
REVENGE
NEVER DIES
FLOYD JONES

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“Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.” — Confucius

“Nothing on earth consumes a man more quickly than the passion of resentment.” — Friedrich Nietzsche

CHAPTER 1

THE TRIAL OF RAYMOND COLE

The jury was out for four hours and eleven minutes, which Jack Mercer took as a good sign. He had prosecuted enough cases to know that a fast verdict usually meant the evidence had done its work cleanly. Four hours said the jury had been thorough without being troubled. They had deliberated like people who already knew the answer but wanted to be sure they'd asked the right questions first.

He waited in the courthouse hallway with his paralegal, Donna Reyes, who had worked with him for six years and knew better than to make conversation at a time like this. She stood a few feet away, holding three folders against her chest the way she always did, organized by some system she had never explained and Jack had never asked about. He trusted the system. He trusted Donna. He stood with his hands in his pockets and watched the far end of the corridor and waited.

The Raymond Cole case had taken eleven months from indictment to closing arguments. Patricia Huang had been twenty-nine years old when Cole decided she owed him

money and that the law was too slow and too unpredictable to resolve the matter to his satisfaction. She had been a bookkeeper in his company, careful and competent, and she had made the mistake of being thorough enough to notice that certain accounts had been doctored. According to him, she had stolen company money — and maybe she had — but where had that money come from? There were several large deposits that he couldn't (or wouldn't) explain. Patricia told a friend that she had uncovered something fishy and that Cole had threatened her. Fourteen days later, her body was found in a warehouse on the eastern edge of the city. The medical examiner's report used words like *blunt force trauma* and *defensive wounds* and *manner of death: homicide*.

Jack had reviewed the file three times before he took the case. He had no doubts about the evidence, which was substantial and had been gathered cleanly, but he believed that a prosecutor who did not fully understand his own case was a danger to justice rather than an instrument of it.

By the third review he could have recited every witness statement from memory. He could have drawn the warehouse. He knew the names and faces and histories of every person on Raymond Cole's payroll who might conceivably be called to testify, and he knew which of them would hold under cross-examination and which of them would crumble. He also believed, privately, that Raymond

Cole was guilty. He had not needed the three reviews to confirm this, though the reviews confirmed it thoroughly.

He learned about Patricia in the weeks before the trial. Got to know her family. He believed, had always believed, that the people harmed by the crimes he prosecuted deserved to have someone in the room who remembered them as people rather than as the sum of their evidence.

The bailiff appeared at the far end of the corridor and nodded.

Donna fell into step beside him as he walked back toward the courtroom doors.

"You're not nervous," she said. It was not quite a question.

"The case is strong."

"You always say that."

"It's always true."

"You said it about the Kellerman case and the jury came back with a hung verdict."

"The Kellerman case had a witness problem. I flagged that before trial."

"You did," she conceded.

"Sometimes the weakness of people can thwart our best efforts."

She held the door for him. He went through without slowing.

The courtroom had filled quickly in the time he'd been in the corridor. The gallery held the usual mix: reporters in the back two rows, the victim's family in the first row on the left, her sister and her husband and an older woman who was probably the mother, sitting close together with the look of people braced for impact; friends of the defendant in a cluster on the right, the kind of friends who came to trials in good suits and made a point of meeting the jury's eyes; and then everyone else, the courthouse regulars and the curious civilians who had followed the case in the news and wanted to be present for the ending.

Jack did not look at any of them. He went to the prosecution table and sat down and arranged his notes with the same precision with which he arranged everything. The notes were largely unnecessary at this point — closing arguments were behind him, the evidence was in the record, the jury had made its decision — but the habit of preparation was not something Jack turned off by choice. It turned off only when there was nothing left to prepare for, and he had not yet reached that point in the present case.

Cole was brought in through the side door, flanked by two deputies. His attorney, a competent man named Watkins who had done everything correctly and was likely to lose anyway because the evidence had not allowed for anything else, sat at the defense table and wrote something on a legal pad.

Cole sat beside him and looked at the table in the way Jack had seen a hundred defendants look at a hundred tables — the inward gaze of a man who is calculating his odds for the last time and finding the numbers less favorable than he'd hoped.

Judge Harlan Prentiss entered and everyone stood. Prentiss was sixty-two, silver-haired, possessed of the kind of physical presence that photographs well and that juries and reporters respond to instinctively. He had been on the bench for nineteen years. He was known for clean, efficient trials, for impatience with procedural games, and for a sentencing philosophy that leaned toward the severe end of the guidelines. Jack had tried eleven cases in his court and respected him the way you respect a tool that performs its function reliably.

"Please be seated," Prentiss said, and everyone sat down.

The foreman was a retired science teacher named Ellis, sixty-three years old, with the kind of steady, deliberate manner Jack had noted during voir dire as a positive indicator. Not someone who made quick decisions, but someone who made thorough ones. He carried the verdict slip the way a person carries something that needs to be handled carefully.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" Prentiss asked.

"We have, Your Honor."

"Will the defendant please rise?"

Cole stood. Watkins stood beside him. Cole put his hands together in front of him and Jack noticed, from across the room, that they were very still. Cole was controlling himself. Whatever was underneath was being held there by considerable effort.

The foreman unfolded the slip.

"On the charge of murder in the first degree," he said, and paused the way people pause before they say a word they know will change the shape of the room, "we the jury find the defendant — guilty."

The room moved. A shift in collective breath, a murmur from the gallery, a sound from the Huang family's section that was either a sob or a long exhalation of air that had been held too long. Cole's hands pressed tightly against each other. Watkins put a hand briefly on his client's shoulder and then withdrew it.

Jack did not move. He watched Cole turn. Not toward Watkins, not toward the gallery where his friends sat. Cole turned and looked at Jack, and Jack looked back at him, and for a moment the room contracted to the space between them. There was recognition in Cole's face — the recognition of consequence, the existence of a process that had run its full course and arrived at its conclusion. Cole nodded very

slightly, as though confirming something he had suspected. Then he turned away and was led out of the room.

Jack gathered his files. He did not feel triumph. He never did, at verdicts. He had been asked about this by Donna once, years ago, and the best answer he'd been able to produce was that triumph implied the outcome had been uncertain, and he did not generally proceed with cases whose outcomes he believed to be uncertain. If the evidence was what it needed to be, the verdict was the result of a process working as designed. That was not a cause for triumph. That was simply accuracy, confirmed.

Patricia Huang's sister caught him in the corridor afterward. She was small and dark-haired and looked like the photographs he'd seen of Patricia, which he found, as he always found such resemblances, quietly devastating.

"Thank you," she said.

"The evidence was strong," Jack said. "The jury did their job."

"And you did yours."

He accepted this. "Yes."

She looked at him for a moment with an expression he could not entirely read — gratitude, certainly, but something else beneath it, something more complicated.

"Does it ever — " she started, and then stopped.

"Does it ever what?"

She shook her head. “Nothing. Thank you, Mr. Mercer.”

She went back to her family. Jack watched them move toward the elevator, the four of them close together, the mother in the middle. He thought about the question she hadn’t finished. He thought he knew what it would have been. *Does it ever feel like enough?*

He didn’t know the answer to that question. He suspected it was “no,” but he also suspected that “no” was the right answer, that it was supposed to feel like not quite enough, that the appropriate response to justice was not satisfaction but resolution. A closed case. A concluded process. Not enough, never enough, but done.

He took the stairs down to the parking garage, where his car sat in his reserved space with the parking permit Donna renewed every January. He sat in the driver’s seat for a moment without starting the engine.

His phone buzzed. A text from Rachel: *Home late again?*

He put the phone away and started the car.

The drive home took twenty-two minutes, which was average for a Wednesday evening. He used the time the way he used most unstructured time — thinking through the next case, a workplace harassment matter that had escalated in ways the original complainant had not anticipated and that would require careful preparation. He was not consciously avoiding thinking about Rachel’s text. He had simply learned,

over the course of their twelve-year marriage, that some conversations were better approached after a period of internal preparation, and Rachel's texts had increasingly taken on the quality of conversations that required such preparation.

Their house was a colonial on Deerfield Road, purchased eight years ago when they had still been talking about children and about the kind of life they were going to build together. The children had not happened — not because of any particular failure or decision, but through the accumulation of postponements that eventually solidified into a new reality, like water finding a different course around an obstacle. The house remained. It was a good house, well-maintained, in a neighborhood that had continued to appreciate.

Rachel was in the kitchen when he came in. A glass of wine sat on the counter, half-drunk. She was not cooking — had not been cooking — but the refrigerator door had been opened recently and she had the air of someone who had considered cooking and decided against it without arriving at an alternative.

"You won," she said.

"It was on the news?"

"You usually win. I expect it." Rather than being proud of her husband, she seemed instead to be rather bored by his success.

He opened the refrigerator and looked into it, but found nothing of interest. He closed it.

"There's a dinner Thursday. The Huang family wants to thank the team."

"Thursday's fine."

"You don't have to come if — "

"Thursday's fine, Jack."

He looked at her. She was looking at the window above the sink, which looked out into the backyard, which in the dark looked out into nothing. She was thirty-nine and still beautiful in a way that had to do with bone structure and bearing rather than effort, and she was as remote from him in this kitchen as she had been on the night he first noticed, three or four years ago, that something between them had gone quiet in a way that didn't seem temporary.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Fine. Long." She picked up her wine. "I'm going to read."

"Rachel — "

"I said I'm going to read, Jack."

She went. He stood in the kitchen with the refrigerator behind him and listened to her footsteps on the stairs and then, distantly, the sound of the bedroom door.

He sat at the kitchen table and opened his briefcase and took out the workplace harassment file and began to read. After a while he got up and made a sandwich and ate it at the table while he read. The house was quiet in the way houses are quiet when there are two people in them who are not talking.

It was, he thought, a functional life. It wasn't exactly good, or full. It wasn't the kind of life that Patricia Huang's family seemed to have. But functional was what he had, and he had chosen it with his eyes open, or at least had watched it become what it was without choosing to redirect it, which amounted to the same thing. He was a prosecutor. He was good at his work and he believed in it. These things were important. Life wasn't always perfect, but if you keep your nose to the grindstone, he believed, there was a good chance things would get better.

He underlined something in the file and turned the page. Outside, the neighborhood settled into its nighttime quiet, and Jack Mercer sat at his kitchen table and read his files and did not go upstairs.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEATH OF DIANE MARSH

Rachel Mercer had learned, in the three years since she and Kevin Marsh had resumed what they had started in grad school and abandoned out of cowardice, that the most effective lies were the ones that required the least active maintenance. The best lies were structural, built into the architecture of daily life — a schedule that naturally accounted for certain absences, a network of people who knew nothing and therefore could not accidentally reveal anything, a set of habits that made her movements unremarkable to anyone who might be watching.

She was not in love with Jack. She had never been in love with Jack.

She had married him at twenty-seven, three years after she and Kevin had gone their separate ways, and she had done it for reasons that made sense at the time: he was stable, he was principled, he was the kind of man who would be exactly who he appeared to be in twenty years' time, and she had

grown tired, in her late twenties, of people who were not who they appeared to be. Kevin had appeared, back then, to be someone capable of great feeling but incapable of sustained action, and she had been right about both.

She had been less right about Jack, though. He was exactly who he appeared to be, as she had predicted, but this turned out to mean that there was very little space in his life for anyone else's version of things. Jack wasn't cruel, but he was remote… a man who had built his identity around a single large idea and who could not make room for the complexity that other people's interior lives introduced. He loved her in the way he loved justice: abstractly, from a distance, with complete conviction in the value of the concept and limited interest in its moment-to-moment reality.

Rachel wasn't much different. She admired Jack's seriousness, his drive, his dedication, and had married him with the expectation that she would eventually fall in love with him; that the act of living together would, over time, forge an emotional bond between them. Instead, he remained distant and with each passing year she grew ever more bitter. And all the while, she pined away for Kevin.

Kevin Marsh had come back into her life at a conference in the city, three years ago. He had aged well in the way that some men age — the softness of his twenties replaced by something more settled, the beautiful uncertainty of his

college self refined into a kind of considered warmth. He had seen her across a hotel lobby and his face had done something that no one's face had done at the sight of her in a very long time.

She had told herself, that first evening and for many evenings afterward, that she would not let it become what it became. She had told herself this while returning his texts and while meeting him for lunches that extended past the professional into something else entirely and while standing in his hotel room the first time looking out at the parking lot and telling herself and Kevin both that this was a terrible idea. Kevin had agreed that yes, it was a terrible idea. She said they should stop, and he had agreed that yes, they should stop, and neither of them had stopped. A few months later, Kevin got the opportunity to move back to Philadelphia. He bought a house just two miles away from Rachel's. Now they could see each other whenever it was convenient.

Over the years, Kevin had had many girlfriends, but he was never serious about any of them. Always, in the back of his mind, there was Rachel. No other woman could ever really compete with her. But, as he entered his mid-thirties, he finally condescended to marry a woman named Diane, a pretty but dull-witted schoolteacher ten years his junior. Rachel had met Diane twice at social functions before the affair began and who she had found — with the sort of

attention one pays to a person one is in the process of betraying — brittle and suspicious in the way of someone who has been given ample reason to be both. Diane Marsh wore expensive clothes and the look of a woman who had chosen a certain kind of life and then discovered she had chosen it for the wrong reasons and was determined not to admit this even to herself. Rachel understood this completely.

On the night that everything changed — Rachel was driving through the darkness toward Kevin's house with the low-grade anxiety she always felt when Diane was supposed to be out of town — she turned her phone over on the passenger seat and saw Kevin's name on the screen.

She answered on the second ring.

"She came back," he said. His voice had a quality she had not heard in it before — flat, and strange.

"What do you mean 'she came back'? She was going to her sister's."

"She came back. Rachel — " A pause that lasted too long. "Something happened."

She had known, from the pause alone, that it was serious. Kevin Marsh was not a man given to understatement or false calm. She had never heard him sound like that.

"Tell me."

"I need you to come here."

She was almost there already.

She entered the house and found Kevin in the living room, sitting on the floor in the center of the room. Diane was on the floor beside the fireplace, staring blankly up at the ceiling, lying in a pool of blood.

Rachel stood in the doorway for a moment that felt longer than it was. She was a practical woman. She had always been a practical woman. Like her husband, she brought a laser-focused clarity of attention to everything in her life, and especially to the difficult moments. She looked at Diane and understood immediately that she was dead and that there was nothing to be done about that, and she moved directly to the next question, which was what could be done about everything else.

Kevin told her, haltingly, what had happened. "She found out about us," he said. "I don't know how. We argued. She started hitting me and I shoved her. I didn't mean to hurt her. I was only trying to create some space, to make her stop coming at me. She tripped and fell and hit her head against the hearth. The sound of it…" He nearly broke down, but continued. "The sound of it was… terrible." The word *terrible* did not contain the thing he was trying to describe, but it was the only word he had.

Rachel listened to all of it. She looked at Diane while he spoke, and thought, with the cold precision that descended on her in moments of crisis and that she had come to rely on

while simultaneously finding it frightening in herself, that Kevin was telling the truth. This had been an accident. The problem was that accidents, in a court of law, required proof of their accidental nature, and the circumstances here — the argument, the affair, the shove — would not present well without that proof.

The other problem was Jack.

She looked at Diane for a long time, and then at Kevin. She scanned the room — the layout, the lighting, the entry points. She thought about Jack sitting at the kitchen table with his briefcase open and his files spread before him, reviewing the story of someone else's downfall. She thought about how good he was at that. She thought about how, if this came to trial, the prosecutor — whoever it was — would do exactly what Jack would do: build the structure of the evidence methodically, in sequence, until the conclusion was unavoidable. Unless, she thought, the structure pointed somewhere else.

