took out his phone. The screen lit his face in a way that cast shadows that didn't match the overheads.

186 He typed one word to Javier.

187 Yes.

188 He hit send, thumb unsteady. The phone showed the gray bubble go and then return with nothing yet. He didn't wait on the second piece. The decision was the piece that mattered. His mouth went dry.

189 A nurse pushed a cart by and needed that section of wall. He put the phone back in his pocket and returned to the chairs. His father's eyes were clear and tired and steady and angry and none of that showed on his face.

190 Diego sat. He watched the double doors until they opened again.

191 He stepped outside under the pull of the doors and stood beneath a sodium light that made the concrete look bleached. Heat still came off the ground and rose around his legs. Cars pulled up and idled and pulled away. The sky over the parking lot was dark and clear.

192 He called Javier. The ring took two beats.

193 "Yeah," Javier said.

194 "I'll drive," Diego said. "Once."

195 The word sat wrong in his mouth. It wasn't a lie yet. It felt on its way to being one.

196 "Victor sets terms," Javier said. "Dawn."

197 Diego didn't ask where. It didn't matter. A clock he hadn't set was running. "Dawn," he said.

198 "Make sure you're not late," Javier said, and hung up without anything that sounded like congratulations.

199 Across the drop-off lane, a woman in scrubs rolled a man in a chair toward a van with a lift. The van's hydraulics made a deep whine. Somewhere a kid cried in big gulps. The door behind him opened and closed with a steady rhythm.

200 Diego stared at his hands again, not because he thought they were magic, but because they were what he had. He flexed them once and put them flat on his thighs to quiet them.

201 When he went back inside, the air felt colder by contrast. The vending machine glowed in one corner. Luis walked toward him carrying two foam cups. The coffee inside was too dark and smelled burnt. Luis handed one to Diego.

202 "Gracias," Luis said. "For being strong."

203 Diego nodded. The cup was hot enough to sting the skin between his thumb and finger. He held it tighter than he needed to.

204 "She's resting," Luis said. "They gave her something."

205 Diego wanted to say everything he had done outside. He wanted to ask his father to stop him. He wanted to hand this off and couldn't. He took a sip and swallowed and tasted the bitterness and the heat and nothing else.

206 They sat. A nurse passed and told them it would be a little while and then they could go back. She paused and lowered her voice. "If you want to talk to patient financial services about charity assistance, there's a board. Applications go up once a week and decisions come a few weeks after that."

207 Luis shook his head before she had finished. "She needs it tonight."

208 The nurse nodded, not offended. "I know," she said. "Just letting you know what exists." She moved on.

209 Diego agreed with the deadline without saying it. The wall clock near the desk clicked over a minute. The word weeks on the board didn't matter tonight.

210 His phone buzzed: a text from Javier. Dawn. An intersection he knew, no more detail. He typed back one word: Dawn. The wall clock read 1:12.

211 He slid the phone into his pocket and felt its edge again. He didn't want it to be a tool or protection. It was both.

212 A nurse waved them through. Rosa lay under a thin blanket with a cannula under her nose. Her eyes opened when they stepped in. She found Diego first and then Luis. She smiled the minimum her face could spare.

213 "You okay, Ma?"

214 "I'm fine," she said, which meant she was stable. Her voice was small and clean. "It's cold in here."

215 Diego tucked the blanket closer to her shoulder even though he knew it would move back. He counted her breaths to match his own and then stopped counting because it made the room feel smaller.

216 Luis stood at the foot of the bed and put his hands in his pockets and then took them out. He looked ready to pick up a tool and had nothing to hold.

217 Diego leaned in and put his mouth close to Rosa's ear.

218 "Te juro," he said. He didn't finish the sentence because she knew how it ended and he didn't want to say the part that would make it true.

219 She turned her head a fraction and met his eyes. Whatever she read there made her mouth firm. She didn't argue. She couldn't spend air on telling him not to do whatever he thought he had to do. She closed her eyes and let the medicine keep her where she was.

220 The nurse from the hall came back and spoke about imaging again and how nights worked for radiology and who was on call and what the window looked like for tomorrow morning if the charge could be met. Her words were even. They still hurt.

221 Luis thanked her for the information. He always thanked. He had learned that people gave you more when you made their day easier. He looked at Diego after she left. They didn't repeat anything. There was nothing new to say.

222 He needed to move, so he stepped back into the hallway long enough to breathe and then went to the doors again and stepped into the heat. The night held. There was no breeze.

223 A paramedic sat on the curb with a bottle of water, the collar of his shirt damp. He nodded once at Diego and went back to staring at nothing. The road beyond the lot ran north and south with a steady trickle of cars that kept to their lanes.

224 After a minute, he went back in and returned to the room. The chair in the corner had a metal bar across the back that pressed into the spine in a way that made you sit straight. He sat and let the bar do what it did. He held the cup of coffee even though it had gone cold and the surface had a thin skin. He didn't drink.

225 The clock on the wall made a small click every minute. He let it mark the night. Dawn would come. He had agreed to meet it.

226 Rosa's breathing stayed even. Luis rested his palms on his thighs, steady. Diego checked his phone once to confirm the time and then put it face down on his knee.

227 He stared at his hands, then at hers. He counted to eight without thinking and stopped. He sat in the room that was theirs for now and waited for a morning he had chosen and didn't want.

Chapter 3

The Induction

228 First light showed along Dyer in a flat band, then brightened. The air held night's cool for a few minutes before heat rose from the asphalt. He had dozed in a chair under the hospital's fluorescent bulbs and woken to the soft scrape of rubber soles and the click of the wall clock. Luis had been slumped forward with his hands on his knees, chin on his chest, out for the first time in hours. A nurse had pushed the curtain aside with two fingers and checked the lines, then let the fabric fall back. Rosa had slept under a thin blanket, mouth open a fraction. Stable.

229 He texted his father a single line and didn't wait for a response: getting breakfast. He dropped the styrofoam cup, walked past the intake desk without catching eyes, and stepped through the sliding doors into cooler air. Disinfectant sat at the back of his throat. He cut across the lot to the intersection Javier had texted. He checked the minute and fixed it.

230 An old sedan eased up and idled with the windows open. Javier leaned over the center console.

231 "Get in," Javier said.

232 Diego slid in back. The upholstery had a tear along the door side that had been fixed with two strips of tape. His knee found the tape. Javier merged without talking. The radio was off. A single empty fast-food bag lay on the floor by the passenger's feet with two napkins tucked inside.

233 They headed north and cut east through a patchwork of warehouses and storage yards. A dog ran the length of a fence and stopped at the gate, chest heaving. They turned in under a faded sign that

read SAFELOCK STORAGE in block letters with one cracked bulb under it.

234 Rows of beige doors faced each other across poured concrete lanes. A camera sat on a corner post, gray dome with a glare on it. Javier parked beside a unit that had its door pulled to six inches off the ground. He killed the engine. The tick of the cooling block counted seconds. Javier got out first and lifted the door with his palms flat under the lip, arms straight. The door rattled up and settled at the top.

235 Inside smelled like dust and old paper. Concrete floor, corrugated metal walls, the overhead fluorescents that made everything look washed. A folding table with one leg that didn't settle right. The table's wobble clicked when anyone touched it. A city map lay taped to its top, with printouts pinned under magnets in the corners because tape didn't hold on the slick paper. A case of bottled water sat to the side.

236 Victor stood behind the table. He wore the same faded pants, the canvas belt, the same watch. Angel leaned against the wall to the right, toothpick in his cheek, eyes on Diego and then not. A fourth guy Diego hadn't met yet had thick forearms and a tight crew cut and a notch missing from one eyebrow. He had a scuffed backpack at his feet and a half-unwrapped granola bar in his hand.

237 "Close it," Victor said without looking over.

238 Javier dropped the door. The slot of daylight at the bottom disappeared. The space took on that inside-no-window feeling. The fluorescent hummed.

239 Victor didn't offer a greeting. He tapped the map with two fingers, a rap on paper that made a small sound.

240 "We keep this simple," Victor said. "Roles are clean and don't overlap. I lead. Mateo runs point. Angel steps in if a situation turns bad. Raul is inside runner. You, " he looked at Diego briefly then back to the map, "drive. That's it."

241 Diego mapped the name to the man with the crew cut.

242 Diego let the words settle. He nodded once, not big. A breath in, slow, out the same.

243 The unit door rattled again. Another metal door outside had lifted and dropped. Mateo slipped in, not out of breath, shirt clean, sneakers clean, rubbing the edge of his phone with his thumb but not pulling it out. He gave Diego a small lift of the chin.

244 "Morning," Mateo said.

245 Victor didn't answer. He tapped the paper again.

246 "We're not building a thing," Victor said. "We're moving through a thing that already exists. That means timing, not force. There's an entry and an exit. Roads in and out. Eyes where they should be. Everybody here already knows how to move. He's the variable." He tipped his head at Diego.

247 Angel's toothpick clicked against his teeth. He shifted off the wall and came close enough to crowd Diego's left shoulder. The bump wasn't a mistake. Diego's foot slid a half inch. He brought it back. He kept his hands close to his sides, still, because his first move in rooms like this had to be not moving.

248 "We got him a prize?" Raul said. His voice had that edge guys got when they acted casual to mask the actual question. He grinned at Mateo, checking to see where to land.

249 Diego didn't give it anything. He watched Victor's hands instead. Victor had a pen uncapped, and he used it to point, not to write.

250 Mateo reached under the table and came up with a pair of gloves in a clear plastic bag, the cheapest kind they sold at the hardware store, beige cotton with gray dots. He squeezed the bag once and tossed it end-over-end at Diego. The package hit Diego's palm with a soft smack.

251 "For later," Mateo said. "You'll hate the feel of the wheel without them."

252 Diego peeled the plastic open with a thumb, slid one glove on, then the other. The fabric sat loose at the fingertips. The dots had that gummy texture that never really gripped. He flexed his hands and took them back off. They were thin. Not protection. A barrier for prints and sweat and nothing more.

253 Victor's pen tapped the paper three times along a roadway line and stopped at a T-intersection. He had marked it with a small X.

254 "In from here," Victor said. "Out from here. No turns that aren't marked. No detours unless I speak it. If I speak it, you don't echo it back. You turn."

255 Diego kept his eyes on the lines. The map had print too small to read at this distance; the shapes mattered more than the names now. He noted the curve that would pull the van past a gas station, the turn between two lots, the long straight that would take them to the arterial. He saw where the median broke. He didn't need the street names yet. He put the geometry in the part of his head that held routes from the tire shop's back lot to the eastbound ramp.

256 Victor put the pen down and lifted his chin at Diego.

257 "Rules," Victor said. "Phones off. If a phone comes out, it's a burner. No questions outside the windows I give. No improvisation. If you're thinking of improvising, you're already behind."

258 The voice didn't change. The words were the edge.

259 Diego nodded once at each line. He felt the way he had in sophomore biology holding a scalpel the first time, checking what not to cut before thinking about what to cut. He put each rule in order.

260 "If anybody gets grabbed, they don't talk," Victor said. He looked at Diego for the first time while he said it. The length of the look was a measure. "You keep your mouth shut. You say you don't know names."

261 The fluorescent buzz ran under his voice. Cool from the concrete came through Diego's soles. He set his jaw and didn't answer.

262 Angel's jaw worked. His knee twitched and stilled.

263 "He's a minor, jefe," Raul said, grin gone, trying to keep it a joke and missing. "They'll send him home with a note."

264 "They won't," Victor said. He didn't look away from Diego. "He'll sit."

265 Victor put palm to paper and slid it toward himself until the magnet popped loose. He caught the corner with two fingers and smoothed it back. He reached under the table and placed a yellow pad beside the map.

266 "We don't need to get fancy with this," Victor said. "We repeat until your hands do it without asking your head."

267 Mateo looked at Diego's face, then Diego's hands, then back. He gave him a small nod that could be read three ways. Good. Calm. Obey.

268 The fluorescent flickered and settled. Someone rolled a dolly down the lane outside. Its bearings made a scraping sound.

269 Victor stepped back, and they shifted forward a half pace. The unit's air held the smell of glue and cardboard. Angel's shoulder brushed Diego's again. Diego didn't give him his eyes. He fixed on the watch on Victor's wrist. The face had a light nick at the rim near the eleven.

270 "I'm going to say this once," Victor said. "Keep your lanes. Tight gaps. No side talk. Move on my mark."

271 He lifted his hand and everyone eased back. The meeting was done. Victor picked up the map by two corners, rolled it, rubber-banded it with a practiced movement, and walked to the door. Mateo went next, then Raul with his backpack. Angel hung back, and when he passed Diego he let his shoulder slide a fraction harder than a pass needed.

272 Diego shifted his weight and kept his stance even. He made a note in himself. He waited. Victor didn't look at him. He waited anyway.

273 Victor put his hand on the door handle and paused.

274 "Last out," Victor said without turning.

275 Diego waited two beats while the others cleared the doorway. He heard the door rattle up. Heat came in around the edges before he stepped into it.

276 They moved out along a frontage road where the city thinned to low warehouses and then to empty lots with scrub and refuse. An old van sat under shade that wasn't real shade, just a billboard's shadow tracking across dirt. The paint had once been white. The side panel had a ripple dent the length of a forearm. Raul had set out empty oil jugs as cones in a stagger that made a small field.

277 "You're up," Victor said. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to.

278 Diego slid into the driver's seat. The wheel was smooth in the places hands had polished it and sticky in the places that weren't part of a circle. The seat had a tear with stuffing showing. Mateo took the passenger seat and pulled the door closed hard enough to be sure it latched. Victor and Angel stood ahead by the first jug. Raul held a phone out with a timer up but didn't start it until Victor moved his hand.

279 "Drive the line," Mateo said. "Don't fight the dirt. Let it give and take it back."

280 Diego breathed in for four counts, held two, let four out. He set his right foot on the brake, left heel flat, hands at nine and three, not the textbook because the wheel didn't deserve textbook. He eased off and let the van creep and then find its weight. The first turn came simple. He felt the rear roll and kept it in. The second came quicker than his eyes said it would, so he let his hands lead and his eyes catch up. The third set him up wrong for the fourth. He corrected with one movement, not two. He didn't clip plastic.

281 Victor's hand moved and Raul hit the timer. They did another run. Mateo didn't say much. When he did speak, he kept sentences short.

282 "Brake sooner."

283 "Eyes farther."

284 "Less hands."

285 On the third pass, Mateo told him to bring it fast and stop on Victor's palm. Victor raised his hand once and kept it there. The van came in quick. Diego rolled out of gas and went hard into brake, not locking, not pumping, holding a squeeze the way his dad had taught him on the dirt road past the water tower years ago. He bled speed and held the nose level. The van stopped with eight inches between bumper and Victor's palm. Victor's head tilted a degree. A small sound came from his throat. Not a full word.

286 It was enough.

287 Mateo kept his eyes on the cones. "Last driver did fine till I said left-left and a bumper flashed. He locked up, then hit the wrong pedal, and we bumped a parked Sentra. Patrol rolled slow two blocks over and looked. Nobody got hurt. Could've. The job is to listen."

288 He caught the point. Not safety. Obedience.

289 A truck passed out on the highway behind the billboard. Tires hummed.

290 They ran through a set of quick stops, then a reverse loop around the last two jugs. The sun lifted. Heat rose from the dirt. Sweat ran down the line of Diego's spine inside his hoodie. The air didn't move.

291 Angel drifted backward twenty yards with a slow, loose walk. He scanned the horizon with a narrow turn of the head. He drew a handgun from a waistband holster and held it down at his side for a second for no reason except to make eyes count it. He pivoted a notch, looked again, then lifted the muzzle, pointed at a patch of open scrub where the ground cut lower and there was nothing behind it for a long way. He didn't ask.

He fired once. The crack came clean.

292 Mateo didn't look away from the line. Victor didn't flinch. Diego's hands stayed on the wheel. The sound slid past. His knee didn't move. His hands stayed steady. He let the van idle and rest his foot without letting the pedal up.

293 Angel looked over his shoulder and watched Diego's face. He put the gun back where it had come from. He gave a thin grin. He chewed the toothpick. He lifted his chin once in acknowledgment that didn't show respect.

294 "Again," Victor said.

295 They ran the line until Raul's timer read past the target. Victor called a stop with a clap that was sharp in the empty. He walked to the side of the van. He put both hands on the roof and leaned in a fraction. Sweat had traced a darker line down his shirt. He didn't look tired. He never showed tired.

296 "Hands are in range," Victor said. He stepped back and looked at Raul. "Pick them up."

297 Raul jogged and grabbed jugs and stacked them. Angel kicked one back toward him with the toe of his boot. Mateo opened the glovebox and pulled a bottle of water from a six-pack. He cracked it and held it toward Diego.

298 "Drink," Mateo said. "Hydrate."

299 "Gracias," Diego said.

300 "De nada, hermano," Mateo said. He twisted the cap too tight and set the bottle near the shifter where Diego could reach without turning.

301 Diego took two long swallows. The water was warm. Fine grit got between his teeth. He swallowed anyway. The hollow in his chest that coffee had left filled a little. He screwed the cap back on and set the bottle between them.

302 "You'll learn the van's shape," Mateo said. "After a while, you'll feel corners without seeing them."

303 Diego nodded. He didn't tell him he already felt the corners. He didn't give him that truth. He pushed hair off his forehead with the edge of his hand. His palm came away damp.

304 "Load up," Victor said.

305 They pulled the jugs into the van, Angel setting them down harder than he had to, Raul checking lids and tossing two cracked ones aside. The billboard shadow had shifted. The dirt was light where the tires had cut across, darker where it hadn't been driven. The highway sounded steady. It would keep sounding that way when they were done here.

306 Diego looked down at his palms. Red patches showed where the wheel had rubbed. It wasn't pain. It was a record. The spots stayed warm. He flexed his fingers and closed them and opened them again. If he put his hands on the kitchen table at home tonight, Rosa would read the marks and not say what she read.

307 Victor swung himself into the seat behind them and slapped the back of the passenger headrest once. Mateo shut the glovebox with his knees and grinned at something only he saw. Raul took the rear bench. Angel chose a seat that let him watch the side mirror and the back window without moving much.

308 They drove in toward town with the windows down. Hot air moved through the van. It didn't cool, but it cleared the cabin. No one spoke on the first stretch back. They didn't need words. Diego matched Victor's hand signals in the rear-view: a flat palm pressing down to slow, fingers slicing to tell him where to put the nose at the next stop sign. Signals and turns replaced talk.

309 They rolled back into the line of storage units with a film of dust on the hood. Victor parked crosswise just enough to block view from the lane. Javier's car had gone. The metal door rattled up. Inside, the same humming light, the same table. The air held a heavier heat now. The water in the case had warmed while they were out.

310 Victor reached under the table and brought up a black plastic bag with a rip in one corner. Inside were small, cheap phones in cardboard sleeves with blister packs cut away. He tossed one on the table in front of Diego. The phone was a gray slab with a scratched screen protector already applied and a keypad that clicked cheap.

311 "This is yours until I say it isn't," Victor said. "Keep it off. Charge it at a place that isn't your house. When it rings, it rings in this pattern." He held up a second burner in his left hand, thumbed the power, then pressed the call button to dial the first. The ringing filled the small space, a hollow tone. Victor let it ring twice, hung up, checked his watch for three beats, then hit call again and let it ring once before ending it. Raul's phone still showed the timer screen from the drill, seconds turning over. Victor set the second phone down. "Two. Pause. One. If you see that, you answer by the second ring, and you move. No voicemails. No texts unless I tell you to."

312 "Two, pause, one," Diego repeated.

313 "Again," Victor said.

314 "Two, pause, one."

315 Victor nodded and slid a small wall charger across the table. "Don't plug that in at home."

316 Diego put the phone and charger in the pocket of his hoodie. He felt the weight pull. He would have to find a place to charge it. He thought of the outlet by the soda machines in the laundromat five blocks from the duplex. He would need quarters to sit there and not look like someone charging something for no reason.

317 Mateo pulled the yellow pad close and sketched quickly with a blunt pencil. Rectangles for buildings. Circles for camera fixtures. Arcs for coverage. He marked a vestibule with a slash and then a small X where the camera's coverage didn't reach for a few seconds when it rotated to view the front door. He pushed the pad over so Diego could see.

318 "These are domes," Mateo said. "They swing. This one covers the pedestrian approach. This one watches the vestibule. There is a sweep lag here between positions. He's got four seconds when it moves."

319 He traced the arc with the pencil. Diego watched the line and measured it against a motion that would be happening in real time with bodies in it. He saw where a van might sit with doors closed and then open, and how long the doors would have to be open before anyone else could see.

320 Victor stood on the other side of the table. "We're inside a six-minute window," he said. "Two things overlap: a shift change and a cash drop. We sit in that overlap. If you drift, you make everyone else slow. If you speed, you make it loud. You go when I touch your shoulder, not before."

321 Six minutes. Shift change and cash drop overlapped. Start to finish inside three hundred sixty seconds. He watched the second hand on Victor's watch sweep and set the count next to the ring pattern.

322 Angel took the pencil from Mateo without asking and drew a rectangle that stood in for a pack of bills. He cut a smaller rectangle inside it, not centered. He marked a dot.

323 "Banks put dye in bundles," Angel said. His voice flattened. "You see a stack that looks too perfect, a little heavy, a hard edge that hides under the paper. There's a trigger that can blow when it clears a threshold or after time. The dye burns. You're the wheel, so you don't touch. If anything looks slicker than usual, don't breathe deep next to it."

324 Diego didn't plan to go near any bag. He watched the lines and put the shape of the marked stack next to the rest of the facts anyway. He had seen a pack once that looked wrong in a news segment about a bank robbery at a place nowhere near here. The reporter had held it in gloved hands.

325 Raul leaned back in the chair he had pulled from against the wall and let the front legs rock off the floor.

326 "Driver's cut? Not worth the heat," Raul said.

327 The chair landed on all fours again. The back leg screeched on concrete.

328 Diego looked at him once, then away. Rent, the \$1,200 scan deposit, and the overdue bill, he only needed enough to turn those.

329 Victor didn't address Raul. He reached to the side and took a bottle of water from the case, cracked it, drank half, and set it down. He pointed at Diego's pocket.

330 "Put your personal away," Victor said. "Turn it off and put it away. If I see it again, you're done."

331 Diego took his own phone from his other pocket and held the power down until the screen went black. Outside the unit where concrete met dirt and a thin strip of sun lay across the lane, he turned it on again, swiped through screens, opened the music app, and erased the downloaded playlists one by one. When the phone asked if he was sure, he pressed yes, watched the screen clear, then deleted three apps that would want his attention. He powered the phone off again, pushed it deep in his back pocket, and pulled his shirt down over it.

332 When he came back inside, Mateo was watching his hands.

333 "They'll stop shaking," Mateo said, voice pitched friendly.

334 Diego looked down. His hands were flat on the edge of the table. They didn't move. He lifted them and let them fall to his thighs. He didn't answer.

335 Victor checked his watch. "Twilight," he said. "We're running the route with traffic. You'll be on the wheel. No masks, no noise. If you look at me instead of the road, I'll hit you in the ear."

336 Diego pictured the board mounted by the elevators at UMC where the visiting hours had been listed on a narrow strip of laminated paper. He did a fast translation in the back of his head from that schedule to the last light where the road would hold heat and drivers would be heading for dinner or the gym. He pictured Rosa asleep and a nurse checking vitals. He told himself he would finish the run and cross town and stand beside her bed while the unit's air made his skin itch. He told himself he would make both. He didn't say it aloud.

337 Victor rolled the map again and slid it into a dented cardboard tube. He dragged a crate left with the toe of his boot and used it to reach the chain that hung from the garage door. He pulled. The metal rattled down. The world outside the unit became bright and hot when it opened halfway.

338 "Back here at six-thirty," Victor said. "If you're late, go home and forget you met me." He didn't say what would happen if Diego didn't forget.

339 They stepped out into the lane. The light stung. The air had shifted from bearable to hard. The smell of heated rubber rose from the asphalt. A man in the far lane unloaded two boxes from a pickup. He glanced over and then didn't.

340 Javier was not there. Diego didn't look for him. Raul peeled away toward a battered sedan. Angel lit a cigarette even though the sign at the gate said no smoking. Mateo walked with Diego to the edge of the lane.

341 "You hungry?" Mateo said.

342 "No."

343 "Eat anyway before six. Don't drive on an empty tank," Mateo said. He gave the little grin and then let it go. He walked off and his shirt

stayed clean.

344 Diego stood long enough to feel the sun bite through the hoodie, then stepped into the narrow shade of the building and took the burner out again and checked that it was off even though he knew it was. He slid it away. He lifted his head and looked at the strip of sky. Flat now; later it would go orange.

