

enough to emboss. Someone had signed angry there. Someone had pushed.

"Turn it," I said.

He didn't. I reached under the desk and slid the ledger toward me two inches. He stiffened but didn't stop me. He watched the doorway, not my hands.

Line items marched down the page: date, time, locker aisle, claimant name, clerk initials. Page numbering in the upper corner, stamped, not written. The stamp was aligned true—until this page. Here, the number sat a

hair low, like it had been applied by a different hand or a different jig. I touched it with a thumb and felt the ridge of the impression. Fresh stamp, older book.

Overwritten line halfway down. You could see the ghost of the first pencil under the second if you caught it sideways. Eli Rusk. Aisle D. Locker 17. Time: 7:55. Clerk initials: T.H.

Next to it, a second entry, lighter pressure, like a man writing with a borrowed spine.

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the chill bite through my glove. My boot slid an inch. I caught the rail and felt narrow hallway to the right with a wire-mesh gate and a padlock. One honest path, two traps. He picked up the pass, pinched it at the paper. "Keep him up front," he said to the clerk. Eight-foot-four. Six minutes before doors noise. I counted exits. Freight door behind. Star down. A could plant himself. The plans near the star motion. I stepped past the desk before he The guard started to speak. I cut him with a signature." "There," I said. "Now I'm a problem干净, black, no feathering. Good pen. Bad signed it with my pen. The ink went down I slid the dock pass back onto the desk and

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He sat still as a stamped envelope. "You on "Not your sheet," I said. I reached for the door stuck. "I need a reason that fits on great dock pass and slid it toward him. "You want a signature, I'll give you one. You want the sheet?" the guard asked. Who sat still as a stamped envelope. "You on

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Downstairs, the cold thickened. Hanging sides of beef swung on hooks, slow, like they were listening. Their fat held the light in dull bands. The floor was wet. Each step made a small sound, leather on slime. The air carried a rope smell—wet hemp and old salt—mixed with meat and bleach. It was a ledger of labor you couldn't fake.

Aisle letters were painted on the end posts in white. A through F. I found D. The lockers were steel, tall, each with a nail and a tag hanging from twine. Brass-edged tags,

dented at the corners, punched holes at the top. They looked like set dressing in a place that didn't do decoration. Men grabbed, signed, hung them back. The system worked because it was simple and because fear backed it.

Locker 17's tag hung a little lower than the rest. At first look, it was only that—sloppy twine, lazy knot. I took it between finger and thumb. The brass edge was cold enough to sting. The front read E. RUSK in pencil, neat block letters.

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paper sense did the arithmetic fast. My counterfeiter trembled, or a conundrum—tiny blue threads embedded, deliberate. Anti-my nail and found fiber speckling—tiny blue pencil. Press words. I checked the edge with ridges where ink sat raised. Not pen. Not was a plate impression you could feel, shallow ridges where ink sat raised. Not pen. Not

I ran a thumb over the printed lines. There was something flat and wrong for meat work.

Paper. Dry, too dry for this room. I drew it out in the motion and kept it close to my chest. The sheet was folded tight, edges sharp. Char stock, pale and fine, not the brown pulp the city bought by the crate. It had a smooth touch that took ink clean. Too clean. I lifted it under the aisle lantern and angled it. Watermark caught far a second—an eagle in a circle, off-center by a hair, like it was laid

I chose the locker.

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butcher paper rolls. I pushed one aside and the locker was half full of canvas sacks and detail air spilled out like a held breath. Inside, pulled, and it gave an inch, then two. The door stuck. Paint and ice at the seam. I could swing. The paint dried. I pushed out the metal clipk small. The shackles sprang with a soft tick. I caught it before it cold. Cold tight to keep the metal clipk small. The pins give with a grrrrt relecturence. The shackles guard. Shift change. The air carried their sets. Rubber soles, not boots. Crew, not detail and live to ask Maeve what Harmon detail could pack out with the tag and the ledger damp wool and cigarette ash.

I heard a sound up the aisle. Footsteps. Two not wear. Somebody had tested it, not opened

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see what Eli hid in a place built to keep rot detail. Of I could open the locker line and detail and live to ask Maeve what Harmon detail could pack out with the tag and the ledger damp wool and cigarette ash.

the top page. Somebody wanted the record to look different to anyone who didn't bother lifting a sheet.