"I have an idea," she said.

Kevin stared at her.

She told Kevin that they could blame Jack for Diane's death. Jack was home now, working. He had been at home when Rachel left, while Diane was meeting her untimely demise. The only person who could provide him an alibi was her, and she could refuse to give it to him.

Rachel watched as Kevin's face moved from revulsion through the sort of calculation that revulsion gives way to in people who are frightened enough, and then to a kind of surrender.

"You want to frame your husband?"

"I want us to survive."

She told him that this was their chance to finally be together. She could divorce Jack and take his money. He would go to jail and would be powerless to stop her. She watched Kevin hear this and weigh her plan against the alternative — likely prison for him.

She took out her phone and called 911.

She let her voice break in exactly the right places.

Kevin watched in a kind of horrified daze. He had been in love with her for so long, but for the vast bulk of that time they had lived apart. They had only been together for two years. They had been good years, the kind of years that established the standard against which subsequent years were measured, which was both their gift and their damage. Kevin had been twenty-four when they parted, and the parting had been his fault — he had been offered a position in Chicago and Rachel had been offered a position in Philly. He had been too afraid to turn the job down, and also too afraid to ask her to leave with him. So he simply packed up and left. He lived through the subsequent years with the muffled quality of a

man standing slightly outside his own life, watching it proceed according to a plan that someone else had drawn up.

He had not been happy. He had come into his marriage with Diane with an absence already in him — the absence of someone who had given the best of himself to another woman and had not stopped wanting her back, but had accepted that wanting her back was not productive. Diane had understood, he thought, that she was not his first choice, though he had never said this and she had never asked. She had her own version of the same compromise. They were, in their way, well-matched in their mutual insufficiency.

When Rachel walked across the hotel lobby toward him three years ago, he saw her face brighten in a way that Diane's face had never brightened for him. He knew instantly that he had to get back together with her, no matter the cost. He was not proud of this, but he was also not capable of feeling more than abstractly bad about it, the way you feel abstractly bad about a flood or an earthquake — something large and external that has altered the landscape irreversibly and about which your personal feelings are beside the point.

Now he stood in his living room with his wife dead on the floor and the woman he loved telling him, in a calm and steady voice, that there was a way through this.

He listened to her call 911 as she put on an act for the police. What kind of a woman was this? He had loved her for so long, but did he ever really even know her?

Then he looked at Diane, and a wave of grief and panic flowed over him. He didn't mean to do this, he told himself. But... that will not be sufficient. His innocence would not save him. Rachel was right.

He hated himself for thinking these things. He hated himself with a thoroughness that he knew, even in the moment, would not be enough to make him act differently. The self-hatred was real, but it didn't outweigh the fear.

The cops arrived ten minutes later. Rachel's performance was extraordinary. He had always known she was intelligent, but he had not fully understood, until that night, the quality of intelligence that could produce such a performance under such conditions. She was grief-stricken. She was frightened. She was a wife who had been afraid, for some time, of her husband's temper, who had prayed it would never come to this, and who now stood in her friend's living room, sobbing pitifully and telling a story that was internally consistent and delivered with the trembling sincerity of the absolutely truthful.

Kevin told his version separately, in the kitchen, while Rachel was taken outside. His version was simpler, a story

Rachel had spoon-fed him: he had come home to find Diane dead, her friend Rachel on the other side of the room cowering in fear, and a man who looked like Jack fleeing the scene. Kevin had been shaking when he told this tale, which was not performance. The shaking was real.

As Kevin answered the officer's questions, he thought about Jack Mercer sitting at his own kitchen table, not so very far away, reviewing his files.

He thought about what was coming and told himself he should put a stop to this. But how could he, without sacrificing both himself and the woman he loved?

CHAPTER 3

JACK ACCUSED

The phone call came at 10:47 PM, and Detective Jim Weston answered it on the second ring because he was still awake and had been awake for going on twenty hours. One of these days, he assured himself, he'd get a chance to sleep again.

The dispatcher told him there was a possible homicide on Sycamore Avenue. He wrote down the address. He told his wife, who was not asleep either, that he'd be back when he'd be back. She had been married to him for twenty-two years and responded to this with the equanimity of long practice.

Weston arrived at the Marsh house at 11:15. The scene was orderly by the time he got there — first responders had secured the perimeter, the neighbors who were awake had been asked to stay inside, and the Mercer woman, Rachel Mercer, had been moved from the house to the patrol car outside. She had reported the incident. She was described by the responding officer as extremely distraught.

Weston looked at her through the patrol car window before he went inside. She was sitting with her hands in her

lap, staring at nothing. Her eyes were red. Her makeup was ruined. She had the look of someone who had been crying for some time. He noted all of this with professional neutrality and went into the house.

Diane Marsh was on the floor beside the fireplace, on her back, one arm at her side and one extended above her head as though she had been trying to catch something. The back of her skull had connected with the edge of the stone hearth. The medical examiner, who arrived ten minutes before Weston, would describe the impact as consistent with significant falling force.

"Does that mean she was pushed?" Weston asked.

"Can't say for sure. I'd say it's likely, but it's possible that she just tripped."

Weston looked at the room. He looked at the positions of the furniture, the distance from where Diane Marsh lay to the nearest piece of furniture that a person might have fallen back from, the orientation of the body relative to the fireplace. He looked at Kevin Marsh, who was in the kitchen being interviewed by Weston's partner, Detective Reeves. He could hear Marsh's voice through the kitchen doorway — low, controlled, describing what he'd found when he came home. Weston listened to the cadence of it while he looked at the room.

He had been doing this for twenty-three years and had learned to trust the cadence. By itself, it wasn't enough to tell him the truth, but if he paid careful attention, it told him where to listen harder.

He went outside and got in the patrol car with Rachel. She told him what happened.

She explained that she and Kevin had been close friends many years ago, that they worked in the same industry — pharmaceuticals — and that they sometimes ran into each other at business conferences. When Kevin moved back east, she had met Diane and had become friends with her. She told Weston that Jack had been acting irrationally lately, and had accused her of having an affair with Kevin.

"Was he right about that? Have you two been having an affair?"

"No," Rachel replied. "But recently, I've been coming over here to see Diane quite a bit. Jack's pathologically jealous, so naturally he insisted that what I've really been doing is sneaking over here to fool around with Kevin. But there's nothing to that."

She described the escalating tension she had been afraid to share with anyone, and told Weston about the night Jack had come home angry — she said this carefully, choosing the word with the delicacy of someone who understands the weight it carries — and said that Kevin would answer for

what he'd done. She had been afraid, she said, her voice dropping to something barely audible. She had been afraid for some time.

Weston listened. He wrote things down.

He asked her about her evening. She had been home, she said. Jack had come home around six and had seemed agitated. He left not long after that, not saying where he was going.

She went to visit Diane when suddenly Jack burst in. He asked where Kevin was, and Diane had told him that Kevin was out, that he had been working late. Jack didn't believe her, though, and got up in her face. They started yelling at each other. She told him to get out of her house, and he pushed her. When he saw that she had been injured, he ran off.

Weston thanked her. He went back inside and talked with Reeves.

"What do you think? You want to pick him up tonight?" Reeves asked.

Weston considered the matter for a moment. "Let's wait for morning," he replied.

Jack was having breakfast at his kitchen table when the police came. He was eating toast and reading a file from the workplace harassment case, and he had his second cup of

coffee beside him and was finding, as he often found in the morning with good coffee and an interesting file, something approaching contentment.

The doorbell rang. He thought it was early for a delivery. He went to the door and saw the two detectives. One he recognized from a case he had worked on the previous year — Weston, competent, careful. The other he didn't know.

Weston held up his badge. "Mr. Mercer," he said, "I wonder if you'd be willing to come with us."

Jack looked at him. "What's this about?"

"We have some questions about last night."

"Last night?"

"Diane Marsh was found dead in her home last evening."

"Who's Diane Marsh?" he asked.

Weston's expression was professionally neutral. "We'd like to ask you some questions."

"Am I being detained?"

"We'd appreciate your cooperation."

Jack looked at him for a long moment. He thought about the protocols. He thought about the correct way to handle this, which was to call his attorney. But he didn't have a standing attorney because he had never been on this side of things and had never expected to be. It was an oversight he was now regretting.

"Let me get my jacket."

He did not know, as he put on his jacket and picked up his phone, that Rachel was not in the bedroom where he assumed she was. He did not know that she had slipped out through the back door just as the detectives arrived, having watched their car pull up from the upstairs window, having waited long enough to be sure they would catch him at home.

He locked the front door behind him and got in the back of the police car.

He thought, with the professional confidence of a man who has spent fifteen years on the other side of these conversations, that he would explain the situation clearly and it would be resolved quickly. He was a prosecutor. He knew how this worked. The system, he had always believed, was self-correcting. Give it the facts and it would find its way to the truth.

He was not wrong about the system. He was wrong about the facts. He was wrong about Rachel.

He rode in the back of the police car with his hands in his lap and thought about how he would handle the interview, and the morning light lay flat and bright across the streets of the neighborhood he had lived in for eight years. Behind him, his house sat quiet and untroubled, while somewhere in the city Rachel Mercer was sitting with Kevin Marsh making sure their story held together, and the distance between what

Jack believed was true and what was actually true was, in that moment, as wide as it would ever be.

CHAPTER 4

JACK FACES QUESTIONS

The interrogation room at the Third Precinct was a room Jack had visited many times, though always from the outside of the glass. It seemed smaller from inside, and colder, and the chair across the table from Weston was the kind of chair designed to communicate, through its discomfort, that the room itself was not neutral. Jack sat in the chair with his hands flat on the table and waited for Weston to begin.

Weston began by setting down a photograph in front of him.

Diane Marsh. The crime scene. The image was clinical and terrible and Jack looked at it without flinching.

"You knew her," Weston said.

"No. Never saw her. Never heard of her."

"And Kevin Marsh?"

"Never heard of him, either."

Weston looked at him closely. "You were at their house last night."

"What are you talking about? I was home last night. *All* night."

"Your wife says otherwise."

The sentence landed like a punch to the gut. Jack looked at Weston. He looked at the photograph, and then at Weston again.

"What did my wife say?"

"She gave a statement last night." Weston's voice was careful and even, the voice of a man delivering information without editorial comment. "She indicated you left the house around six-thirty. She wasn't sure of the exact time."

Jack was quiet for a moment. He was aware of a sensation he didn't immediately have a name for. It was the feeling of standing in a room and discovering, with certainty, that the floor is not where you believed it to be.

"I'd like to speak with my wife," he said.

"She's given her statement."

"I understand that. I'd like to speak with her."

Weston exchanged a glance with Reeves, who had been standing near the door. Reeves shook his head and Weston looked back at Jack.

"That's not possible right now, Mr. Mercer."

Jack looked at his hands on the table. He thought about the process. He thought about what he knew and what he didn't know and what the correct steps were from this position. The

process was knowable. The process was reliable. He had believed this his entire professional life and he believed it now, in spite of what was happening presently.

"Then I'd like a lawyer," he said.

They held him for six hours before his attorney arrived. The attorney was a man named Marcus Bell, whom Jack had met twice at bar association events and who had the reputation of being competent and thorough, if not brilliant. Jack had called him because he was the first defense attorney whose number came to mind, and because in the holding cell in those initial hours he had not been capable of the kind of careful selection he would normally bring to such a decision.

Marcus arrived at four in the afternoon looking as though he'd been interrupted doing something else, which he had. He sat across from Jack in the consultation room and asked his questions with the systematic thoroughness of someone working through a checklist, and Jack answered them, and when Marcus was finished he sat back and looked at Jack with an expression that contained more complexity than Jack had expected.

"Your wife's statement is the problem," Marcus said.

"Her statement is false."

"Walk me through last night."

Jack walked him through it: the dinner he'd made for himself after Rachel went upstairs, the files on the kitchen

table, the time he'd spent reading. He had not left the house and hadn't been aware that Rachel had left. He did not go to the Marsh residence. He had never met Kevin Marsh or Diane Marsh. He had no idea who they were or where they lived or anything else about them.

Marcus wrote it all down.

"There are other problems," Marcus said. "Not just the statement."

"What other problems?"

"The medical examiner's preliminary findings. The ME is not treating this as a straight fall. The impact distribution suggests — " Marcus consulted his notes. "The impact distribution is inconsistent with a standard backward fall. He's saying she was probably shoved. Of course, the ME's an idiot. You know the guy — Anderson? Total moron. Doesn't know how to work the instruments, so he makes mistakes in his readings all the time. I think the coroner will correct his error. If it *is* an error, that is."

Jack was quiet.

"Jack. Was Diane Marsh already dead when the police arrived at the Marsh house?"

"I don't know what she was when the police arrived. I wasn't there."

"You know," Marcus said carefully, "that your being a prosecutor is going to be a complication. On the jury."

"I know."

"People have feelings about — "

"I know, Marcus."

Marcus closed his notebook. He looked at Jack with an expression that was, Jack recognized, the expression of a man deciding whether to say the thing he is thinking.

"Say it," Jack said.

"I've done this for many years. I've had a lot of clients tell me their spouse gave false testimony."

"And?"

"And you're the first one I've believed."

Jack looked at him.

"Which is interesting," Marcus said, "because it means someone else did this. My guess would be that Kevin Marsh killed his wife, maybe accidentally, maybe on purpose. That would mean your wife is covering for him, which suggests that he's probably her lover, which would mean —"

"Yes," Jack said. "That's what it would mean."

The word *lover* sat in the air between them. Jack had not said it before. He had thought it, in the holding cell, with the cold clarity of someone assembling evidence and following where it leads. He had thought about Rachel's remoteness, the years of it. He had thought about the nights she came home late and the mornings she was already elsewhere in her mind before she left the house.

"I should've seen this coming," he said to himself.

"All right," Marcus said, as he opened his notebook again. "Let's talk more about your wife."

CHAPTER 5

RACHEL, JORGE, AND PRENTISS

Jorge Reyes had been the county coroner for eleven years, and in that time he had developed what he privately regarded as a sophisticated understanding of what courts required from a medical examiner's testimony. They required precision and they required clarity, but above all they required certainty. A coroner who said *this is consistent with* was less useful to a prosecuting attorney than a coroner who said *this is the result of*. The science did not always support the second formulation, but the science, in Jorge's considered view, was a matter of interpretation, and interpretation was a skill he had cultivated carefully.

By 10:30 on the morning following Diane Marsh's death, Rachel had finished meeting with Kevin, and the two of them had worked out the final details of the story they would tell. It was a simple tale, easy for both of them to remember, and consistent with what they had told the police the night before: Jack was furious over the affair he believed Rachel and

Kevin were having, so he burst into the Marsh house. Kevin wasn't there, so Jack couldn't confront him, but he ended up arguing with Diane, accusing her husband of infidelity, and then shoved her toward the fireplace, killing her.

One detail nagged at Rachel, though — what would the coroner say? Would he, perhaps, conclude that Diane had merely tripped, and that, therefore, her death was accidental? Having gone this far, Rachel wanted Jack convicted of the most serious crime they could pin on him. Ideally, they'd get him for murder. At the very least, intentional manslaughter. She wanted to make sure the coroner was on her side.

Jorge knew Rachel — they moved in some of the same professional circles; the overlap between the pharma community and the medical examiner's office being not inconsiderable — and he had found her, in those peripheral encounters, attractive in a way that he had not pursued, partly from professional caution and partly from the belief that she was out of his league.