345 He walked out under the storage sign and turned west toward a bus stop he wasn't going to use. He needed a place to sit where no one would ask him why he looked young and tired. The laundromat two blocks over opened at seven. He could buy a soda and sit on a plastic chair near the outlet. He could call Luis from the payphone beside the ice machine, if it still worked, to ask how Rosa was. Luis would say stable again.

346 He checked the time on his dead phone without turning it on and then laughed once without sound at his own habit. He put his head down and walked, hands at his sides, fingers keeping their own count.

347 The heat rose. The street kept its shape. He kept the ring pattern, two, pause, one, and the six-minute window in sequence. He saw where his hands would be when it started and where they had to be when it ended. He kept walking.

348 At six-thirty, he would return and put his hands where they told him to put them and drive a line they had made for him. He would not be late.

349 There were hours between now and then. By then, light would be low on windshields and traffic heavy on Dyer. He walked with the air dry against his throat and dust on his tongue and told himself, *Te juro*. Two, pause, one.

Chapter 4

Planning the Heist

³⁵⁰ Heat blurred the view above the asphalt. Over the bank's glass, heat shimmered and made the reflections wobble. Two cars sat curbside across the arterial, spaced a half block apart, far enough to read as different errands. Earlier, the burner had hit two, pause, one. Mateo had picked him up off Dyer without small talk and put him behind the wheel. In the nearer car, Diego watched employees filter through the doors and marked time in his head without moving his lips. 3:57. A woman in a navy cardigan palmed her badge to the reader, the little green LED blinked, and she stepped inside. 4:02. A teller with hair pulled tight into a bun came out, turned left, crossed to the lot with her phone already up, and slid into a compact sedan that struggled when it started. 4:05. A man in a blazer locked the door with a key he wore on a retractable clip that fed back to his belt with a quiet zip. The details were the job now. Names didn't matter. Shapes, timings, the ways doors behaved, those mattered.

³⁵¹ The second car idled farther down. Victor sat in that one. Angel too. Mateo had chosen the seat beside Diego and kept his voice low when he did speak, which wasn't often. Raul was out of the vehicle entirely, two blocks down behind a bus stop bench, reading a free paper in the way people read when they aren't reading, eyes over the top edge.

³⁵² The vestibule door clicked. Diego watched the delay. Same four-second sweep on the dome. He watched the pivot and counted slow. First door opened inward on a closer, the second sat locked until the staffer's badge beeped it through. During the staff change, that second lock didn't snap back immediately. The woman in the cardigan had to nudge and then it rolled to. Three beats of slack and then the solidity

returned. Mateo lifted a finger toward the vestibule without making it obvious.

353 "There," Mateo said. "When they're swapping out, it's slow to bite again. You catch it on the slow."

354 Diego didn't nod. He watched one more pass. Another badge swipe. Another three-count before the lock engaged. Not broken. Not safe. Just slower. He pictured a sleeve caught by the edge if timing went bad. No drama in the image. Just a caught sleeve and a body pinned at the wrong moment with eyes up and alarms already deciding what to do about it.

355 Static on the arterial drifted under everything. The light at the corner cycled. A city bus hissed and pulled away and left the smell of hot brakes.

356 A bank employee propped a solid core door near the back corridor to carry a box through. It swung closed on its own. Victor's car rolled up a single car length and stopped again. Diego could see Victor's profile in a reflection. A flat line of a mouth. The watch face under the cuff when he raised his wrist. The nick at the eleven.

357 Angel got out on foot and drifted to the side of the building, crossing to cut through the lot. He stopped by the metal service door that sat down a short ramp, paused over the handle with a small show of confusion, and put a flat palm briefly to the handle through the corner of a folded takeout menu he'd picked up from somewhere. It gave half an inch before a faint chirp sounded from inside and a red LED at the door frame flashed twice in tight sequence. Angel didn't look up or back. He let his palm go. He turned his head toward the street and walked away, unhurried.

358 He was back inside Victor's car three minutes later. Victor didn't look at him when he re-entered. He didn't have to. The slight turn of his head at the next breath said he'd heard what he needed to hear.

359 "Side door's live," Mateo said, barely moving his lips.

360 Diego took it in and moved the plan one notch in his head. Front entry, not side. Maintenance cover, not as customers. The vestibule's slack mattered more now because it was the place where soft turned to hard.

361 A courier in a branded polo walked toward the doors with a clipboard and a tote. He keyed the vestibule, then had to wait while a customer inside fiddled with the second door because someone else was coming out. It made that awkward shuffle where bodies almost touch and one person smiles and steps back. Diego logged the beat and didn't attach any feeling to it.

362 Victor's car repositioned again. He had the angle on the back corner. When a manager-level man in a blue shirt disappeared behind a partial wall visible through the glass, Victor tipped his chin once. Mateo followed his line. Diego traced it too. The hallway doglegged by the manager's door. From the lobby, that corner went blind if you were on the wrong side of the service desk. Anything happening there would happen out of sight for a few seconds that would be longer than they sounded.

363 "Blind turn by the manager office," Victor said, voice carrying across both cars because the windows were down just enough. He didn't raise the volume. "We don't freelance near that corner."

364 Don't freelance. Don't improvise. He set the words next to each other. He pictured a body hitting tile near that corner if someone decided to be clever. He pictured the handle of a drawer turning at the wrong moment.

365 A white armored truck with a blue shield logo rounded the far corner late enough to matter and took the slot by the curb that was reserved for it. Diego's count ticked over its mark and kept going. He heard, just barely, Victor's curse from the second car, compressed into two syllables that stayed in that vehicle and didn't come across the street.

366 Without speaking, he recomputed the window. The overlap changed. He built a new six out of the collision of the late delivery and the shift cadence he'd been watching. In that new six, the vestibule slow mattered differently, let them slip inside, yes, but warned them the door would catch if they stalled.

367 Raul drifted by the branch on a normal walk now, paper under his arm. He slowed at the glass to check his reflection, casual, and then moved on. When he reached the far side of the lot he adjusted his cap and kept going. Over the next ten minutes he came back and stopped at the bus bench, made himself a guy waiting for a bus. By then, three tellers had exited and two had entered. One of the entry group wore her keys at the waist on a retractable clip. It flashed and then hid itself again as she moved. The reel clicked dry as it seated, and he looked to the curb for a beat. Raul didn't point. He scratched the side of his neck in a way that said fifth vertebra, if there had been a code, and Diego read it because it was his job now to read what the crew tried to say without getting loud.

368 He didn't like the recognition that came with watching a stranger for what she carried. Eyes stayed on the practical shape of the thing. Round black housing. Metal ring. Plastic badge behind it. He told himself this was what they taught when you watched a driver's hands for drift. Safety, not prey. He tasted copper anyway.

369 A patrol car pulled up at the corner light and stopped. The officer behind the wheel had an elbow resting near the window. He looked straight ahead until a bicyclist rolled through the crosswalk against the signal and then he turned his head and said something to his radio that changed nothing about where the patrol car was going. The light shifted and the cruiser eased through and kept moving south.

370 Diego ran the exit pattern in his head with that flash of police blue in it. If he had to go under that blue, he saw how to cut two blocks down, punch a right, take the median break, and set up for the longer straight. If he didn't have to, he wouldn't even look at it twice. He watched his hands resting on his knees and let them stay steady.

371 When Victor raised his hand and moved it flat, the cars eased out one after the other. No one said anything. The two vehicles took different directions at the light. Diego's car went right. Victor's didn't. No one said it; the split was understood.

372 The coffee shop two blocks away sat at the end of a strip where an empty storefront had a FOR LEASE sign curling at the corners and a nail salon's OPEN sign flickered. Inside, a student behind the counter wore earbuds and rang up small coffees without seeing faces.

373 They took a table against the wall. The table wobbled and Mateo folded a napkin, slid it under a leg to stop the slack. The coffee tasted burnt. Diego didn't make a face.

374 "Maintenance," Mateo said, low. "Southwest Facilities. Who called? Night manager. What for? Filters, and a door closer that sticks at peak." He sipped, winced. "Plain voice. No lift. State it."

375 Diego repeated the line once and heard the upturn on the last word. He did it again and flattened it. The third time, he let the words sit where they were.

376 Victor looked down at the table, not at the map because there wasn't one here, but at the space where a map would have been. "Truck's late," he said. "We move the overlap."

377 He gave times without numbers on a page. Diego put them on the inside of his head where he couldn't lose them. The paper napkin under Mateo's table leg had a pale irregular stain. Diego took a ballpoint from Mateo's hand, rolled his sleeve, and wrote two marks small on the heel of his palm where the lines of his skin were tight enough to blur ink.

378 Angel watched him write. "Ink is dumb," Angel said.

379 Diego turned his hand over. He could wash it on the way out. He could keep the marks long enough to hold the shape of the change. He let his hand rest near the cup so the writing wasn't visible to the counter camera.

380 "Window stays at six," Victor said.

381 "Make it eight," Angel said. "Late truck, traffic, "

382 Victor didn't lift his head. "Six."

383 Angel's knee twitched once under the table. He didn't push again.

384 "Guard habits," Raul said, wiping a ring of coffee with the heel of his palm. He had come in late, a man who had decided he needed a second cup and changed his mind twice at the door.

385 Mateo looked at the ceiling, counting in his head, cross-checking the time he'd just lived through with what he'd seen the last time. "He checks his phone at 4:12," Mateo said. "Same lean, same thumb flick. He looks down too long, then looks up too quick."

386 The student at the counter laughed at something in his earbuds. He unplugged one, looked at a customer who wasn't there, then plugged the earbud back in.

387 Diego let the information add itself to the set in his head. He kept his face plain. Across the small table, Victor watched him more than he watched anyone else, measuring readiness.

388 "We don't touch the vault," Victor said. "Drawers only. In and out. If something's off, we leave it."

389 On the table, the coffee ring widened. Drawers meant fewer locked layers, less time with a door between them and air. Drawers wouldn't save them if everything turned. He didn't pretend they would.

390 "Say it," Mateo said, nodding at Diego.

391 "Maintenance, Southwest Facilities. Night manager called it in. Filters and a door closer that sticks at peak," Diego said, laying it down

flat.

392 Mateo gave a small nod. Not friendly, affirming accuracy.

393 Victor tapped the table twice with his knuckles. The soft sound ended the discussion.

394 "So, " He closed his mouth and swallowed.

395 When they stood, Diego walked to the bathroom and ran cold water over his palm until the ink thinned and ran off in a gray stream that took too long to clear. He dried his hand on paper that tore, wiped his hand again on his jeans, and came back out to a room with no evidence he had put numbers on his skin.

396 Two hours later, with the window redrawn, they went to take the credential that would make it real.

397 They tailed the cleaning contractor. It wasn't a chase. Victor sat a car length back with his headlights a notch dimmer than default. The contractor turned off Dyer onto a residential cut street where the houses looked built in the same week years ago and repainted by different hands over time. Victor let him get another block ahead and then caught up, then let him go again. At a four-way stop, the contractor paused too long, thinking about something. Angel, who had slid into the passenger spot, smiled in a way that didn't reach any part of his face except for the moving mouth and said nothing.

398 The contractor parked in front of a duplex with a patch of dead grass and a chain stretched between two metal stakes. He got out with a tote bag and a key ring heavy enough to be a weapon. He locked his car and turned. Angel was already at the corner of the walk, hands visible, nothing in them.

399 "Hey, man," Angel said. "You got the time?"

400 The contractor looked at Angel's hands first, then at his face. "You can see the time," he said, but he said it without anger. He could read the rest of the picture, and the picture said, Don't get brave.

401 "We're with facilities," Mateo said, coming up slow from the driver's side of Victor's idling car. "Wrong address earlier. We need to check a thing before morning. South side branch." He said it in a tired voice, more worried about a supervisor than anything else. He didn't look over his shoulder to see if Victor liked the tone.

402 "I don't , , " the contractor started, then shut it down on his own. He had a badge on a lanyard. He put his hand to it because people defend what matters even when they shouldn't, and Mateo stepped into that movement and lifted the lanyard up and over with two fingers and a thumb. No shove. No grab. He lifted it clean off.

403 "Take a few days," Mateo said. "Out of town's better if you got family."

404 The contractor's mouth tightened. "You cops?"

405 Victor smiled in a way that showed teeth without warmth and didn't answer. "It'll come back to you," he said, lying in a tone that could pass for policy.

406 The man shook. The keys in his right hand knocked against each other with a small chime. He looked at his car, then at his front door, then looked up and down the street for another answer. There wasn't another answer.

407 Angel bent his head, a near-apology in the gesture. He didn't.

408 Diego stood a step back from the line of it all and watched the small points that made up this picture: a plastic card with a logo he recognized from the bank's service entrance, a ring of keys, a man with his shirt untucked by an inch on one side, the muscle in his jaw jumping as he tried to decide whether to argue. The sun sat low enough to get caught on windshields. The heat hadn't let go yet. He thought of Rosa

asleep with the blanket pulled up to her shoulder and the tubing at her nose and the cold air in that room. His breath shortened once, his eyes dropped, and a tight pressure held behind his sternum.

409 They left the man on the sidewalk with his tote bag still on his shoulder and the keys in his hand. He watched them drive away. He didn't call out.

410 They stopped two blocks over in the shade of a tree whose leaves were dusty because the city didn't come this way with water. Victor held the badge by its edge and tapped it once with his knuckle. "Clock got friendlier," he said. The corners of the plastic had a scratch that would be invisible to anyone not holding it close. He pictured the green blink, a short chirp, the latch letting go.

411 Diego stepped out and walked to the corner store for air. He powered his phone on for a single minute and watched the missed-call screen show nothing from the hospital and one text from Javier, a thumbs-up he didn't deserve. At the store he turned his back to the dome camera, counted sixty seconds to cap the tower ping, then killed the phone. He pushed it deep in his pocket and left it there.

412 From the storage rows, they ran the route at twilight when everything was harder to see and more people were out. The van, not the practice one with the dent, but a similar one, took the line cleanly. Mateo sat shotgun and called time marks instead of corners. "Fifty-five at the light... forty-eight at the break... slow hold at the church lot," he said, and Diego put the vehicle exactly where those words wanted it, neither faster nor slower. He feathered the brake once to keep the mark on time.

413 Victor sat behind Diego with one knee braced, close enough that if Diego had turned his head, he would have seen the watch face again. He didn't turn. He kept his eyes on the road and the mirrors when he needed

them. He let his hands do what his head had already practiced in an empty room without a map and the humming light.

414 A row of cones popped up halfway down a block that had been clear in the afternoon. A city crew had left them to guard a rectangle of cut asphalt where a utility had done a quick trench. Angel leaned forward from the second row and put a finger toward a parallel street. Diego checked traffic, signaled, not for courtesy but to keep other drivers predictable, and cut two blocks over and two blocks back in a clean jog that took exactly as long as he had needed it to take. He counted the cost of that detour and locked it in as the new default if those cones stayed.

415 At the next light, a school bus sat long after it should have gone, hazard lights blinking while a driver stood at the front with his hands on the wheel in a way that said someone had stood up or shouted or taken out their phone in a way they shouldn't have. He didn't try to squeeze the van through. He let the bus have its seconds and took the seconds into his count and placed a buffer next to that intersection in his head going forward. People did dumb things in bright yellow boxes at exactly the wrong times. The plan had to carry that without cracking.

416 They passed the diner with the neon script that blinked two letters weak and one letter strong. The parking lot showed dark patches where oil had lived through many summers. A man smoked near the payphone and stared at the glowing end, nothing else taking his attention. Mateo looked at the clock and then at the street where the bank sat three minutes away if every light worked.

417 "From the sign to the front curb, two minutes, thirty-six seconds if it's green at the church," Mateo said. "Make it three if not."

418 He added it to the map in his head. The diner would be a staging point, whether anyone called it that or not.

419 "Six minutes is a lifetime if you earn it," Mateo said then, quiet, not trying to make it a line.

420 That felt correct in a way he hated. He didn't say anything.

421 A patrol car rolled the other way. The officer inside didn't look at them. The car kept going. For a breath, no one saw them. It would not hold when it counted, but it was there now, and Diego didn't put any weight on it.

422 The van's engine heat soaked into the cabin. The air smelled like old rubber and dust and the fabric in the seats that had been sat in by too many clothes from too many houses. He held the count with the new detour and the bus delay and set their nose at the final light so the turn would hit the minute not as a surprise but as something they'd shaped. He took the corner and aligned the van in the lane. His count kept time. Mateo's call matched it. The curb came up, then the spot where a vehicle could stand without drawing attention for one wrong beat, then the vestibule glass where the slow relock would be.

423 Victor put his hand once on Diego's shoulder. It wasn't hard. It wasn't gentle. It was there long enough to be unmistakable. Diego didn't move. He put the van where it needed to be and imagined a different set of hands, Rosa's, folded in a blanket that never got warm enough. He set his jaw and looked at the road ahead.

424 Night came fast after that. Storefront gates came down. Traffic on the arterial stayed steady; from here the cars made a steady drone of tires on asphalt. They took the van back out of the line and toward the storage rows they had used all day.

425 Victor didn't speak on the last stretch in. Angel watched the side mirror and the back window the way he had all morning. Raul counted backward under his breath. Mateo adjusted the visor down to shield his eyes from a streetlight that was too bright for the hour.

426 Diego kept his hands steady. He had learned that looking at his hands in moments like this told him more than his head would. They were steady. That meant he would drive the line they drew for him, even while the memory of his mother's voice told him to run home and stand in a cold room and be a son instead of this. He didn't run. He put the van

where it needed to be and shut it down when Victor said, "Here," and pulled the key.

427 Outside, heat rose from the hood. Heat moved off the metal in wavering lines. Not enough to matter yet. He kept the count behind his eyes and under his tongue, and he knew that when he tried to sleep, it would keep the same count.

428 Victor stepped out and closed the door without a slam. He could end a talk with the way he closed a door. He didn't need to do it tonight.

429 "Tomorrow we see it again, the same way," Victor said. "No changes unless I speak them."

430 No one answered. The rule from the coffee shop held: two taps ended what needed to be said, and nothing else needed saying. They stood by the van for a breath longer than felt natural and then moved apart at the pace set by the lane's lights.

431 He set his palm to the van's side and let the heat sit, Rosa's face there for a moment. He lifted his hand, watched the skin lose its pink, and kept the count.

Chapter 5

Family Silence

432 The soup didn't hold together. It slipped off the spoon almost clear, a few noodles floating, the steam thinner than it should have been under the rattle of the swamp cooler. Rosa set the bowl in front of him anyway, hand steady where the rest of her moved slower.

433 "It's thin," she said, voice low.

434 "It's perfect," he said, and took a mouthful without changing his face. The heat went down and didn't do much. He set the spoon down and picked it up again so she wouldn't see the pause.

435 Luis stood by the counter in his work shirt with a sleeve rolled once to the elbow and the line of oil he couldn't get out of the fabric. He ate standing up because he did everything standing up when he was about to go back out. He kept the bowl close to the edge and watched the news crawl without watching the screen.

436 The red-trimmed envelope sat at the corner of the table where the sun had bleached the laminate before the cooler's chill reached the edge. It looked the same as it had all week, the red top edge visible. The scan appointment card stayed under the magnet on the fridge with the date in blue. He had stopped reading the date and started reading the way the edges of the card frayed.

437 "Traffic on the Ten, again," Luis said. Not to either of them. He pushed the last of the broth down and put the bowl in the sink without running water on it. He dried his hands on his jeans. Seeing the stain, he wiped the denim with a dishrag, then stopped.

438 Rosa turned toward him. "You sure?"

439 “I told Mando I’d cover. He did me a favor last month,” Luis said. He picked up his keys. Boots stayed off. He stood there a beat too long, keys in his hand, not moving, eyes on Rosa. He rolled one shoulder once, the joint stiff.

440 Diego pushed his hair off his forehead with the heel of his hand and lifted his bowl a little to show Rosa he was still eating. “You need me to drive you?”

441 Luis shook his head. “We’re close,” he said, which wasn’t about miles. He pulled his boots on without socks, same as the night at the hospital. He cinched the laces hard and stood into them.

442 The front door stuck the way it stuck when the frame swelled under heat. Luis had learned the angle. He lifted, then pulled. It let go with a quiet pop. He half turned back in and said, “Back late,” in the same tone he used when he was leaving at normal hours.

443 “Gracias,” Rosa said, and that covered more than one thing.

444 There was a thin echo in the hallway outside their duplex. Keys hit against something metal as Luis moved down the walk. The car started on the first turn. Headlights passed across the kitchen wall and the cartoon magnet next to the appointment card lit up and went dim.

445 Rosa stood and set her spoon in the sink. She leaned on the counter for the four steps it took to make the corner into the living room. Diego moved at the same time she did without saying he was doing it. He slid his hand under her elbow and let his fingers close where the bone rose under skin that had grown thinner in the last month.

446 She turned her face toward him. The look she gave him said she’d argue if he made it a big thing. He didn’t. He kept his hand there and matched her pace to the couch.

447 “You okay?” she asked, when she had settled and he had pulled the blanket up over her legs.

448 “Just tired,” he said.

449 She looked at him for a second like she might not let that answer stand. He kept his face plain and focused on the blanket edge, smoothing it where a thread stuck up. She swallowed whatever words she had and let her head rest back.

450 He picked up the remote, pressed mute, and left old episodes running without sound. On the screen, mouths opened and hands clapped, jokes he didn't need to hear to know weren't funny.

451 He sat on the floor with his back against the couch. His mother's hand hovered in the space near his shoulder the way it did when she was awake and thinking through something. The swamp cooler knocked once and steadied.

452 He listened to her breathing. Counted it because counting was the only thing that turned noise into sense. He let the count build toward sixty and then started again. The numbers stayed in his head where no one else could see them and the rhythm said she was here now even if the paper on the fridge said something else later.

453 Her hand fell against the couch pillow. Her mouth opened a little. He leaned back so he could see her profile better. He moved closer, close enough that only he could hear himself, and said, "Te juro, Má," and the words were the same as the ones he had said at her bedside under the hospital lights when the room smelled like cleaner and his father had stood with his hands on his knees.

454 The phone in his hoodie pocket started to move against his hip. It wasn't a ring; it was a vibration that came in two tight bursts, then a breath-long pause, then one more. He didn't have to pull it out to know what he'd see on the screen. No need to look to know who had said to pick up by the second.

455 He let it go through the first vibration and the second, counted the pause. He waited until the third hit and then slid a thumb over the button to kill it. He was supposed to answer by the second. The screen went dark before it could turn the room a different color.

456 He kept his palm flat on his thigh and stared at the black screen where his face was a smudge. His fingers tightened and stopped; he made them open.

457 On the couch, Rosa shifted. Her eyes opened to slits and then opened farther. It took a second for her to focus on him. When she did, she smiled small.

458 He smiled back. He knew what his face did at the eyes because he could feel the skin around them pull in the wrong direction.

459 “Go to your room, mijó,” she said. “Homework.”

460 “It’s done.”

461 “Then sit,” she said, and let her eyes close again.

462 He sat.

463 The hospital air was cold, the kind that stayed in sleeves. The chairs near the counseling window were hard and close enough together that coats brushed. A sign taped on the acrylic said CHECK IN HERE. Another sign said PLEASE SANITIZE. There was a pump dispenser and two little cups for pens.

464 The woman behind the acrylic didn’t raise her voice. She had a stack of folders with stickers on the tabs and a plastic tray full of forms that had squares for dates and blanks for policy numbers and a signature line at the bottom drawn too light to be reassuring.

465 “There is a charity fund,” she said. “For cases that qualify. It covers portions of imaging for those who meet the criteria.” She slid a paper through the slot and put a yellow highlighter mark where the instructions sat. “Applications go to a board. It’s a rolling review, but the typical window is thirty days.” Thirty days in a stack somewhere. He had six minutes.

466 Luis had shaved the morning stubble under his jaw too fast and missed a line near his ear. He folded his hands together on the counter edge and kept them there. “Thirty,” he said once. He didn’t ask any question after that. “We’ll do what we have to,” he added, to nobody in particular.

467 Diego watched the woman’s mouth move and kept his mind on the words that mattered. Criteria, review window, board. He took the packet because his father didn’t shift to take it and because his mother was sitting on the chair, hands folded in her lap with the hospital’s gray blanket still in memory under her fingers. He ran his thumb along the edge of the paper and felt the thickness of the packet. It didn’t matter. What mattered was how long it took for a telephone to ring and for someone to say a word that unlocked a door.

468 “Do you call us if, ,” he started.

469 “We send a letter,” the woman said, whose eyes were tired; she had said this sentence more than once before lunch. “If we need more documentation, we’ll call.” She pointed to the phone number line. “Make sure this is current.”

470 “It is,” Luis said, fast. He tapped his own phone on his belt as if to prove the number existed. “We pay our bills. We don’t want,” He stopped like he had seen his own reflection and remembered there was a plastic wall between him and anyone who could grant anything. He smiled instead. It wasn’t a smile. He held it in place, shutting down whatever had been about to show.