I slid the ledger back. "Where's Aisle D?"

He jerked his chin toward a metal stair that ran along the wall. The bolts on it were orange with rust, the heads rounded from years of boots and mops. "Down. Then left past the beef. Don't touch nothing."

"I only touch what touches me," I said.

A shape moved in the entryway behind me. A dock guard in a pea coat, cap low, baton on

desk. Then to the ledger. Then to the clerk, His eyes went to the union card on the don't get to tear them up." "Some of us "Harbor keeper keeps receipts," I said. "Mark, "Thought you went inland." "Markian," he said. He said it like a tally notice. Another pier. Another job I quit without him like he belonged to it. His face was one I'd seen under different lights. Years back, him like the dock pass. Another pier. Another job I quit without him like he belonged to it. His face was one who sat still as a stamped envelope. "You on

Cold storage stamp. Offset. Like the dock pass.

I pulled the tag off the nail and palmed it. The metal left a cold print in my skin.

Locker 18's tag was blank. Not missing—blank. New tag, new twine, square knot, no dents. Somebody had swapped a name out and left a clean mouth where a truth used to be.

I crouched and ran my hand along the seam of Locker 17. The paint was chipped where hands always went. The hasp had a new file

Eli hadn't been stealing maps. He'd been handling paper meant to become something else.

The footsteps came closer. A cough. A murmur. The sound of a crate dragged over wet concrete.

I slid the chart stock back into my coat, kept the locker door cracked, and moved my body to block the view. My split knuckle from last week's job rubbed against the cold steel and made a small sting. I wiped it on my cuff

once, then again, until the blood spot stayed small.

Voices turned into words at the aisle mouth. "D's got to be counted before the bell," one said.

I had three choices and six minutes. Hide behind beef and keep hunting the vent gaps for more paper. Confront the crew and buy control with a lie. Or retreat now with the tag and the sheet and let somebody else close the door behind me.

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Q-17. thumbs until the grease litfed. other metal. I rubbed the stamp with my down on one side, like it rode a pocket with impression, not cast. The edge was worn and my work. It had a stamped face—deep brass token. Heavy, warm from his hand. A brass token. Heavy, warm from his hand. The object came free with a scrape against bone. Rigor doesn't bleed easy. That meant he hadn't been here long.

Joint. A dark bead welleed where it shouldnt have. Rigor doesn't bleed easy. That meant

crease. His finger pad tore a fraction at the I tried again, using my thumbnail at the by beef and seal. voice sounded wrong in the locker, swallowed "Come on," I said under my breath. My like cable. I hooked a finger under Eli's first two fingers and pulled. Nothing. The tendons held once. glove off with my teeth. The air bit my skin from the room itself. I worked my own split knuckle against sharp, like a knuckle duster or a tool handle had kissed him once. was a flat oval, edges sharp, like a knuckle from the room itself. I worked my own split knuckle against sharp, like a knuckle duster or a tool handle had kissed him once. glove off with my teeth. The air bit my skin from the room itself. I worked my own split

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Not a letter. The Q sat hard and square, like a punch set. The 1 and 7 were slightly off level, hand-set dies. Somebody wanted it to look official and didn't have the jig.

I slid the token into my coat lining seam and pressed it flat with my palm until it sat quiet.

Eli's left hand lay open on his thigh. Under it, caught between his sleeve and the hat brim, was a strip of paper no wider than my thumb. Chart margin. The edge had the

machine cut—smooth, no tearing. I lifted it by the corner. It was damp on the underside where it had kissed his skin.

Tiny print ran along it: tide times in neat columns. The ink was blue-black, pressed, with a bite you could feel when you ran a nail over it. Along the bottom someone had written in pencil: Q-17, and beside it a dock code in shorthand I'd seen on harbor boards. The pencil line was thin and hard. 2H, maybe 3H. A hard lead. It hadn't smudged in the damp until Eli's sleeve had dragged it; the

smear ran left to right, meaning it had been written, then rubbed by a cuff moving inward. He'd checked it, pocketed it, then clutched it when the room turned on him.

I didn't have my camera out. Too loud, too bright. I slid my matchbook from my pocket, peeled back the cover, and laid the strip inside, folding the cardboard tight so it wouldn't curl. The matchbook still smelled like sulfur and cheap tobacco. It mixed with ink and made a new kind of problem.