She asked to meet. She was direct about the nature of what she wanted: she needed his interpretation of the Marsh findings to support a particular conclusion. She explained the conclusion. She explained what was at stake.

He met her that evening at a hotel bar just outside the city. She was already there when he arrived, composed in a way that he found simultaneously reassuring and unnerving. They

sat beside each other and she told him what she needed without embellishment and without apology.

"What's in it for me?" he asked.

"You'll have my undying gratitude," she whispered into his ear, as she nuzzled up to him and ran her hand up his thigh.

He looked at her intently and ran the problem over in his mind. He thought about the science of it — what the instrument readings actually showed, what they could be made to support, where the ambiguity genuinely lived. It was not as much of a stretch as it might have been. The impact point was unusual for a fall. Not impossible, but unusual. He could work with unusual.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"Think hard," she told him. "Think *long* and *hard*. I need to know by the end of the week. I'll make it worth your while, believe me."

He called her back the next day. They met again at the hotel, but not in the bar this time. He booked a room and Rachel helped Jorge to feel more comfortable with their arrangement.

The bail hearing was three days later. The prosecution argued for remand on the grounds of flight risk and danger to

the community — the latter argument hinging on the characterization of Jack as a man who had made threats in the past, a characterization based entirely upon Rachel's statement and that Jack's colleagues at the DA's office found, from their seats in the gallery, deeply uncomfortable to watch. Jack was offered bail at an amount that was technically achievable but practically difficult given that his accounts had been frozen pending the investigation, and Marcus argued for a reduction that the judge — a man named Cartwright — declined to grant.

Jack sat through the bail hearing with the stillness he had brought to the interrogation room and would bring to every subsequent proceeding: the stillness of a man who has made a decision to be present and accurate and to conduct himself in a way he will not regret, regardless of what is happening around him. It was the stillness of a prosecutor, and in its current context it was misread, by almost everyone in the room, as the stillness of a man who knows he is guilty and has decided to accept the consequences. Only Donna, who had come to the hearing and sat in the gallery and watched him with the forensic attention she normally applied to case files, read it correctly.

She tried to visit him in the jail that evening and was told that visitation was limited to family and legal representation. She was neither. She went home and called Marcus and gave

him, over the course of forty-five minutes, everything she had on Kevin Marsh. She had done a little investigative work on her own time and discovered that Kevin had a history of questionable business practices, contractor disputes, and various other situations in which he had behaved in ways that suggested a pattern of using proximity to people he considered useful and then extracting value from them when it became advantageous. Marcus listened and took notes and thanked her and said it was helpful, which she understood to mean that it was not yet sufficient.

The trial was assigned to Judge Harlan Prentiss.

Jack learned this from Marcus on the morning the assignment was announced, and he felt, upon hearing it, something he could not immediately name. He had appeared in Prentiss's court often enough to know his manner, his rhythms, the tells in his judicial temperament. He trusted Prentiss's procedural rigor. He had always trusted it. And yet he was troubled by his assignment to this case.

Rachel Mercer arrived at Judge Prentiss's home at 7:15 PM on the evening the trial assignment was announced. Her car reached the entrance of his property and the gates swung open for her. She drove up the long driveway, parked, and knocked on the front door.

Prentiss let her in.

She had called him three days after the arrest. She had his personal number because she had attended a dinner party at which he was also a guest, and they had spoken at some length about Jack. He had given her his card in the way that high status men give cards to women they find interesting — with the implication that the card represents access to something, and that that something is contingent on the right circumstances arising.

She had filed the card and had waited for the right circumstances.

She sat in Prentiss's personal library that evening in the chair she had placed herself in deliberately — not across the desk, which would have been the formal position, but at an angle to it, in the chair he used for reading, which she had noted upon entering and had found suggestive. She told him what she needed in the tone of someone who expects to be understood.

Prentiss was vain and possessed of the deep self-regard that accrues in men who have been important for a long time and have come to mistake the respect of their position for the respect of their person. He had been the most important person in nearly every room he'd entered for nineteen years. Rachel looked at him and he felt, with disconcerting

intensity, like a man being genuinely seen for the first time in a considerable while.

"I cannot be seen to —" he stopped. "This must be handled carefully."

"I trust your judgment entirely."

She leaned toward him slightly. She said something he would afterward find impossible to repeat accurately, which was its purpose. She said it quietly and with complete attention to him and only him, and Harlan Prentiss, who had not had that quality of attention directed at him in some years, felt his professional caution recede to a manageable distance.

"I'll see what I can do," he told her.

"I appreciate it, Harlan."

She left. He sat at his desk for a while and poured himself two fingers of the scotch he kept in the bottom drawer for occasions requiring steady focus. He thought about what he had agreed to and what it would require of him. He thought about his career, all nineteen years of it. He thought about the pension, the reputation, the framed commendations on the wall.

He thought about Rachel Mercer saying his name in the particular way she had said it — and poured himself another finger.

CHAPTER 6

THE TRIAL OF JACK MERCER

The trial of Jack Thomas Mercer, Assistant District Attorney, for the murder of Diane Catherine Marsh, began on a Monday in October with a full gallery, fourteen reporters from seven different outlets, and a jury that had been selected over three days with more than the usual difficulty, owing to the challenge of finding twelve people in the county who had not formed a strong opinion about a case that had received significant local coverage.

The jury that was finally seated consisted of eight women and four men, ranging in age from twenty-four to seventy-one. Marcus had wanted more men, on the theory that male jurors would be less sympathetic to Rachel's testimony about fear. The prosecution had wanted more women, on the same theory inverted. The jury that resulted was not what either side had designed, which Marcus and Jack both knew was par for the course.

Jack sat at the defense table in the suit he had asked Marcus to bring from his house — charcoal grey, white shirt, a tie he had chosen because it was unremarkable. He had thought carefully about his appearance and had arrived at the conclusion that unremarkable was the goal: not the suit of a man performing innocence, not the defiance of a man who doesn't care how he looks, simply the clothes of a person going to work. He leaned forward — a pen in his left hand and his elbows on the table — and watched the room with careful attention.

He read Prentiss.

At first, Prentiss ran the trial with the procedural precision that Jack had always associated with him. He sustained objections correctly. He instructed the jury with appropriate care. He asked clarifying questions when the testimony warranted it and declined to ask them when it didn't. Everything was in order.

But as the trial continued, there was an ever greater accumulation of small things that just didn't seem right. Prentiss allowed certain prosecution questions to develop at a pace that gave the answers more weight — a hesitation before sustaining a defense objection, brief enough that it couldn't be characterized as improper but long enough that the jury heard the answer and registered it before the objection landed. He denied Marcus's preliminary motions

with a speed that suggested the denials were pre-ordained. When the prosecutor, a young ADA named Holt whom Jack had mentored briefly two years earlier, approached the bench, Prentiss's posture opened slightly — an almost imperceptible relaxation that Jack, who had stood at that bench eleven times, recognized as the body language of a man in a familiar and comfortable relationship. He was playing favorites, and for the wrong side.

Jack noted all of this in the notebook Marcus had given him. He noted the instances, the times, the specific rulings. He handed pages to Marcus. Marcus read them and looked at Jack with an expression that moved through skepticism and into something more troubled.

"You can't prove bias from these," Marcus said, during a recess.

"I'm not trying to prove it for the trial. I'm building a record."

"For appeal?"

"For whatever comes next."

Marcus looked at the notebook pages. One note stood out to him:

Prentiss relationship with Rachel?

"What's this?" Marcus asked. "Do you have evidence of a relationship between them?"

"I'm not going to make claims I can't support," Jack said. "I'm a prosecutor. I know what a claim requires."

"You think Rachel got to him?"

"I think his bias is real. I think it has a source. It may be a wild guess, but at this point I wouldn't put anything past her."

On the fourth day of trial, Jorge Reyes took the stand.

He was, Jack thought, a very good witness. He had the expert's combination of accessible language and technical authority — he could speak to a jury in plain terms without condescending to them, and he could retreat into technical specificity when challenged in ways that made the challenge seem to shrink against the edifice of his credentials. He had testified in forty-three trials. He knew the rhythm of it.

Holt led him through the findings with the clean efficiency of someone who has practiced the examination until it flows like conversation. Jorge described the injury: the impact point at the posterior crown, the force distribution analysis, the geometry of the wound relative to the fireplace hearth. He described what was consistent with a fall and what was not. He used phrases like *concentrated impact* and *directional force vector* in ways that were precise enough to be credible and accessible enough to be followed.

"In your professional opinion," Holt asked, landing on the word professional with a slight emphasis that Jack found calculated, "could this injury have resulted from a fall?"

"The physics of a standard fall," Jorge explained, "the distribution of force, the angle of impact — would produce a different pattern. To produce the injury we see here, the amount of force must've been greater than that. I believe that what we see here was caused by a push from in front and above."

"Could you explain the distinction for the jury?"

Jorge could. He explained it. He used a diagram he had prepared, which Prentiss admitted over Marcus's objection on foundational grounds, an objection Prentiss overruled with the speed Jack had come to recognize as a tell.

Jack wrote: *Diagram admitted over foundational objection — basis for exclusion strong, ruling weak.*

He passed the note to Marcus.

Marcus cross-examined Jorge about the sensitivity of the instruments he used, based on an argument Jack had suggested. Jorge fielded it capably, acknowledging the limitation without conceding the conclusion, pivoting to a secondary analysis that supported the same finding. It was good witness work. Jack watched it with the cold assessment of a man who had spent fifteen years evaluating testimony and who understands the difference between a witness who is

wrong and a witness who is obfuscating, intentionally blurring the lines of reality.

Jorge did not look at Jack during his testimony. Not once. He looked at Holt, at Prentiss, at the jury, and at his own hands when he paused to consider a question. And frequently, he sneaked furtive glances at Rachel. She looked back at him.

Jack noticed and wrote: *Reyes relationship with Rachel?!?*

Marcus saw the note and sighed. He thought Jack was getting desperate and was starting to imagine things.

Rachel Mercer took the stand on the seventh day of trial. She was dressed in a charcoal suit — not identical to Jack's, but close enough in register that the effect, conscious or not, was to suggest equivalence: two people in the same professional uniform, one of whom was telling the truth and one of whom was not. She sat in the witness chair and folded her hands in her lap and looked at the jury with the focused attention of someone who is not performing composure but actually has it.

Holt led her through the background first — the marriage, its duration, its general character. She described Jack as a man she respected and, for many years, had loved, but who had always had a quality of intensity that she had found difficult to live with. She was careful not to make him a

villain. She was a loving wife, after all. Was it her fault that her husband had become a jealous fiend?

"His relationship with Kevin Marsh," Holt said. "Can you describe that?"

"Jack knew that Kevin and I had dated each other years ago, back when we were in college. He believed that Kevin had moved back to our neighborhood specifically to try to rekindle our relationship. He brought it up often. He took it as a personal insult; the idea that Kevin would try to steal me away from him. As a result, he hated Kevin. And he also was infuriated by the friendship that I developed with Diane. I tried many times to explain that the whole situation was innocent; but Jack has a way of holding onto grievances — not letting them go, returning to them."

From the defense table, Jack watched Rachel perform his own destruction with the professional detachment of a man watching a surgery being performed on a part of himself he can observe but not feel. He noted the way Rachel's hands remained entirely still in her lap throughout, which most people would take as a sign of composure but which Jack understood, from many years of watching her, as a sign of control. Rachel's hands were still when she was working hardest.

In the gallery, Donna sat and watched Rachel and held her face absolutely neutral and thought, with increasing certainty,

that she was watching a masterwork of deliberate deception. She had known Rachel for six years — not closely, but enough to have assembled a picture. The woman on the stand was rendering a version of Jack that contained enough truth to be credible and enough invention to destroy him. Donna knew the difference because she knew Jack. She looked around the courtroom and wondered how many people were buying into the false picture Rachel was painting of him.

"The night of Diane Marsh's death," Holt said, his voice modulating into something softer, more careful. "Were you with your husband that evening?"

"He came home around six. He seemed agitated, more so than normal." A pause. "I could tell he'd been drinking."

"Was that common?"

"He was a man under considerable stress. He drank more than he should have, in the last year. Around six-thirty, he left __"

She stopped and looked at her hands.

"Take your time," Holt said.

"I had tried to talk to him, but he was so angry. He left without telling me where he was going. Shortly afterward, I thought I'd go hang out with Diane for a bit. I needed to talk to someone."

"Did you call or text him to tell him you were going out?"

Another pause, perfectly placed. “I was afraid to say anything.”

“You were afraid of your husband?”

“I was afraid of what he was capable of. Not of him, specifically. But of the anger, when it had somewhere to go.”

Marcus stood. “Objection. Speculative.”

“Overruled,” Prentiss said, after the beat.

Jack wrote: *Overruled on speculation — basis for objection clearly established, ruling unsupportable.*

He handed it to Marcus. Marcus read it and set it aside. The pile of such notes had become substantial.

The night before closing arguments, Jack was moved to a county facility closer to the courthouse. He spent the evening in a different cell, smaller, with a fluorescent light that buzzed at a frequency that makes concentration difficult. He sat on the bed with his notebook and reviewed everything he had written.

The notebook was dense. Two weeks of observations, notations, the architecture of a case being built from the wrong side of the table. He had not stopped thinking like a prosecutor. He could not stop thinking like a prosecutor. It was the only tool he had.

He looked at what he had:

Prentiss's bias: documented in thirty-seven specific instances, perhaps insufficient for an immediate appeal, but substantial as a record.

Jorge's testimony: challengeable on methodology, the instrument sensitivity argument still valid. Marcus had established it competently, if not devastatingly, during cross-examination.

Rachel's testimony: internally consistent, well-delivered, built on enough true elements to be difficult to wholly discredit. If only there was a way to prove that he had not left the house that night.

Kevin's testimony had been brief and had added little to the prosecution's case beyond corroboration of Rachel's version of events and a characterization of Jack as hostile and exceedingly jealous.

He closed the notebook.

He thought about something Marcus had said early in the case, something he'd returned to repeatedly: *You're the first client I've believed.* He did not find this comforting, exactly, but it was a hopeful sign. One person in the machinery of this proceeding had read the evidence correctly and arrived at the right conclusion. The evidence was there to be read. It simply required someone with the time and the access and the willingness to read it.

The more he thought through the case, the more he burned with anger. Why had they done this to him?

He reminded himself that he would get out of that cell eventually, and when he did, he would make the people responsible for locking him up there pay, and pay dearly.

He put the notebook under the mattress. He did not sleep for some time.

CHAPTER 7

THE VERDICT

Marcus Bell's closing argument was the best work he had ever done in a courtroom, which Jack assessed with objectivity because he had also seen the worst work Marcus had done and several things in between. Marcus stood in front of the jury and made the case for reasonable doubt with clarity and structure and the rhetorical confidence of a man who has found, in the preparation of his argument, something he actually believes.

He worked through Jorge's methodology and the issue of instrument sensitivity. He raised Rachel's testimony and the impossibility of independently verifying her account of the evening of Diane's death, or really anything else she had said. The prosecution papered over the questions about Rachel's reliability, essentially asking the jury to believe the testimony from a supposedly grieving spouse on faith, but that remained a problem.

Marcus did not accuse Rachel or Kevin of anything directly. He didn't need to. He needed only to establish that the prosecution's case, for all its surface persuasiveness, was

built on foundations that a careful person would find unstable.

"My client spent fifteen years in this building," Marcus said, near the end. "He knows what a compelling case looks like. He knows what evidence feels like when it's been assembled to lead somewhere rather than to reveal something."