471 Rosa looked at the list through the acrylic. “Thank you,” she said. She reached for the pen that had a plastic flower taped around it to keep people from walking off with it, and she signed inside the too-light line with a hand that didn’t shake.

472 In a hallway off to the side, a volunteer with a badge on a string stepped toward them with a half-size sheet of photocopied paper. “Some of the churches help with utilities or rent,” she said. “Sometimes medical

costs. It depends.” She held the list so they could see the names before she let go. There were phone numbers in small type and a line that said LEAVE A MESSAGE IF NO ANSWER.

473 Luis took the sheet and thanked her. He folded it once, then again, and tucked it into his back pocket where it would get damp and unreadable by the end of the day if he forgot it in the wash. Diego pictured him dialing one number at a time, saying the same sentence in the same voice to a person who wanted to help enough to make a note but not enough to bend a rule the person didn’t control.

474 “We’ll make do,” Rosa said from the chair. She lifted her hand and touched Diego’s wrist.

475 He nodded. “Okay,” he said, and let the word stand where it stood without changing its weight.

476 The packet went into his hoodie pocket because the small plastic bag the woman offered would make a sound when he moved and he didn’t need that sound in his ears. He looked down at the floor where the mop water had dried in streaks and then looked back at the square on the paper that said DATE OF BIRTH and ADDRESS and could be filled in ten times without moving anything that mattered one inch closer.

477 They stepped out. The sliding doors opened and closed. Outside air carried heat and dust and the smell of the lane where ambulances parked. At the edge of the overhang where the hospital’s shade ended, dots appeared on the concrete and darkened it in small circles. The sprinkle didn’t last long. It spotted the concrete and then stopped.

478 A drop hit his cheek. He licked his top lip because something wet had touched it. Salt hit his tongue and he blinked once and stood still until he could move without anyone noticing he had stopped for a reason that didn’t matter in any room they had just left.

479 He slid the packet deeper in his pocket with the edge of his hand and felt the shape of the burner against his hip. The paper had corners. The phone had weight.

480 “Let’s go home,” Luis said.

481 “Sí,” Rosa said, and breathed out slow.

482 They walked toward the car. A siren ran somewhere far enough away that it didn’t change the speed of anything in front of them. The packet pressed one hip; the burner on the other. He counted twelve steps to the curb and kept the number when the door shut.

483 That night, he kept his room in staging.

484 The fan clicked every third sweep. It had done that all summer and the sound had become part of the room. Diego lay on his bed and held his hand over his face so the fan’s shadow cut the bones of his fingers into four moving bars across his eyes. He moved his hand away and the room returned to its regular shape.

485 He sat up and put his feet on the floor where his sneakers had made two pale marks in the carpet. The left shoe came first. He rubbed a damp rag around the insole and along the inside edge where the foam had worn a little rough. He did the right one the same, the movement clean and repeated until the rag picked up nothing else. He set them side by side, toes squared to the baseboard.

486 With one finger in the air, he traced the route, same size every time so the distances stayed true in his head, same as the twilight run: out from the storage rows, the turn that always looked too tight until you hit it at the line he had marked in his head with a light pole and a crack in the asphalt, the jog for the cones if the city hadn’t come back to fix the trench, the slow hold near the church lot where the bus might sit stupid and then get moving, the neon sign at the diner, pink letters fading one by one, the count from that sign to the bank’s curb at two minutes and thirty-six seconds if the light helped them, three if it didn’t.

487 He set his hands out at wheel width and moved them the way Mateo had told him to move them. Less hands. He felt the pull in his forearms the way he had felt it all week and let the thought go so the movement stayed clean.

488 Back on the bed, he pulled the burner out. He didn't power it on, just set it next to his old phone on the blanket and looked at the pair, two tools you'd take to a job that didn't need both, then picked up the old phone and checked that it was still in airplane mode. He thought about the tower pings, the way a device made a map of everywhere it had been even when the person carrying it tried to be smarter than the device, and let the thought go because it did nothing to stop what was going to happen.

489 He broke his own rule and typed a message anyway: in? He put no name. Javier's number didn't need a name. He killed airplane mode for a count of five and sent. The reply landed. He shut it back down. A flame emoji. No words. No time.

490 He closed his hand around the phone, thought about throwing it, and didn't. He put the phone face down on the nightstand and put the burner next to it, both of them dark.

491 In his pocket, he had a folded scrap he had torn off the last page of a school notebook where he was supposed to write a Spanish verb chart. He took the scrap out, flattened it on his thigh, and printed a 6 on one side and a small X on the other. Folded the paper again and slid it into his front pocket.

492 He stood and moved through the route one more time with his finger. His head ran at the same speed as his finger until he didn't need the finger any more; his hand dropped and his feet shifted in small steps.

493 He stared at his hands. Palms turned toward him. The scars at his knuckles were small, the kinds of marks you got from being a kid who helped his father with tools and cut his skin on stupid edges he should have seen. He closed his grips around air and then opened them. He saw

those hands on the wheel where the plastic had a thin texture he could feel through cheap cotton gloves. An image cut in that didn't fit here: the same hands with dust ground into the lines, a pale grit under his nails, a dry taste at the back of his tongue. He didn't know why it was in there. He pushed it out. It wasn't tonight's problem.

494 He set his alarm for five minutes before the time the window opened. Not because he would be asleep but because he needed the sound as a check. He looked at the little bell symbol on the screen that showed it was set and then turned the phone face down so the light wouldn't catch him in the eyes when it decided to remind him of his own choices.

495 He lay down and counted his breaths. He ran the numbers up and over and let them restart when they got too high to care about. Somewhere around fifty the count went to one low sound so he didn't make any other sound. The fan clicked at the same spot again, third sweep.

496 The neighbor's TV leaked through the wall in a low wash. A dog barked two streets over and someone shut it down with a word. The duplex stayed where it was, a box with a door that stuck and a magnet on the fridge that kept a card with a date written in blue.

497 He looked at the dark phone screen and the darker burner next to it. The posters were only lines on a wall. The fan clicked at a steady rate. He stayed in the bed, more waiting than sleep.

498 He kept the count. He didn't sleep. The alarm would go at five minutes before the window.

Chapter 6

The Heist

499 The alley behind the strip mall trapped heat. Grease leaked through a dumpster lid and ran in slow lines down the metal. A pair of pigeons lifted and settled on a sagging power line. Across the back wall of the nail salon, a unit kicked on with a rattle. Victor set a cardboard box on the ground and pulled tan shirts from it one by one, each with a stitched patch that read FACILITIES in blue. The thread ends hung loose, cheap work done fast.

500 He tossed one to Mateo, one to Angel, then held one out toward Diego without looking at him. Diego took it and slid it over his hoodie, the cotton catching once at the shoulder seam. The collar smelled of plastic wrap and warehouse dust. Mateo adjusted his hem and smoothed the front with his palm.

501 Victor lifted a lanyard from the box last. The stolen contractor badge swung at the end of it, white plastic with a blue stripe and a scuffed corner. He tapped the card face with his knuckle and said, "If it chirps red, you move." He slipped it over Mateo's head, set the card flat against Mateo's chest with two fingers, and held him there a beat. "No chatter inside. Two taps ends it."

502 Angel rolled his shoulders, stuck two fingers under his shirt to hook his waistband, and checked the cold weight at his hip. He kept it there all week, even when they pretended it wasn't there. He wiped sweat off his face with the back of his wrist. "Hot for October," he said. No one answered him.

503 Diego pulled his cheap cotton gloves on and flexed his fingers once inside the grip dots. The wheel would feel wrong through them, but

fingerprints felt worse. He looked at his hands and let everything else fall away. The van in front of him wasn't the wobble-sprung practice van from the frontage road lot, but it had the same uneven feel in the wheel at idle, the same faint vibration that came up through the column when the AC kicked, the same sour fabric in the seats from too many bodies. The dash squeaked once when he pressed the brake. He set his foot and held it.

504 Mateo leaned down at the open driver's window. His shirt already looked three shifts old. He spoke low. "Six minutes." He didn't add anything else. He didn't need to.

505 Diego touched the folded scrap in his pocket with a knuckle. The paper edges bit through the fabric. He kept the number steady in his head. Six. He placed the X where the exit would be if they earned it.

506 A police cruiser rolled across at the end of the block, not on their street but close enough to be a problem if it turned. Its lightbar was dark. The officer inside didn't look their way. The car kept moving and turned out of sight.

507 Victor glanced, not long enough to show he'd seen it, then said, "Blessing. They just cleared it." He wasn't asking anyone to agree.

508 Diego knew the move and didn't contest it. A car passing didn't make a street clean. It started the timer. He set that timer next to the one they brought.

509 Angel lifted his shirt hem again and adjusted the pistol with two fingers. "Sweat is going to get in the dye. Burn worse."

510 "Put your hands down," Victor said, not looking at him.

511 Victor walked to the front of the van, set his palm on the roof hard enough to drum, and said, "On my count." He held Diego's eyes an extra heartbeat and then stepped away.

512 They split the way they had rehearsed. Mateo with the badge and the cover script walked toward the vestibule with practiced steps. Victor moved two paces behind him, head up, carrying a small black hard case

to complete the picture. Angel drifted left, scanning without moving his head. Diego kept his eyes forward.

513 He pulled out from the alley and took the right that put him on the block they had claimed. The van settled into the curb space they'd marked as theirs during casing. He angled the nose a few degrees so the exit arc would be clean. The vestibule glass caught a thin smear of cloud. A reflection cut through the middle of the door where it had been wiped last.

514 Far down the street, the white armored truck with the blue shield logo turned early onto their block and had to slow behind a car making a poor decision. Off by two minutes from what they had watched yesterday. The guard riding passenger kept his eyes straight ahead, trained for it, not reading any faces on the sidewalk.

515 Victor raised a flat hand and cut it twice down. Compress. No talking.

516 Diego shifted the count without words. He pulled back on the throttle just enough for the engine to settle lower. This wasn't for speed. This was for launch.

517 Mateo stepped into the vestibule and held the badge up under the reader. The embedded LED went from red to green. A soft tone sounded, too thin to carry past the glass, but Diego saw the movement. The inner door didn't seat as fast as it should after the last employee crossed, still that three-beat lag they owned. Victor used that lag. He was already moving.

518 The crew slid through the opened door on the schedule they had studied. Diego started the count, six, and let his breath match it. He watched the dome camera's sweep slow onto the front door and then away, four seconds, the blind they had earned. He matched the sweep to his count and held the timing with his hands on the wheel.

519 First, bodies changed how they moved. Inside the lobby, a woman in a navy cardigan and a badge at her hip lifted her hands and then dropped behind a counter, legs tucked under to get small. A second teller crouched and put her hands flat on a drawer in slow motion. That told him something had gone wrong. The script they practiced wanted faces open, mouths calm, hands precise. This had none of that.

520 A red light at the corner of a frame near the manager's corridor came alive and began to pulse. Diego couldn't hear a siren, but everything moved in a beat: the strobe, a head jerk, a shoulder locking. His chest tightened. He pictured what the alarm did in the back office and in a central place downtown he would never see. He didn't add it to the count. He already had what he could hold.

521 The security guard came into view on the far side of the lobby, stepping wide with his hand pressed hard against his forearm. Blood showed through the light blue of his shirt in a circle that didn't have clean edges. He moved unsteady, keeping himself upright. Diego's jaw tightened until the muscles ticked and then released because clenching would not help him keep the van straight.

522 A customer in a ball cap bolted for the vestibule. Victor cut him off with a shove that put the man back onto the lobby tile. The man slid a few inches and stayed there, face blank with shock. Diego counted the movement against their window and knew they had lost close to a minute to that piece of nothing.

523 Angel came into frame carrying a duffel that looked heavier than it should if everyone had stuck to drawers and nothing else. The bag's sides bulged. The strap pressed into his shoulder. Angel's mouth pulled into a line, the only sign the weight wasn't right. Diego didn't need to touch it to know there was too much in there or there was something in there that wasn't money. Dye. He could almost smell it even with the glass and the van between them. Angel had been the one who warned against deep breaths if a pack went off. Diego took a shallow breath and kept the wheel steady.

524 Javier lifted a hand and opened his fingers flat near his chest in the signal for hold up, problem. He pointed down at a drawer and flexed his wrist, showing it would not move. Diego watched seconds go. He tracked it in how fast Victor's head turned and in a teller's fixed stare.

525 A bundle came loose in someone's hand and hit the floor at the base of the counter. Bills scattered around a metal footrail. The teller who had thrown it made a sound he couldn't hear and tried to scoop with the side of her hand. Diego shut his eyes for one beat to cut the image out and then opened them. Five. He put the number where it needed to go and let his foot ease the engine a hair higher to anticipate the mark.

526 A scream came next. Even through two doors and the van's shell, the edge of it cut through. Diego's grip tightened on the wheel under the glove's dotted texture. He didn't plan a sentence. He planned a motion. He would go the second Victor gave him a body in the door, even if it wasn't enough bodies. Better the van moving than the van stuck.

527 The dome camera swept back toward the entrance. Its lag was consistent. It would not save them now. Only movement would.

528 Victor hit the vestibule first. Mateo pushed the inner door wider with a shoulder and turned half sideways to stay small to the camera sweep. Angel came next with the heavy bag, jaw set, teeth showing just a little. For a fraction of a second no one was in the doorway behind them. Javier should have been there.

529 Diego saw Javier in that opening. The duffel strap had twisted tight; Javier's foot caught the edge of the threshold. He went down onto one knee. He half stood, the bag coming with him. A uniformed guard, maybe the same one, maybe a second, closed a hand on Javier's upper arm in the space where the vestibule narrowed. Javier's mouth opened in a word that didn't carry. Diego didn't let himself read it. At the lot he had

run cones with a taped wrist and still hit time. He had held his palm out flat for Diego's hard stops, never flinching.

530 Victor yanked the van's sliding door from the outside with a practiced pull. The metal rattled. "Go," he said, voice flat. Not a shout. Flat meant there was no time to shape it.

531 Diego put the van into motion. His grip bit the wheel, then he eased it; six stayed, and the window was already thinner. He had waited since the first count. Tires rolled off the curb with a bump he absorbed through bent knees. Mateo dragged the door in, a grunt working out of his chest as the seal fought him. In the mirror, Javier's shoulder was pulled back, his palm sliding on glass, useless against the pull.

532 The patrol car from the far block turned onto theirs, nose first, unhurried, still with no lights. That would change. Diego didn't give it the chance. He cut left at the intersection they had built into the map for exactly this arrival and took the two-block jog they had memorized when the city tore up a lane last week for a trench. One stop sign, then another. He used the same signals he used when he had driven his father legally to work, then dropped them as soon as he was alone on a short stretch and could gain seconds without making a scene.

533 From the back of the van came a muffled snap and then a rush of chemical air. Pink smoke filled the space, swirling where the door's seal didn't meet right. Angel hissed out a curse and coughed twice. Diego's throat grabbed on reflex and he forced a shallow breath instead of a deep one. He rolled his window down one inch and no more, enough to change the air, not enough to draw eyes in the cars on their right. Even with that inch of air, it stuck at the back of his throat.

534 "Door," Victor said without turning. The sliding door had ridden back two inches when the van hit a rough patch. The gap sounded bigger than it was to Diego. Mateo slammed it with his hip and hand. The latch clicked.

535 "Hold the money, not the handle," Victor snapped at him, the voice sharper than it had been minutes ago. Diego gave the van a hard right that brought them back into line with the longer exit line he had rehearsed. The tires squealed for half a second and then held.

536 They passed a school where a group of late practice kids stood with two coaches on a patch of grass inside a chain-link fence. Parents idled on the curb. A child pointed at the pink leaking at the edge of the rear window. Diego eased to the posted limit and kept his hands easy on the wheel. Victor said his name and a curse in one breath. Diego didn't answer. He would not let them draw attention here and be done for. Not in front of kids.

537 Sirens flared somewhere behind and then faded toward the bank. Light flashed behind them but did not close on them. Diego merged the van into a line of cars heading toward a commercial strip where neon would be on in an hour. He used the gaps that appeared, not the ones he wanted. He turned when the pattern matched what he had practiced and didn't press when it didn't. Less hands. Mateo had said that and he had learned it.

538 The first swap spot sat in the east lot behind a half-empty office strip, where a light flickered in a window and a FOR LEASE sign had curled edges. Under that window, in a slot beside a dumpster, a second van waited with a hood warm enough that the swap would pass as someone else's errand.

539 He braked into the slot and killed the engine without being told. The sliding door moved once more and Angel shoved it back into its track with the heel of his hand. They moved fast without tripping over each other. A bag thumped against his thigh as Victor shoved it past his hip to the second vehicle's floor. Pink powder left a smear on the door edge.

540 "Again," Victor said. Not a question. He watched the empty street too long and then checked his watch twice, quick. "Again. One more." Another swap meant more time in the open; he took it and moved.

541 Victor's extra watch-checks said enough. Diego set his jaw and got back behind the wheel where his words didn't matter as much as his hands. He waited for the door to shut, watched the mirror for a tail he didn't see, and pulled the second van out of the slot without touching the horn or the brakes too hard. He made a left laid out in the map, not the moment. The van held steady.

542 Diego cut north behind the office strip and took one more right to the foreclosed house they had marked.

543 The foreclosed house had a lockbox on the front knob that someone had already pried with a screwdriver weeks ago. The door stuck and then let go. The front room smelled like dust and something that had been under a rug too long. A rectangle of a picture hung lighter on one wall where sun had not hit the paint.

544 "Shoes," Victor said. Not for cleanliness, there was none here, but for noise. They left prints anyway. Footprints wouldn't last in a house that already had a hundred different prints, and if anyone came to read them, they were already finished for other reasons.

545 Angel pulled his shirt over his head and threw it onto an abandoned recliner. The pink spread on the fabric and stung his skin where sweat kept it in place. He scratched at his ribs and then stopped when he remembered the warning about friction driving chemical deeper. Diego kept his eyes off the raw patches; he had enough in his head.

546 They cracked one of the bags to look at the damage. Bills showed pink along the edges, powdering up. Dye from the pack had spread through it. Angel had told the truth about breathing near it. The fumes hung light but present.

547 Diego slipped a hand under another bag he didn't want to touch and the torn strapping caught the thin skin at the base of his thumb. He

didn't think anything about it until a minute later when he looked down and saw a thin smear of red curved across his palm in a narrow line. He wiped it hard across his jeans and it left a darker mark there that would not lift with the same pressure. He flexed his fingers once, trying to clear the image. It stayed.

548 Victor found a TV left behind on a low pressboard stand. He dug around on the stand shelf, came up with a remote with missing battery cover, and smacked it against his palm. The TV blinked and then stayed dark. He hit the power button on the set. A local station came up in the middle of a weather tease. He pressed channel until a news image of the bank showed, a shot from the sidewalk, red and blue somewhere off-frame washing the glass.

549 The anchor's voice cut in clean. ", report a security guard wounded in the arm and in stable condition at University Medical Center." She kept talking but the sentence that mattered had finished. Stable. Diego noted it. It shifted a number down next to charges that would stack anyway. His jaw eased; his breath clicked back to six.

550 Outside, a dog barked. Three times, a pause, then two. Everyone in the living room froze. Victor raised his hand without looking. Mateo kept his eyes on the TV. Angel's jaw worked and then stopped. Diego matched his count to the barks and held his breath until the dog stopped; the quiet after suggested no one had looked at the wrong house.

551 Victor lowered his hand. "Shifts," he said. "Twenty. Then we move." He pointed. "Mateo, you and me first. Angel on the glass." He looked at Diego last. "You shut your eyes and keep your hands ready."

552 Diego didn't close his eyes. He lay back on a rectangle of bare carpet where a couch had been and watched the ceiling. The texture was uneven; scraped in patches. It showed patches that didn't line up. He overlaid the route in his head and kept it there.

553 Mateo stood over the bag with his hands on his hips, head tipped, testing the air. "Team pink," he said, the grin small and tired.

554 Angel gave a dry laugh, without humor. Diego said nothing. He kept his mouth shut and let it die without a reply.

555 In his hoodie pocket, the burner moved against his hip. Two short pulses, a pause, then a third that his thumb killed. He didn't put the phone to his ear. He didn't speak.

556 Victor's eyes cut to Diego's pocket, then up to Diego's face. He didn't ask. He looked back at the TV, turned the volume down a notch, and listened for something that wasn't there.

557 "We count and we split," Victor said, low. "Diner. Then you go separate."

558 Diego swallowed against the dye at the back of his throat and matched his breath to six, steady and thin.

Chapter 7

Betrayal Revealed

559 The diner's neon washed the front glass a tired pink that didn't reach the back booths. Grease hung under the lights over the pass. A short-order cook slid plates down metal with his palm flat, practiced. A sugar caddy rocked on its uneven base and came to rest with the packets slanted.

560 Victor took the corner booth that let him see the room and keep his back to the door. He set his forearms on the Formica and did not touch the menu. His watch sat where his cuff didn't hide it, the nick near the eleven catching the light when he moved his hand. Angel took the seat that gave him the window and the lot in a single turn of his head. Mateo slid in last, a faint cologne over sweat and dye, and set his elbows with space between them, unbothered by shoulders brushing.

561 Diego sat on the end facing the counter where the TV hung at an angle that made the colors run. He studied the picture without moving his head much. The coffee in front of him steamed weakly. It tasted burned. He took two sips anyway and let it sit.

562 The TV carried a live shot from the block he had left an hour ago. Police tape touched itself in a short wind. Behind it, a paramedic wheeled a cart through the frame and out again. The lower-third read in white: ARREST IN NORTHSIDE BANK ROBBERY. Below that, smaller: NAMES FORTHCOMING.

563 The anchor's voice was measured. She said words about community concern and coordination. A cut landed on the image of a man in a blue shirt with his arms pulled behind his back, head turned down and away. Javier Solis's eyebrow notch showed when he looked up

and then down again, clear even in the bad lighting. An officer's hand steered him toward a cruiser. Cuffs clinked on the TV, sharp and short.

564 Victor's mouth barely moved.

565 "Coward," he said.

566 Diego pressed his palm flat on the Formica under the table; the cut at his thumb pulled.

567 Angel's knee bounced under the table and stopped. Mateo's grin was small, routine. He glanced at Diego.

568 "It's fine," Mateo said. "We landed it."

569 A knot across his shoulders eased and then tightened harder when he saw the grin stop short of Mateo's eyes.

570 A quick cut on the TV brought security camera footage. The picture showed coarse noise. The vestibule doors blurred open and shut. A van's rear quarter crossed an edge of the frame no one had cleaned well. Diego counted. One, two, three, four frames and gone. Not enough to read a plate. Enough to build a line on a board if they wanted it.

571 The anchor came back, posture unchanged, voice steady. "Police say a task force is forming with federal partners," she said. "Roadblocks are possible tonight as agencies coordinate."

572 Boundaries shifted in Diego's head. City to county. County to state. If it reached farther, it took bridges and airports and everything that watched the space between. He watched a pair at the counter eat, unhurried.

573 The waitress who had been there since before he was born, probably, set plates down without asking who had ordered what. She slid a check on the table and tucked the book's corner under the napkin dispenser so it wouldn't skitter.

574 "You boys need anything else?"

575 Victor didn't look up. "No, ma'am."

576 She nodded and left them to it. The coffee kept its heat without changing taste.

577 Victor stood first. "Walk the numbers," he said.

578 Diego's stomach tightened.

579 Victor let a beat pass before moving. He reached into his pocket, pulled a short roll, peeled bills in a practiced strip, and dropped them on the check. The bills lay crisp and clean, green without any haze. Not from the van. Not from today.

580 A tight pull under his ribs. He looked down at his hands where the dots on the gloves had rubbed off onto his skin in a faint pattern. A line of red had dried at the base of his thumb where the strap had caught him at the foreclosed house. He turned his hand once and studied the cut.

581 Mateo threw the grin again, smaller this time. "Hit the head," he said to no one in particular and slid out the side. Victor didn't answer. Angel watched the window, not the door Mateo used.

582 Diego stood and followed Victor and Angel into the night air. Outside, the neon colored the lot; nothing looked different. Oil stained the lot in shapes he knew too well from the tire shop, round and flattened where cars had idled and leaked. The door chime pinged once on their way out.

583 The lot felt colder than the booth they'd just left. The wind carried grit. A wiper on someone else's car squeaked once without doing any work. A truck down on the street rattled over a seam in the asphalt.

584 Victor pulled a duffel across the van's threshold and unzipped it in a single hard motion. The zipper rattled and then went still. Under a layer of bills that wore a faint chalk of pink around the edges sat thick stacks of paper cut to size. The paper wasn't new. It carried old ink and

grocery-list edge marks where someone had written red numbers once. Newspaper filled the space a payout was supposed to fill.