Diesel and cold fat cut the air and sat in my throat.

Eli's brass claim tag burned my palm through my coat pocket. D. Same letter the voice had called out. I counted lockers by touch, knuckles on steel, one-two-three, until the tag's notch matched a dented latch.

Locker D-14. The door sat shut, but it didn't sit right. The hinge pins were clean-bright where the rest wore rust. Somebody had pulled them and set them back with care. I put two fingers under the lip and tugged.

rye. It was a ledger entry with meat around

footssteps hit the aisle, faster now. Rubber soles. A man in work boots wouldn't hurry that silent on wet concrete.

shallow ridge. I rubbed it between my fingers and thumb. It squeaked faintly. Good rag content,

press bite sat along the compass rose, a shallow ridge. I rubbed it between my fingers and thumb. It squeaked faintly. Good rag content,

twine snapping tight.

A crate draggèd. Then a different sound:

A sound at the aisle mouth—steel on steel.

I compared it in my head to the city's chart paper. I'd handled it at the Harbor Office. This paper had sizing—stiff, sealed fibers that shed water in beads. City supplier ran soft and thirsty. This was specialty stock. The plate-

I didn't look up. I made my hands small and

In the locker shoulder'd have been there, was a nail that signed from a staple legs,

fast. The sign from a nail that should've been there, was a nail that signed from a staple legs,

I lifted the tag and turned it. The back held

a receipt stub stapled on—clean staple legs,

no rust. The sign from a nail that should've been

tight and stained.

H. Peil / tally.

New name. New hand.

Method, too. That smooth twine, that clean

hinge pin—somebody had swapped access

like it was cargo. Duplicate claim checks.

locke openend, body placed, door closed,

smoth spin and a flat spot where it had been

which came rough and hairy. This twine had a

wax pencil across the bottom. The twine was

tag, stiff card, printed header, and a smear of

fresh cargo tag. Not a claim tag. A shipment

smooth spin and a flat spot where it had been

tightened with pliers.

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blue fiber speckling laid in like you could

twine snapping tight.

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time, like a clerk's stamp when the line gets long.

I went in with my hands empty and my hat on straight. Not a badge. Not a favor. A customer with a pocket and a face that didn't ask for trouble.

I took the room the way I used to take a pier: count the ways out, count the hands paid to notice you, count what moves and what doesn't. One door to the street. One door marked MEN that would lead to a back hall if the building had any sense. A cashier

window with wire mesh and a little shelf worn by a thousand wrists. A stairwell behind a canvas banner that said TRAIN HARD, painted by a man who couldn't spell hard without help. Two boys in sleeveless shirts ran between the ring and the window carrying rolled towels and loose talk. A thick man in a suit jacket stood too close to the cashier for a citizen. Doorman. Not muscle. A hinge.

The ring sat under lights that made every bruise look like a confession. The bell on the

table had a dent in its rim. Somebody had hit it with something heavier than a glove.

A man in clean cuffs drifted toward me with a smile that had a receipt attached. Hair neat. Tie straight. Shoes shined like he had a boy at home doing it every night.

"Evening," he said. "Crowd's light. Means you can see the work."

"Means the smart money's somewhere else," I said.

His smile didn't change. "Smart money's always here."

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me. Rance stayed at my shoulder, polite I drifted toward it like the board had called fingers and sweet. Names of slips pinned to a strip of cork. Under it, a row of slips from block letters. Odds, wall like a parish notice. Chalk lines. Behind him, the betting board hung on the simple".

He spread his hands, palms clean. "You place a bet. You enjoy the round. You stop asking about a boy named Eli. Transcations

"And what's the offer?" I asked. Rance's smile finally tightened at the corners. "It's a door you don't open." "Q-17," I repeated. "That's a locker? A leave Q-Semirent alone." "Leave the teeth show." "I didn't come for the show." "Enough to hear the teeth click." "Rance Hobby." He said it like a printed letterhead. "And I'm telling you as a friend: math. "What's your name?"

I kept my face still and made my mind do limp. Civilian. Somebody had already priced my

glance flicked down once, too fast for a leave with your ribs in the same order." His voice dropped. "You want to watch a bout? I leaned in like we were sharing a tip. His gun side. To the paper side. That told me Maive was right to worry.