He paused. The jury was very still.

"Ask yourself, how do we know what the prosecution claims to know? Ask what the instrument readings actually prove. Ask whether the woman who shared his bed for twelve years ever, in any statement or document prior to this case, described her husband as capable of violence."

He let that last question sit.

"She never did such a thing," he said, "because he isn't a violent man. The prosecution's case — for all its careful assembly — is a story that someone *needed* to be true. You've been asked to trust that Rachel Mercer has been honest with you and that her husband has been lying. All the rest is window dressing, designed to make you forget the lack of actual evidence. And in the absence of evidence, your duty is to acquit."

He sat down.

Jack looked at him with the closest thing to gratitude he had felt in months.

"That was very good," he said quietly.

"Thanks," Marcus replied. He was breathing harder than he had appeared to be. "Now we wait."

They waited two days.

The waiting was the sort of experience that Jack had not anticipated, though he should have. He had watched juries deliberate from the other side many times, had occupied the prosecution table during deliberations with the patient certainty of someone who has done his work correctly and is waiting for the machinery to complete its cycle. He had not understood, until he was sitting at the defense table, that the wait felt entirely different from this side. From this side it was like living in limbo; all forward motion was suspended. Life was on hold. One was forced to stand in a place that was neither here nor there and was unable to move in any direction until the jury came back.

He used the time to review his notes again, and to think. He did both of these things with the sustained concentration that had served him well his entire professional life and that served him now in the narrow way that tools of a certain kind serve you when the problem has exceeded their capacity: he could think clearly and carefully and he could document everything, yet he could not change a single thing about the situation he was in.

He thought about Rachel. He thought about the night after Raymond Cole was convicted, the night she had texted him "*home late again?*" and he had put his phone away and started the car. He thought about where she had been that night, what she had been doing.

He thought about Kevin Marsh, a man he had never heard of before this nightmare started. By now Jack was convinced he must've been Rachel's lover all along. "I was looking at the wrong thing," he told himself. "I was always so focused on my work, I couldn't see what was going on all around me."

The jury came back at 2:47 PM on a Thursday, which was fast enough to make both Jack and Marcus cautious, and slow enough to have allowed for what they hoped was genuine deliberation. They filed in without looking at the defense table, which made them both nervous.

Jack watched the foreman. He had read jurors his entire career. He read this one. He knew what he would say before he spoke.

On the charge of murder in the first degree," the foreman said, "we the jury find the defendant — guilty."

The room moved the way rooms move at verdicts: the reporters leaning forward, the galley murmuring, the

machinery of consequence beginning to engage. Marcus put his hand briefly on Jack's arm. Jack did not move.

He was watching Rachel.

She was seated in the gallery on the right side, with Kevin two seats away and a woman Jack didn't recognize between them — deliberate spacing, he thought, meant to suggest distance between them in front of witnesses. He watched Rachel receive the verdict, watched her cover her mouth with one hand in the expression of relieved grief that she had no doubt practiced. He watched Kevin look at his hands. He watched Jorge, at the back of the gallery, shift in his seat.

And then Rachel looked at him.

One second. Two. The hand came down from her mouth. The performance receded. A faint, Mona Lisa-like smile showed on her face. It wasn't a look of guilt, nor one of triumph. It was dispassionate; the expression of a problem that has been solved.

She looked away. Jack stood.

He stood slowly, and Marcus grabbed his arm, and he shook it off — not harshly, but firmly. He stood and he pointed at Rachel, and his arm was steady, and his voice, when he spoke, was not the voice of a man losing control. It was the voice of a prosecutor.

"I know what you did," he said loudly. The room froze, and everyone in it — except Rachel — looked at him.

He turned and pointed at Kevin, who looked at the floor. "And I know what you did, too."

Then he turned to Jorge at the back. "And you. Don't think I don't know."

He turned to the bench and looked Prentiss in the eyes.

"Quiet, Jack," Prentiss said. "Don't say anything you'll live to regret."

"You rotten bastard. You rigged this trial. All those bad rulings. Your bias was a little too obvious. And I swear to you, you won't get away with this!"

The gavel came down. The bailiffs were moving. Jack let them take his arms because he knew fighting them would do no good. He let them turn him toward the door because the door was where he was going regardless. But he kept speaking, his voice remaining controlled, measured, deliberate — the voice of a man making a closing argument.

"I'll be back," he said. "For every one of you. You'll all answer for this! I'm going to get even with you if it's the last thing I ever do! I *will* get justice!"

The doors opened in front of him, and he was led out into the corridor beyond them. The machinery of the system he had served for fifteen years was leading him somewhere he had never expected to go. He looked back once, over his shoulder, at the courtroom.

He saw Rachel, who was accepting the embrace of the woman beside her. And Kevin, who was still looking at his hands. And Jorge, who was looking at his phone.

He saw Prentiss, who was making notes on his pad with the untroubled deliberateness of a man who had concluded the business at hand and moved on to the next thing.

“Every one of you is going to pay!” Jack yelled as the doors closed behind him, loudly enough so that everyone heard him.

CHAPTER 8

PRISON

The penitentiary occupied forty-three acres on the eastern edge of the county, a campus of concrete and chain-link and sodium light that had been built in 1971 and expanded twice since, each expansion reflecting a theory of incarceration that had been superseded by the time construction was completed. The original structure was brutalist in the architectural sense — flat planes, narrow windows, a studied indifference to the human scale — and the expansions had replicated this aesthetic without quite achieving its coherence, so that the whole thing had the look of a bad argument extended over several decades. Jack noticed this as he was processed in, the way he noticed everything: with the attention of a man who cannot stop cataloguing his environment even when the environment is one he would give a great deal not to be in.

In his career as a prosecutor, he had sent one hundred and fourteen men and women to prisons in this county, many of whom had served their time in this specific facility, which he had visited on three separate occasions in the course of

professional business and which he had left each time without looking back. The state of not looking back was no longer available to him. He looked at everything.

Processing took four hours. He changed into his uniform in a room that smelled of industrial detergent and other people's histories. He handed over his belongings in a manila envelope, looking at his wedding ring as it disappeared into the envelope. As he did, he felt something that was not grief and not relief, but a kind of finality — the formal conclusion of something that had been over in practice for longer than he could now accurately calculate. He handed the envelope to an officer and moved through the door into the cell block.

His cell was on the second tier of Block D, six feet by eight, with a cot bolted to the wall and a shelf above it and a window that admitted a rectangle of sky approximately the dimensions of a sheet of legal paper. He sat on the cot the first evening and looked through the window and thought about the sky and then stopped because it was not useful to think about the sky. He had more important things to think about.

He took out the notebook Marcus had arranged for him — spiral-bound, seventy sheets, a concession from the warden that Marcus had negotiated on the grounds of Jack's ongoing appellate proceedings — and opened it to the first page and wrote:

Rachel

Kevin

Jorge

Prentiss

He underlined each name. He studied the list for some time. Then he closed the notebook and put it under the mattress and lay down on the cot and stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling was institutional concrete, twelve feet up, stained in patterns that suggested leaking pipes at some point in the past. The stains had the quality of accidental maps — land masses and coastlines, a kind of abstract geography that changed depending on where you were looking from. Jack had never been a person who saw shapes in clouds or faces in shadows; he had always thought this a minor deficiency. He looked at the ceiling stains and they remained stains. If he had more imagination, perhaps he'd see something else… and perhaps he'd have been able to see Rachel's affair and been able to prevent his current predicament from ever happening.

The sounds of the facility were the first thing to adjust to. Not the volume — it was not as loud as he'd expected — but

the constancy. Prisons at night are not silent. They are a layered sound environment: the distant radio from another block, the metallic tone of a facility at rest, voices at intervals, the occasional cough. Jack lay in the dark and listened, and at some point his consciousness gave way to something between sleep and the absence of thought, and the night passed.

The days organized themselves quickly into a structure he imposed, because structure was how he functioned and because the alternative — the unstructured time of a man with nothing to do and everything to think about — was not something he was willing to tolerate. He read his case files, which Marcus supplied on a weekly basis. He wrote in the notebook, filling its pages with the ways his four antagonists had wronged him, how he might prove his innocence, and what he'd do to those villains once he got out.

He walked the perimeter of the yard during recreation time with methodical regularity. He wasn't sure what was coming, but he had decided that he must be prepared for whatever that might be, and therefore that physical maintenance was a necessity. He hadn't managed to avoid being locked up on a bogus charge, but he wasn't going to rot away while he figured a way out.

He did not make alliances in those first weeks. He was aware of the social architecture of the facility — the groupings, the understandings, the lines that were not crossed — with his usual precise attention, and he observed it and moved around it without engaging it. He was not unfriendly, but did not have, in those early weeks, the surplus of self that friendship requires. Everything available to him was being used elsewhere. Plus, there were rumors that some of the inmates were looking to get even with him for having put them in there, and he wasn't yet sure who he could trust.

He kept his anger in a specific place. This was something he had learned to do, years earlier, in the context of difficult cases — to locate the feeling precisely, not to suppress it, but to house it somewhere that was not the center of his thinking, so that it was available when he needed it and not in the way when he didn't. He had always done this with the ordinary anger that legal work generates: the anger at injustice, at the gap between what the law could do and what justice required, at the faces of perpetrators who knew they would get away with what they had done. He had housed this anger for fifteen years. He knew how.

What was different now was the personal nature of it. What he felt now was not abstract anger at the failure of a system. This was specific, with names and faces and the fact that this injustice had been done to him deliberately, by

people who had weighed his destruction against their comfort and had chosen their comfort. He found that this sort of anger was heavier than the professional kind and that it had a different relationship to time. Professional anger, in his experience, diminished as cases moved through the system. This kind did not diminish. Instead, it grew more powerful with each passing day, like steam trapped in a valve that was bound, sooner or later, to explode.

As he entered his third week in prison, Jack's life took a dramatic, unforeseeable turn.

He had been walking the perimeter — his sixth lap, a distance he had calibrated to sixty minutes at his natural pace, giving the walk a function beyond mere movement. A large man stepped into his path near the northwest corner of the yard. Jack stopped and looked at the man directly, without the slightest hint of fear. He thought he recognized the man — perhaps someone Jack had prosecuted years ago; perhaps someone who wanted to punish Jack for having put him in this place. When this man stared into Jack's eyes, he recalibrated and stepped aside. Jack continued.

A voice came from his left.

"You handled that well."

Jack slowed. He looked toward the voice. The man on the bench was thin, wiry, with fire in his eyes and still in the way

of someone who moved when he had reason to and not otherwise. He was perhaps forty-five, with a face that radiated intelligence, but was also weathered and worn down. He was watching Jack with an attention that was neither aggressive nor casual. It was the attention of someone for whom observation was a practiced art.

"I didn't do anything," Jack said.

"Exactly."

Something in the word — not its content but its quality, the sense that it contained more than it said — made Jack stop. He stood at the edge of the bench's orbit without approaching it.

"Sit," the man said. "I don't bite. Not anymore."

Jack sat, because the bench was there and because the man was not threatening and because he was, despite himself, interested.

"My name's Guillaume," the man said. "Guillaume Pierre."

"Jack Mercer."

"I know who you are. News travels fast in here. People have been talking about you"

"What do they say?"

"That you were a prosecutor who got prosecuted. That your wife testified against you. That you made threats in the courtroom."

"I made a promise," Jack said. "A promise to four different people."

"Yes," Guillaume said as he looked at the yard. "I made a promise once. A very similar kind."

Jack looked at him. Guillaume had the quality of someone who would say only what he chose to say and could not be hurried into saying more, and Jack had enough experience with witnesses of this type to recognize that hurrying was counterproductive. He waited.

"How long are you in for?" Jack asked.

"I'm serving life," Guillaume replied. "But maybe I'll get out someday."

Both men were quiet for a moment.

"Was it worth it?" Jack asked.

"Was what worth it? Keeping my promise?"

Jack nodded.

Guillaume considered the question carefully. "Ask me again in ten years."

He looked at Jack directly. "What will you do when you get out?" he asked.

"I told you. I made a promise."

"And if the law won't help you keep it?"

"Then I'll find another way."

Guillaume studied him with steady, unhurried attention. There was something in his expression that was not quite

approval and not quite pity and not quite recognition, but contained elements of all three.

Jack sat beside him. They watched the yard in silence. Two men in a yard. The yard had its ordinary life — the groupings, the movement, the low-grade theater of a place where time was the primary currency and everyone was spending it differently. Jack watched it and thought, for the first time since his arrival, that the time he was spending might be moving him toward something.

CHAPTER 9

DOCTOR SOLOMON

The prison's psychiatrist occupied a small office on the ground floor of the administrative wing, separated from the cell blocks by two locked doors and a stretch of corridor that had the quality of a decompression chamber — the architecture of an institution attempting to indicate that what happened in this room was different from what happened everywhere else. There was a plant on the windowsill. Two chairs that were not institutional. A diploma on the wall and a degree certificate beside it and a photograph of a mountain Jack didn't recognize. These details were meant to suggest normality, and to a certain extent they worked.

Dr. Alfred Solomon was forty-eight years old and had been the facility's psychiatrist for four years, having come to the position after a period in private practice that he described, when describing it at all, as instructive. He was diminutive — short, thin, bald-headed and bespectacled — and he had a quality of attentiveness that was so consistent and unperformative that Jack, who was accustomed to reading attentiveness as a professional tool, found it briefly

disorienting. Solomon actually listened. It was as if he genuinely cared.

Their first meeting, three weeks into Jack's incarceration, lasted fifty minutes. Solomon asked questions that were standard for a first evaluation. He took notes and then took more notes and at the end of the session looked at Jack with a troubled expression.

"You're not sleeping," Solomon said.

"Sure I am. Three hours a night. Sometimes four."

"And you're spending your recreation time walking the perimeter."

"I've been told it's conspicuous."

"It is. Not in a problematic way. Just — you're not engaging."

"Engaging? With these nuts? That's a laugh. Besides, half the men in this joint would love to cut my throat."

Solomon made a note. "What are you working toward, Jack? The walking. The notebook. What's on your mind?"

Jack looked at him. "Just trying to keep sane."

"Is that all?"

"No."

Solomon put down his pen. He understood that putting down the pen was a signal and did it deliberately.

"I want to be honest with you," Solomon said. "I read the transcript of your trial. Both the prosecution's case and the defense. I read Marcus Bell's motions."

Jack was very still.

"I'm not supposed to tell you that. It's not standard. But I'm telling you because I want you to understand that I'm not coming to this without context."

"What did the transcript tell you?"

"It told me a great deal." Solomon was careful. "But what I want to talk about is what's in the notebook."

"The notebook is mine. It's personal."

"I'm not asking to see it. I'm asking what's in it."

Jack considered him for a moment. "Evidence. Analysis. A record of what happened and how."

"For appeal?"

"For whatever comes next."

Solomon picked up his pen again. "And what do you believe comes next?"

"I believe I will be released eventually. I believe the case will be reconsidered; that judicial errors were made. I believe —" He stopped.

"Say it."

"I believe the people responsible for what happened to me will be held accountable."

"By the law?"

"Maybe."

"And if not?"

Jack looked at the plant on the windowsill. It was a peace lily, he thought. The irony did not escape him.

"Then by me," he said.

Solomon began scribbling notes at some length. Jack waited.

"I want to say something to you directly," Solomon said. "Is that all right?"

"You're going to say it regardless."