585 Diego swayed and steadied. The asphalt stayed flat. His vision wavered and cleared on a short breath.

586 Angel pulled a second duffel from the van's mouth and dug at the zipper with irritated fingers until it ran. Same inside. Real on top in a neat layer that would fool a glance across a room. Dead paper under it. No weight that counted.

587 Victor pushed the real layer aside. The newspaper compression showed a neat rectangle where the first touch had pressed down. He reached again and lifted a strip. The trick was clean and basic. He let it fall and looked up.

588 "Don't look at me," Angel said. "You told me to carry weight and not think. I carried weight."

589 Diego's eyes went to the strap where it met the duffel body. The webbing on this one showed no fray. The strap that had cut his hand at the house had a split at the stitch. He could still feel the sting where the thin skin had torn and gone slick for a second. He looked at the first duffel and saw the same perfect straps, new, no rub marks from door edges or a shoulder.

590 The switch didn't sit at the house. It happened earlier. Before Victor called for the second swap. At the first transfer in the east lot, when his thigh took a thump from a bag that didn't feel right. Mateo had been nearest the door then, one hand on the sliding track after it tried to ride back, the other hand free. Diego pictured the smooth pass off from one van to the other, bodies blocking sightlines, pink in the air and everyone ducking from it. A bag moving left to right. Another moving right to left. Angel's hands were full. Victor was watching the street and checking his watch twice when he shouldn't have needed to. Mateo had room. His breath caught once.

591 "Where is he?" Victor said.

592 Angel pointed at the diner door with his chin. "Bathroom. He said."

593 Diego's nails pressed into his palm once.

594 The dye-stiff seam at Diego's wrist pulled when he flexed; he let it sting and didn't rub it.

595 Victor reached for the duffel and threw it into the van's side. The impact sounded hollow and short. Empty. The hollow sound matched what they saw.

596 Angel looked at Diego. "Driver knew. He runs the gate. You leave someone, you can leave paper."

597 Diego shook his head once. He took one step back. Night air cooled his face and then dried it. The cut at his hand pulled when he opened his fingers.

598 "Say it," Victor told Angel without raising his voice. "Say you lost it."

599 "I didn't lose anything," Angel said, voice going sharp. "I held the bag that cut him. Ask him. He's the one with the mark."

600 "Then who?" Victor said.

601 "Not me," Angel said.

602 "Name him," Victor said.

603 Victor turned to Diego. "When."

604 Diego dragged the timing into a line. "Before you said again. At the first lot. The straps are clean. The one at the house, " He lifted his hand and didn't need to finish. The line at the base of his thumb did it.

605 Victor's face set in a way that made it unreadable. The muscles didn't flex. Only the jaw worked once. He looked toward the diner door and did not move to it. He didn't send anyone in. Decision made.

606 A siren lifted from two streets over and held for a count before dropping into something else. Traffic moved the way it always moved near a wide road, but the rhythm under it had shifted since six. Victor rolled his shoulders once and set them.

607 "Listen," he said. "You hear me? We find him or we die broke."

608 Angel lifted both hands out and then dropped them. "Then we go now."

609 "No," Victor said. "Split. Motor court by the frontage. The one with the yellow doors." He looked at Diego and then the van. "You take the van and park two streets off. Change where you can and wipe the wheel."

610 Angel pointed at the duffels. "What about these?"

611 Victor didn't look at them. "Trash," he said.

612 Diego reached into the open console for nothing in particular and his hand came up with a flat piece of plastic and metal the size of two matchbooks stacked. A battery from a cheap phone. He didn't remember seeing it there. He didn't remember deciding to take it. He pushed it into his pocket and it slid against the folded scrap where the six and the X had lived earlier, nothing to do with this moment and everything to do with it. Batteries died at bad times.

613 Victor turned toward the street. "Ten minutes," he said. "If you're not at the door by then, you keep moving."

614 Victor checked his watch; the nick near the eleven caught light.

615 Diego nodded. He didn't add a word. He climbed into the driver's seat, wiped the wheel with the inside of his shirt and then wiped the shirt on the seat where someone would not look. The pink smear on the door edge had dried dull. He pulled out of the lot without a turn signal and added it two blocks later where a signal looked normal. He checked the rearview once and kept his speed steady. Sodium lights ran along the frontage. The tires hummed over patched concrete. Warm air from the

vents held a faint dust smell.

616 The motor court sat tight to the frontage road, line of low doors under a painted sign that promised weekly rates and something about cable. The office window had a bell and a taped sign that read NO CASH BACK. A soda machine stood out front with letters scratched into its side. The ice machine droned and coughed once. The door to a far room was propped with a plastic chair with a cracked leg.

617 Inside their room, the carpet made a sand noise underfoot. The bedspread had a pattern that was supposed to hide stains and did not hide all of them. The air smelled like old cleaner over old smoke. The wall AC rattled and kept running.

618 Victor locked the metal hasp over the knob and slid the chain with a practiced hand. He set the remote on top of the TV and left it there without turning the set on. Angel went to the corner where the dresser met the wall and leaned there, braced. Diego stood near the bathroom where the light was too bright and then moved two steps into shadow. He didn't want the glare on him.

619 Victor didn't sit. "We're not sleeping," he said. "We're hunting. Tonight."

620 No one answered. Angel exhaled hard once and then short.

621 "We run south," Angel said. "Cross and it gets quiet."

622 Victor didn't blink. "Bridges choke at night. Cameras on every lane. Plates there and plates back. You stand in that line and you write your name in a log you can't see."

623 Diego stored that as a line he could not cross even if he had a reason. Every place had record now, even the places that used to pretend they didn't.

624 "How?" Diego asked. He meant how do you find a man who had time to step away between a check and a door.

625 "You track what he touched," Victor said. "A watch he pawned because he thought he'd replace it. A number he thinks is dead that's not dead because they never are. You stay on it until he moves. Keep lanes tight, no side talk."

626 Angel pushed off the wall. "He's not stupid. He's not going to pawn a thing."

627 "He's hungry like you," Victor said. "Hungry men do ugly math." He looked at Diego. "You're driving. You drive and you work the number. If he answers, keep him on. We move quiet and simple. If I give a turn, you don't echo it. You turn."

628 Diego nodded. "Okay." His chest stayed tight after he said it. He put his hand against his ribs once without thinking and let it drop.

629 Angel pulled the pistol from the back of his waistband, set it on the cheap table, and slid it a few inches so it rested closer to Diego. The metal caught the weak light from the bathroom. Diego looked at it and then pushed it back with two fingers, careful not to let it spin.

630 Angel's mouth twitched. He made a small sound that wasn't a laugh and wasn't far from one. "You'll wish you had it when a door opens."

631 Victor didn't let the pistol move again. He set his palm over it and then lifted it to the corner of the table wedged against the wall. "There's no cut without the bag man," he said. "No man, no money."

632 Diego kept the words with the numbers he'd been tracking since the afternoon. He had been driving to buy time for a scan and bills and a house that always needed something. The thin real layers in the duffel had covered newspaper. He breathed and let the image of the cut strap fade because he couldn't use it.

633 Somewhere in the next room a TV chirped with the breaking-news tone. Angel reached for the remote and clicked the TV to life.

634 The banner in red said: SUSPECTS BELIEVED ARMED. The words glowed on the TV glass. The anchor wasn't the one from the diner. She was holding a page she didn't look at and looking into a camera that made her eyes dull. A phone number at the bottom of the screen invited tips.

635 His skin prickled. Believed armed turned into permission in other people's mouths. It meant you moved wrong and a hand went to a holster faster. It meant a boy who drove a van and didn't pull a trigger yet could be a problem someone would solve. He tasted something metallic near the back of his tongue and swallowed it down.

636 Victor turned the TV back off. "We move before dawn. Lanes stay light then," he said almost to himself, then shifted. "Angel, you sleep with your shoes on. Diego, you close your eyes without closing them."

637 Angel snorted. "I never take them off."

638 Victor checked the latch again. He picked up the handset of the motel phone without pressing a button and set it back down to feel the weight. He put the pistol under the pillow nearest the door and checked the sightlines.

639 Diego sat on the corner of the bed and then lay back with his hands palm up at his sides. The coverlet was thin and rough against his wrists. He looked at the ceiling. A water stain had spread from a corner near the vent and dried there. Its edges wandered and stopped and didn't connect to anything. He followed the edges anyway. They didn't connect.

640 He kept his mouth closed and drew air silent through his nose. He counted to steady himself and let the numbers reset when they got high and useless. Somewhere outside, a truck engine idled too long and then shut down. The AC unit stuttered once and caught again. The AC's green readout showed 4:18 a.m. He listened for footsteps in the walkway and

heard none that stopped at their door.

641 "Te juro, Má," he said in his head, not out loud, the words the only
ones he didn't let anyone else in the room hear.

642 He stayed awake. They would be moving before dawn.

Chapter 8

On the Run

⁶⁴³ The corridor smelled like old cleaner that never left. The carpet held it, thick and faintly sweet, a film that clung to the baseboards and to the back of the throat. The door had a metal hasp that someone had painted over and the paint had chipped along the edges, showing how many times it had been lifted and dropped. A laminated evacuation map was tacked behind the door. It showed two stairwells and a red YOU ARE HERE dot pressed into the wrong corner. Diego traced the route anyway and counted steps from their room to the stairs with his eyes.

⁶⁴⁴ Victor set the chain and checked the latch without looking at it, fingers fast and exact. He didn't turn on every light. He left the bathroom on and the main lamp off. He stood in the dim and let his eyes adjust while the wall AC rattled at a steady pitch that covered conversation without hiding footsteps.

⁶⁴⁵ Angel pressed his shoulder blades to the dresser and stayed there. He had the same torn thumbnail, chewed lower where it caught on fabric. He drew shallow breaths through his mouth. The pink stain from the dye at his ribs had faded to a film where sweat had not stripped it, and he had stopped scratching. The skin was raw. He didn't touch it.

⁶⁴⁶ Diego went to the window and lifted the edge of the curtain with two fingers to see the external walkway without exposing the room. The neon of the office sign washed a weak red through the fabric. The lot beyond the rail was empty except for their van and an old sedan with a replacement door primed gray. The van sat angled the way he had parked it, nose out, arc set for a clean pull without hard steering.

647 On the small TV, a red banner along the bottom held still and white text slid. The anchor's mouth moved without urgency. Joint task force. Tip line. A graphic with blocks marked green and yellow showed temporary checkpoints. The banner didn't need the sound to read: ROADBLOCKS IN EFFECT. In the corner a live bug flashed.

648 Victor took the remote from on top of the TV and turned it up enough to catch the words without drawing attention through the walls. The map replaced the anchor. He stepped closer and pointed with the end of the remote. "This one's here." He named the cross streets, not their names but the time from the last interchange, the right-turn-only, the merge that always stacked cars on weekday mornings. He tapped the screen with a soft plastic click. "What's your count."

649 Diego set both hands on the dresser, looked once at the door to mark it in his head, and counted intersections from the checkpoint mark to the motel driveway and back again in two different directions. "Four east, five west," he said. He added the cross path toward the alley slot with a dumpster and the rapid turning space. "Two if it's open."

650 Victor nodded once. He tore a map out of the back of a free brochure with a photo of a balloon on the front and unfolded it on the desk. He used the tiny hotel pen with the rubber cap to draw a short set of lines that looped around the blocks the TV had marked. He crossed the loops with arrows for one-way pairs and cut them with an X where police would stand in the street. He ended up with circles that touched themselves and closed. He drew fast. The lines didn't open.

651 Diego watched the loops sit there and take the air out. Lanes that moved at night would not move by noon. Lanes that let them breathe now would choke as soon as the sun felt strong on the concrete. He let the picture argue in his head and didn't say it out loud. His mouth tasted like old coffee. The cup from the lobby had been free and terrible; he had brought it upstairs anyway. He drank twice and stopped.

652 Angel banged the heel of his hand on his thigh and then pushed out of the corner. "I'm hitting the machine," he said.

653 "Back in one," Victor said without looking. "No conversations."

654 Angel left and the door shut soft and then latched. The chain stayed set. The sound through the wall shifted and a cart squeaked somewhere down the hall. Diego tilted the curtain again. He counted a woman in a housekeeping polo pushing a cart and a man walking toward the elevator with an ice bucket. Angel's cap showed as a flat curve for a second and then he was gone.

655 The TV cut to the anchor again. A clip showed a woman outside UMC speaking careful words the reporter fed her. Married to the guard, the lower third said. Two kids. The camera angle widened on the family's backs in a hallway. A young boy turned toward the camera before a relative touched his shoulder back around. A doctor had said the word stable. The anchor repeated the word stable. The hallway behind the family had shine on the floor and a sign that read IMAGING.

656 Diego held the word in his head. Stable didn't erase a gun in a bank. It didn't erase a man gripping his own arm while he moved badly and a red strobe pulsing in an empty lobby. It didn't change his hands on a wheel and a van rolling while someone's palm slid on glass in a vestibule. He took the word anyway. He stored it where he could get to it fast. He needed something that wasn't raw.

657 The latch clicked and Angel came back with a small bag of chips and a water that wasn't cold anymore. He opened the chips by pulling until the seam popped and the sound was bigger than the room. He ate with his mouth closed, fingers quick. The bag went empty in less than a minute and he flicked it toward the little wastebasket by the door. It hit the wall and fell to the carpet face down.

658 Victor turned his head. He didn't speak. His look held and said more than the room had space for.

659 Angel lifted both hands, palms open, and then put them down on his thighs. “My bad,” he said without volume.

660 Diego went and got the bag. He didn’t like anything on the floor that they had touched. He could smell oil on it from the chips and a trace of the chemical off the plastic. He folded it into a tight strip and slid it into the pocket of his hoodie. He felt the weight of the burner against it. The two edges sat against each other and made a rectangle he could feel with his hand.

661 The cart squeaked again and then stopped at their door. A knuckle hit the wood with a practiced rhythm. A woman’s voice, accented but clear. “Housekeeping.”

662 Everything in the room went still. The AC rattled. The TV voice kept moving in the background. Victor put two fingers up and then flattened his hand toward the floor without turning. He stepped to the door and put his shoulder against it like the wood could lean back.

663 “No service,” he said through the door. Not loud, but once.

664 A pause. The knock came again, polite but present, the kind that meant she expected a response. “You stay tonight? I bring towels.” The cart squeaked again as she leaned on it.

665 Victor slid two folded twenties under the door. Not from the bags and not from today. Bills that had sat in his pocket folded tight for a while. “Tomorrow,” he said, same tone. “No service.”

666 The paper moved. A breath. The cart wheels squeaked once. “Okay,” the woman said. She didn’t push a passkey. Her footsteps went away in the same clean rhythm. Diego waited until the sound got small and then he let his shoulders drop a finger’s width.

667 Money moved the clock. It bought a day or an hour. It told the person who took it there was someone in the room who didn’t want eyes. It wrote a note in someone’s head for later. It sat under the door and said: remember this door. Diego watched it do both and filed it. He didn’t like

that he understood it so well.

668 The burner in his pocket felt heavier. He took it out and looked at the screen. No texts. No calls. The wallpaper was the default one with the blue swirl no one ever changed. He looked at the keypad and thought of his mother's number. He pictured her phone in the living room with the charger bent wrong from years of pulling and the mark in the baseboard near the outlet where his shoe had hit when he was younger. He pictured her hand on the couch blanket and the way she breathed when she slept, in through the nose and out through her mouth in a sound that barely existed.

669 He could call and tell her nothing and she would hear everything in the nothing. He could say "Má" and stop there. He felt a bend start in his chest. He put the phone in the drawer and closed it. He didn't let the wood hit hard. He kept it at the last inch and eased it the rest of the way. The click was small and final.

670 Angel cleared his throat. "We could ring her," he said, looking at Victor, "the girl he mentioned. Mateo. He said her name once. She'd talk to him. Or to us if we, "

671 Victor didn't let him finish. "Trap." He didn't raise his voice. "You burn heat straight to her and to us. You don't know her. You don't know if she's even real except when he needs to be interesting." He pointed at the brochure map with the pen. "We don't get cute. We don't go social. We pull thread."

672 Angel looked to Diego like he wanted a second vote. Diego had nothing to give him. He realized then they knew almost nothing real about the man who had stood next to them for weeks. A grin, a cologne that didn't match the rooms he stood in, clean shoes and lines he delivered like he had been born with them. No address in his mouth that mattered. No family story that held weight. He had smiled at them and they had let it stand for information. They had chased what he gave them and it wasn't much.

673 He went back to the window and pushed the curtain with two fingers again. A patrol car rolled past the lot entrance without slowing. He followed the headlights across the withered shrubs on the median and counted the time from that car to the next car. He counted the breath pulls between. He didn't stop counting.

674 The lights came back from a different angle. This time they washed the curtains red and blue in a pulse that didn't match the TV. Victor crossed the room without a sound that mattered and put his hand on the chain. He pulled it up until the metal lifted and went tight. He held it that way and leaned toward the spyhole without putting his eye to it.

675 "Bathroom," he said in a small voice. It wasn't a whisper. It was a word used for movement.

676 Diego was already moving. He stepped into the bathroom, flipped off the light with the side of his hand, and pressed his palm to the tile of the shower to take the cold in for a second and quiet his skin. He slid to the window and lifted the corner of the slatted blind with the back of a knuckle. The exterior walkway beyond was empty. He could see the stairs, a wedge of concrete and a rail of chipped black paint. He could see the reflection of their bathroom's faint brightness in the glass and his own eye in it if he wanted to. He didn't look at his own eye. He looked at the space.

677 A knock landed three doors down, the sound traveling clean under the gaps and along the metal. A voice said a man's name that was not anyone in their room. Another voice made the same name into a question and then into a statement. There was a required silence and the knock again. "El Paso Police," the voice said in a tone that carried enough to reach the end of the walkway. "Open the door."

678 Angel had his pistol in his hand now, muzzle down toward the carpet, trigger clear. His knee bounced once and stopped. He kept the gun's barrel at the floor and looked at Diego in the bathroom door. Diego shook his head once. He didn't let his face move. He formed the word

with his mouth without air. No.

679 Angel's jaw shifted. He lowered the pistol. Victor watched it without turning his head all the way. He registered the choice and put it somewhere behind his eyes. What went in there didn't come back out unless he needed it.

680 Footsteps moved. The voices went to the stairs and down. They hit the turn on the stair metal and the sound changed. A door thumped open at the bottom, air shifted, and the footsteps went into the lot. Diego let his breath go and it came out too hard. The sound cut the air wrong.

681 Victor was on him fast, two steps and a hand to his shoulder, fingers quick and sharp. "Control," he said next to his ear. Not a correction. An instruction. "You buy it or you let it go. Don't let it go."

682 Sirens rose again in the distance, a shape moving through radio made air. The sound turned once and came around. Victor didn't look at the TV. He checked the latch with his palm, made sure the chain would lift clean, and said, "Now."

683 Diego didn't think about anything but shoes and keys. He slid his feet into his sneakers without socks and didn't fight the heel. He took the keys and nothing else. Angel put his pistol at the small of his back and covered it with his shirt. Victor lifted the chain and cracked the door and paused for air as if he could feel the hallway in his lungs.

684 They made the walkway with their bodies angled to present less than faces. The metal rail was cold through Diego's sleeve. They moved to the stair and went down without touching it with their palms where anyone would look for prints. At the second landing a door opened and a child stood there. A small boy in pajama pants with a cartoon on them. He held a bag of ice in both hands like he'd been sent to fetch it and then forgot the task when the door swung open.

685 Diego's eyes met his. The boy didn't speak. He blinked. He looked at Angel's shirt and the shape underneath and then at Diego's hands. Diego made his hands still. He shaped a silent "Por favor." The boy's

mouth stayed closed. A woman's voice behind him said his name once and he turned and went back inside. The door shut.

686 The van's door handle felt cold and familiar. Diego opened it with his fingertips where the angle would be hard to lift prints and slid into the seat. He didn't jam the key; he set it and turned and let the engine come on by itself without help. He let the idle settle. He saw the dried pink smear on the rear door edge in the side mirror and shifted the angle of the van a small degree so that line would not catch a light if anyone looked hard.

687 He rolled out of the slot at a measured pace and let the wheels carry the weight the way they did when a person who wasn't him used them to go get breakfast. He went right at the driveway to keep the turn consistent with traffic and took the lane like any guest who had slept four hours and woke to a problem at work. The portable board sat two blocks ahead past the nail salon with the flicker in its sign. Its amber letters read CHECKPOINT AHEAD in big block letters and a left arrow blinked under the words.

688 He didn't look at Victor. He looked at the street. He turned down the side street one block before the board where there was a sign with peeling paint and a dead tree in front of a boarded storefront. The turn needed barely any wheel. He set it early and let it ride. He felt Victor's silence as a weight beside him and kept the van steady.

689 The cut street ran parallel behind a rank of houses with chain-link fences and plastic tricycles in yards. At the end he could see another corner where the light stayed stubbornly red and the cross-traffic stacked. He cut left before the light, matching his earlier count with what the street gave him, and rejoined a feeder farther down where no one had put out cones yet. His shoulders stayed forward and his hands held the wheel at the spots he had worn smooth in his head during training. The heat in his throat eased as the board fell out of the rearview and the lane widened.

690 “Again,” Victor said finally, not a rebuke. It meant keep doing that until it stopped working.

691 They drove with the TV map in his head overriding most of the street names. He took a left to cross under the Ten where the sound changed and the air felt dry in a new way and then came up near a strip mall with a faded banner where a tax place had been seasonally open. He parked behind the building where the dumpsters made a dark shape and cut the engine. He checked the mirror again for tails that weren’t there.

692 Victor took the brochure map and added a new line and another loop that didn’t open. He set the pen down and kept his hand on it. “Two hours,” he said. “Then we move.” The TV anchor, muted now, kept moving her mouth under the red banner that didn’t end.

693 They had cleared the first place before the carts made their next pass.

694 They kept to side streets until the light at the edge of the city turned the sky the color it got just before day. Diego’s eyes stung and his neck had gone stiff from holding the same angle too long.

695 The next motel had a different smell. Less cleaner, more smoke ground into the carpet and the drywall. The bedspread had a geometric pattern meant to hide stains and it failed. A window unit answered every time any foot touched the walkway outside. It was morning now but the kind of morning that stayed gray because air hung still. The clock by the bed didn’t offer a time; its display pulsed 12:00 like no one had set it this year.

696 They didn’t unpack anything. There was nothing to unpack. Diego washed his hands in the sink and dried them on a towel and looked at his palms. Tiny gray dots from the cheap glove coating had set under his skin’s lines. They had transferred off and wouldn’t rub out with the motel

soap. The cut at the base of his thumb had closed without bleeding again but the skin pulled when he flexed and he felt it.

697 Victor had the burner that carried the number for the bait on the table. He flicked it on for a count of one, two bars, then killed it. The battery sat at a sliver from the brief checks and the movement. Diego touched his pocket and felt the spare battery against the folded paper with the 6 and the X. He didn't pull it out. He left it there and noted weight and angle.

698 Angel stood by the wall again. He opened and closed his hands, not restless, just ready. He looked like he might sleep standing up with his head on the drywall if someone let him. He didn't sit.

699 The TV carried the same map as before, different anchor. The same board shot repeated with a cop moving cones in a vest. The banner ran the red warning with a tip line. They kept the sound low. It didn't matter; the message entered the room anyway.

700 Diego stood by the bathroom door again because he liked anchoring himself to a threshold where he could move either way. The window in this bathroom opened a fraction if the latch was forced. The glass was textured and cut the angle, and the walkway turned out of sight ten feet to the left. He checked the latch and left it as it was. He eyed the grass strip below the window and measured if a person could drop into the strip without landing on their own ankle wrong. You could if you landed with the weight right and didn't twist.

701 Light moved through the curtain in a way that wasn't the TV. Red and blue again, sliding without a pattern that belonged to this room. Victor moved to the door in three soft steps, lifted the chain and pulled it tight, and leaned in without looking through. It was the same posture, a shape he made with his body that meant go quiet. He didn't have to say the bathroom this time. Diego went there anyway and took his angle. The walkway outside this window had a stain near the far end that looked like a spilled drink cleaned badly.

702 The knock landed down the hall again, this time closer. They said a name that had probably checked in under a discount. They said it in a voice designed to move through doors and find ears. Boots stood in front of that name's door. A faint police radio squawk carried along the walkway. There was a murmur that wasn't a door opening and then the knock louder, not angry yet.

703 Angel had the pistol pointed at the carpet again. He caught Diego looking and almost smiled, then didn't. He set the gun on the bedspread near the pillow with the pillowcase seam turned wrong and stepped back. Victor watched it and added the choice to the other ones.

704 Footsteps moved. They didn't hurry. They went down the walkway to the stairs at the end and into their folded car doors out of sight. Diego let his breath ease but kept it inside. It still came out too loud. Victor tapped his shoulder with two fingers and left it there.