His eyes went to my coat pocket. Not to the gun club.",

"Leeder says your house paid out last Thursday," I said. "I'm not asking for your books. I'm asking for one entry."

pressure, the kind a foreman uses when he wants you in a certain lane.

I leaned in close enough to smell the chalk dust. The board itself wasn't the clue. Boards lie easy. Paper has to work harder.

Three slips sat together, pinned low. Different names at the top, different amounts, but the ink had the same sick bloom around each stroke. Feathered edges. The kind of spread you get when a pen is loaded heavy and the hand moves fast. Same pen. Same

rushed wrist. Same house pad stock—fibers showing on the torn edge like cheap cloth.

I had seen a thousand forms die in a rain barrel. This wasn't water. This was speed and control.

I reached for a fourth slip with my eyes, looking for the odd one out. Plenty of them—some written with a pencil that bit deep, some in a cleaner ink that sat on top of the paper and dried crisp.

House writing, I thought. One hand filling in for three "customers." Planted money. Line control. A fix dressed up as a crowd.

Rance watched me watch. "You like numbers?" he asked.

"I like knowing who holds them," I said.

"You want the window," he said, nodding toward the wire mesh. "Or you want the ring? I can make either easy."

Easy was a word men sold when they were out of truth.

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Paper stock. Envelope that did not bend like cash. Stiffer. Hard banner, then back out with a folded back hall to the office window—window to back hall, corner of my vision—corner of motion. I watched the runner's path in the sound. That gave me what I needed: a map buys you seconds. The bell drew eyes. The crowd rose on the buys you seconds. I nodded like I agreed, because agreement

first two rows. The jump rope stopped. The ring bell rang once—sharp, metallic—and every head lit. Lights. The jump rope stopped. The ring bell rang twice. The air got hotter closer to the first room snapshot forward on cue.

I set my slip next to the three pinned ones in my mind and the edges lined up like dock planks. One writer. Multiple bettors. A house runner doing the syndicate's work. I folded my slip once and put it in my inside pocket, against my chest, where sweat ignored them and kept counting. "Ringside," Rance said, steering me. "You'll ignore them and keep counting. I wrote the odds and the stamp number in one short hold. Thumb high. Pressure heavy enough to score the paper without tearing. He to fill the runner pushed his pen through the slot to the official line, and I watched his grip. The runner pushed his pen through the slot to the official line, and I watched his grip. Same feathering. Ink spread the instant it hit. Same bloom.

wrote slow, making my hand look dumb on same cheap fiber. I pulled my pencil and wrote slow, making my hand look dumb on same feathering. Short hold. Thumb high. Pressure heavy enough to score the paper without tearing. He wrote the odds and the stamp number in one short hold. Thumb high. Pressure heavy enough to score the paper without tearing. He to fill the runner pushed his pen through the slot to the official line, and I watched his grip. The runner pushed his pen through the slot to the official line, and I watched his grip. Same feathering. Ink spread the instant it hit. Same bloom.

I swung one leg over, found the first rung. It slid under my boot. I tightened my grip and felt the damp paper of Eli's chart stick to my palm where I'd tucked it into my waistband. It tugged like it wanted to stay in daylight.

Maeve went down after me, quiet, quick. She moved like someone used to not being noticed in crowded rooms. The hatch above us framed a strip of pier and boots moving past. No one looked down. That was the point of windows.

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The corridor at the bottom ran narrow and low, concrete sweating. Vent stacks rose along one side, thick pipes with riveted seams. Old quarantine placards clung to the wall, numbered and peeling, each one stamped with a date and an authority seal that had faded to a gray smear. Q.W. 17 had been built to keep sickness in. Now it was built to keep men out.

I shut the hatch most of the way, leaving it cracked for air. The sound changed at once. Outside, the dock was horns and chain. In

here, every noise got swallowed and given back small. Our steps sounded like we were walking on wet sacks.

I tested the floor with my toe before each step. Concrete can hide holes. It can hide panels. It can hide a drop that breaks a leg and kills a clock. I kept my fingers near the wall, feeling for seams, feeling for drafts. Drafts mean gaps. Gaps mean doors.

Maeve's breath stayed even. She kept her ledger page in her fist like it could anchor her. "This corridor should run under the loading

apron," she said. "Old plans had a maintenance spur. It comes up near the pump room. The men who had keys—Garrity, Boon, and—"

"Don't say names like prayers," I said. "Say them like suspects."