"Yes, but I find it's more useful if people know it's coming." He set the pen down again. "I think anger is eating you from the inside. The people who harmed you are outside this facility living their lives. You're in here, in a six-by-eight room, feeding something that is not nourishing you."

"It's keeping me functional."

"It's keeping you going. But keeping you functional? I don't know about that." Solomon leaned forward slightly. "There's a distinction between holding onto injustice because you need it corrected and holding onto it because you need it to be yours… because it has become the organizing principle of who you are."

"That's a clinical observation."

"Yes."

"It may be accurate," Jack said. "I find I don't care."

"You may not care now, but you will later. I think you're right about the possibility of you getting out of here someday. Your trial was very strangely run. I'm only vaguely familiar with Judge Prentiss, but from what little I know of him, his behavior in your case is hard to fathom. I wouldn't be surprised if your appeal succeeds. And if that happens, you're going to want to be in a healthy frame of mind when you get back into the real world."

"Maybe so. But for now, I'm in here. A prisoner. Falsely convicted."

"We all go through bad times, Jack. And as we go through life, we play different roles. Other cultures sometimes see this more clearly than we do. The Navajo, for instance, teach their children that every morning when the sun comes up, it's a brand new sun. They say the sun is born anew each morning and lives for only one day and in the evening it passes away, never to return. Every day is like a new life for us, too.

"I once had a patient who had been a professional football player. A quarterback. After his playing days were over, he got into coaching. But then he quit that and became a businessman, opening a restaurant and starting a few other businesses. Time passed and he grew older and he had a stroke and ended up in a wheelchair. Later, he went out and did a public appearance for some charity event. Afterwards, he told me that he didn't like doing public events anymore.

He said people wanted him to be the man they remembered — the young man, the sports star, but he wasn't that man anymore, and it hurt him. He talked about the Lamborghini in his driveway and the golf clubs in his closet. But he couldn't drive or play golf anymore. The man who could do those things was somebody else, and he had been born again into a disabled body. And this is what happens to all of us in one way or another. We die and we're born again and so we have to ask, who are we? Are we the roles that we play or is there some deeper truth of who we are? You were once a prosecutor. Today you're a prisoner. Who knows what you'll be tomorrow?"

Jack looked at the mountain in the photograph and thought about what Solomon had said and found it all very interesting, and yet it changed nothing. Solomon's words registered at some level below decision-making, and that level was not currently relevant.

"Same time Thursday?" Solomon said.

"You're the one who keeps showing up," Jack replied as he stood up and straightened his uniform — a habit, the gesture of a man who had worn a suit every day for many years — and walked back through the decompression corridor toward the cell blocks.

CHAPTER 10

CLAUDETTE

They talked through the wall at night. This had not been Jack's idea initially — Guillaume was his neighbor on the tier, their cells sharing a concrete wall that transmitted voices with surprising fidelity — and the first time Guillaume had spoken through it Jack had been surprised by the intimacy of it, the way the darkness and the concrete and the disembodied voice created a confessional quality that face-to-face conversations in the yard did not have.

It was through the wall that Guillaume told him about Claudette.

It was a Saturday night, six weeks into Jack's incarceration, and the block was quieter than usual — a weekend quality, slightly different from weeknights in ways that Jack had not expected and could not entirely account for. He had been lying on his cot with the notebook on his chest, not writing, looking at the ceiling stains, when Guillaume spoke.

"You still awake?" Guillaume asked.

"Yeah. Why are you still up?" Jack said.

"I'm always awake at this hour," Guillaume said.

A pause.

"You want to know how it happened? The thing that brought me here?"

Jack turned his head toward the wall. "Yes."

"I've told it before. A few times. To people it was necessary to tell it to."

Another pause.

"I'm going to tell it differently tonight. The way it actually happened rather than the way I've told it to others."

Jack said nothing. He waited.

"My sister's name is Claudette," Guillaume began. "When she was twenty-three years old, she met a man named Théodore. He was well-regarded in our community in Port-au-Prince — a man who presented well, who knew how to be charming in the appropriate contexts. Our family liked him. My parents liked him. I liked him, for a time."

He stopped. Jack listened to the silence on the other side of the wall.

"Then we came to America. Flown into the country in the middle of the night. We were given apartments to live in. Claudette moved in with Théodore. She called me one night," Guillaume continued. "Her voice was — it had a quality I had never heard in it. She wasn't crying, but I could tell she was frightened. She asked me to come and help her."

"What had he done?" Jack asked.

"Everything. For a long time, he had been doing bad things to her. Not in ways that were easy to see from the outside — Théodore was careful about visibility. He was the kind of man who understood that the maintenance of appearances was crucial for him to maintain his reputation. But everything that happened behind those appearances — " Guillaume paused. "I drove to their apartment. Claudette met me at the door. She had prepared. She had put on a different shirt. She had done something to her face. She tried to make it look like nothing had happened."

Jack felt something move in his chest that was not a professional response.

"That was the thing," Guillaume said. "Not what Théodore had done to her, though that was — that was something I will not describe because some things should not be described. But she had tried to hide it from me. She had thought, before she called me, about how to make the evidence disappear before I arrived. She had not wanted to show me."

"Why?"

"Because she was ashamed." Guillaume's voice was level. "That is the thing that shame does — it relocates itself from the person who should carry it to the person who has been harmed. She was not responsible for what he did to her, but

she was ashamed of it and she had tried to hide it and when I arrived and saw what she had tried to hide I felt something that I had never felt before."

"What did you feel?"

"I felt that the world had made an accounting error," Guillaume said. "I felt that there was a correction that had not been made and that would not be made by any process I was aware of. I took her to the hospital. I sat with her for several hours. I held her hand and told her not to worry. I promised her that I would take care of things. And then I left her there and I drove to the apartment where Théodore was."

The block was very quiet around them. Somewhere far away, someone coughed twice and stopped.

"I told him to leave," Guillaume said. "I told him he had three days to go back to Haiti and not come back. I was reasonable about it. I made the proposition clearly and I gave him time to act on it. I warned him that, if he didn't leave, something very bad was going to happen to him."

"But he didn't leave," Jack said.

"He did not leave. I came back three mornings later and he was at his table eating breakfast with the composure of a man who has concluded that he has nothing to fear."

A pause.

"Men like that always make that assessment. But men who are accustomed to being the most frightening person in any room sometimes underestimate the room."

Jack thought about Raymond Cole, in the courtroom, looking at Jack over his attorney's shoulder, finally realizing he had finally met something he couldn't manage.

"What happened?" Jack asked. Guillaume was quiet for a long moment.

"I kept my promise," he said. "And Théodore was no longer a problem for Claudette or for anyone else."

"Did it help?" Jack asked. "After?"

"Claudette is safe. She has children now. She has a life. That helped."

"And the rest?"

"There is a moment," Guillaume said carefully, "immediately after — when it feels like balance. Like the world has made its correction. Like the accounting error has been addressed."

"How long does that last?"

"Long enough," Guillaume said, "to bring you here."

Jack lay in the dark and thought about this.

"She comes to visit me," Guillaume said. "Claudette. Every month. She brings photographs of the children. She has asked me not to carry guilt — she says it does not serve her. She is a generous woman."

"Does it work? Not carrying it?"

A silence that had the quality of a very old question being given its honest answer.

"Some days," Guillaume said. "I've been working on it for eleven years. Some days it works."

Jack looked at the ceiling. The stains were the same shapes they always were. But now they seemed different than before. The imaginary coastlines, the accidental geography… these things stood out to him now. He thought perhaps he was seeing Haiti in the stains.

Jack closed his eyes. He did not sleep immediately. But he was aware, as he lay there, of something that had not been present in him for the past six weeks: the faint, distant feeling of anticipation. He kept his eyes closed and waited for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 11

WISDOM

The autumn of Jack's first year in the facility became winter in the way that institutional time becomes the next thing: without ceremony, the quality of the light through the small window changed gradually until one morning it was different in a way that implied a new season. Jack vented his anger in his notebook and walked the perimeter and talked to Guillaume and sat across from Solomon every Thursday and continued to hope for the break that would set him free.

Solomon had modified his approach, he had to give him that. The early sessions had been foundational — the careful assembly of a clinical picture, the therapeutic protocols for processing wrongful conviction and the grief that attended it. Solomon had moved, in the later months, toward something more Socratic: asking questions rather than offering frameworks, following the thread of Jack's thinking rather than redirecting it.

"What does justice look like to you?" Solomon asked, on a Thursday in January.

"It looks like the people responsible for what happened to me facing the consequences for what they did," Jack said.

"And who determines what those consequences are?"

"The system, ideally."

"And if the system fails?"

"Then it's up to me."

"And you trust yourself to determine the cost proportionally? Without the bias of being the person who was harmed?"

Jack looked at him. "I spent fifteen years making those determinations about other people's harms. I'd argue that experience is relevant."

"I'd argue it's different when it's yours."

"You might be right."

Solomon seemed slightly surprised by this concession.

"I know you might be right," Jack said. "I'm choosing to trust my judgment anyway. That's an honest answer. I'm not pretending I'm certain."

"But you're certain enough."

"I'm certain enough."

Solomon looked at his notepad for a moment. Then he looked up.

"Jack — your anger is eating the wrong man. I've said this before and I'm going to keep saying it. The people who harmed you are out there living while you're in here burning.

Whatever it is you're planning — it's costing you. Right now. Every day."

Jack looked at the plant on the windowsill. It had been repotted since his first session. The same plant, different pot. It seemed to be doing well.

"What kind of plant is that, Doc? I can't tell one flower from another."

"Jack, this is serious."

"Oh, come on!" Jack scoffed. "I've been hearing this stuff for as long as I can remember. The so-called 'Christian virtues' — turn the other cheek, forgive those who do harm unto you, and so on and so forth. And I've gotta tell you, I don't buy it."

"I'm not suggesting that you should turn the other cheek. I'm saying you should be cautious and not harm yourself. You have to be careful about how you think about things. You see, there's a theory in contemporary biology called *morphic resonance*. According to this theory, the more the habits of a given species are repeated, the more probable they become. In the same way, the more we repeat certain kinds of thoughts, certain patterns of thought, the more probable it is that they will arise again. Our actions are conditioned by our thoughts, by how we think about ourselves and the world around us, and so it follows that proper thinking will bring

about proper results. Proper thought — right thought — is a crucial element in understanding how our lives unfold."

"My thoughts were right a year ago and look where that got me."

Solomon ignored Jack's objection and continued. "It's important that we reflect on the kinds of thoughts that arise in our mind and ask ourselves if they'll cause harm or promote some good end. We have desires, and whether these desires are healthy or unhealthy, they're usually associated with pleasure, so the idea of renouncing them seems unpleasant.

"I see a great problem with you now," Solomon said. "You're burning inside. Your desire for revenge is eating you up, but there's a sense in which it's giving you pleasure, too. Isn't that so?"

Jack pondered the question. The thought of his enemies getting their just desserts did indeed bring him a perverse kind of joy. He wanted to hurt them. He imagined getting them all together in a room and whacking them with a hammer, jabbing them in the eyes with a screwdriver, ripping their hair out with his bare hands. He knew that these were sick fantasies, so yes, Solomon had a point. But he wasn't ready to concede that point just yet. Instead, he responded to the question with a shrug of his shoulders.

"When we think about renunciation," Solomon went on, "we think about the repression of desires, with deprivation.

But we may also think of renunciation as the experience of non-addiction. We understand the suffering that addictions can cause — addiction to food, to alcohol, to drugs or sex or money or whatever. We can become addicted and entranced by certain states of mind or emotions like excitement. We get addicted to the feeling of intensity. We become addicted, not only to the gratification of our desires, but also to the mental habit of wanting. We become addicted to wanting, to the endlessness of struggle. It's like the myth of Sisyphus.

"You may remember that Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to push a rock up a mountain again and again forever, only to see it fall back down again. He's often thought of as a tragic hero, but the truth is that Sisyphus loved that rock. For him, life was unimaginable without it. He never stopped to think that at any moment he could've stepped aside, let the rock fall to the bottom and gone home.

"So, in this light, we should ask ourselves 'What are we addicted to? What are we attached to? What do we keep struggling with?' Only then can we see the possibility of renunciation, of just stepping back and letting things be."

"And then what?" Jack asked. "Just let bad people walk all over us? Let them get away with everything?"

"No," Solomon sighed, "that's not what I'm saying."

Jack leaned forward. "Anything we talk about here is confidential, right?" he asked.

"Absolutely. Nothing we say here leaves this room."

"That's what I thought. So let me tell you about a case I had a few years ago. It was the only time in my career where I didn't give my best effort. In fact, I threw the case. I lost on purpose because I thought justice demanded it.

"You see, there was this man… he was forty years old, and he went online and lured an eleven-year-old girl to his home and molested her. Her father found a video on her phone that showed the man taking advantage of her. He went to the police, but they told him they couldn't do anything about it. So he went to the man's home and shot him in the groin

"The authorities decided to charge the girl's father with attempted murder and assigned me to prosecute him. Now, in my opinion, when the police refuse to protect your family, no one should be surprised or upset when you take the law into your own hands. People told me that he shouldn't have gone vigilante and that he deserved to be punished. Well, I couldn't go along with that, so I threw the case and the man walked away free."

Jack leaned back in his chair. "So what do you think?" he asked. "Did I do wrong?"

"Based on what you say, I suspect that you probably did the right thing," Solomon replied. "But so much of what we do is predicated on the circumstances of a given situation.

Justice is important and even necessary — when it's possible. But sometimes the moment passes and our desire for justice, as with any of our other desires, can become destructive."

Jack looked at him skeptically.

"We must always ask ourselves certain questions regarding our behavior — 'Is this necessary? Is this helpful?' — so that we can bring wisdom to our actions. Sometimes we can respond with a 'yes,' but sometimes we must say 'no' to many of our thoughts and desires. 'No, I don't need to do this or that. It's not helpful.' Without wisdom, we can cause great harm to ourselves, and to others."

"But I'm right about this," Jack protested.

"Sometimes," Solomon replied, "a person has to choose between being right and being free."

CHAPTER 12

THE DEATH OF JUDGE PRENTISS

Spring came, and on a cold and blustery evening in late March, Judge Prentiss sat alone in his library. Clad in a thousand-dollar cardigan, with a scotch sitting on his desk in front of him, he was reviewing papers — notes for a trial set to begin the next day. He paused and looked around the large, handsome room. He looked at the framed commendations on the wall, the exquisite model ship on the shelf, and assorted other items — the trappings of a long, distinguished, careful life. He smiled contentedly, picked up his scotch, took a sip, and set the glass back down.

He began again to look over the trial notes, but his hand was not quite steady and could only turn the pages with great difficulty.

He shifted in his chair, thinking that something was not right. He put a hand to his chest and straightened his back, as if improving his posture could help. It didn't.

The hand on his chest pressed harder. His breathing quickened. He reached for the phone on the desk, but his grasp was weak and the phone fell to the floor.

Prentiss slumped sideways in his chair. For him, everything went black as he breathed his last breath.

The room was very quiet.

A few days later, Jack met with Marcus to discuss what progress (if any) was being made on his appeal. "We're looking into evidence concerning Rachel's motive," Marcus informed him.

"Yeah? You find anything?"

Marcus looked at his notes. "Your friend Donna has been helping out on her own time. She has been — persistent."

"Tell me."

"She's been building a picture of the relationship between Rachel and Kevin. She found a former colleague of Rachel's who is willing to state that Rachel confided, approximately six months before Diane Marsh's death, that she was involved with a married man. The colleague didn't know who at the time."

"That's not much."

"Maybe so, but it starts to build the picture — the motive for framing you, the relationship that was being protected."