705 A metal scrape touched their lock. The handle turned and a passkey slid; the chain took it and jumped hard against the plate. Victor leaned his shoulder into the wood and kept it from clattering. The passkey scraped the chain and a small paint chip fell from the jamb. "Occupied," he said, even. The pressure tried again. He slid a bill under the door and held it there with two fingers. "Tomorrow." The weight lifted. A cart rolled on. The chain had left a mark in the paint near the latch.

706 A siren rose and fell in the near distance and then rose longer. He didn't wait this time. "We go," Victor said. He set the remote on the table. He kept the pistol in his waistband this time and didn't set it under a pillow.

707 Diego slid into his shoes and didn't check the laces. He took the keys. He made sure the room looked empty of them except for the indent on the bed cover that would settle in an hour. He put the towel he had used back on the rack the way it had been and didn't think why.

708 They moved to the external stairs and started down. The van started with a single turn of the key and a shiver in the steering column as the AC belt caught. Diego's hands looked older on the wheel than they had three weeks ago. He pulled them out of the lot and let the van settle at twenty and then twenty-five without pushing. His heart hit up against his sternum and his throat thickened with it. He kept his face still. He ran the checklist he used when he got behind any wheel: mirrors, signals not at the wrong times, a watch of faces in other cars. He watched how people held their necks behind their own windshields, who looked at him twice and who didn't.

709 The portable board sat crooked this time, one leg shorter than the rest so it tilted. The amber letters read CHECKPOINT TWO MILES in a blink pattern that was hard to ignore. He turned before the board told him where to go, into a residential cut that had church flyers tacked to a telephone pole and a dog pacing the fence on the right with its tail low. He registered the choice as survival first, not orders. He saw Victor turn his head enough to see the street they weren't taking. He still didn't speak praise or blame.

710 Diego matched what he had counted to what the pavement offered. He cut to a feeder, then into a service lane behind a warehouse where a chain had been stretched between two posts but someone had unhooked it and left it lying in the weeds. He didn't run it; he drove around. He came out near a dead gas station where the pumps had been wrapped in plastic and faded. He took a right and let a bus go first when it wanted the merge. He counted the cars stacked behind the bus and felt numbers shift in his hands to the shape of a wheel.

711 Victor checked the burner again. The battery indicator was a thin sliver. He turned it on long enough to make sure the number remained the number and turned it off again. He looked to Diego's pocket and saw him check that the spare battery was still there without touching it. No words.

712 They drove until the gray shifted toward white and the air through the vents went dry and warm. Somewhere distant, a helicopter noise held and then faded. At one corner a dome camera's red LED flicked as they passed, and two blocks over an onramp had a new row of cones. He tasted the inside of his mouth and it tasted like aluminum, the way it did after bad coffee and no sleep. He swallowed twice and looked for a place to get gas that wasn't crawling with cars or cops. A sign promised fuel at a discount. He took the turn and placed the van where he could leave without backing.

713 A county unit sat at the edge of the gas station lot like it belonged there. The car's sides reflected the blocky letters someone had rubbed clean recently and the light bar sat dark. A deputy stood by the hood with his hands on the metal and looked out at nothing. His posture was rest but not rest. He was waiting for nothing in particular.

714 Victor watched him through a sliver of window. "Normal," he said to Diego. "Normal beats smart out here. You look normal."

715 Diego nodded. "Okay." At pump three, he woke the screen and keyed the ZIP wrong on purpose so it would throw SEE CASHIER. Then he walked toward the door with the bell and went in.

716 The fluorescent light in the store washed out color. He bought two bottles of water and a folded paper map from a wire rack by the counter. The map had the same balloon on it as the brochure and a photo of mountains framed by a soaked sky. The clerk's eyes kept going to his phone even while his hands moved to bag the items. A headline on the phone's screen glowed up: SUSPECTS BELIEVED ARMED. The photo above it could have been anyone. A blur off a lobby camera. It didn't matter that it was no one's face. The caption did the work.

717 Outside, Angel moved toward the trash can at the side of the building with a white plastic bag of pink-stained towels pressed in his fist, a small tremor at the knuckles. The bag sagged with cloth. The deputy's head moved without the rest of him; his eyes had already marked the bag and the man and the can. The bag had weight and it read wrong if you looked at it with a cop's eyes.

718 "Hey," Diego called, not turning his head all the way. "Quarters, man. You got any," He held up a small handful of change like he had a plan to use a vacuum that he didn't. He made his voice careless. He made his hand visible. He redirected Angel's path and Angel came back and handed him three quarters one at a time, the last one clinking off Diego's palm. One slipped; he crouched, grabbed it, and stood in the same beat.

719 The pump screen outside flashed SEE CASHIER, the prompt he had forced. The clerk muttered and slid a card through a reader under the counter and said, "Again," to the screen like that ever helped. He lifted a printer cover and slapped it down. The deputy shifted his weight off his hood and put his hands back in his belt.

720 "Pump three," the clerk said. "Try again."

721 Diego went back out, tapped the metal above the gas cap once to feel the van and hear the sound in his bones. His knuckles made a small hollow noise. He steadied himself with that one sensory point and moved the nozzle in a smooth motion. He didn't splash. He clicked the lever into its latch and kept his back turned to the deputy without showing avoidance.

722 A woman with a little boy came up with a gallon of milk in a plastic bag and a second smaller bag with juice boxes. The boy pointed at the dirty arc the wipers had left on the windshield and laughed. Diego watched him for one breath and let the laugh pass through him without grabbing it. That laugh would meet the word police one day. Not today if the world was kind.

723 The pump clicked off and then clicked on and then threw the error again and the clerk cursed. The deputy finally pushed off his cruiser and started toward the door, his belt settling, the stance of a man who was going to do an errand for the clerk first and then see what else the room had to offer. Diego handed Victor the keys under the open van door like you hand someone a pen to sign a receipt. “I’ll grab it,” he said, meaning the slip.

724 Victor took the keys without looking at him. The deputy veered to the counter when the clerk said, “This thing,” loud, like the machine had wronged him and only a badge could fix it. The deputy leaned on the counter and started pressing the lottery terminal’s buttons in a rhythm that said he’d done this before and it never worked but they were all going to pretend it did. He asked the clerk if he’d tried unplugging it and the clerk said yes even though the power light had not blinked.

725 Diego moved with the receipt, folded the paper twice between his fingers, and kept walking toward the door as if the last thing he wanted to do was stand around and talk about tickets. He didn’t look at the deputy’s face. He read the room’s tension the way he read wheel wobble at the shop. He let his hands do what hands do when a person is not worth remembering.

726 He slid into the driver’s seat. The keys were already back in his hand. They had made the loop without speaking. The van backed a foot and then moved forward out of the spot as if nothing had been wrong a minute ago. The county car stayed where it had been. The deputy kept the clerk company at the counter and told him he should call the service line. Diego turned left out of habit and then right because the way was clear.

727 He tasted metal. He pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek and found the blood. He had bitten there when the pump had thrown the second error. He swallowed the blood and swallowed again. In the mirror, his eyes looked older than they had at the start of the week. He didn’t look in the mirror again.

728 Victor opened the map on his lap and set a finger on an exit farther up that could still be clear if the task force wasn't fast enough. "We keep lanes," he said. "We work the number in the next window." He tapped the burner once and kept it dark. "Small threads."

729 Angel sat with his hands flat on his thighs and didn't speak. He had wanted to toss the bag with the stained towels. He kept it now under his feet and tucked the plastic under the seat where it would not move.

730 Diego drove on surface streets and let the feeder road take them when it made sense. He thought about the boy in the hallway with the bag of ice and the little boy with the milk and how close all of them had been to a set of words none of them would ever forget. He held his shoulders like he had learned to in a room where a man had asked him what he was good at. He kept his hands on the wheel at the points he had worn smooth with his head during drills.

731 Heat built on the other side of the windshield. The noise from a helicopter held somewhere to the west and then drifted away. The city's plates and cameras stayed where they had been bolted. The roads bent them into loops that didn't open. He kept counting. He would count until there were no numbers left.

Chapter 9

The Hunt for Mateo

732 The pawn window held a square of dim light. Dust streaked the glass where a hand had wiped it and lost interest halfway. Behind it, tagged pieces leaned at angles arranged as a display: a trumpet with a dent near the bell, a stack of game consoles with one controller between them, two chain saws with no chains. Watches sat on a strip of green-gray felt. One of them was wrong in a way Diego recognized before he named it. Black dial, stainless band, a clasp with a small nick at the bend where a thumbnail had worried it open and shut in long conversations. He had watched that hand talk while Mateo called him hermano and corrected his grip on a wheel.

733 The van made a low sound at idle. Victor said nothing from the passenger seat. Angel watched the street and not the glass. After the gas station and the last board flashing CHECKPOINT, he kept to side streets until the awning with the rip. The portable board two blocks back had read CHECKPOINT AHEAD with the arrow blinking left, but the left lane had a pickup with a ladder rack half out into traffic and everyone kept straight. He turned into a side street where small businesses shared an awning that rippled in the wind.

734 He looked at his hands on the wheel, the dotted residue still ghosting his skin. He felt the cut at the base of his thumb pull when he flexed. He reached for the key but didn't kill the engine yet.

735 "Stay?" Angel said. He kept it neutral, a question that could turn into either direction.

736 "I'll go," Diego said. He didn't look at Victor first. He had learned where looking got him. He checked the mirror. The sidewalk caught and

reflected early afternoon light that made faces look flat and tired.

737 Victor studied the window anyway, not the object inside it but the corner of the frame. Sightline to the lot. The counter behind it. He didn't nod. He didn't forbid it. That was the permission he gave.

738 He left it idling. He slipped out, closed the door with two fingers on the edge so it wouldn't clap, and set a pace that matched any kid who needed to waste time between bus runs. Inside the pawn, the air had the metallic tang old A/C units made when the filters weren't new. The bell didn't ring; the door sensor had stopped working at some point and no one had fixed it.

739 The clerk looked up with eyes that knew the city. Middle-aged, a ball cap with a team logo washed to gray, forearms darkened by years around oil and sun, and a thin silver chain that had survived a decade under cotton shirts. He wasn't bored. He was waiting to be done.

740 "You buying or you pricing?" the clerk asked.

741 "Looking," Diego said. He kept his voice quiet, kid register.

742 He went to the case with the watches. He didn't touch the glass with his palm; he set his knuckles down instead and looked through.

743 "That one," he said, not pointing right away, making the man look at the whole strip before he pointed.

744 "This one?" The clerk tapped the black dial with a pen.

745 Diego nodded.

746 "Good time?"

747 "It's not a Rolex," the clerk said. Not mocking. Just fact. "Keeps time fine. You looking for yourself?"

748 "Graduation," Diego said.

749 The man looked at his sweatshirt, at the scuffed shoes, at the hair that needed a cut.

750 “Uh-huh,” the clerk said, but it wasn’t “no.” It was a weight set down between them to see who picked it up.

751 “What’s it cost?” Diego asked. He placed enough interest in it to sell the story and not more.

752 The clerk swung the case open and lifted the watch. Up close, the clasp’s nick wasn’t the only mark. A link near the clasp had a flat pin that didn’t match the others, a repair done without the right part. Mateo’s fidget had done its work over time. Diego felt the recognition in his stomach first, then that skin-pull at his thumb, the urge to make it a number.

753 “Hundred fifty,” the clerk said.

754 Diego leaned as if he were reading the brand. What he read was a small tag with a price in red marker and another line, faint pencil digits pressed hard and erased once and written again. 915, then a slash, then seven numbers grouped wrong. The last two had deeper graphite ridges as if the hand had been called away and come back, and when the tag tilted, CB sat next to the same digits.

755 “Cash?” Diego asked.

756 “Cash,” the clerk said. “We log serials; you paying cash, you keep your name. Not at that from me. You want me to hold it, it’s half down.”

757 “I’ll think about it.” He set the watch down with care. He kept his hands visible. He kept the hunger out of his face.

758 The door sensor stayed dead; Victor’s presence filled the entry when he stepped in. The clerk’s eyes grew smaller. It wasn’t fear. It was a calculation. The clerk’s hand hovered near the counter buzzer.

759 “You got receipts on that?” Victor asked. Not friendly. Not with a smile.

760 The clerk didn’t answer the question directly. “You looking for something or you making a scene?” His voice moved to a place where he called a cousin next door if he had to and the cousin called someone else.

761 Victor stepped in instead of back.

762 Diego moved without thinking about why he moved and set himself between them in the easiest way. He picked up a small chain from a tray near the register without looking at it much.

763 “I’m good,” he said to the clerk, sliding the chain across the counter.

764 “Three dollars,” the clerk said, and took the coins without counting them out loud.

765 “Thanks,” Diego said.

766 “Sure,” the clerk said in a tone that meant don’t bring that friend again. He slid the watch back into the case, turned the tag over so the pencil line faced down, and, under the digits, Diego caught CALL BACK in small letters before the glass closed.

767 They went outside into heat. The van sat two doors down, angled so they could leave without making a shape at the front. Diego could feel Victor looking at him before he spoke.

768 “Soft,” Victor said. The word wasn’t loud. That made it worse.

769 Diego didn’t flinch. He’d done the flinching already this week and it hadn’t helped anyone.

770 “He gave more because you didn’t scare him,” Diego said. “We have a number.”

771 Victor’s jaw shifted as if he were setting a bite back into place. His eyes went to Diego’s hand.

772 Diego turned his palm and wrote with the nub of a pencil he kept in his hoodie pocket next to the folded scrap with the six and the X. He filled the faint troughs in his skin with the graphite. 915, then the digits as the tag had grouped them, then the last two. He rewrote the string, no slash, the cadence right. Not missing, mis-grouped.

773 Angel stepped around the back of the van and squinted down the street. He had his hands in his pockets, the outline of a gun plain in baggy denim.

774 “It’s probably nothing,” Angel said.

775 “It’s the only something we have,” Diego said. He didn’t add anything to it. He didn’t have to.

776 The laundromat two doors further had an ice machine that made a wet cough every minute and a payphone bolted to the block wall between the soda machine and the sliding door. Someone had tried to pry the change return open with a screwdriver and failed. The phone still had a dial tone when Diego lifted it. The line still lived. He didn’t waste it.

777 Victor came up behind him close enough that his breath shifted the air.

778 “You don’t call from our number,” Victor said, not because he thought Diego was about to. Because he couldn’t stop saying rules out loud.

779 “I know,” Diego said.

780 He set three quarters into the slot one after the other and heard the internal gearing catch and count. He dialed the digits from his palm with a flat, regular pace, not the sped-up cadence of a person who cared too much. The ring carried three times. Then a greeting that wasn’t a name. A woman’s voice the system had provided, telling him to leave it. He didn’t need Mateo’s voice on the greeting to know he had the right box. He had the watch and the pencil and the way the air had felt in the pawn when Victor walked in and the clerk flipped the tag.

781 He waited just long enough past the beep to make it sound like he’d had to swallow first. He let his voice come out without upturn.

782 “You split paper and left people short,” he said. “You want the rest of yours, you’re going to stop making us chase you. Diner lot. Same one. Pink sign. You know it.” He gave the number of the bait burner and not

the payphone. He kept it slow.

783 He heard his own voice come back through the line, flat. His jaw stayed tight and his tongue went dry. He sounded older than he was. He hated how easily it fit. He put the handset back in the cradle without clack.

784 “Again in an hour,” Victor said.

785 Diego nodded. He pocketed one more quarter and left the rest hanging as weight for someone who needed to make a call for help or for nothing. Angel shook his head and walked back toward the van. A patrol car crossed the gap at the far end of the strip, slowed, and then kept moving. The driver didn’t look in.

786 They took the van a block over and let it idle in shade between a nail salon and a shuttered tax place with a banner still up. Victor put the bait burner on his thigh and tapped it once with a fingernail. He turned it on long enough for the screen to show signal. One bar, then two. He powered it down. The battery icon showed nearly empty.

787 Diego reached into his hoodie pocket and touched the spare. He hadn’t decided to take it when he took it. His hand had closed on it in the console at the lot and it had sat there since, pressing on the folded paper with the six and the X. He looked at Victor without looking like he was asking permission. He took the back off the bait phone, snapped the old battery out, slid the new one in, and closed it. The weight felt right again in a way that scared him for a second. He didn’t let it show.

788 “Don’t get clever,” Victor said.

789 “I’m not,” Diego said. He kept his eyes on the road while he said it.

790 They waited. They let the air in the van warm them and then they cracked the window a half-inch and Angel blew his breath up toward his forehead the way he did when he wanted a bit of air. The ice machine coughed. The board two blocks away blinked.

791 He went back to the payphone with the quarter warm in his palm. He had counted sixty-one minutes since the first call. He hung a minute back from the exact hour; exact hits read wrong. He called and let it ring twice and then he closed the line and redialed without a pause. The third time, he let it ring into the same woman's voice. He let his breathing press the mouthpiece once. He let his voice be the same voice.

792 "Diner lot," he said. "You care about your share, you pick up. Today. Shift change." He gave the number again and set the handset down clean. The payphone swallowed the last quarter and didn't give up the dime change. The slot stayed shut.

793 Back in the van, the bait phone flashed its text alert. The tone came thin and uneven.

794 WHERE, the screen read from a number Diego didn't know. The area code told him it was local.

795 Diego didn't look at Victor while he typed. He kept his thumbs steady.

796 DINER LOT, he wrote. PINK SIGN. YOU KNOW IT.

797 A minute of nothing. Then: SAME MONEY? The letters arrived stripped of punctuation.

798 YOU MADE PAPER, Diego sent. YOU FIX IT. YOUR SPLIT IF YOU SHOW.

799 Another pause. He breathed through it. He pictured the ceiling stain of the motel room, the way the green digits had read 4:18 when it was still dark out. He counted to twelve and reset.

800 ANOTHER CORNER. GROCERY ON PUEBLO. He could picture that lot. Too tight. Too many cameras on the eaves.

801 DINER, Diego answered. SHIFT CHANGE.

802 NO ARGUMENT came back in that there was no reply at all.
Then: 6:10.

803 He looked up at the early evening sky and set the time on his own
watchless wrist the way he always did, distance from light to roofline, the
color of concrete, the number of buses still moving.

804 Victor's hand when it moved brought the nick in his watch to the
air and caught light. He didn't ask to see the screen. He watched the way
Diego's body loosened and then re-tightened; he didn't need the screen.

805 "Ambush it," Victor said.

806 "Face-to-face first," Diego said.

807 Victor made a sound that wasn't a laugh.

808 "Bait," he said, and it wasn't an insult. It was a function.

809 Diego let it sit. Cold.

810 Angel bounced his knee twice and stopped it with his hand.

811 "What if he brings people?" Angel asked.

812 "Then they picked the wrong day," Diego said. He wasn't sure he
believed it. He looked at his hands where the dotted residue had worn
into the lines. Heat moved up his face and down again without showing.
Two days ago, he'd only worried about a test. Now he worried about a
trigger.

813 Victor reached under his seat and brought out the pistol Angel
had moved off the bed earlier. He held it with the barrel low and the grip
forward, not a dare, an offering.

814 Diego didn't push it back this time. He closed his fingers around
the metal. It felt colder than anything else in the van. He let the cold settle
in his hand and up his wrist. "Está bien," he said under his breath. The
weight was solid in his palm; oil darkened the edge of his nails. His index
stayed off the trigger. His thumb brushed the safety and came off it. He
didn't chamber a round in the car. He didn't make the room sound

different.

815 “Shift change is five-fifty-eight to six-oh-five,” Victor said. He had studied that diner. He had watched a waitress’s smoke breaks and a cook’s habit of stacking plates before his seat changed. He had seen the way the camera above the door made the same sweep and a blind spot sat in the overlap of the sign’s double-flash.

816 “We set on six-ten,” Diego said. He wasn’t correcting Victor. He was taking responsibility for what could not afford to slip.

817 He put the bait phone back into his hoodie and held the gun down near his ankle where it didn’t touch clothing that would snag it if he needed it. He pictured what he would say first and last when Mateo came. The words felt wrong and necessary.

818 They parked across from the diner in a line of cars that looked long-parked. The wall clock above the register read 5:24. The neon over the door stayed dark in the afternoon. The counter TV inside flashed sports at a volume that made no sense from a distance but the brightness cut through the glass. The lot held oil stains that had spread and dried.

819 Diego watched the door and the edges. He watched the small dome above the door. It wasn’t new; the plastic had gone a little cloudy and the seam had collected grit. It still moved with the tiny shudder of a cheap motor. He counted its arc: three over the door and one to the right, two across the small patio where staff went to smoke, then back. Blind at the far left for a staggered beat when it hit its end-stop and hesitated. He marked it. He marked how long a person could be in that blind without becoming a face later.

820 A waitress came out with a cigarette and lit it with a book of matches, not a lighter. That meant she took them from the jar by the register and put them in her apron. That meant she was the kind of

person who didn't trust herself with a lighter or didn't want the weight. She took five in the smoke and then went back in, putting it out with a twist of two fingers and knocking the ash into the rebar can. A busser took a break two minutes after and stood where he could lean without being on camera dead center. That told Diego somebody had already taught them to avoid being taped smoking at the door. People learned without saying they had learned.

821 Victor watched a different line. Approach and retreat arcs, where the door made you turn your body, how far you could be from the glass and still see a reflection of what was behind you. He traced lanes on the windshield with his finger but didn't touch it, leaving no line you could look at from outside.

822 "You stand here," he said, marking a spot across the lot where the camera missed for a breath and a half while it chose its next swing.

823 "No," Diego said.

824 Victor's head turned slowly, controlled.

825 "There," Diego said. He pointed with his chin and not his hand to the place an inch left where the neon's metal bracket threw a shadow no one cared about. It would keep one shoulder and one side of a face out of the dome's center even if the motor sped up because someone had touched the controls.

826 Victor let the inch be his maybe. He didn't say it out loud. Victor shifted to the spot Diego pointed and left it at that.

827 Angel blew his breath up toward his forehead again. He looked down into the footwell, restless.

828 "This waiting," he said.

829 Diego counted the dome's pan. He counted the waitress's smoke and the busser's foot rocking in his shoe. He counted the cars that turned into the lot and shook their heads at prices they had already known before they turned in. He picked the gun up once and then set it down

again, fixing where it sat. He kept quiet where it counted and let the rest pass. He felt the minutes. His shoulders held it. The training hadn't been for this, but it made this bearable.

830 A school bus rolled past with kids at the windows. He used to ride that route. Back then he hadn't thought about risk. He saw a girl's hair in two puffs and a boy's face pressed to the glass hard enough to leave a patch of fog. He watched the driver's hands, steady at the wheel, both at ten and two. His own hands remembered the rubber of a different wheel and a woman in an ER hallway saying the word stable. He sat with a gun he hadn't wanted and a meeting he would have to see through.

831 The bait phone vibrated once against his thigh: a tiny, insect sound doubled by the van's interior.

832 OK, the text read. The time repeated. 6:10.

833 Diego turned the phone off with his thumb and watched the screen go to black. He let the quiet sit in the van for the long minutes until six ten. He tracked each small sound. The A/C belt in a truck across the lot squealed and then went quiet; somebody had turned a knob to fix it. He liked that, a small noise could be fixed with a knob.

834 Victor laid out contingencies without drama.

835 "If two, you hold one and pin him against the fender; wrist first," he said.

836 "If he runs, we don't run loud," he said.

837 "If he's got a piece, you control the wrist. Always the wrist first." His hand showed the movement in the air next to the dashboard, a small pivot and a twist that brought an imagined gun to nowhere.

838 Diego took it in and put it in a back pocket inside his head. His plan was simpler because he was young and because he couldn't make his head hold six things right now without one of them getting dropped. Talk first. Get him outside the camera's center. Get him to say enough with his face and his hands that the rest of what had to happen could happen

clean. If necessary, pull the trigger. Pull it once with the muzzle where it had to be. Not three times. Not a panic pattern. Then move without running. That was as much as he could keep without losing all of it.

839 They ate because you had to make your hands do something and keep your blood sugar from falling down a hole it didn't need to. Angel brought back three burgers in a greasy sack from the diner counter. He handed them out without talking inside the restaurant. The bag left a dark circle on the van's seat. Diego took two bites and they did nothing. The meat tasted of salt and heat and nothing else. He listened to the way he would have to make his voice sound when Mateo stood four feet away and played big brother one last time. He would not let it become an argument or a remembered story. Short, even sentences. No upturn. No mercy in the middle that would cost someone later.

840 The sun moved behind the strip mall's roofline and made the oil shine. The neon tubes came on one by one until the sign glowed soft pink. The dome above the door hummed when it hit the end-stop and came back left. The bell's clapper sat crooked; it clicked once against metal. At 5:58, one apron changed hands at the door. A server tied an apron in the doorway and did it by feel. Inside, a till drawer slid once.