She didn't flinch. Cooperation. She gave me what I needed, not what I wanted. "Boon kept a ring with three brass keys," she said. "One had a filed tooth. He used it on a door that stuck in winter."

228

Two sets. One heavier, one light, like a man metal. Then footfalls. Not running. Measured. Above us, through a grating set into the ceiling, I heard a truck door slam. Metal on numbers.", "No", I said. "That's a door talking in schedule.", Maeve leaned over it. "That's not a pier what you were seeing. designed as tide marks if you didn't know mechanical grid. Pressure-lock notation,

wasn't part of the harbor map. It was a bruise lined up with a printed grid that pressed hard at one point on the paper, and caught the margin bruise again. Someone had holding it open with two fingers. My flashlight I touched and laid Eli's chart on the floor, right ran higher, and the air was drier. Right ran lower, a faint drip sound in that direction. forced the passage around it. Two ways. Left ran right, a tight circle. "Water'll come back to that line," I said. Margin ticked with it.

carrying a clipboard or a gun he didn't need to swing.

Maeve's eyes snapped to mine. She didn't whisper. She didn't need to. Her hand tightened on her ledger page until the paper creased.

I listened. The footfalls paused. A voice muffled by concrete said something short. A reply came back. Then the scrape of something dragged across wood.

I counted seconds. I counted exits. Left split. Right split. Hatch behind. Water coming.

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Maeve's mouth moved without sound. Question. Choice.

At the junction, with the chart in my hand and the tide clock in my pocket, I had to pick: push deeper toward the pressure-door housing while the window stayed open, or flatten ourselves into the corridor's dirt and let whoever was above show their shoes through the grating. Pursue, or hide. Trade minutes for eyes.

I closed the chart with my palm and felt the salt grit bite my skin. I lifted my head toward

the right passage, then toward the left, and listened for which way the building wanted me to die.

I went right. The higher run held less water and more sound. It carried. Every footfall back there would come to us like a receipt slapped on a counter. I kept my shoulder close to the wall, chart folded tight in my left hand, flashlight low. Maeve stayed a half-step behind, not because I pushed her but because she knew how men move when they plan to hurt you.

A tug horn moaned somewhere beyond the concrete. Long note. It shook the air through the pipes.

Ahead, a service ladder bolted to the wall climbed into a grated landing. The steel rungs were slick with old hand grease. I tested one with my boot. It didn't give. On the second rung, I found a fresh nick in the paint—bright metal under it—like someone had hit it with a tool and didn't care who saw.

"Up," I said.

234

marked out in chalk. I'd seen it on a board by Pier Nine last week, printed on it because my eye through the slit. Jackets. The laminate was cloudy. The name dock pass tag fastened under the collar of his jacket. One of the men shifted his weight and his scraping. No dens. This is not a barroom.", "Gentlemen?", he said, voice mid. "No antechamber door like he was checking a ledger line. Maeve stopped where the deck met the pressure door like he was checking a ledger line. A narrow maintenance slot in the wall years. A narrow maintenance slot in the wall before her coat and climbed like she'd done it under her belt, hands sure on the cold rungs. I went after her, ribs tight, counting rung spacing, before, hands sure on the cold rungs. I went after her coat and climbed like she'd done it under her belt, hands sure on the cold rungs. I went

for a second, lit lanced up with the beat of those steps like a metronome for trouble. Leo Varin came in first. He wore a coat that didn't belong under ground. Clean lapsels. No init. He carried wanted to watch without being watched. Keys rang below. A whole ring, too many wanted to watch without being watched. Somebody had despatched it for men who let you see in without stepping out.

The tug horn sounded again, farther off, and another with a hand pump and a coil of rope with bolt cutters hooked over his arm. Canvas sacks that sagged at the corners, one sweating for him—two of them with bigger lunch pail. He didn't swing it. His men did the a small canvas bag in one hand like it was a lunch pail. He didn't swing it. His men did the wanted to watch without being watched. Keys rang below. A whole ring, too many wanted to watch without being watched. Somebody had despatched it for men who let you see in without stepping out.