"Keep going," Jack said.

"We will," Marcus replied. "Oh, and by the way, there's another item that will be of interest to you. I'm not sure if this will make you happy or upset."

"Lay it on me."

"Judge Prentiss died six days ago."

Jack sat with this.

"Cardiac event," Marcus continued. "At his home. He was alone."

Jack looked at Marcus, who looked back at him with the patient neutrality of someone who has delivered difficult news to many people and has learned that the response is not always what you expect.

"I see," Jack said.

"His clerk tried to reach him for a morning hearing and found him in his study. He'd been there since the previous evening, apparently."

Marcus paused for a moment, then went on.

"It was quick. The ME said he wouldn't have felt much."

Jack said nothing.

"You're upset. I had a feeling you would be."

Jack considered the situation — one of the four people he had promised to hold accountable was now beyond the reach of any conventional accounting. He was glad that Marcus had told him because he deserved to know. But it hurt. It hurt bad.

"You OK, buddy?" Marcus asked.

Jack nodded. He knew it was possible he was being observed, so he breathed slowly and deeply — maintaining a professionally neutral poker face that was present and thinking but not giving information. Inside, something more complicated was happening.

He thought about Prentiss in his study. Alone, with his commendations on the wall and his scotch glass and the model ship he kept on the shelf, which Jack had noticed on the one occasion he'd been in that office on legitimate business, years ago. He thought about the heart giving out with no warning and no audience. He thought about the unremarkable quality of such an ending for a man who had done what Prentiss had done.

He thought: *that death was supposed to be mine.*

He recognized this thought. It was the kind of thought Solomon had warned him against — the thought of a man who has made revenge the organizing principle of his identity, who has housed his anger so carefully and for so long that the world's management of consequences feels like an intrusion. He recognized it and did not disown it. It was accurate. The recognition was not going to change it.

"Thanks for the update," he said as he stood up. "Keep working on the appeal." Then he turned and went back to his cell.

That afternoon in the yard, he found Guillaume and sat beside him. “Prentiss is dead,” he said bluntly.

Guillaume received this in silence.

“Heart attack. In his house. Alone.”

They sat in the bright April sun. The yard had its ordinary life around them — the groupings, the movements, the meanderings of men with too much time on their hands.

“You wanted it to be yours,” Guillaume said.

“Yes.”

“I know that feeling. You wanted to look him in the eye.”

“Yes. I wanted him to understand what he did; to know how wrong it was. And I wanted him to pay a price for what he did.”

“And yet he died without suffering.”

“He died in his mansion, with his fine scotch and his commendations.” Jack heard the bitterness in his own voice and did not moderate it. “Comfortable. Undisturbed.”

“That is often how men like that go,” Guillaume said.

“Yeah.”

They were quiet.

“Three left,” Jack said.

“Yes,” Guillaume said. “Sometimes the gods do not cooperate with us, but as mortal men, we must do what we think is right.”

CHAPTER 13

THE DEATHS OF THE OTHERS

Jorge Reyes came to Rachel's house on a Tuesday evening in November, when the leaves on the trees lining Sycamore Avenue had mostly fallen and the light went early and the neighborhood had the particular quality of late autumn — quiet, inward, the world reducing itself to what was essential.

Rachel was alone. Kevin was coming over, but was running late. She had been reading in the living room when the doorbell rang. She opened the door and found Jorge standing on the porch with a bottle of wine and a smile that he had clearly decided in advance. Rachel had a good idea about what he wanted. She was creeped out by his smile.

She invited him in, though, because not letting him in was also a decision with consequences, and she needed to know for sure which kind of visit this was before she determined her response.

She sat across from him and watched him settle into the armchair with the ease of a man who has decided he owns a room, and she felt, beneath the coldness she was maintaining, the first sustained fear she had experienced since the night in the Marsh house.

He told her what he wanted.

He was not crude about it. He had a manner — she had known this about him from their initial arrangements; it was part of what had made him useful and part of what had made her wary of him — that presented the foulest propositions in the language of reasonableness.

"I've been thinking," he said, "about what we did together. And about what it's worth in the long run."

"You were compensated."

"I was thanked. Warmly. But now I think I'd like you to thank me again. I think we have a connection. I want to stay close to you. You're a very attractive woman."

He looked directly into her eyes. The implication was clear and ugly.

"I'm a careful man," he continued. "I keep records. Documents. Everything's very well organized, locked in a safe in my office. The kind of safe where, if I decided I'd been patient long enough — the right people would find the right things. I've waited a long time already."

Rachel glared at him. “If you told anyone what happened,” she said, “you’d sink yourself in the process.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I’ve got my bases covered so that only you would end up taking the blame. You and your boyfriend. I know everything.”

He stood up and walked over to the sofa and sat down beside her. “But let’s not think of things that way. I’m not really so bad, am I? And what I did for you — it was helpful, was it not? The life you’re living now — it’s only possible because of what I did for you.”

“Jorge —”

“Let’s think of this as two old friends catching up.”

He put his arm around her and moved in close. She recoiled from his advance.

“Don’t —”

“We’ve been here before,” he said. “You liked it, didn’t you?” He began nuzzling her neck.

“Get off of me!”

Quietly, almost gently, Jorge said “Don’t make this difficult.”

Just then, the front door opened and Kevin stepped into the entryway. In an instant, he took in the room — Jorge, Rachel, the positioning of their bodies, the look on her face. Jorge turned toward him. He backed away from Rachel and

straightened his jacket with the composure of a man who is recalculating but not retreating.

"Kevin, I was just —"

"Get out of this house," Kevin said, shaking with rage.

"We were having a conversation. A private — "

"He's trying to blackmail us," Rachel interrupted.

Jorge looked between them. He smiled — but this was a different smile from before, one without warmth or pretense. "I'm not asking for much," he said. "Just a little appreciation every now and again, that's all. I've been a good friend, but I can also be a dangerous enemy, if that's how you want it."

He stood up and moved toward the door, unhurried. Kevin went to Rachel and embraced her.

Jorge opened the door, then turned around. "Think about it. Both of you."

As Jorge stepped onto the porch, Kevin bolted toward him. Jorge turned back, and, seeing the look on Kevin's face, broke into a sprint, jumping down the porch steps and racing across the street. He moved fast — faster than Kevin expected. He ran to the end of the block, across another street and into the woods, with Kevin in hot pursuit.

It had been a dreary day, chilly and wet. Behind the clouds, the sun was setting. The woods were dark. Branches and roots cracked as the two men rushed through the

undergrowth. Jorge stayed just ahead, weaving, losing his footing on a slope, recovering.

Kevin was breathing hard. “I’ll kill you!” he wheezed.

The trees began to thin out. Up ahead, Jorge could see the pale stripe of a road. He burst through the last of the trees onto the road. He looked back at Kevin, now a good distance back in the woods.

He was still looking back when the truck hit him.

The sound of the impact was loud and sudden and final.

Kevin stopped at the edge of the trees. The truck braked and stopped fifty yards down the road. Its hazard lights began to blink. The driver got out of the cab and started back toward Jorge’s mangled, lifeless remains.

Kevin watched the scene unfold for a bit, then backed into the trees and turned and headed back to Rachel’s house.

While the chase was happening, Rachel sat in the living room. If Jorge is hurt, she thought, then there are new variables. She thought this with the coldness that she had come to accept was simply who she was under pressure. She did not like the coldness. She had never liked it. But it was there and it worked and she used it.

Kevin came back twenty minutes later with dead leaves on his jacket and the look of a man who has been somewhere he

cannot describe and witnessed something he cannot unsee. He sat at the kitchen table.

"Well? What happened?" Rachel asked.

"He ran into the road."

She looked at him.

"I followed him. Down the street. Into the woods. He came out on Millbrook Road and he was looking back at me and — "

He stopped.

"I didn't touch him," he insisted. "You understand? He ran and I followed him and he ran into the road and the truck hit him. I wasn't even close to him!"

She looked at him for a long moment. She thought about what this meant. Jorge was dead and could trouble them no more. But, she thought, what about the safe?

"You were here all evening," she told Kevin.

"Rachel — "

"Kevin. You were here all evening. We had dinner. We watched TV."

He looked at her.

"There's just one problem," she said. "He told me he has incriminating evidence in a safe in his office."

"What could he possibly have?" Kevin asked. "Maybe he was lying?"

“Maybe. But can we take that chance? It will take a while before the police will even think to look in his office. If you were to go there tonight — ”

“If I’m caught — ” he started.

“You won't be,” she said.

Kevin nearly broke down at that moment. He felt as though a heavy weight had been placed on him and that he had been carrying too much already. Rachel felt it, too. She knew that she was placing a big burden on him, but she also felt she was unable to do otherwise.

He took his car keys from the hook beside the door. “Kevin,” she said.

He stopped but didn't turn.

“Be careful.”

He went.

What happened at the county coroner’s office on Palmer Street happened quickly and then slowly and then with a finality that left no room for revision.

Kevin found it easy enough to get into the building — perhaps a little too easy. He moved through the stairwell and halls with the unsteadiness of a man doing something for the first time that requires practice he hasn’t had. He found the office. But where was the safe?

"There's no safe here," Kevin muttered to himself. "I knew it. That bastard was lying!"

He looked on Jorge's desk. There were several folders there, thick with papers. He noticed one with the name "Mercer" on the label. He opened the folder and looked through the papers inside. Was it important? He couldn't tell.

He was still reading when the police arrived.

He would think, afterward — and he had only a very short afterward — about the decision that had taken less than a second to make and that he would have made differently if he had known he was making a decision. He would not have time for much thought, but he would have time for this: the understanding that fear is its own kind of trap, that a frightened man with a gun in a room where he is cornered will use the gun not because he has decided to, but because the fear has already decided for him, and by the time the rational mind arrives to assess the situation, the thing has already happened.

The gun was in his jacket pocket. It was something he kept in his car, and as he went to break into the office building, he grabbed it for reasons he could not clearly articulate. It had seemed reasonable to have it. Most of the decisions he'd made in the past year had seemed reasonable in the moment and had revealed themselves, over time, to be

the decisions of a man who was groping his way through the darkness rather than thinking clearly and rationally.

The shot was deafening.

The return fire was instantaneous.

Kevin Marsh, who had been afraid for a year, who had loved a woman badly and managed the consequences worse, who had stood in a living room with his wife dead on the floor and made the worst decision of his life because he was frightened and Rachel was calm and calm has a gravitational pull in moments of terror — Kevin Marsh went down against the wall of Jorge Reyes's office with the manila folder in one hand and the gun in the other, and the documents scattered across the floor around him. The police radio began to crackle and the officer with the shoulder wound made a sound, and the fluorescent lights of the office hummed overhead, indifferent and unrelenting.

Rachel received the call at nine-forty PM.

She sat in the living room where Jorge had sat that evening and listened to the voice on the phone — her attorney — tell her what had happened, and she said the appropriate things, and then set the phone on the cushion beside her.

She sat in the dark for a long time.

She thought about Kevin at twenty-two, in a philosophy seminar, turning to look at her as he saw her for the first time. She thought about the hotel lobby three years ago, and his face brightening as he saw her. She thought about lying in hotel rooms in the late afternoon, talking in the way that people talk who have been interrupted for years and are finally finishing their sentences.

She thought about what was in the folder.

She understood, with the clarity that had always been available to her in moments of crisis but that was now being used against itself — the cold analytical faculty finding the situation unrecoverable — exactly what the folder meant. The folder meant that what she had built, over the course of a year, was coming down.

She went upstairs.

She stood in the bathroom for a long time looking at her reflection in the mirror above the sink. She was forty years old. She had a face that had always served her well and eyes that had always been useful and a quality of composure that had carried her through things that would have undone other people, but it was all over now. Even if it turned out that Jorge had been bluffing — that whatever documents he had contained nothing incriminating — the mere fact that Kevin had tried to steal them would open up a world of trouble for her. It was only a matter of time. Perhaps she hadn't been so

cool after all. This time, she had made a mistake, and it was a fatal one.

She opened the medicine cabinet and took out a prescription bottle. Sleeping pills, powerful ones. She filled a glass of water, sat on the edge of the tub and looked at the bottle in one hand and the glass of water in the other and thought about what was on the other side of the decision she was making.

There is nothing after this that resembles what came before, she thought. She opened the bottle.

CHAPTER 14

THEY'RE ALL DEAD

Jack was summoned to the warden's office on a Friday morning, three days after Kevin Marsh died in the coroner's office and two days after Rachel Mercer was found unresponsive at her home on Deerfield Road. Something in the quality of the summons told Jack that what was coming was significant.

The warden — a man by the name of Harris — was a bureaucrat of the decent variety: competent, kind, possessing the equanimity of someone who has spent three decades watching the long-term consequences of short-term decisions and has made his peace with the fact that he can affect neither. He sat behind his cluttered desk and Jack sat across from him, and Harris told him about Jorge. Hit by a truck on Millbrook Road; died instantly.

Then he told him about Kevin. Shot in the county coroner's office. He told him about the folder, and about the documents that Kevin had evidently been trying to steal. About the review that was already underway over at the DA's office.

He told him about Rachel, and about the sleeping pills.

Jack sat through all of it with his hands flat on his thighs and with no emotion on his face. Outwardly, he was as cool as a cucumber, but inside he was on fire. He received each piece of information with increasing fury.

"They're all dead," he said, when the warden had finished.

"Yes."

"All four."

"Judge Prentiss, Jorge Reyes, Kevin Marsh, Rachel Mercer. Yes."

Jack looked at the warden's desk. He looked at his own hands. He looked at nothing in particular.

The warden said: "The DA's office has a theory about your case. I suppose I might as well tell you, they think you were framed. I expect you'll be released within the month pending a formal review. Your attorney has been notified."

He slid a form across the desk.

"I'm sorry for how this happened," the warden said, and meant it, or Jack believed he meant it. "I'm sorry it took what it took."

Jack picked up the pen. He held it for a moment.

"It's funny how so many people involved in your case have died," Harris said. "Reminds me of the curse of King Tut's tomb. I mean, it's not funny-funny. It's strange-funny. Very strange."

"Yeah," Jack replied.

In his mind, he thought: I spent the past year building toward something. Every day I got up and walked the perimeter and talked to Guillaume and sat across from Solomon and every minute of all of it was organized around the fact that those people were alive and accessible and that eventually I would reach them. But now they're gone. I've been robbed. The warden was right — my case was cursed. Perhaps I've been cursed.

He signed the form, set the pen down on the desk, stood up and walked back to his cell.

That evening, he talked again with Guillaume. "They're all dead," he told him.

"I heard," Guillaume replied.

"All four. While I was in here."

"Yes."

"I can never get even with them," Jack said bitterly. "Through the rest of eternity, they'll always have that over me. They hurt me badly. Practically destroyed me. And there's nothing I can do to square that circle. They got away with it."

"Jack, my friend," Guillaume said, "there is something I must tell you."

Guillaume told Jack things he had never told him before, about Haiti, about his country's history. Sometimes his descriptions seemed a bit sentimental, even romantic, but he didn't shy away from the problems there, either. Its revolutions, its occupation, its peculiar relationship to death and power, the ways in which a society that had been saddled with an inadequate formal system of justice had developed informal ones.

He talked about voodoo — the word itself, its origins, and the caricature the wider world had made of it. He talked about it the way a doctor talks about medicine: as a system with a logic, a literature, a body of knowledge that required study and practice and something he called *relationship* — a word he used the way most people used the word *faith*, but with a more specific referent.