841 Diego wiped his palm on his jeans without thinking and left a gray line. The pencil marks held under it. The gun lay where he could reach it without searching. He thought of his mother on the couch saying the soup was thin and he had said perfect. He pressed his tongue to his teeth and found the faint iron taste where he had bitten the inside of his cheek at the gas station.

842 "Six-ten," Victor said. His thumb went to his watch without looking; the nick near the eleven caught a bit of light.

843 Across the street, the door opened and a couple went in and took the corner booth that let a person see the whole room while keeping their back to the wall. They were ordinary and tired and unaware they sat in the place where violent men liked to sit because of angles. Diego let that

be a kind of hope and then let it go because hope had not paid anything anyone owed this month.

844 He matched his breathing to the camera's pan and the neon's two-second pulse. He fixed on the door and the latch under the bell. When he stood, the bell would sound whether he heard it or not. He touched the pistol once with the edge of his hand and left it where it was, his thumb near but off the tang. He kept his eyes on the door. The latch inside clicked once and went still. He kept his eyes on the door until it opened for what was next.

Chapter 10

Breaking Point

845 The neon over the diner buzzed and then stilled between pulses. Shift change rolled past; the dome paused where he'd marked it, the same arc he'd already counted. Diego counted it without looking like he was counting it. He matched his breathing to the pan. In his hoodie pocket, the bait phone sat cold and dark.

846 The latch inside the glass door clicked once and settled. His hand drifted toward the pistol by his ankle, stopped at the edge of motion, and stayed there. Victor's watch hand moved a fraction, the nick near eleven catching lamp light from the lot across the street.

847 The burner buzzed alive. One pulse and a half, not their code. A text lit the screen when he brought it up under the window line. DELAY. TEN. He didn't answer. He heard Victor's breath change. The warehouse sat four blocks off the feeder. Ten minutes was margin.

848 "No," Victor said softly. Judgment, not reply. He didn't look at the phone. He looked at the street beyond the neon where reflections made more bodies than there were.

849 Angel made a small sound through his nose that could have been a laugh or a cough. "He's not coming," he said. "He smells the trap."

850 Victor opened his door. "We move," he said. He watched the camera's swing as he spoke. "Different room. Then we come back."

851 Diego kept his eyes on the door until the camera came back to center. He slid out of the seat when it turned. He didn't argue. Victor had already decided.

852 They cut two blocks before a message board that said CHECKPOINT AHEAD. Diego followed the back cut he had banked earlier, the one with low houses and the gray dog that paced behind a chain link. They crossed a feeder and turned into an older industrial strip where the buildings had windows too high to see from the street and doors opened only to load or to count. Victor pointed without naming the cross streets. Diego didn't echo directions. He turned.

853 The warehouse smelled of old oil even before they opened the door. Inside, dust sat on a line of shelves where gaskets had once lived. Pallets leaned against a cinderblock wall. A folding table stood near the center of the floor with a plastic water bottle on it and a map corner torn from a brochure under the bottle to make it stay flat. Mouse droppings dotted the sill under one window. A light from a yard pole sent a thin slice onto the concrete.

854 Victor set the chain. A habit. He checked the latch by touch, another habit. Overheads stayed dark. He put the bait phone down next to the map. He took it back up and pocketed it. The pistol he had moved off the motel bed earlier lay on the table where he had set it to free his hands. A spare magazine sat by the pistol, face up. Angel stood two steps off the table, his own gun at his waistband, his knee bouncing once before he stopped it with a hand.

855 Victor faced Diego across the table, posture set to talk through a report that went bad. He didn't talk. He stepped forward fast and open-handed. The slap was flat and hard. Diego's head turned with it and came back because he brought it back. The side of his face stung.

856 "Liability," Victor said. No heat.

857 Diego set his feet. He kept his shoulders from turning in. He didn't raise his hands to his face. His mouth tasted of blood from the bite he had put in his cheek in the gas station. He swallowed, and the swallow burned.

858 Angel pulled his gun and let it hang pointed at the floor. He flicked his wrist, casual. "Trade him," he said to Victor, ignoring Diego. "You want Mateo to show? You promise him something he wants. He wants the kid. He trusts the kid more than you, more than me." He tilted the barrel in Diego's direction to put weight on the words. "You walk him in on a rope. You pull the rope when you have to."

859 Victor moved his jaw the way he did when deciding whether to make a lesson. "Idiota," he said. He shoved Angel with the side of his hand hard enough to push him back a half-step. "What does that buy when he brings a second car?" His voice lifted by a hair on the last word and then flattened.

860 Angel came forward again and brought the gun up shoulder high. He pointed it at Diego to prove that he could. Diego's hands rose out from his sides without him deciding to lift them. Palms empty, fingers spread. He watched Angel's thumb, not the muzzle. The thumbnail was torn where the bed met skin. Angel had ripped it low days ago and it hadn't healed right. The thumb sat on the frame, not the safety. Angel didn't use the safety.

861 Victor stepped in close to Diego until they were chest to chest. The nick near eleven on his watch caught light.

862 "You're out of your depth," Victor said in a voice meant for the man on the other side of the table, not for Diego. "You think bait is a rank. It's a function."

863 Diego found his own voice. It came out even.

864 "I'm the only one he'll meet," he said. "You know it." He didn't look away. "He heard me on the message. He texted me. You want him at the door, it's me he's coming to see."

865 Victor's mouth made something that wasn't a smile. He leaned closer so the space between them was gone all the way. Diego felt his breath. He smelled gum that had long since flattened. He could have counted Victor's pulses by contact if he had put his palm there. He didn't.

866 Angel reached and closed a fist in Diego's hoodie near the shoulder seam and pulled. The fabric bit into Diego's neck. The muzzle caught the cloth at the pouch and snagged. They froze for a beat.

867 Victor moved for the only thing that mattered in that instant: Angel's wrist. He reached, fast and small, the way he had shown by the dashboard in the van. Angel jerked away hard, his reflex to keep his own weapon under his own control stronger than his sense. The muzzle dragged across Diego's forearm as it came free, hot metal against skin, a straight scrape. He pictured himself on the floor.

868 No one else was going to keep it from happening.

869 Diego moved before he thought. He went for the pistol on the table. It was the same gun Victor had pressed into his hand under the dashboard. He knew its weight now in a way he hated. The gun sat two feet left of the folded map. He dove the short space and his hand landed on the grip. He pulled, feeling the ridges in the plastic under his fingers, the oil at the seam. His breath turned into count. One. Two. Three. The warehouse smelled of oil and mouse shit and old cardboard. He got the front sight on Angel's chest because that was the larger thing and he didn't have the luxury to aim at smaller things. He put pressure where pressure went.

870 He pulled the trigger.

871 The report echoed against the concrete. Angel's body jerked. The toothpick he always kept in the corner of his mouth fell and hit concrete and made a small, clean tick. He looked surprised for one second and then he stared past everything. He hit the floor sideways and didn't get up.

872 Victor cursed and charged, head down, hands up, weight forward. Diego swung the pistol up from where it had been on Angel and fired again. The shot sounded like a door slamming in a small house. He fired because the man was closing and there was no space left. Victor staggered, banged a shoulder into the cinderblock, and went down. His

hand went to his side and came away dark. He grabbed the wall and slid down the last foot. His breathing shortened to a wet rasp.

873 The room went quiet. Blood taste filled Diego's mouth from the torn cheek. He swallowed and it spread down his throat.

874 Angel's eyes were open and fixed. Diego knew looking wouldn't change anything. He looked anyway for one second too long. His blink came late.

875 Victor on the floor said a curse under his breath and tried to bring his feet under him. He got one knee planted and didn't make the second. He made a sound through his teeth. Diego took a step toward him without deciding to. He stopped just as fast. His hand twitched open, then closed. Victor's hand left a smear on the wall the color of old rust under the yard light.

876 "Go," Victor said, looking at the concrete beyond Diego. Diego didn't ask which. "Control," he said.

877 Diego backed toward the door with the pistol up. His hands had stopped shaking. That steadiness scared him more than the shots. On the way, he swept the spare magazine off the table. He wasn't going to leave what he had touched where anyone could photograph it later. He dropped it into the darkest part of the corner by a stack of pallets and pushed it underneath with the side of his shoe. Deny a reload. Deny prints. At the door, he didn't turn his back until he couldn't do otherwise. He turned and he ran. Behind him, a shoe scraped on grit and a breath caught.

878 The air outside was cooler by a margin that didn't help. He put his hand on the door to keep it from slamming and then let it shut. It still sounded louder than it was. He took one step into the lot and looked back because the body made him. Inside, beyond the dirty square of glass, he saw Victor's outline against the wall, broad even now, sliding down. Diego turned away.

879 He told himself Victor was dead because it was the only way to leave.

880 He wiped his hands on his hoodie out of reflex. It made the blood from his arm and the spray from somewhere else smear wider. The fabric took it and kept it.

881 He got behind the wheel and put the key where it had always gone. The engine caught fast and then settled into that old, uneven sound. He opened his mouth and nothing came out but air and heat, his molars set hard. He put both hands on the wheel to contain it. His palms matched the wheel where the grip dot residue had worn into his skin days ago.

882 He pulled out of the lot without lighting the tires and hit the first right because he didn't need to be seen going straight. He was pointed at the diner before he let himself name it. He had made the call. He had set the time. Running with it half done would drown him. The next turn came without his eyes leaving the street. He saw a white board two blocks down flash CHECKPOINT AHEAD and he turned before he reached it. He didn't need to see it again to know what it said.

883 A church sat on a corner where the houses stopped and the concrete widened. The sign out front said FORGIVENESS IS WORK in changeable letters. Another line under it said SERVICE WED 7 PM ALL WELCOME. He let out one short sound that was meant to be a laugh and wasn't. It hurt in his throat.

884 A siren rose on the far side of the city. He counted intersections to the diner without making it look like that's what he was doing. Four east, five west, and one more if the alley near the nail salon was still open. He didn't need Victor to point it.

885 He came up on the strip where the neon sat tired over the glass door. The dome camera turned and paused just where he had written it into his mind. The couple from earlier was gone. A new pair at the counter leaned over plates without looking out the window. A bus turned

onto the side street and hissed at the curb. He rolled into the lot and chose the shadow by the sign's bracket. He put the van between two long-parked cars, left the wheel straight, and slouched enough to read as a kid waiting, then turned the engine off. He kept the pistol on his thigh under the jacket, index along the frame, safety where he preferred it. He pressed his shoulder an inch left to stay under the bracket's shadow, the one that kept one side of his face out of the camera's center.

886 He looked at his hands. He didn't like what he saw in them and they were what he had.

887 "Te juro," he said under his breath. He didn't say to who. He didn't need to.

888 Three sweeps and back. He counted them without looking.

889 He waited.

Chapter 11

The Confrontation

⁸⁹⁰ The hood held heat from the last drive and carried it into Diego's palms. He sat on the edge by the headlight where the bracket's shadow still cut the camera's center sweep, shoulders squared to the door he had been watching for what felt like hours. The dome above the glass made its slow pan, then the small pause at the end-stop. He matched his breath to that. Three across the door, one to the right, two over the patio where staff went to smoke, then back. The neon over the entrance flickered and settled into pink again. Inside, a TV threw color with no sound. The couple at the counter had gone; a bus had hissed and pulled away; the apron at the door had changed hands earlier and that shift was long gone to wherever shifts went when they ended.

⁸⁹¹ The burner stayed dark in his hoodie pocket, screen black by choice. He kept the pistol under the open fall of his jacket, down at his thigh where his hand could get to it without catching cloth. The scrape on his forearm from Angel's muzzle had dried and stiffened; each time he straightened it pulled skin. He didn't rub it or touch his face where the warehouse slap had left heat. He sat and counted the dome's pass and let the numbers still his mouth.

⁸⁹² Headlights showed at the lot's far end before he let himself see them. He had known from the quiet curve of the street that they would appear. The car came in low and smooth, tires tracking the cleanest arc with a practiced line. Silver, two doors, familiar stance on the springs. The same coupe that had cut into the salvage yard late. It rolled into the space Diego had expected, front three-quarters to him so the driver could angle a look across the lot while keeping the exit open. A habit born of

small, fast exits.

893 Mateo let the engine idle a second longer than needed and then cut it. The dome above the diner swept and hesitated. The coupe's door opened without a sound Diego could hear over the unit's hum inside. Mateo stepped out with both hands already up by his chest in open show, fingers loose. The grin sat where it always sat. Not big, not for a camera. Present. It didn't reach his eyes.

894 Diego slid off the hood and kept his weight soft on landing so the van didn't creak. He put space between the pistol and sightlines. He kept his hands neutral and empty, not inviting a case to be made on a tape he couldn't see. He met Mateo halfway between cars. Oil marked the concrete under their feet; old arcs where someone had spun a wheel and someone else had mopped with a bucket that wasn't clean.

895 "Alone," Mateo said, as observation and test. He tilted his chin toward the van and toward the diner door without moving anything else. His shoes were clean. He always kept the white edges clean.

896 "Like we said," Diego answered. His voice came out even. He didn't force it down; he didn't let it rise. He listened to his own voice and kept it there.

897 "You turned the phone off," Mateo said. "Good boy." He smiled wider then toned it down. He tapped two fingers against his thigh twice. "You make me change spots, and you stand here like a statue. I thought Victor had you in his pocket."

898 Diego didn't follow the bait in the name. He kept Mateo's shoulders and wrists inside his view. The coupe's interior smelled faintly of cologne through the open door, something light that didn't belong in lots like this and lingered. Diego's hands wanted to tremble. They didn't. He kept them still where Mateo could see them and where the camera would not have a clear front shot if it hit the center while they spoke.

899 "Where are the bags," Diego said.

900 Mateo tilted his head a fraction. “Straight to business. Growth.” He looked around the empty lot and the strip across the road. A portable message board two blocks down still threw a slow CHECKPOINT AHEAD in amber letters, even if it faced a road nobody here took at this hour. “You’re going to hand me what’s mine,” he said. “You’re going to tell your cousin you tried. And then you’re going to disappear, because if you don’t, Victor will put you in the ground in a week and eat lunch after.”

901 Diego didn’t explain the warehouse. He watched the breath move under Mateo’s shirt, a small lift, then fall. He watched the way Mateo’s fingers flexed with each sentence and then reset. “The bags,” he said again.

902 Mateo made a small noise in his throat that could have been a laugh or the start of a cough. “You should have stayed a driver,” he said. “Six minutes. Hands on the wheel. A good boy.” He took one step closer, inside arm’s length like he was going to put a hand on Diego’s shoulder and make it a lesson. “You’re too soft, kid.” His voice dropped as if to protect a secret. “You think you can talk me into a split? You’re late. It’s done.”

903 He leaned forward and searched Diego’s face for fear. Diego let him look. He didn’t give him what he was shopping for. Mateo’s grin faltered just at the corners. It came back. “This is what happens,” Mateo went on, knowing he had already won and couldn’t stop saying so. “You tell me where the others are. You walk away breathing. Or you play soldier and I put you down in front of your diner. Which headline you want?”

904 Diego kept his eyes on him and only him. Victor with his jaw set in the warehouse. Angel on the floor. Angel’s toothpick clicking once. Luis writing numbers in a notebook with the TV muted so Rosa could rest. Rosa’s hand warm under a thin hospital blanket. The word stable. The word stable meant she still breathed. The rest came down to this and this alone. “The bags,” he said one more time.

905 This time Mateo laughed. He showed his teeth, all of them, quick and then gone. He stepped back a half pace and cut his eyes toward the coupe. “Then I guess not,” he said. He spread his fingers as if to say look how empty these hands are and turned his back.

906 Diego’s hand shifted an inch toward the gun and stopped. The dome camera at the door reached its end and hung a beat, then swept right. Mateo walked to the driver’s door at the same pace he’d approached the salvage yard the first day, easy, at his own pace. He got in. He didn’t look back. The engine caught and hummed. He let the car roll toward the exit that kept his angle to the street clean.

907 Diego stood still and made himself hold that choice. His shoulders stayed tight. The taillights slid toward the curb cut. The coupe cleared the shadow. It turned right without a signal and the glow disappeared behind the low building with the rent sign taped to its window. The sound thinned and then stopped.

908 He went to the edge of the lot and stood by the curb where the concrete met the short gutter. The portable board down the block announced its checkpoint to nobody at all. Inside the diner somebody moved a chair, a leg scraping on cracked tile. He breathed in on four, out on four, then on six, then on eight, and the counting landed with no change. His hands hung in front of him inside his jacket and he held them there, palms facing each other as if to measure something he couldn’t measure. Still. They were still.

909 He pictured the next week with Mateo moving through it. The pawn shop, the watch under glass with a tag that had given up a number even with the clerk watching. The way a person like Mateo used numbers and people and rooms and never thought about the part where someone ended up on a slab and someone else made coffee in a kitchen that wasn’t going to get cleaned today. He could see Mateo’s clean shoe putting a shoulder against the Alvarez front door because a knock hadn’t worked, Rosa on the couch, Luis shifting to cover the space with his body and no weapon that made any difference. He kept that picture until his teeth

pressed and his shoulders pulled tight.

910 The TV inside the diner flashed a red bar that slid under a talking head, the words in white along the bottom ran left to right in a crawl. The sound was down but the caption read adolescent suspect and then a number to call under the tip line graphic. His breath count clipped and reset; his finger pads went tight and then eased. He swallowed; it scratched.

911 Angel falling. Victor's breathing. The scrape of a shoe in dust on concrete. The way Victor had said Control. Diego rubbed his thumb against his forefinger once and the gun oil that had lived there since the warehouse came back in his nose. Leaving Mateo breathing, this felt the same as leaving that spare magazine in the room. A wrongness you didn't get to edit out later.

912 He reached his hand down to where the pistol sat and set his fingers on the frame without moving anything. He didn't wrap the grip; he didn't chamber anything; he had done what had to be done in the warehouse. He let his thumb rest near the safety, where he preferred it, and he made the decision with his hand touching the thing that would carry it. Pain now. Not fear every day.

913 He walked back along the lot edge to the curb cut and stood in the channel where a car had to line up before it kissed the street. The neon flickered once and returned. The dome above the door swept and paused. Diego didn't shake. He felt the scrape on his arm and the heat where Victor's hand had landed earlier. He let each signal mark time and then go.

914 Headlights came back from the same street where the coupe had gone two minutes before. Not fast, not trying to be quiet, just here again. A loop to check the angles.

915 The coupe slowed inside the lot entrance and rolled until the nose lined with the curb cut, driver's side facing Diego. The window buzzed down three inches and then four. The dome at the door hung at its

end-stop; the bracket shadow covered his chest. He'd clicked the safety off when the headlights turned in. Mateo leaned into the space he had made and let the grin return to full. "You think I don't see you?" he said, low enough that the lip of the door would eat half the sound.

916 Diego didn't wait for the rest. He brought the pistol up from his thigh in one motion. Elbows in. Front sight on the window seam. Mateo's eyes altered by a fraction. Diego held. He pressed. The shot cracked in the open lot and the glass shattered, fragments peppered the seat and asphalt. The slide cycled. Recoil into his hand. He kept his wrist locked, the same tension he'd drilled with dry draws. The muzzle came back down without swinging.

917 Mateo's hands reflexed open and then dropped. No drama. No arc. A wrist hit fabric. No blink. No lift at the ribs. His head fell to his shoulder and then forward so that Diego could not see his mouth without moving closer. He stayed where he was for a count that belonged to no one but him and made himself look until he knew what he had done was complete.

918 There was no one at the door. An empty doorway didn't change what came next. The bus boy who had smoked by the rebar can earlier was somewhere on the other side of the wall washing something metal. Closer to the door, a chair leg scraped once and stopped. The portable sign down the block blinked the same message as before. A patrol car passed an intersecting street two blocks away without turning. Inside, a plate hit a rack and the compressor kicked and steadied.

919 Diego lowered the pistol a few inches, not all the way down, and moved around the front of the coupe to the passenger side. The handle was clean and smooth under his palm. He opened the door without swinging it wide. The interior light flicked on, weak and warm, not helpful. Two duffels in the back seat, one stiffer than the other, both with straps that had real wear. When he put his fingers under the near strap and lifted, the weight pulled at arm and back at once.

920 He slid the first bag free, careful not to drag it along the center console. A strap lip caught; he lifted it free. Something rattled under the seat that had nothing to do with him and he didn't check. He balanced the bag against his thigh and closed the passenger door with a firm press from nearer the latch so the edge wouldn't bounce and call attention.

921 Through the driver's glass that wasn't there, Mateo's hand lay on the edge of the seat, loose. Blood had already started to pattern the shirt. It was night. No one was at the door. He took the second duffel and heaved it against his body so the strap wouldn't cut deeper into his palm.

922 The van's sliding door had that thing where it could ride back and not seat unless you told it to. He brought the first duffel to the rear, opened the cargo door he had left unlatched a setting, and lifted the bag into the empty space. Pink chalk dusted the edges of some stacks under the zipper. Faint. Old. The kind that rubbed onto fingers when you counted out loud and wouldn't show unless someone was looking. He set the second duffel on top and moved both into the corner where a look in the window from passing eyes would make them an anonymous dark.

923 He closed the door and set his palm flat against the metal. The heat had drained off the panel but he could still feel the faint vibration of the engine settling. He held it for one long second and removed his hand. He went back around the van and slipped into the driver's seat and pulled the door without a slam. He set the pistol down near his ankle again and let it rest where it had, in the quiet near the mat.

924 He started the engine. At idle, it held its old unevenness, a small shiver when the air kicked and then stopped. He checked his mirrors without looking at himself. He watched the street one direction and then the other. He waited through one camera sweep and then pulled out of the lot at a normal pace.

925 He did not look into the coupe again. Looking again would change nothing. He eased toward the intersection and took a right instead of a left because he had marked a cut there earlier that bled into back streets

where houses sat low and dogs paced chain link and only regular cars passed. He held his speed under the limit by two and then by one when a light blinded white and blue across a shopping center half a mile away and rolled back to darkness.

926 He passed closed shops and a corner dome whose LED sat dark, keeping his face low. He touched the burner in his pocket with the back of his hand and didn't bring it out. He didn't need it on. He left it dark and followed the map in his head toward the warehouses and the frontage road.

927 The church's sign caught his headlights: FORGIVENESS IS WORK. Under it, SERVICE WED 7 PM ALL WELCOME. His throat closed and then opened. He didn't make a sound. He kept the van in his lane and rolled past without coming off the gas.

928 He turned under the interstate where pillars had been tagged. He took the feeder toward where warehouses thinned and scrub showed through gravel at the edges. He didn't have a shovel in the van. He knew which lot he would hit next because he had seen one leaning tool rack near a fence earlier that day when he had not known he would need it. The rack would be there or it wouldn't. He carried two duffels that would draw eyes all day and all night. He would fix that before a sun he did not want to see found him.

929 He swallowed and tasted iron and dust. His hands held the wheel in the trained way he had been taught to hold it, small motion, no swing. He kept his eyes on the road. The van hummed. The city fell behind.

930 He turned toward the long dark where the frontage cut away from the lanes that everyone else used at this hour. He set a mark in his head: a rusted signpost with no sign, a low wall built for a neighborhood that had never gone up, a cluster of mesquite standing where nobody had planted anything. He had said Te juro already. He didn't say it again.

931 A helicopter pushed air somewhere he could not see and then drifted away. The road widened for a truck pullout and then narrowed.

He kept his speed where any bored deputy would mark it and let him go. He had the money and the job to hide it.

932 He put his palm flat on the wheel. No tremor. He trusted the map in his head and the engine he could hear. He stayed quiet. He counted a breath and then another and let the count fade, leaving room for the turn where the frontage narrowed, for the wash opening, for the duffels and the sound that real weight makes when it changes hands.

Chapter 12

The Money in the Desert

933 He stayed with the feeder road because it carried him out without asking questions. The pillars under the interstate had fresh paint layered over old tags that still showed through in little hard ridges. The van's idle held its uneven buzz when the air kicked and stopped. He kept the speed where a bored deputy would wave him past without marking the plate. On the right, warehouse fronts fell away one by one until scrub pushed up through gravel at the edges and unlit lots took the place of glass.

934 He took the cut he had written into his head earlier. A tool place squatted behind a chain-link fence hung with a sun-faded tarpaulin that used to advertise roofing nails. Beyond the fence, a rack leaned against posts that slanted toward the ground. Shovels and rakes sat in the rack, some bent at the neck where metal met wood, all with handles that had seen rain and heat.

935 He nosed the van in with the lights low and rolled to a stop where the bumper lined with a plywood pallet. One camera dome watched the office door from a crooked mount. Its lens was pointed down toward the handle and a coil of extension cord on the concrete. No light burned behind the plexiglass. He stepped out and stood a second with the door open, listening for a dog, for anyone. Nothing moved but a scrap of plastic flipping in a gust.