Beside it was a control housing with a round, thick, wide dogs spaced around the pressure door set there like a ship's mouth—an attachment cut out of concrete. A metal mesh over a drop. It looked down into At the top, the landing was just a strip of us to grab an ankle. counting how long it would take a man behind a rim. Besides, it was a control housing with a round, thick, wide dogs spaced around the pressure door set there like a ship's mouth—an attachment cut out of concrete. A metal mesh over a drop. It looked down into At the top, the landing was just a strip of us to grab an ankle. counting how long it would take a man behind a rim. Besides, it was a control housing with a

232

fact, like ink. She nodded once. No argument. Time is a cork.", I said. "When it turns, that hatch through which concrete. "How long?" Maeve glanced at the corridor floor, then at "Water'll come back to that line," I said. Margin ticked with it.

I touched the line. Dry. The tide table in Eli's cooler. My watch ticked. The tide table in Eli's margin ticked with it.

230
I touched the line. Dry. The air above it felt cool. My watch ticked. The tide table in Eli's cooler. My watch ticked. The tide table in Eli's margin ticked with it.

leak had been counting time longer than any stainied darker, above it, the concrete was stained bright beam. Above it, like a man wanted it seen in a high-water mark. The paint had been reached a paint line on the wall, waist-hinges. "Filed tooth," I repeated, and filed it in my head next to wrench bites and greased head next to wrench bites and greased

of us.

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been laid thick, like a man wanted it seen in a

hinge. We reached a paint line on the wall, waist-hinges.

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231

wasn't part of the harbor map. It was a bruise lined up with a printed grid that pressed hard at one point on the paper, and caught the margin bruise again. Someone had holding it open with two fingers. My flashlight I touched and laid Eli's chart on the floor, right ran higher, and the air was drier. Right ran lower, a faint drip sound in that direction. forced the passage around it. Two ways. Left ran right, a tight circle. "Water'll come back to that line," I said. Margin ticked with it.

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caught in the fibers. I tipped the paper toward the lantern. The grease held a dull shine. Machine oil. Same kind that had pooled in the corners of this room and stained the grit black.

"Same handler," I muttered.

Maeve heard it. Her eyes flicked to Varrin, then to the man at his left.

Varrin spoke soft, like he was reading off a bill. "We are wasting tide."

"Then stop talking," I said.

257

I took the brass insert—my key that wasn't a key—and seated it into the hub. It didn't drop clean. The hub had a burr on one side, raised by a tool slipped in anger. I ran my fingertip over it and felt the snag bite skin.

"Someone's been in here," Sable said.

"Someone's failed in here," I told him.

I pulled my handkerchief, folded it twice, and scrubbed grit out of the hub. The cloth came away gray with sand and oil. I cleared the burr with the edge of my brass piece,

gentle, like you coax a stubborn pin back into line. The metal complained with a thin squeal.

Maeve stood at my flank. She wasn't watching the door. She was watching shoes.

One of Varrin's men—short, tight jaw, knuckles taped under his sleeves like a fighter hiding work—set his heel and tapped his toe twice. Then he stopped. Then he shifted his weight and didn't look at anyone.

Maeve's voice came low, for my ear only. "Toe. Twice. That's a cue. Like a cut-man on the apron."

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times I'd leaned my shoulder into a problem of truth tried to come out—but how many times I'd leaned my shoulder into it, ribs breaking. A line until it gave and took some teeth with it. I leaned my shoulder into the end of travel. I The hub locked hard at the last notch. "Two." I turned the hub to the last notch. "Two." "The one you can drown in," I said. "The chart window's right," I said. Sable's eyes narrowed. "What window?"

The lock gave with a groan that ran through the bulkhead and into my teeth. Not loud. Deep. Like a tugboat engine starting under strain.

Then the dogs seated. Clack-clack-clack in a ring. The door face shivered. The seam broke with a wet sigh.

Varrin stepped forward at once. His hand rose, not to touch, but to claim the moment.

Sable's hand went to his pistol, half-show, a reminder. "Nobody moves without me."

"You're not the tide," I said, and pulled.

292

The pressure door swung inward, slow, heavy, water sucking at its edge as it moved. The chamber beyond was darker, and the air that slid out was colder, stale with metal and wax.

Lantern light caught shapes inside. Drums. Sealed, stacked two high. Burlap bundles strapped with twine. At first glance it was the usual dockside grocery: something to sell, something to smoke, something to hide.

Then my eyes did the second pass.

The nearest drum had a lid that wasn't factory tight. The seal was scuffed. Fresh marks around the rim from a flat tool. I jammed my fingers under and pried just enough.