"The *lwa*," he said, "are spirits. They are not gods, in the sense your tradition means. They are forces. They have personalities, preferences, domains. They interact with the living in ways that require — " He paused. "Protocol. Respect. The relationship is not unlike any other relationship between parties with different kinds of power."

"You're describing religion," Jack said.

"I'm describing what exists," Guillaume said. "Whether you call it religion depends on what definition you're using. My definition of religion requires institutional structure and

doctrinal enforcement. What I'm describing is older than that and operates differently."

"What does this have to do with me?"

Guillaume was quiet for a moment.

"The dead are not simply gone," he said. "The death of the body is not the death of everything. The *ti bon ange* — the little good angel, the part of the soul that is the self, the will, the consciousness — this can be preserved. Held. Used."

"Used how?"

"In various ways. One way is what you have heard of — the creation of what those of you in this country call a zombie. A body reanimated, the ti bon ange removed and held separately, the body made to serve the will of whoever holds the soul."

Jack lay on his cot and looked at the ceiling and thought about what he was hearing. He was a man trained in evidence. He was a man who had spent fifteen years in the universe of provable fact. He was also a man who had, a year earlier, watched a system he believed in produce a conclusion that the evidence did not support, and who had been adjusting, since then, the calibrations of his certainty.

"You've seen this?" he asked.

"Yes, I have seen this. I have been in the room where it was done. I have watched the practitioner work and I have watched what resulted."

"And the person whose soul was — held. Were they aware?"

"In the case I was involved with, yes. The ti bon ange, held in its vessel, is aware. It cannot act. It cannot speak. But it knows what is happening."

Jack looked at the ceiling for a long time.

"Jack," Guillaume said.

"Yes?"

"You've seen the amulet I wear?"

Guillaume pulled a dark green crystal from under his shirt. It was encased in a narrow band of gold with a small hoop in the top. Through the hoop ran a durable, braided chain made of hemp.

"Yeah, I noticed it before but never gave it any thought," Jack replied.

"I've worn this for a long time now. Since before I came here. Since the night I kept my promise." Another silence. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I think so," Jack said. "Tell me anyway."

"A *bokor* — a practitioner of a certain kind — can capture the ti bon ange before it goes where the dead go. Can place it in an object. The soul remains — aware, present, unable to

act." Guillaume's voice was very steady. "I did not only kill Théodore. I kept his soul."

Jack said nothing.

"I have carried him for twelve years now," Guillaume said. "Every day. He is aware of his condition. He cannot change it. I talk to him sometimes. At night. I know he cannot talk back. I hope he is angry. I want him to be angry. Eternally angry and frustrated. That is what he deserves."

The darkness in the cell had a different quality now.

"Does Claudette know?" Jack asked.

"No."

"Your wife?"

"Ezili knows," Guillaume said. "She has her own feelings about it." He paused. "She is a wise woman and she loves me and she thinks I made a terrible mistake. She may be right. Twelve years is a long time to carry something."

Jack thought about the four names in his notebook. He thought about what it would mean to carry them rather than to let them go.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Because you're going to get out of here," Guillaume said. "Your evidence will surface eventually — these things have a way of surfacing. And when you get out, you will have a choice to make. I want you to make it with full information."

"What choice?"

"Whether to keep the promise you made to the people in that courtroom. And if yes, how."

Jack absorbed this.

"My wife, Ezili, knows things I know and things I don't. She was born into the tradition more fully than I was — I was taught by my grandmother, who was taught by hers, but Ezili's family is — the knowledge is deeper there. Older. You can visit her when you get out of here."

"Would she help?"

Guillaume was quiet for what felt like a long time.

"She agreed, once, that she would help anyone I trusted enough to send to her," he said. "But she will have her own feelings about this. She may say no. She will certainly try to talk you out of it. She believes I was wrong to do what I did and she will believe you are wrong to do what you are considering."

"But she'll try."

"If you tell her I asked," Guillaume said. "Yes. She will try."

For the first time in over a year, since before all this started, Jack felt — not happy, exactly, but something close to it. The people who had wronged him might finally receive justice after all.

"I've thought about this," Guillaume said. "I think perhaps that now I have carried Théodore long enough. And you will

need something to show Ezili. Something she will recognize."

Guillaume took the amulet from around his neck, laid it on the floor outside his cell and pushed it over toward Jack's cell. Jack reached through the bars and picked it up. It was warm in a way that it should not have been — a warmth that did not come from Guillaume's chest or from the air, but from somewhere else, somewhere that Jack could not name and did not yet have the vocabulary to question.

He peered into the crystal, trying to see what was hidden inside. He could see nothing.

"Show this to Ezili," Guillaume said. "She will know what it is. She will understand what I'm asking."

"Thank you," he said, putting it around his own neck.

They were quiet then for some time. The block settled into its nighttime sounds, the radio and the cough and the distant footsteps, and Jack lay on his cot with his hands on his chest and thought about the names in his notebook and the souls in small warm objects and the various ways the world offered to correct its accounting errors, and Guillaume Pierre sat with his own thoughts, and between them the night moved at its ordinary pace toward morning.

CHAPTER 15

EZILI

Jack was released from prison on a Monday morning just after New Year's, processed out through the same room that he had been processed in, the manila envelope returning across the same counter with the same contents in the same configuration. He signed the final form with the pen the processing officer provided and did not feel what he had expected to feel — something, anything, the emotions one would expect to feel after the conclusion of a nightmare lasting more than a year — but instead, he felt nothing. He had spent so long organizing around the anticipated exit that the exit itself was simply what came next in a sequence, not an event with its own weight. He was numb.

He put on his watch and slid his wallet into his pocket. He held the wedding ring for a moment — the gold band, worn at the inner edge, warm from being in the envelope but a different kind of warm from the amulet, a dead kind of warm — and then he put it in his jacket pocket, picked up the envelope and walked out.

The gate opened. He stepped through it.

He stopped on the other side and stood in the January morning and breathed. The air had the quality of early winter — cold, carrying the smell of dead leaves and distant woodsmoke, the kind of air that makes the inside of your lungs feel fresher by breathing it. The sky was enormous. He had forgotten, in two years of window-sized rectangles, how much of the world was sky.

He stood there for a minute or so, taking it all in. Then he reached into his jacket, took out the amulet and held it in his palm. He felt its warmth — steady, sourceless, impossible and entirely real — and closed his fist around it and started walking toward the bus stop.

The bus took forty minutes and deposited him two blocks from the address Guillaume had given him. He walked those two blocks through a neighborhood of older houses on mature lots, the trees bare now, the architecture visible in the absence of leaves, the details of structure that foliage conceals.

The house was small and green with a porch and wind chimes — copper, moving slightly in the cool fall breeze with a sound that was less a chime than a whisper. The garden had been put to bed for winter: the beds mulched, the perennials cut back, the whole enterprise a model of elegance in an otherwise shabby neighborhood. Someone had tended it

recently and carefully. He went up the porch steps and knocked.

He waited. He heard movement inside. He stood with his hands at his sides and thought about what he was going to say, which he had been thinking about on the bus and had not resolved to his satisfaction.

The door opened.

Ezili Pierre was thirty-nine years old but looked younger than that. She looked at him from the doorway with eyes that were the kind of dark that contains its own light. She was holding a dish towel, and the first thing she did was look at his hands — not his face — and saw the amulet. Something happened in her expression; the confirmation of something she had been hoping would not arrive.

She was beautiful in a way that was different than the sort of beauty Jack had been accustomed to seeing throughout his life — the maintained, calibrated beauty of women in professional contexts. Rachel's assembled precision, for example. Ezili's beauty was natural, unforced and unselfconscious, the beauty of someone who had never thought of it as a tool and therefore had not learned to use it.

"You must be Jack," she said.

"Yes."

"Guillaume told me you would come." Her voice had the musical cadence of someone who had learned English as a

second language and had been speaking it long enough that the music was subtle but still present.

"He said to show you this." Jack held out the amulet.

She looked at it without moving to take it. "I know what it is," she said.

"I know you do."

She looked at him and he looked at her and the wind chimes made their whispering sound and the January air moved between them.

"Come in," she said.

The kitchen was warm and fragrant. Herbs were drying above the window — rosemary, thyme, and something Jack didn't recognize, dark and pungent. A shelf of small objects sat along the far wall: bottles stoppered with wax, stones of various colors and sizes, things made of bone or wood that had been shaped by hands, a small clay figure whose features were worn smooth by handling. These objects were arranged with deliberate care, and Jack looked at them carefully and found that they looked back at him in a way that most objects did not. The room was alive in a way he had never experienced before.

Ezili set two cups of coffee on the table without asking and sat across from him. He put the amulet between them. She did not touch it.

"Tell me what you want," she said.

"Guillaume explained — "

"I know what Guillaume explained. I want to hear it from you."

He looked at her. She was not going to make this easy, and he found that he was glad she wasn't — that he needed to say it directly, to hear himself say it in this kitchen with this woman looking at him with that clear, undeflectable attention.

"I want to raise them," he said. "The four people responsible for putting me in prison. Rachel, Kevin, Jorge, Prentiss. I want to bring them back and I want them to get the punishment they deserve."

"And then?"

"Then I'll be done."

She wrapped her hands around her coffee cup. She looked at the amulet between them with a serious expression, as if she was reading a document she had read before and did not enjoy reading.

"A zombie cannot face anything," she said. "You understand this. Guillaume must have explained."

"He explained about the ti bon ange. The soul held separately."

"Yes."

"The body is raised. The soul is kept apart but is aware. It watches."

"It watches," Ezili said. "It cannot respond. It cannot speak or act or show you what you want to see in its face. The awareness is real but it is imprisoned — the ti bon ange in its vessel, the body moving as directed, and between them nothing. No bridge. No exchange."

"But the soul knows," Jack said.

"Yes."

"That's enough."

She looked at him for a long time. "Is it?"

The question was not rhetorical. She waited for an actual answer.

He thought about it honestly — about what he had said in Solomon's office, month after month, about what he wanted: *I want them to face the consequences for what they did to me.* He had held this want for over a year with the tenacity of a man possessed. He had examined it from multiple angles in the notebook. He had defended it against Solomon's careful dismantling and Guillaume's implicit questioning and his own occasional doubt. He had held it because he was right and they were wrong.

"Yes," he said. "It's enough."

She studied him carefully. She wasn't entirely satisfied but felt she had to give him credit — credit for giving an honest answer to a question she had expected to be deflected.

"Do you know what it requires?" she said.

"Guillaume said it requires my anger."

"More than that. The working — what you're asking me to do — is sustained by the force of what you feel. Your hatred, your need for this. While that is present and strong, the raised ones remain. If it weakens — if you lose the will to sustain it — the working unravels."

"It won't weaken."

She looked at him.

"I've maintained it for more than a year," he said. "It's not diminishing."

"You maintained it when they were alive and inaccessible," she said tersely. "What happens when they are standing in front of you may be different from what you expect."

"I understand the risk."

"I don't think you do," she said. "But I believe you believe you do."

She stood and went to the window and looked out at the stripped winter garden.

"Guillaume asked me to help anyone he sent," she said, to the window. "Years ago. He was in a different place then, about what he had done. More certain of it. I disagreed with him then and I disagree with him now, but I made a promise." She paused. "I have not told you that I will help you."

"I know."

"I'm telling you the context of the promise. What happens next depends on something else."

She turned from the window.

"Why you?" she said. "Not why you want this — I understand why you want it. Why do you deserve it?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. He looked at the amulet on the table.

She waited.

"What was done to me was wrong," he said. "The people who did it chose to do it with full understanding of what they were choosing. The system I spent fifteen years serving failed to correct it."

He stopped.

"I'm not going to claim I deserve this more than anyone else who has been wronged. I'm not going to make a principled argument. But I want it. And I believe I deserve it."

Ezili looked at him. "You know the old proverb: 'Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it,'" she said.

"Yeah, I know. But I've got to have this."

She looked out at her garden for a long moment.

"I have watched what that amulet has done to my husband. For twelve years he carried a dead man in his pocket. It did not make him free. It has not made his sister free. It made

him a man who talks to a piece of stone every night and wonders if anyone is listening."

She turned to face Jack.

"I will not be part of making more of those."

"Guillaume said you'd agreed — "

"Guillaume was wrong to agree on my behalf. And he was wrong to send you here."

She walked over to the table, picked up the amulet and held it out to him.

"Take this back. Go somewhere. Build something. The people who hurt you are dead, Jack. They died badly. Is that not enough?"

"No," he said quietly.

"Then I'm sorry for you. You are only hurting yourself with this obsession. The only way for you to find peace is to let go of your desire for revenge. If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will have complete peace. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.

"But as for this, I can't help you. I won't."

CHAPTER 16

RÉMY

Jack had money — the state had given him back pay upon his exoneration, and while it was not nearly enough to compensate for losing over a year of his life, it was sufficient to get him started living again.

He couldn't go back to his old house. Rachel had succeeded in getting his name removed from the mortgage — part of her plan to sell it and move in with Kevin. So, a week before his release, Jack rented a house on Corwin Street, about five miles from his old place. Marcus had handled the arrangements with the efficiency of someone who understood that a man being released from prison after a wrongful conviction needed certain things in place before the release rather than after it. The house was at the end of a cul-de-sac, unremarkable, with a basement that had been the primary criterion in the selection. Marcus had not asked why the basement mattered.

The basement was concrete-floored and low-ceilinged. It was a space that had never been used for anything but storage. Jack had placed four chairs there at intervals he had

calculated. He had bought ropes and left one on the floor beside each chair.

A few days after his meeting with Ezili, Jack was in the kitchen, fixing himself a sandwich, when the doorbell rang. He opened the door. A man in his fifties, dark-skinned, thin but broad-shouldered, was there. Standing on the porch with him were three younger men, similar in stature.

"Mr. Mercer? My name is Rémy. I am a friend of Guillaume Pierre. I believe you may need some help."

"How did you — ?"

"Guillaume communicates with some of his old friends. He told us that Ezili refused to help you. We understand. She is a good woman. But she can be a bit — squeamish."

"What are you offering?"

"What you went to her for."

"When?"

"Soon. We should talk about it."

Jack let Rémy and his friends in. Rémy spent the next couple of hours explaining. He explained the voodoo cosmology more fully than either Guillaume or Ezili had done — about the lwa, the distinction between the gros bon ange and the ti bon ange, the first being the general life force and the second being the individual self, the consciousness, the thing that made a person who they are. He explained what

a bokor was and was not, and where he positioned himself in relation to that term, and what the distinction meant in practice.

Rémy also told Jack about Baron Samedi — the crude, lascivious, top hat wearing master of the dead in Haitian lore. "Sometimes, if the circumstances of a person's death displeases him, the Baron will decline to let a soul rest in peace. In your case, the people who did those bad things to you have been dead for a long time… weeks, months. It can be difficult to retrieve a soul once a person has been dead for too long. Usually, you don't want to wait for more than a day or two. But in your case, I think perhaps the Baron has been looking out for you."

He explained what he was going to do in two stages. First, he would call the souls back and place them in vessels. This could be done tonight, he said, if the conditions were right, which he would determine through a process he did not describe in detail but whose seriousness he communicated clearly. Then they would go to the cemetery and get the bodies. This was the aspect of the process he described with the most care — the specific preparations, the protocols, the things that must be done, the order they must be done in, and the things that must not be done regardless.

"The working requires your presence throughout," he said. "Not just physically. You must be engaged. Attentive. What you feel is what sustains it."

"Ezili told me that yesterday."