936 He moved quick and plain, not sneaking, and took the first shovel his hand found that didn't flex under a test. The handle was splintered an inch below the D-grip. The steel had a wobble where the rivets set, but the edge was sound. He closed the van's sliding door with a smooth press, no slam. Back behind the wheel, he kept the line steady as he pulled out. A

green-striped Border Patrol truck rolled past on the opposite lane, high beams flat. He kept one under and his face toward the road, eyes on the lane markers that flashed out and in again under the light wash. The truck did not slow. He let the air in his chest leave and then fill again in a measured count that never made it to ten.

937 A rusted post without a sign marked the turn he wanted. He took it without braking hard. He switched the headlights off before the tires left asphalt. Tires bumped across the lip of dried clay. He felt the undercarriage rock, kept it slow, and held the wheel with small motions so the van didn't yaw into the ruts. He had been on this cut with his father once when he was thirteen. Luis had said watch the ruts, not the horizon, and had set his hand lightly on the kid's wrist to steady it. He tasted dust now and held that instruction the same way he held the wheel.

938 He reached a place where mesquite leaned toward a shallow wash and a low wall for a never-built neighborhood showed pale in the dark. The idle buzzed in the steering column. He cut the engine and listened. No sound answered but a freeway hush so far away it felt like memory. The odor in the cab shifted to old fabric and the faint oil that lived under the seats. He sat one more second with both hands on the wheel and then let go.

939 Outside, the air was dry enough that his teeth flashed cold in his mouth when he drew breath. The sky above the interstate glow was not black so much as used up. He slid the rear hatch and the light inside came on with a low, dull tone that didn't carry. The two duffels sat in the back corner where he had wedged them with other dark shapes so that anyone glancing in through glass would see nothing that read as money. The fabric showed wear from years of being thrown down and picked up. Straps were rough where they rubbed skin. He hooked a hand through the nearest strap and felt the immediate drag through his shoulder.

940 He lowered the first bag to the ground and then the second. The pink chalk along the edges of some stacks had dusted into the zipper teeth where handling had ground it into the weave. He looked up and fixed the

angle of the van to the wash line. The right headlight pointed at the nearest mesquite's triple stem. The rusted post sat just off the driver-side mirror's outer edge when he leaned into it. He had a map in his head he didn't want to draw again.

941 He took the shovel and walked the few paces to where the mesquite cast a minor relief against wind tracks at the wash edge. Before he committed to metal, he knelt and pulled a flat piece of limestone from packed soil. He set the stone edge against the crust and pried. The desert was not a yard. The surface gave in hard flakes. His first lever caught and snapped against a rock below. Pain ran under his thumbnail when the stone slipped. When he set the rock aside, blood sat under the nail and at the cuticle in a thin crescent. He wiped it on his jeans and tasted grit between his teeth.

942 He stepped back and put the shovel's blade into the scabbed earth with weight and both hands. The first thrust skittered. The second found purchase. The third carried a scrape through something harder. He set his foot on the step, leaned, and put his back into it. The handle flexed, the wobble in the head squeaking at the rivets. Keeping a rhythm, he stayed there. Working, he didn't think of time. He pushed until he had a rectangle big enough to take one bag and then pushed until it would take two without splitting wide when he covered them.

943 Once the hole was the shape he could use, he dragged the nearest duffel over the lip and pulled the zipper. The smell at first draw was ink and the dry, sharp thing left by the dye pack even after days. He pulled stacks with two hands and lowered them in a layer, then another, then another, until the first bag had given up a tight grid at the bottom. In the low light, the faces on the bills were just pattern. Pink dust sat at some edges. He kept his breath short over the hole and let each layer settle without lifting dust into his mouth.

944 He reached for the second duffel and worked the zipper slower in case the sound carried. The money came out heavier at the start. Another layer went in. He did not count. No guessing at the amount. He noticed

one strap end with a hard edge where old plastic had cracked and gone rigid, the same strap edge that had cut his palm at the foreclosed house. He put that detail down as something that had already happened and kept moving.

945 When the hole was full, he pulled soil in from the sides. He broke the crust into small pieces as he moved it so it would reseal in a way that didn't look like a trap set the day before. Stones went back where they had been. He spread mesquite litter and a couple of dry twigs across the surface and then knelt and pressed both hands flat against the mound to pack it. Heat from his palms came back at him off the ground. He kept them there a second longer than he had to.

946 He didn't speak.

947 He stood and checked his work. The ground read as rough desert again, not as a fresh place that someone had torn open. He stepped in long back strides to break any clean outline his shoes had cut into the dirt. The steps felt theatrical and thin. He wished for a gallon to wash the marks. The desert kept its water. Good. He did them anyway until his heels touched the wash lip.

948 No reason to leave cloth that carried other people's hands where dawn could find it. He took the empty bags back to the shovel and opened another cut a few yards down behind a screen of thorn. This one did not need to be as careful. He put both duffels into it and pulled dirt over them until the fabric disappeared, to keep fibers off the van, and the surface was pitted by his shovel's edge and then not pitted at all. The mound held. Time to go. He carried the shovel back to the van and slid it inside under the remaining dark shapes. He stood with the door open long enough to let the small light cut off.

949 The wash was still. He listened for anything close; only the far hiss of traffic.

950 He got behind the wheel and sat with his hands at ten and two until his pulse lowered. Easing forward with the lights still dead, he let

the tires find the rut they had made coming in. He bumped up to the lip of asphalt and only then switched the lights on. The sudden light hit the windshield; his pupils tightened; glare showed on the dash. He kept his speed steady and small as the tires warmed back onto smooth surface.

951 A billboard ahead burned at full night brightness, a smiling man in a suit holding up two fingers over a promise in English and Spanish: NO FEE UNLESS WE WIN. His mouth set without words and he moved under it without looking up again.

952 He passed a corner where a dog crossed with ribs showing and a steady head. The animal cleared the lane, paused, and then disappeared into the shadow of a chain-link yard where a swing sat still. Two blocks later, under a bus shelter light, a man and a woman argued in low tones with hands kept tight to their sides. The woman shook her head. The man stared at his shoes and then at nothing. The shelter's plexiglass had a crack up the middle with clear tape over it that had picked up dirt along the edge.

953 He avoided the main crossings. He let amber turn green without pushing the line. The portable sign that had said CHECKPOINT AHEAD earlier in the night didn't show on these streets. He took a last cut that ran parallel to Dyer, parked in shadow two blocks off his duplex, and sat so the engine's shake could settle into the kind of quiet his house made through thin walls.

954 He checked the rear. No shapes back there now. The place where the duffels had ridden looked wrong in its emptiness. He reached down, slid the pistol farther under the seat until cloth took it, and left it there. Let them find it there.

955 On the walk home, he kept his hands in his sweatshirt pocket and his eyes up. The night had the dry crawl on skin that came before sun if wind didn't bring dust in early. He made a regular pace past the neighbor's El Camino with the primed quarter panel and up the little path where crabgrass had never given up.

956 The front door stuck the way it always did. He lifted and pulled. The bolt slid and the door came in a half inch and then opened all the way. He stood in the kitchen doorway with the key still in his hand. His fingers hummed under the nails and stung where the shovel handle had chewed them. He flexed them once and then closed his fingers around the key again.

957 The swamp cooler clicked and knocked. The TV was off but the neighbor's news came through the wall soft and clipped. He took two steps and saw the couch. A blanket lay loose, not folded. From the bedroom down the short hall, a breath that had pace and strength came and went. He went just far enough to see the doorway. His mother slept facing the wall, hair tied back under a scarf. The IV had been gone for days, but he still saw the clear line, the tape, the bruised places where nurses had gone looking.

958 He set the key on the counter and sat on the couch facing the front door. He gave the room a minute. The stove clock blinked 4:52. The cooler, the breath from the other room, the little click in the kitchen when the fridge kicked on and then back off. He put his hands on his knees because putting them together made them look like prayer and he wasn't going to ask for anything he wasn't already doing.

959 Grit lay under his nails. Dust dried on his tongue. There was no more weight in the van, and his hands were empty. The cooler clicked again, his mother breathed steady down the hall, and his jaw held. Waiting in quiet wasn't going to change what came next.

960 The morning ahead was set. He would lift the door when his father came back from the early shift or when he got up slow because he slept at home when they let him. Words would come without hurry and without excuse. He would take whatever came next as his. Then he would go tell a uniform the rest because anything else would poison the air his mother was breathing.

961 He pressed his palms together once and felt the grit at the heel of his hand grind into the other one. Then he let them come apart and put them flat on his thighs. He watched the door and let the light in the window over the sink shift to the gray that came before the sun. The room shifted toward blue for a while. He kept his eyes open through it.

962 He fixed on a mark on the far wall where a picture had once hung and the sun had burned a lighter rectangle into the paint. On this floor, he had once sat with the TV muted so his mother could sleep, counting her breaths without meaning to. He made a count now and let it go before it could fix into anything.

963 The house held. The cooler knocked. The blue deepened and then thinned. In the room down the hall, his mother's breathing altered a little the way it does when sleep moves. He sat and watched the door and didn't move, and when his throat tightened and opened, he let it pass.

964 He didn't repeat himself. He had already said it.

965 He waited for enough light to speak without a tremor.

Chapter 13

The Confession

966 The cooler knocked once, twice, the way it did when the air shifted before the sun warmed the room. The stove clock blinked 4:58, then held 4:59 for long enough that he thought it had stopped. He sat where he had been sitting, on the couch turned toward the door, hands flat on his thighs to keep them from the old prayer posture. The key he had set on the counter sat where he had left it, a little bright edge catching whatever light the window gave it.

967 The front lock turned and the long bolt slid. Luis pushed the door in with the same lift Diego had used. He came in quiet, boots on the mat, shoulders hunched from the belt and from everything else, then he straightened that last inch because he was in the room with his son. Diesel and cold air came with him and then thinned, leaving the house smell, cooler damp, old coffee in the sink, something faint from the fridge. He set his cap on the hook and looked once down the hall toward the bedroom.

968 “You’re up,” he said.

969 “I didn’t sleep.”

970 Luis’s eyes went to the floor, then to Diego’s face again. “She’s still asleep.” He reached for the coffee canister and then put it down. “You want to wait?”

971 “We wait,” Diego said. His voice came out even. The word sat in the room as a choice and a sentence.

972 They waited without television or radio. The neighbor’s news put words through the wall, low and chopped, didn’t resolve into meaning. A

car passed on the street slow, tires over the patch by the curb where asphalt never held. The house stayed still. The cooler knocked and steadied.

973 Rosa's breathing in the bedroom shifted at the hinge where sleep changes. A minute later she came into the hall with one hand on the wall, the scarf tight, the other hand out because she didn't want the cane for this small distance. Luis went to her and set his hand under her arm without the habit of making a fuss. Diego stood up when she stopped in the doorway to look at him as if he were both in front of her and far away.

974 "Sit," she said, and they did, Luis in the chair, Diego on the couch, Rosa on the wobbly chair they never fixed because the money could be used for something that mattered more. She brought the blanket from the couch around her shoulders even though the room was warm.

975 He started without clearing his throat because his mouth would not open again if he gave his body the chance to refuse. "Javi brought me to a place with cars stacked. A salvage yard. The man in charge is named Victor. There was Angel. There was Mateo. They said six minutes. They said maintenance. They gave me a phone. They told me to answer on the second ring. They told me to keep it off. They said if someone says turn, I turn and don't repeat the words. I did the drills. I drove well." His hands were still on his thighs. "I drove for the job."

976 Rosa closed her eyes once and opened them. She did not interrupt. Luis set his elbows on his knees. The cooler knocked into the pause and then went flat.

977 "The bank was the one near the busy road," Diego said. "They had a badge. We went in the front. We wore shirts that said Facilities. I timed the camera and the sweep. I kept the count to six inside my head. Raul was grabbed on the way out. A guard was hurt in the arm. The news said stable." He swallowed and tasted the ragged place in his cheek where teeth had found it the night before. "I drove them out. The pack went off in the van. Pink everywhere. We did a switch and then another. We hid in

a house. The money in those two bags had newspaper under the real bills. Mateo was gone.”

978 Rosa blinked slow at that name. Her hand under the blanket gripped the cloth.

979 “We went to a motel. Then another. Victor said we hunt him. We found a watch at a pawn place. I called a number from a payphone. We set a meeting at the diner with the pink sign. Shift change. The camera there stutters an inch on the end and makes a shadow you can use. We waited. A message came: ‘Delay ten.’ Victor moved us to a warehouse to keep the window. He hit me one time, not hard, to say I was a liability. Angel pointed a gun at me to prove a point. The muzzle caught on my hoodie.” He paused because the next word carried more than sound. “I shot him. Angel. He died there.” Luis’s knuckles clicked once. “Victor came at me and I shot him too. He went down. Breathing wrong.” He looked at the table and then at his mother’s hands and then at nothing because there was no place to set his eyes that was not a person he was breaking. “I left. I told myself he was dead so I could leave.”

980 Luis’s jaw changed shape and then came back to the line Diego knew. He didn’t ask questions in the middle of it. He didn’t let the room leak out around them.

981 “I went back to the diner because that was the plan. Mateo came. He tried to make it a game. He left and then he came back.” He did not let himself soften his voice on the next words. “I shot him in the car through the window. I took the bags. I didn’t count the money. I went out past the warehouses and got a shovel. I buried it in the desert under mesquite. I buried the empty bags in another place. I left the gun under the van seat where someone would find it. I came home.”

982 Rosa made no sound. Her mouth was tight, her hand on the blanket knuckles lifting under the thin cover. Then she got up from the chair and came to him and put her arms around his ribs, strong for what her body had been through. She shook once and then again, and her

breath came hard at his shoulder. The blanket slid half off and fell to the couch, and he caught it with one hand and pulled it back around her automatically because he had done that motion one hundred times. “M’ijo,” she said into his shirt, the way she did when he had been small and sick. “You should have told us.”

983 “I’m telling you,” he said. It came out as a scrape. He had to say it again. “I should have told you. Lo siento, Má. Lo siento.” He said it until the words carried no meaning, just air moving through the same channel, and still he said it because there was nothing else he could pick up and place in front of her.

984 Luis sat without moving until Rosa stepped back and put her hand on Diego’s face with the blanket between her palm and his cheek as if heat might transfer through fabric. She looked into him hard enough that anything false would have fallen. “You’re alive.” She breathed. “You tell the police. Today.”

985 “I will,” he said. “Te juro.”

986 Luis’s voice came after a moment, low like he had pulled it out of a place that had been closed. “Yesterday,” he said, “I went back to the hospital. Not intake. The counseling window behind the glass. The woman with the notes on her clipboard, the one with the hair the same every time. She looked up our case. She said the board met. She said charity is approved for imaging.” He had to stop there to make his mouth work around the next sentence without breaking it. “She said she was sending a letter. I have it recorded in my notebook. I was going to tell you last night.”

987 No one moved. The stove clock went to 6:01. A truck went by on Dyer in the distance and the vibration ran under the floorboards. Diego felt a small lurch in his stomach. The air he had been holding stayed high in his chest and would not go down.

988 Rosa’s hand stayed on his face. “M’ijo,” she said, the way a person speaks when everything they feared and everything they asked for arrive

on the same day and do not cancel. “We are going to the station. I am glad you are alive. Even if it means,” She stopped, not to avoid the word but because saying it plain would not change it. “Even if.”

989 He nodded. Both things were there at once. He took one breath. He set his molars and let the breath out slow. He did not trust what would happen to his hands if he let them move.

990 Luis stood up and went to the small drawer where stamps and rubber bands lived. He took his wallet and the folded church list with a corner worn white. He set them on the table and then left them there. “We’ll go with you,” he said.

991 “I have to go,” Diego said. He did not say he wanted to. He went to the sink, ran water, and let it run over his fingers until the dust loosened from under his nails. The cold hit the scrape on his forearm; he didn’t flinch because there was nothing helpful in flinching.

992 Rosa watched his hands under the tap. “The money,” she said. “Where is it.” Not a question that would be answered, but she placed it between them because if she didn’t ask it now, it would live between them with more weight later.

993 “In the desert,” he said. “Hidden. I’m not telling them where.” He didn’t drop his eyes. She looked at him and some room opened between them that was new, and she stepped over that room with the one thing she had left to step with. She reached and pulled him in again. The blanket touched his neck. He heard her breath steady. He stood with his mother and his father until the clock said 6:30 and then 6:31, and they let each other go because staying would turn into a way of not moving.

994 He picked up the key from the counter and lifted the door when he pulled. They stepped into an air that had not turned hot yet. The neighbor’s El Camino sat where it sat. The crabgrass in the cracks by the path showed dew only in name. Luis locked the door. Rosa stood straight with her scarf and her face set. They walked to the car.

995 The station lobby smelled like floor cleaner and paper that had been printed and stacked. A sign told people not to bring phones past the metal detector. A woman with a badge at a side desk took down a name and then looked at him with a second look that held both seeing a kid and seeing the case.

996 Detective Marisol Vega met them halfway across the room. The blazer she wore didn't hide the weight on her hip, not that she was trying. Her hair was tied low and tight. Her eyes had that used-up look people got after a week that never ended. She saw Luis and Rosa first and then Diego as if she understood sequence. "Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez," she said in a voice that kept edges out. "Diego." She didn't pretend she did not know his name.

997 "I want to make a statement," he said. He kept his tone flat.

998 Vega looked at him for a beat and then at his parents. "We're doing this by the book," she said. "I need you to understand you can ask for an attorney at any point and then wait until they get here. This is not a sprint."

999 Diego nodded. "I understand. I still want to speak." He looked once at Rosa's hands. Her hands were still.

1000 An agent stepped through the security door. She wore a plain suit, a badge on a chain tucked to her jacket. She wasn't tall, but there was no extra movement on her. "Agent Dana Whitaker," she said, not reaching for anyone's hand. She looked at Vega with a practiced exchange that did not need words, then at Diego and his parents without softening. "We're coordinating on the robbery task force. Detective Vega will lead this."

1001 Vega took them through a hallway that said interview rooms on the door plates and past a bulletin board with flyers for a training on trauma-informed something. She guided Luis and Rosa to two seats

outside and set a hand up, palm small and square, to keep them there a second longer than necessary so the moment would land and they wouldn't follow him out of reflex.

1002 Inside the room, she shut the door and did a small circuit without touching anything she didn't need. She slid a recorder toward herself, pressed a red button, and set a case file on the table but kept it closed. She set her notebook, opened to a clean page, and a pen laid flat. Then she turned back to Diego and met his eyes without trying to look into him. "Diego," she said. "I'm going to read you your rights." The red dot held steady; his throat went dry under it.

1003 She read them plain. He had heard the words before in movies, but they lived different in a small room. He said that he understood. He did not start speaking. "I want to wait for counsel," he said. Saying it put his mouth back into a place that could function. "I'll still give a statement once counsel is here."

1004 Whitaker stood in a corner a step behind Vega, folding her arms without menace, not trying to be the room, steady in the corner, a fixed point. She watched him the way you watch a busy corner instead of one car.

1005 Carmen Escalante came in ten minutes later in a black jacket with a binder under her arm and her hair pulled back because loose hair gets in the way on a long day. She looked first at him, not at the file, and not at the room. "Diego. I'm Carmen. We'll do this right," she said, same words in spirit, but coming from the place they came from, which mattered. She touched his shoulder once, a careful contact, then sat, opened her binder to a clean yellow pad, and clicked a pen once.

1006 Vega brought them back onto the record. Time, date. Names in the room. She asked him to spell his last name; he did. Carmen nodded in the small way that tells someone to keep breathing.

1007 He started where he had started at the kitchen table. He did not give a speech. He laid out what happened in the order it happened and

put the names in the places they belonged: Victor Rojas, Angel Salgado, Mateo Cruz, Raul Pineda. He didn't make a story out of it because stories are suspect. Not explaining why, he left that part to other rooms and other days. He said the bank and how they entered, the stolen badge, the six-minute count, the camera sweep, the guard wounded and later labeled stable, Raul grabbed. Dye pack and pink dust and older houses with locks that stick and a motel chain mark left in painted metal. He said pawn shop watch and a number on a tag. Then the diner with the camera that stuttered its pan. The warehouse and the slap that landed flat and the muzzle that scraped his arm and the way his hand found the pistol on the table. He said Angel on the floor. He said Victor against the cinderblock and the sound of breath that didn't move right. He said he left.

1008 Vega didn't look down for those parts. She didn't interrupt. When he stopped, she let the quiet sit until she was sure he was done with that slice of it. "The diner," she said.

1009 He nodded. "He came. He played it like business. He left and came back. I shot him. Through the window." His hand made a small motion at his thigh and stopped. "I took two bags from the back seat and left."

1010 "Where are those bags now?" Whitaker asked. The voice was even, not a push, like a hand offered palm up to see if it would be taken.

1011 "I hid the money. I buried it." He looked at Carmen and then back at the table in front of him. "I'm not giving the location." He said it without heat, not as a challenge. "There are people not accounted for."

1012 "Victor," Whitaker said.

1013 He said nothing to the name.

1014 Carmen put a hand on the table, palm down. "We'll address recovery later," she said, and her tone carried enough steel that the question moved to the side of the table and stayed there for now.

1015 Vega's pen moved once on the clean page and then stopped.
"Who is alive, Diego?"

1016 He swallowed. Sitting under recorded light and putting the words into air changed them. "I left Angel on the floor. He was not breathing. I left Victor bleeding. I don't know more. Mateo is dead. I shot him." The last sentence carried weight through his teeth. He didn't let his jaw shift after it.

1017 Vega nodded once. "The guard?"

1018 "Stable," he said, giving the word back to the room where he had first heard it. "News reported it."

1019 Carmen asked for a short break and they took one. The recording went off; the red dot died. Vega went to the door and opened it two inches to move air into the corner. When they sat again, she had the booking officer ready. The door buzzed. Rubber soles squeaked; the corridor smelled like coolant and paper. The officer had a calm face and hands that moved through the steps without adding friction.

1020 "Property," the officer said. They made a list. Burner phone, powered off. No personal phone. A folded scrap of paper with a six and an X from a pocket, faded, went into a plastic bag. Shoes. Laces. The scrape on his forearm the officer noted with eyes only.

1021 "Fingerprints," the officer said. No cards and ink anymore, a glass and a reader and the pressure of each finger in sequence. He watched his fingertips flatten on the glass and then appear again in tiled images on a screen, the same hand multiplied, the same prints in squares that weren't hands anymore. The room smelled of disinfectant and old latex. He tasted metal from the vent. The officer's hands were dry and steady, nails clipped short. He didn't look away. A camera clicked once and again. He stood where they told him and then sat on a bench with a chain running through a metal loop and did not pick it up to test its weight because he did not need to feel it to know it would not break.

1022 Carmen stood where he could see her through the door window while they moved him to holding. She lifted a hand small at the wrist. It was not a wave. It was a promise to be there when the next door opened. Vega spoke to Luis and Rosa out in the hall for a long minute he could not hear. Rosa's hand went to her own throat and then down. Luis's shoulders did the inch. Then the door shut the view.

1023 The conference room they brought him to after booking had the same table as the interview room, the same chair that felt bolted even if it wasn't. Windows sat high and narrow and showed sky too bright to look at. A paper on the table had a county seal at the top and a blank where a judge's name would later go.

1024 Assistant District Attorney Patrick O'Connell came in with a folder full enough to keep a thumb on. He didn't sit right away. He stood and took in the room, not measuring him like a plan but scaling the day. He had a quiet tie and a ring that caught and let go of the ceiling light. "Mr. Alvarez," he said without the softeners. "Counselor." A nod to Carmen. "Detective." A second nod for Vega. Whitaker stayed at an angle, back enough that her presence still took a part of the air.

1025 O'Connell sat, set the folder down, and opened it so that the top page stayed angled away. "We're at charge review and preliminary posture," he said. "This is not a plea hearing. You are not in front of a judge. I want everyone clear in their heads about that." He did not look at Diego for permission to proceed. He looked at the file again. "Aggravated robbery of a financial institution. Assault with serious bodily injury for the guard. Weapons counts. Conspiracy. Fleeing. Two homicide counts. One tied to Angel Salgado's death. One to Mateo Cruz." A thin draft from the vent traced the back of his neck. "There's also potential certification to adult court for violent felony. I'm saying certification is on the table, not that it's decided."

1026 Carmen's pen clicked once. "My client surrendered this morning. He requested to make a statement, and he made one on record. He's seventeen. He cooperated in identifying co-actors. He has no prior. He did not brandish in the bank." She kept her voice level. "The warehouse. The shooting of Mr. Salgado occurred during an escalation when a gun was put to my client's chest and the muzzle caught. We're not litigating in this room, but self-defense will predominate there. The diner lot is different. You have his words on it. He isn't hiding from that."