Inside, it wasn't powder. It wasn't liquor. It wasn't coin.

Bundles. Thick, brick-stacked. Federal war bonds, faces pressed flat under wax paper wrap. The wax had finger dents and oily smears. The paper edges were clean, too

The slug hit high, where the pipe ran tight aimed at a man. A panic bid for a timetable. A short bark. A pistol in a wet hand. Not only place it could. The shot came from nowhere and from the arthmetic with her eyes. Her pencl came up, then stopped. "You can buy men back," she said. "Paccheks, Mortgagge, Hospital bills. You can cut his ledger open."

Maeve stared at the bonds and did

the opposite wall, tore paint, and turned the Water knifed out in a white jet. It slapped the seam and the room got a new voice. came back doublet. Then the pipe split at a sound bounded off the pressure door and along the brick before it bent into the valve bank. It rang like a bell struck wrong. The valve mechanism.

The water proof that could hang Varrin bundles, overproofed. Varrin's toe-

over the open drum, over the wax-wrapped dogs decided to argue. My right hand hove red that could slam shut under pressure if the was the only thing between us and a door I kept my left hand on the keywheel hub. It chummed faster and still lost. If I kept the door true, I'd keep an exit and leave the bonds to men who biled in fear. The water touched the paint stripe and started to erase it.

I had to choose: take the weight in my arm, or take the weight in my pocket.

I didn't look back. I counted exits instead. One. The slit behind us. The ladder outside it. And the door in front of me that had a waterline mark on the floor beneath, old paint, a thin stripe the color of dried blood.

"Hands where I can see them," Sable said to nobody in particular, which meant he meant Maeve.

I set my palm on the keywheel hub and started the first turn.

The mechanism fought. Not seized, not dead-loaded. A pressure-lock with dogs that

260

taking and letting go. I listened. The metal door, like a latch tongue pulling home. One turn. There—a faint crack, deep in the catching and through my wrists, like teeth had to seat in the right order. I felt each "Oh," I said. I turned. The hub pulled against me, then eased. Another crack.

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clean for anything that had ever been in a pocket. They'd been stored, not spent.

Beside the bundles, wrapped in oiled cloth, were plates—engraved steel, press-ready. I peeled the cloth back a corner. The edge of one plate showed fresh filing. Tiny parallel lines, like a man had worked it in a hurry with a bastard file and no time to polish. That pattern would be a signature if I lived long enough to show it.

Varrin exhaled through his nose, controlled. "Assets," he said, as if naming a column.

268

"It belongs to whoever survives the water," said. "This is federal," he looked at the bonds like they were a case file later in light painted his face in copper. He Sable stepped into the threshold, and the can cut his ledger open."

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low. The driver's side window dropped an inch, then rose. The car horn gave one short pulse, then two. Answer.

Pryce spoke into the receiver, clipped.

"Bring the team to Danton and Kline. Now. And get to Pier Nine before shift change. Tug window closes at five-oh-five."

He hung up. His eyes returned to us.

"The tug route sails," he said. "And a print shop gets paper at first delivery. I can move on both. I need you on record to do it clean."

He pulled a statement form from his case. Federal header. Carbon copy. A pen that clicked like a typewriter key. He set it on the loading bay lip beside my damp newspaper.

Maeve leaned in, voice low. "Jeff. If your name goes on that, Sable will hunt you with paperwork. And Varrin will hunt you with men."

"My name's already on their list," I said. I wiped my cuff again, like I could scrub off what I'd done. The stain stayed.

Pryce held the pen out. "Sign, and you get protection. Or don't, and I take what you brought and you walk away."

Maeve's eyes met mine. Cooperation had brought us here. Friction sat between us, sharp and thin as a razor blade tucked in a wallet.

"If you leave it to me," she said, "I can keep my people safe. I can keep the ledger out of the wrong hands."

"And I can keep you alive when the wrong hands get impatient," I said.

Pryce's pen didn't move. The street behind him began to fill with early shift boats. Men with lunch pails. A foreman's whistle in the distance. Time stacking up like crates.

I took the pen. My fingers were slick from damp paper and blood. I steadied my hand against the loading bay edge.

"I'll sign," I said. "On one condition."

Pryce's eyes stayed blank. "State it."