1027 "Good." O'Connell's mouth did not change shape. "The city still has a dead man at the diner because of him." He looked down and then back up again. "The guard being alive matters. We're not in a capital posture. But this is not going to be a handful of youth sanctions and a lecture. He shot a man in a car. He set this entire thing in motion."

1028 "That's not accurate," Carmen said. "He did not set this plan. He was brought in by older co-actors. He drove. He did not pull the alarm. He did not shoot the guard. He's a minor with a family that came with him and will stand with him." She cut a look at Vega. "The detective knows the difference between the person who directs violence and the person who is told to turn left."

1029 Vega's face did not move. "He walked in and told the truth," she said. "That is in the file."

1030 Whitaker's voice came from the corner. "He also buried the stolen funds, which is obstruction-adjacent. He is refusing to disclose where," she said without heat, letting the fact sit on the table without pushing it toward anyone's hand.

1031 O'Connell's finger tapped twice on the folder. "Restitution has to be part of this. Not a symbol. Actual dollars back." He shifted the papers, then put one to the top. "We'll seek adult certification on the homicide. The remainder stays in juvenile where appropriate if he cooperates. A cap on exposure is possible if the cooperation is real. The distinguishing factors will be the police guard's family statement, the pawn shop owner's

input if he wants to give it, and recovery of funds.” He paused. “If restitution is real and victim statements align, I’ll support the cap, contingent, not a promise.”

1032 “Elias Mendez,” Vega said. The guard. She said it like a fact she meant to keep in front of them.

1033 Diego looked at the table. “I want to see him,” he said. “If he wants to see me. If he doesn’t, I’ll keep quiet.”

1034 Carmen pressed her hand flat on the yellow pad. “We’re not promising restorative justice. We’re not staging a scene for anyone. If Mr. Mendez wants a statement or a meeting, we’ll do that with care and on his terms.” She added, “Only if he requests it, on his terms, and not today.” Diego’s hand tightened on the chair.

1035 Vega slid a sheet of paper over, not to Diego but to Carmen. “The guard’s family. They sent their statement this morning.”

1036 Carmen read it, then set a finger on a line and turned the paper so Diego could see it without pulling it close like it was only for him. The words were simple: He has a family. We want him to come home. We want someone to take responsibility. We do not want more dead men. Diego read it all the way to the end and then up again to the top because the second time was what counted. His vision blurred at the edges for a second. He pressed a thumb to the paper to keep it flat and drew one slow breath.

1037 “Here’s my proposal,” Carmen said. “Manslaughter for the warehouse shooting. Second-degree murder for the diner. Juvenile on the non-fatal counts. Concurrent time. Recommended cap that allows time served in juvenile to count, with a review point tied to age and program completion. He will plead. He will not fight the narrative. He will not contest the guard’s injury. He will not contest the robbery counts.” She kept her eyes on O’Connell. “He will not hand you a map today. He will not hand you one while people are unaccounted for.”

1038 O’Connell stayed still. “Restitution?”

1039 “Later,” Carmen said. “With care. With conditions.”

1040 He looked from Carmen to Diego. “If you think you’re holding onto those funds as a family nest egg, you’re wrong. That money goes back. We can do this clean or we can do it the hard way that costs you years.”

1041 Diego lifted his eyes. “I’m not using that money,” he said. “I hid it so no one else gets hurt.” The words did not feel noble. They felt like a road he had already put his feet on, and it didn’t matter who approved of the road because it was the only one left. “There are people out there I don’t control.”

1042 Vega met his gaze in the quiet that followed. “Does keeping it hidden protect your mother,” she said, “or punish you.”

1043 He held her eyes. “Both.”

1044 No one filled the next seconds on purpose. O’Connell made a note without announcing what it was. “I’ll run this up the line,” he said. “We’re not locking anything here. Detective, Agent, counsel. We’ll reconvene.” He stood. He did not offer his hand. He took his folder and walked out.

1045 Carmen waited until the door clicked. “You don’t speak without me. We do not put the location on tape. If you start to think you should, hold that feeling and let it pass before you say anything.”

1046 He nodded. He could feel the heat on his fingers anyway; it didn’t change what he was going to do.

1047 Vega stood. “Your parents are on a bench near the vending machines,” she said. “I told them we’re not doing spectacle. You’ll see them again before transport.” She glanced at Whitaker and then back at Diego. “We’ll keep moving.”

1048 A door buzzed open and shut behind them; the hall smelled of cleaner and duct air. They brought him back through a hallway that bent around to the holding side. Outside, the light was hard and bright. A

chain rattled once on a bench they passed. Cooler air from the dayroom moved across his face.

1049 In the holding dayroom, a television hung near the ceiling behind scratched plexiglass. The remote had tape around the battery door. The volume sat low because yelling at the screen didn't change what played. The HVAC hissed through a ceiling vent and shifted cool air over his neck. The air smelled of disinfectant and old metal.

1050 The podium on the television had a city seal and two logos, police and federal, staged to show agreement. A chief spoke; an agent behind him held a trained lean without making a show of it. The words were about coordination, roadblocks presented as planned deployments, and a tip line that would ring in a room with five people and a map on the wall. Cool air from the vent touched his neck.

1051 The camera cut to a hospital conference room. The panel looked the way panels look: a CFO in a tie, a clinician with an ID badge on a retractable reel, someone from the county with a legal pad. The lower third said Compassion Admission Pilot under their names. A phrase about triage at intake that would not halt imaging. The words were softened for a news cut but had weight. A mention slid in about a county-backed relief fund under discussion for families whose bills had stopped care. A bright reflection showed on the screen.

1052 His throat tightened. The room around him stayed the same, the plastic chairs, the tile that always needed mopping, but his chest stayed tight. He pressed his thumb along the chair seam because that kept his hand down.

1053 The next cut was a county commissioner with a last name the anchors had learned to say correctly two cycles ago. Sylvia Mendieta stood on a courthouse step with microphones pointing up toward her, a

cheap flag to the side, and said in clear words that safety mattered and civil liberties mattered and they were not in competition. She said neighborhoods with more roadblocks deserved the same respect as neighborhoods with fewer. She said the county would be asking for reports on who was stopped and for how long and why. It was a line spoken on camera and logged for later. He kept his breathing even.

¹⁰⁵⁴ The anchor came back and repeated the tip line. Then a story was more urgent: an unnamed suspect in custody was cooperating. Protective custody for the inside runner. A plain car outside a building where no one wanted a camera. Then a leak that put the address on a message board, and the next shot showed a small crowd with signs that did not agree with each other. The sound was muted, but there are certain sounds you didn't need to hear to know what they were. The crawl used the words sensitive transfer. B-roll showed a night frame: two figures moving a man with his hood up from one car to another under a parking garage light, faces turned away, postures that showed awareness of the camera and a choice to keep moving. The clip was quick and blurred, but he knew Vega's rhythm even sideways, and the federal agent's joined the picture next to it. The muscles low in his belly tightened and then eased.

¹⁰⁵⁵ A bank spokesperson in a gray suit replaced that image. The branch logo sat behind him. He read a statement about a community restitution initiative. A fund for direct support to those harmed, an allocation to neighborhood programs, words that would sit on a flyer in a lobby and also show up as a line on a spreadsheet under Donations Out. It sounded good. It also sounded clean in a way that made his skin itch. He wasn't angry at it. He just knew what it was and wasn't. The scrape on his forearm stung under the cooled air.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Another cut. A soft piece with a reporter in a cardigan, standing outside UMC, talking about improved protocols and a mother whose prognosis had shifted in the right direction. The camera didn't show her face all the way. Her scarf was in frame. Her hand touched a cup. The reporter said small changes could keep care moving. No names. No

specifics. The story still found the hole in him and pressed into it. The seat edge pressed into his thighs. He swallowed once and it stuck, then went down.

1057 The last crawl in that block made his pulse jump and hold. Rumors on social media about buried cash. Two teens caught digging at a wash east of the loop before first light. Trespass charges. “Wrong wash,” someone in the dayroom said to a person who wasn’t listening. The voice pulled a quick laugh he didn’t have any use for. The screen kept moving. He stared at the corner of it where the plexiglass was cracked and taped. He had known when he pressed his palms into the dirt and put stones back where they had been that the burial would not stay secret forever, that buried money draws people.

1058 An officer called his name. He stood. The dayroom door buzzed. He walked the small distance. A second door opened when the first door shut. They put him in a cell barely wider than the cot with a mattress cover that had gone wrong in the wash and never come back right. The light overhead made a sound at the edge of hearing. The air had the cold-on-concrete feel of all built rooms that keep people. He sat on the edge of the cot. He set his hands on his knees. He did not put his head in his hands. He counted three breaths and then stopped counting.

1059 A key turned somewhere else and not here. He could still taste the grit from the wash when he swallowed. He looked at his hands until they were just hands again. He thought of his mother’s blanket slipping, his father’s jaw, a piece of paper at a counseling window with his family’s name at the top and a stamp at the bottom. He thought of a pistol under a van seat and a shovel under other shapes. He did not think about numbers or years or what the calendar would do to his face. That would come. He kept his eyes on the door until he could keep them closed without seeing the door on the inside of his eyelids.

1060 He said nothing. He waited for the sound of a step coming to his cell because that would be the next thing. He would stand when the next thing came. He would sign when there was a paper to sign. He would not

tell them where he had put the money while men still walked around who thought it was theirs. He would not give them a reason to stand at his door later with the wrong names in their mouths. He set his hands, steady now, on his knees, and watched the light vibrate.

1061 A lock clicked down the hall. When Carmen came back, he would nod. When Vega looked through the little window, he would hold her eyes and not blink first. When they let his parents in for five minutes in a room with a table that was bolted for no reason, he would stand up, and if Rosa's hand shook, he would hold both her hands and let the shake run through him instead. He leaned his shoulder against the painted cinderblock and let the cold move into his skin. He waited.

Chapter 14

One Year Later

¹⁰⁶² The visitation room held the cool of old air from a vent that hummed without hurrying. Tables sat in two rows, their legs scuffed and the edges nicked where rings had caught and scraped. The floor kept the smell of cleaner and dried coffee in the seams. A corrections officer stood near the door with his hands behind his back and a radio on his shoulder, eyes on the room without needing to move. A wall-mounted television played local news on low.

¹⁰⁶³ The door lock buzzed once and opened to admit families in small pairs. Rosa had a cane now for longer stretches. She didn't lean on it the way she had leaned on his arm the week she came home from the hospital. She used it to make certain the floor would not change under her. The scarf at her neck was different, blue flowers that looked bright against the beige walls, and her face had color in it again. Her mouth held a corrected calm rather than a practiced one. When she looked straight at him, something in his chest loosened and a hurt shot through the opening.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Luis came in beside her holding her tote in one hand and his cap in the other. His shoulders were straight. He had lined up the brim of his cap with the seam of the tote strap without thinking about it. A crease lay where his jaw carried long days, but his eyes took in the space, fixed on Diego, and stayed there. He nodded once, the kind you give to a person you have already decided to stand next to no matter how the next block goes.

¹⁰⁶⁵ They sat. The chair legs whispered against the floor. Rosa set the cane gently against the table leg and then reached both hands for him. He

didn't stand all the way; he leaned across the short distance and she pulled his hands into hers. Her palms were warm. The new strength in her fingers canceled out a hundred pictures of a thin hand on hospital sheets.

1066 "Hi, mijo," she said. Her voice wasn't loud. It didn't need to be. "You look good."

1067 He shrugged because he didn't know how to do more with the words sitting on top of his tongue. He wore the same county-issue top as the last time they saw him. His hair was cut closer because they used clippers here and the line ran fast. He set one hand flat again on the table to feel the laminate under his skin. He didn't grip the edge.

1068 Luis placed the tote on the floor by Rosa's foot and then rested both hands flat on the table, knuckles pale. "Hey, son." He almost smiled and caught it with his mouth. "We're on time."

1069 The officer at the door spoke without lifting his chin. "Thirty minutes." He pointed at the plastic clock on the far wall with his eyes, a small habit that ran across shifts. The clock's second hand jumped rather than swept.

1070 Rosa slid a folded paper across the table. It was a copy of their church bulletin. She tapped the back where someone had written a phone number under a list of food pantry days. "They brought tamales last week. Sister Berta's group. The hot kind and the sweet kind. I didn't eat the hot. You know me."

1071 He let out a sound that started as breath and turned into a small laugh before he pulled it back. The picture of his mother standing at their counter with a foil pan and the smell of masa in the whole house hit him fast. It felt good and wrong at the same time. He pressed his tongue against his molars and the back of his jaw clenched on its own. He kept his eyes down and then lifted them again so she didn't have to see him looking away.

1072 "Tell Sister Berta thank you," he said. His voice came out steady.

1073 “She knows,” Rosa said. “She said your name without saying your name. That kind of knowing.” She squeezed his fingers once and then let go only so she could reach into the tote, find a small plastic container, and set it on the table. “They said I could bring this in. It’s a picture. From last Sunday.”

1074 She slid the photo through. It was not glossy, they had printed it at the pharmacy and the color sat on the paper like chalk that wasn’t going to move. Luis stood with a grill behind him and a line of children waited with paper plates. Rosa was seated under the shade of a tarp. A boy from down the block, the one with the hair that would not sit down, carried a bag of ice. In the background, the neighbor’s new dog had both front paws on the picnic bench and a girl was trying to pull him down by his collar. The letters on the church sign had been changed to “WELCOME ALL.” The corners of the photo were already soft where Rosa had held it.

1075 “Dog eats everything,” Luis said. It made his mouth pull up for real. “He ate one of my shoelaces. I told the man at the shop I needed a single one. He laughed like it was a joke.”

1076 “How’s the shop,” Diego asked, because this was a safe road to walk down. He still saw in his head the tire machine and the smell of rubber when heat cut through the bay. He had a memory of standing at the register before this part of the year began and wanting the clock to move.

1077 “Same,” Luis said. “People put air when they should put a tire and then wonder why it pulls. A woman came with a nail head deep and a spare in her trunk so bald you could see your face in it and asked me if I could rotate it to the front. I told her I could rotate her home if that’s what she wanted.” He shook his head and then lifted it again. “Boss asks about you. He’d take you back.” His eyes flicked at Rosa and then back. “When that’s a thing.”

1078 “It will be,” Rosa said softly. “One thing at a time. One foot.” She tapped the cane with the toe of her shoe and made a face at it. “I hate this thing.” The way she said it took the weight off it. “But I’m using it.”

1079 Diego smiled. Small. He let his shoulders go down one notch. “The neighbor’s dog,” he said, picking the thread back up. “What’s his name?”

1080 “Chuy,” Luis said. “He doesn’t answer to it. He answers to food.”

1081 Rosa leaned in. “He answers to the little one. The girl. She whistles and he sits.”

1082 The officer at the door called, “Twenty.” The clock hand jumped again.

1083 Rosa touched the sleeve of Diego’s top where a seam had rubbed shiny from washed-out fabric. “They cut your hair too close.” She whispered it; the room could still hear if it wanted. “You were so little yesterday,” she added. “And now I sit, and look, and you’re taller than your father.”

1084 Luis made a face at that. “He was taller than me at fifteen,” he said, and the shape of it relaxed something in the center of the table.

1085 Rosa waited until the laugh passed and then took Diego’s hands again. She turned one palm up. The thin crescent scar under his thumbnail had flattened. The scrape on his forearm that once stung under air was gone under new skin. She looked at the lines on his hand the way you look at a map you believe in. “Grip,” she said, closing his fingers around hers. She pressed against his grip. He felt the pressure meet his hand and hold. It sat in him more solid than the chair.

1086 Luis gave a small cough to move air. “The county fund,” he said, keeping his voice level. “They did it. It wasn’t just talk.” He glanced at the TV without turning his head. “The neighbors, the ones two doors down, you know his back, the scans, no one asked them for that deposit. They didn’t have to sell the car.”

1087 Diego shifted in his seat. It wasn't a flinch. It was a push against the part of him that wanted to get up and go fix every wrong thing he could name. The vent sent a thin current across his neck and it didn't take the heat out. "Good," he said. The word landed and stayed on the table. It didn't chase any of it backwards. He let that be true and breathed around it.

1088 "We replaced the kitchen bulb again," Rosa said, choosing a new piece of their house. "It still flickers. Your father says the socket is the thing."

1089 "It is the thing," Luis said, picking the argument up in its quiet way. "I'm going to replace the whole fixture next week."

1090 "Next week," Rosa repeated. She made it into a place they could step toward and it grew into something big enough to stand on.

1091 The TV brightened a little because the camera on the other end adjusted to a white shirt. A news anchor, hair neat and delivery careful, said numbers that tracked payments forgiven and balances zeroed by a new county-backed relief fund. The panel they cut to showed a table with microphones and name cards. The CFO from the hospital spoke about admissions where imaging wasn't stopped by a card and a cashier. A nurse with a badge on a reel told a story about scans that moved because someone at intake didn't have to say "deposit." There were graphs, not too many of them, and the lines went down where bills used to pile. The reporter did not call it a miracle. He called it a policy. He said the word "pilot" and then said, "now permanent."

1092 Diego watched the corner of the screen where a number updated from 610 to 611 and then kept going. He translated those lines to doors opening and to a nurse's arm pushing them through. Beds without a price tag. A room where a machine switched on because someone wrote "OK" on a form instead of "hold." He didn't smile. He let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding.

1093 The segment shifted. A bank spokesperson in a gray suit stood in front of a pull-down backdrop with a logo. He read from a statement. The community restitution fund, launched with corporate donations after an incident the anchor did not describe in detail, had created a small business grant in the name of Elias Mendez. The camera held on the name at the bottom of the screen. It did not say pawn or guard. It said the name and “grant.” The audio cut to a woman at a sewing shop describing two new machines and to a man at a barber’s chair talking about paying an apprentice. The suit returned and thanked “the community.”

1094 Diego’s mouth opened to draw air in and then closed. He let the air out slow. If the name was the man he remembered behind glass cases and fair offers, if it was another man who had put on a uniform and stood at a bank door, the news didn’t explain which. Either way, it put the name in a place that wasn’t a crime crawl. His jaw eased a notch and then held.

1095 A crawl ran under the picture with a blue strip and small white letters. It said the joint task force had arrested three members of a crew working a copy of a maintenance-entry plan. It used the words “dismantled a related crew.” There was a short clip of a line of cars at a checkpoint and a patrolman waving one through. The sound stayed low. The anchor said “procedures” and “training.” Then he said “civil liberties” without making the words feel like a fight.

1096 Luis said, “Good,” under his breath and set his hand back down on the table.

1097 Rosa nodded once toward the television. “They should have done it last year,” she said with no heat, just the weight of a week in an ER waiting room inside the sentence. Her eyes were calm when she looked over at him again. “They’re doing it now.”

1098 The officer walked over to the TV and pushed the volume down two notches. He looked at the room the way you look at a street before you step into it. He returned to his place by the door.

1099 Diego watched the screen without hearing the words and then let his eyes return to his mother's face. When he spoke, he kept his voice where it would not travel past their table. "I'm starting the GED classes," he said. "They do them Tuesdays and Thursdays after chores. The teacher is a real teacher. She's strict."

1100 Rosa's shoulders lifted and then fell. The movement was small and it lit her face in a way that moved past the room. "Mijo," she said, and pressed her hand to her chest. "Good. That's good."

1101 Luis's mouth did the almost-smile again and didn't catch this time. "Tell me what books you need. I'll send them. Used is fine if the pages aren't written on by idiots."

1102 Diego nodded. "I'll make a list." He shifted his hand on the table and let his thumb brush the side of his palm like he was confirming the prints he had left belonged to him. "Te juro," he said quietly, letting the words fit into a groove that was cut the night before the job when he had said them for something else. He wasn't borrowing them. He was using them again.

1103 The officer called, "Ten minutes." The clock's second hand jumped again. A boy two tables over who had been talking fast to his grandmother stopped and sat back like he had been pulled by a rope.

1104 Rosa reached into the tote and took out a folded sheet with recipes. She ran her finger down the lines. "Your aunt sent this. She says the trick with the empanadas is to freeze the filling a little so it doesn't run when it hits the pan." She looked up from the paper. "We made them and they were ugly, but they tasted right."

1105 "Ugly doesn't matter," Luis said. "If the crust is flake and the meat is cooked, God eats ugly." That earned him a soft elbow from Rosa and he took it with the satisfaction of a man who knew he had landed the line where he aimed it.

1106 They avoided words with sharp corners. No "warehouse." No "diner." No "money." They talked about a bulb and a dog and the time for

the bus to the clinic and the woman at church who had gone home after a month away, who had stood up and walked between the pews without a cane and smiled until everyone else smiled too.

1107 The vent pushed air across the back of Diego's neck. He counted one breath and another and let the count fall away so the minutes would not turn into numbers. He watched how Rosa's hand rested on the table. He kept filing the small, quiet things where they would not get lost.

1108 The officer at the door checked the wall clock and said, "Five." It wasn't loud. It reorganized the room anyway.

1109 Rosa looked at Luis and then at the TV as if something on the screen had caught at her earlier and she had put it down for later and now the time had arrived. She took a second to put the words in order. "They said on the news," she began, not pushing it. "About the... about what happened. They said the police recovered bodies. From the place with the shelves," she didn't say warehouse, she made a shelf motion with her hand " , and from the diner." She kept her eyes on his face and didn't change her voice.

1110 Diego's face didn't move. He made it not move.

1111 "They said two," Rosa said. "Not three." She barely gave breath to the second number. Her thumb pressed the skin between his thumb and first finger and held there.

1112 He let his eyes drop for the space of one second to the table edge and then back up again. In the one second, the pictures hit in the order they lived in him: Angel on the floor with the toothpick ticking against concrete in his head whether it had been there or not; Mateo folded into the seat with the window glass gone and the engine still idling; the space on the warehouse floor where Victor had fallen, the sound his breath made in that room. Angel was a body. Mateo was a body. The third name had never been a body in his mouth because he had needed it to be done to leave.

1113 The fluorescent light did nothing to the room, but his skin felt colder on the inside. The vent's air touched his neck and traveled down his back, and it wasn't the vent anymore. He didn't open his mouth. He calibrated the lines of his face and held them without making it a mask.

1114 Luis was not a man who asked a question if the answer would only set fire to the air. He still looked. He scanned his son's face like it belonged to him, which it did, and he let the second run long enough to be a test and then stopped it so it wouldn't become a demand. The lines at the sides of his mouth deepened and then eased.

1115 The officer spoke. "Time." The word hit without echo. Chairs slid. A toddler at the end of the row yelled because he was happy to move. A chair bumped another chair. The clock ticked in jumps.

1116 Rosa stood, put a hand on the cane, and then didn't touch it so she could take his hand with both of hers. She held it with that same steady strength. Her eyes had the question in them and the request not to answer it. She knew what she knew, and the rest lived in a box with no label yet.

1117 He bent across the small gap and hugged her careful so the officer wouldn't have to clear his throat. Her hair smelled clean the way a kitchen towel smells when you pick it up at the right time. He didn't shake. Salt touched the corner of his mouth and he knew the source without lifting his hand to his face. Water had a way of showing up in the desert when you didn't have words for it. He let it be.

1118 Luis stepped in second. His arms went around both of them, the three of them making a shape that fit around a table that wasn't theirs. He leaned back first because he always made the choice to make the hard part lighter. He picked up the tote and the photo.

1119 "We're coming next week," he said. That was the last thing he said because a man had to leave one good thing in the room when he walked out of it.

1120 Rosa lifted her cane, clicked the rubber tip twice on the floor in a small private rhythm, and turned toward the door. She didn't look back and didn't need to. Luis put his hand to her back as they passed the officer. The officer's face didn't change when he pressed the door release.

1121 The door buzzed and shut. Another door, on another wall, opened and a different family stepped through. The room is built to keep moving.

1122 Diego sat where he had been. He set both hands flat on the table and watched his fingers until they were just fingers. He didn't count. He didn't reach for the old habit because it would make the minutes into something sharper than they already were. He thought about telling them to get new locks on the doors and figured out how to send that instruction without making Rosa sleep lighter. He decided he would watch names on the TV crawls and listen to yard talk that came through vents and travel from mouth to mouth and then drop as if it had never been said. He would look for other signs: a last name in a court calendar, a line in the bottom half of a newspaper page someone left on a chair. If Victor was breathing, the world made a record of breath without meaning to. He would learn to read the record.

1123 The officer called another set of names. A chair across the room tipped and thumped back to the floor. The vents hummed. He kept his hands where they were. They didn't shake. They rested there, ready for doors and clocks and the work that had to be done with no one clapping for it.

1124 He waited for the next sound the room would make and watched the light vibrate until it didn't. He set his jaw where it belonged and didn't move it. When the officer touched the table to get his attention, he would look up. He would stand. He would step where he was told to step. He would go back through the door, keep his name level, and hold on to the grip his mother had given back to him.