"The ledger copy stays out of local police hands," I said. "No Sable. No vice. You want

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"Pier Nine," I said, and tasted copper again. "Before the tug hears the whistle." Seizure notices went up on Pier Nine like new skin. White paper. Red borders. Staples stuck crooked into wet timber. A clerk's hand had grabbed it to seal, the impression deep enough to read by touch. The air smelled of diesel and fresh paste. A pair of men in plain coats walked the gate line and pointed. Dock passes came off belts. Lunch pails hit planks with dull knobs. One

I folded the federal copy and put it in my breast pocket over my ribs, like paper could stop a bullet if you believed in it hard enough. Maeve shifted her stance so she could see back. She chose the corner. Now it was choosing us. I put my name on the waterfront, then to the gym district where the ruggedights paid for muscle at dawn. "You're going to Pier we go."

Pryce looked toward the waterfront, then to the street and the alley at once. She had tries to take your evidence, you show it." and handed it to me. "Keep that. If anyone else snatched it, tore off the copy, Pryce took the statement, snapped her ledger shut. "Where do we go."

I put my name on the line. The pen ink looked too black on that paper. Too honest. The carbon beneath caught it. The scratches. Pryce watched me a beat longer. Then he nodded once. "Agreed. Federal custody. Not relief. A calculation. Maeve let out a breath through her nose. Protect the people from Treasury. You names, you get them from Treasury. You protect those names belonging to."

longshoreman held up his hands, palms out, as if he'd been caught stealing time instead of cargo. A Treasury agent slid a tag onto the gate chain and cinched it tight. The tag had a serial number punched clean through thin aluminum.

Across the yard, the tug radio squawked from a wheelhouse window left open a crack. Call signs rolled out between bursts of static.

"Marlin Two—stand by. Herring Six—hold your line. Cutter Three—cut engines and wait."

A horn answered from out on the water, short and mad. Men got pulled down off a deck ladder by their collars. Their boots left dark streaks on the paint. One of them tried to talk fast; his mouth ran, his eyes didn't. An agent held up a bundle of cargo tags like prayer cards. The tags were stiff brown stock, each with a hole torn oval from being yanked off wire too quick. A grease pencil mark ran across three of them, the same slanted hand, the same hurried loop.

Two blocks inland, a gym door wore a padlock the size of a fist. It wasn't a gym lock. It was a government lock—square shoulders, clean teeth, a new steel bite. A paper seal wrapped the hasp, stamped and signed. Someone had tried to peel it once; the seal fiber had stretched, then given up. Through the glass, you could see the ring. The ropes hung slack. Chalk dust sat on the canvas like flour left after a raid.

A man in shirtsleeves carried out a cardboard box full of bet slips. He tried to

keep the slips square. They spilled anyway. Pink paper. Blue paper. Cheap pulp that fuzzed at the edges. A cut-man's towel went in another box, still stiff where blood had dried. One slip had a thumbprint in pencil graphite, a smudge right over the odds. Proof of hands on money.

Down in the paper district, supply crates lay open. Stenciled mill marks on the pine. Watermark samples clipped to boards. A woman with an ink-stained thumb flipped through order sheets and kept swallowing. An

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"Men are already getting killed," I said. I took the sheaf away and flipped to the page she didn't want me to touch. It was page 14. The ink was the wrong shade for the rest—green-black instead of flat black, as if the pen had been filled from a different bottle. One line had been sanded off flat black, but the ink had pressed too hard on a name and the ink had pooled like a bruise. LT. O. SABLE sat on the line like a head. L.A. nobody could deny. The blot ate the last letter. A thumbprint smudged across the label.

"Keep your clean," I said. "I need the dirty," Dated. "You don't need the page that gets men killed."

"I got their crates opened," I said. "That's different." "You got your rails," she said. "You got your noise." "You got your rails," she said. "You got your same efficiency she used on numbers. Held her ledger bag tight against her ribs like a shield. Her hair was pinned back with the boards above us dripped old river water. She always did. She always did. Squared too carefully. She'd done it herself. Sound of tug horns came muffled and the awning, out of the traffic line, where the mills window—an anchor inside a cirlce, not the window—a faint watermark when he held it to see the faint watermark when he held it to

agent tapped a sheet with a pencil. You could smell with a pencil. The order form had been sound of tug horns came muffled and the awning, out of the traffic line, where the mills window—an anchor inside a cirlce, not the window—a faint watermark when he held it to see the faint watermark when he held it to