"I'm sure she did. I'm saying it again because I want you to hear it more than once." He looked at Jack steadily. "There will be a moment — I don't know when, I can't tell you when — when what you see will be different from what you expected. The face of your wife, the body of her moving without her in it. It may feel different from how it feels now, when it is still abstract."

"I understand."

"I hope so."

Rémy looked at him for a moment longer. Then he opened a black bag he had brought with him and pulled out four small vessels — bottles, clay-stoppered, each slightly different in shape — and placed them on the kitchen table. "Tonight?" he asked.

"Yes," Jack answered. "Tonight."

He did not watch all of what Rémy did that night. Not because he was prevented from watching, but because some of it was not for watching — it had the quality of a private conversation, the sort of practice that had its own protocols about audience and witnesses. He sat where he was told to sit

and he was present and attentive in the way Rémy required and he watched the parts that were for watching.

The kitchen was different at night with the candles Rémy placed at specific points on the table and around the room, including on the floor. These and other objects used in the ceremony seemed more present in a way Jack would not normally have thought possible for inanimate objects to be and which he did not examine too closely. The four vessels stood in the center of the table with the amulet beside them.

Rémy worked with the focused efficiency of a person who has done a thing many times and can now do it without thinking. He moved around the table and chanted — sometimes in Haitian Creole, sometimes in something that Jack did not recognize — and he worked with the herbs and the objects and the small bottle of something he had prepared earlier. He was not dramatic about any of it, and the undramatic quality was more convincing than drama would have been.

At some point — Jack could not have said exactly when — the quality of the air in the kitchen changed. It was a subtle change, like the change in air pressure before a storm: a density, an aliveness that had not been present before. He felt the amulet warm on the table without touching it. He felt the four vessels take on a quality he could not name.

Rémy stopped what he was doing. He stood very still and looked at the vessels with the concentration of someone listening to something below audible range.

"Yes," he said quietly, not to him. "All four."

He looked up at Jack. "Now we go to the cemetery," he said.

The cemetery was municipal, which meant it was large and imperfectly lit and had that quality of civic neglect that municipal cemeteries accumulate over decades — the paths uneven, some of the older stones leaning, the newer section at the far end too bright under its sodium lights and therefore, paradoxically, less navigable than the darker older ground. They went at midnight. Rémy had a lantern, the kind that produced real light without electricity. His friends carried the tools and the vessels.

They found Prentiss first — the newest grave in the oldest section, the stone still clean and the earth above it not yet fully settled. Then Jorge, in the newer section, a family plot with a modest marker. Then Rachel.

Jack stood at Rachel's grave for a long time.

The stone had her name and her dates, and the dates made her forty years old. Jack thought about the way that dates on gravestones make things real in a way that nothing else quite does. This was the woman he had shared a house with for

twelve years. She was the woman who had looked at him across the courtroom with the expression of someone setting down a burden, and he had been the burden.

"Take your time," Rémy said, quietly and without impatience.

He took what time he needed. Then he nodded.

They found Kevin last. Rémy's friends said very little, but they moved with the gracefulness and purposeful quiet of people who know what they are doing and have done it before.

CHAPTER 17

THE BASEMENT

They worked in the basement for most of the night. Jack was present throughout. He watched Rémy and his men work with the kind of attention he had once brought to trial preparation: total, exhaustive, missing nothing.

At some point before dawn, Rémy stopped. He stood in the center of the basement and looked at the figures in the four chairs and then at Jack.

"It's time for us to leave," Rémy said. "We will leave you alone with them. This part is yours."

The four men went upstairs. Jack listened as their footsteps crossed the floor above him and heard the front door open and close. He heard the diminishing sound of their car on the street.

He turned back to the basement.

They sat in the four chairs, bound at the wrists. Rachel, Kevin, Jorge, and Prentiss, the evil people who had sent Jack to prison for more than a year because they were selfish and cowardly. But something was missing. Jack stared at their rotting, stinking, decaying flesh. Prentiss was in the worst

shape, since he had been dead the longest, but they were all a disgusting sight to see. Jack noticed their eyes. They were vacant, like windows in an abandoned building. Light moved across them, but nothing registered. They were looking at everything and seeing nothing.

Jack stood in front of them and he knew, from what Ezili and Rémy had told him and from what he was seeing now, that the soul of each of them was held in one of the four clay-stoppered bottles sitting on a table in a far corner of the basement — and that the consciousness that had been Rachel, that had been Kevin, that had been Jorge and Prentiss — was in those bottles, aware, unable to act or speak, knowing what it was and where it was and why. This was what he had asked for. This was what he had wanted.

He looked at Rachel's face for a long time.

He had prepared for this. He had prepared more thoroughly than he had prepared for anything in his professional life, which was a considerable standard. He had written out his speech. He had rehearsed. He had stood in his cell for months and ran through what he would say when this moment finally arrived. He had the words. He knew the structure. He knew the sequence of charge and evidence and conclusion that he had built through so much careful work.

He looked at Rachel and his anger spilled out in a torrent.

"You took everything from me!" he screamed, as the four zombies sat and stared. "You built a lie and you put me inside it and walked away!" He got up close, his face just inches from hers. "You *planned* it! You and Kevin killed his wife and pinned it on me! And then you got Prentiss and this other stupid bastard to go along with it! You sat in my kitchen, in my house, in my marriage, and you decided that my life was something you could use or throw away as you pleased — whatever would suit your interests!"

Rachel's eyes were open and the light in them was the same light that was in the air around her: undifferentiated, external, belonging to the room.

He turned to Kevin.

"You helped her," he said. "You killed your wife and then stood there with her dead body on the floor and you let Rachel tell you what the story was going to be. Why? Why did you do it? What had I ever done to you? We had never even met!"

Kevin stared blankly.

He turned to Jorge.

"You lied to the jury!" he said. "You were supposed to be a professional. A man in a position of public trust whose entire function was to provide accurate information so that accurate conclusions could be drawn. You took that function and you bent it to serve someone who was using you, and

you were used, and you knew you were being used, and you didn't care who got hurt as long as you got what you wanted!"

Jorge's expression did not change. It had not changed and would not change.

Jack turned to Prentiss.

"You took an oath," Jack said. "You *knew* what you were doing was wrong! How many other times did you do something like this? How many other lives have you destroyed? Was I the first? Probably not, right?"

The words fell into the room and were absorbed without reaction.

He stood there for a minute, breathing heavily. He had more than a year's worth of material — a notebook full of it, the careful construction of every charge, every piece of evidence, every sequence of what had happened and what it had cost. He had the whole of it organized and ready and he looked at the four figures in their chairs staring dull-eyed at nothing in particular. He was tempted to just stop right there — tempted to think that he was wasting his time — that the zombies couldn't understand what was happening, so why should he bother?

He sat on the basement stairs with his elbows on his knees and his hands loose between them and he looked at the four figures in front of him. He thought about Solomon. He

thought about what Solomon had said: *The anger is eating the wrong man.* He had known this was correct when Solomon said it. He had known it and had found it irrelevant, and he still found it irrelevant. Justice must be done, he thought, no matter the cost.

He thought about Ezili in the kitchen that first morning, her hands around her coffee cup, looking at him with the clear attention of someone who was not going to look away.

Let it go. Build something. There is still time.

Eventually he got up. He went upstairs. He went to the kitchen and stood at the counter and thought about the four sealed vessels that contained what remained of the ti bon ange of each of them and he remembered what Ezili had told him — that the awareness was real, that each of them knew where they were and what they were — and he went back down into the basement, grabbed a hammer from his toolbox, and proceeded to punish the four zombies.

An hour or so later, he returned to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Exhausted, he guzzled the water and sat at the kitchen table until the sky through the window began to lighten. At last, he went upstairs and slept.

CHAPTER 18

IT'S OVER

Jack went to Ezili's house at ten in the morning. What little sleep he had gotten was fitful and restless. She opened the door before he knocked.

She looked at his face carefully. She had seen the expression on it before — it was the same look Guillaume had had after he had captured Théodore's spirit. She stepped back from the door. He went in.

As she had done previously, Ezili offered him a coffee and they both sat down. Jack put his hands around the cup she set before him and looked at the surface of the coffee for a moment.

"It's over," he said.

"I know. Are you satisfied?"

He thought about this honestly. "Satisfied?" he replied. "No, I wouldn't say that. I don't know what to think or how to feel. I know that those fiends got the punishment they deserved, so that's something. But I'm not happy. Not yet. I'm still angry. Honestly, I want to go back there and torture them some more."

"So why don't you do that? Why come here?"

Jack looked up at the ceiling. He was on the verge of tears.

"Because," he said, "there's also a sense in which I think you had a point. You and my prison psychiatrist — Dr. Solomon. Both of you told me that I needed to let go of my anger; that ultimately the person I've been torturing has been myself. And I want to stop it. I've suffered enough, and I suppose, so have they."

Ezili did not say *I told you so*. She did not say anything for a moment. "What do you want now?" she asked.

"I want to end it," he said. "I want my life back. Things can never be the same as they were before, and I guess I wouldn't really want them to be. But I want to move on. I need to move on. I want to start living again, and I want them to be dead again. I don't want to keep their souls. I want to undo it."

"You can't undo it. The raising happened. What you can do is close it properly — return the ti bon ange and let the bodies return to what they were."

"Let's do that."

"I can't do it. Not alone, anyway. Rémy and his men would need to come back."

"Can you call them?"

She looked at him across the table. She felt as though a decision was being made that she is not entirely at peace with but was committed to regardless.

"Yes," she said.

She reached across the table and covered his hand with hers for a moment. He felt the warmth of it — different from the amulet's warmth, the warmth of a living person.

"I'm sorry for what was done to you," she said. He looked at her hand.

"So am I," he said. "For all of it."

He stayed.

He did not plan to stay — he had no conscious plan about anything for those hours — but Ezili did not indicate that he should leave and he found that he did not want to, and so he stayed. She made food and they ate it and she asked him questions about his life before the trial, not the legal life but the other life, the person he had been before the madness of his current situation had overtaken him, and he answered her questions with a directness that surprised him and that he attributed to the permission of her attention — the way she listened, fully, without the therapeutic frame that Solomon's attention had, without the professional context. She listened like someone who was interested, specifically, in him.

He told her about the cases he'd been proud of and the cases he'd carried badly. He told her about Patricia Huang's

sister asking him in the corridor whether it ever felt like enough. He told her about walking out of courthouses and sitting in his car and not knowing what he was feeling, and how he had considered this to be a deficiency for years but now thought it might have been an appropriate response to a situation that was genuinely hard to feel clearly about.

She told him about growing up in Port-au-Prince. About the tradition she had been born into — the way people are born into a particular religious tradition or class, something that shapes the air you breathe and every aspect of who you are. She talked about Guillaume with love — a love that had accommodated a great deal, including the thing he had done, including years of imprisonment and the grief of being married to someone who is present only through paper and on visiting days.

"He is a good man who did a terrible thing and has now spent a dozen years being exactly who he is regardless," she said. "I find that more admirable than I expected to find it."

"Sometimes people have to do terrible things, don't you think?" Jack asked.

"Perhaps. But the price one pays can be very great. It's not always worth that price. In his case, I think he made the wrong choice. He was right about you, though."

Jack looked at her. "What did he say about me?"

"He said you were a just man who had lost his way for a while," she said. "He said you would find it again."

"He might be optimistic."

"He might be." She smiled faintly. Her face showed a mixture of sadness and pride. "He usually is. It's one of his better qualities."

The afternoon light moved across the kitchen in the way light moves that time of year — low-angled, brief, making the ordinary things in the room shine with a golden glow. Jack sat in it and thought about what finding his way again would mean and found that he could, for the first time in a long time, consider the question without the answer being immediately foreclosed by the cold grey walls of the county prison.

"Stay for dinner," Ezili said.

He stayed for dinner. He stayed, in the end, for the night — on the couch, at his own suggestion, and she did not argue with him about this — and in the morning she made coffee and he sat at her kitchen table and looked out at the bare winter garden and thought that it was perhaps the most ordinary morning he had ever experienced, and that ordinary was, at the moment, the most extraordinary thing he knew.

"We should go to your house today," she said, over coffee.

"I know."

“I’ll come with you. There are preparations to make before Rémy comes. Things that should be in order.”

“Ezili?”

She looked at him.

“Thank you,” he said. “For last night. For everything.”

She considered him for a moment in the way that had become familiar — the full consideration, nothing withheld.

“You’re a good man who did a foolish thing,” she said. “That happens.”

“Does it always end like this?"

“It hasn’t ended yet,” she said. “Come on.”

CHAPTER 19

THE BREAKOUT

They spent the day together, going to various stores to pick up items Ezili said would be needed for the closing ceremony. In between these stops, they ate lunch together, and then dinner, and for a while found themselves walking aimlessly through a park. At last, they drove to the house on Corwin Street as the sun was setting.

The street was quiet in the way of residential streets on weekdays — a dog being walked by a woman with a stroller at the far end, someone's car warming up in a driveway, the general ambient life of a neighborhood going about its business. Like many a house of horror, this house was notable mainly for its dullness; its unremarkable face and ordinary porch and the basement beneath it. Jack parked in the driveway and he and Ezili entered the house.

"Where's your bathroom?" she asked.

"Second door at the top of the stairs."

"Take these to the basement," she said, handing him a bag filled with the things they had purchased during the day. "I'll be with you in a minute and help you prepare the space."

He watched her go upstairs. Then he went to the basement door, flicked the light switch and descended to the bottom of the stairs.

He stopped and froze instantly.

The ropes lay on the floor — all four of them. He looked at them with the attention of a man reading evidence, and he understood immediately what the ropes told him: the ends were not cut. They were not untied. Rather, they were frayed in a way that suggested they had simply ceased to function — as though the thing that had been holding them together had been withdrawn, and without that thing the material had given way.

But the zombies were gone.

He looked at the four empty chairs. He looked at the coal chute in the corner, its cover displaced and lying on the floor. He looked at the ceiling. He raced upstairs, to the bottom of the main staircase and looked up.

"Ezili?"

Nothing.

"Ezili!"

He took the stairs two at a time. The bathroom door at the end of the hall was closed. He went to the door and tried the handle. Locked. He put his shoulder to it and it gave on the second attempt and he went in and stopped cold.

He stood in the doorway and looked.

He did not go further into the room. There was no reason to go any further.

Ezili's lifeless body lay on the floor in a pool of blood, and crouched over her was Jorge. He had bitten a chunk out of Ezili's neck. His mouth and chin were covered in gore as he chewed her flesh. He looked up at Jack, grinned maniacally, and swallowed.

Jack stood in the doorway with one hand on the frame. He made a sound that was not a word — something below language, something that had been waiting under all the words he'd been saying throughout his ordeal, something that belonged to a register he had not known he had access to. He stood there and the sound moved through him and then he was quiet.

He took his hand off the frame and straightened.

He stood for a moment in the hallway and thought, with the terrible clarity of a man whose capacity for clear thought had survived everything else, about what had happened and what was going to happen next.

He thought about the ropes; the fraying. *What you feel is what sustains it — if you weaken, if you doubt, the working unravels.*

Outside, suddenly, from next door — the piercing sound of a woman's scream — a single note of pure shock, abruptly cut off.

He went to the hallway window and looked out at the yard next door.

Mrs. Hensley — he knew her name from Marcus's notes; an elderly widow with three black cats — was lying on the ground next to a small garden. She was looking up at something in her garden that Jack could not see from his angle. In one hand, she held a trowel, which she was furiously waving around, as if defending herself from a predator.

Jack rushed down the stairs and out the front door. He went to the fence between the properties and looked into Mrs. Hensley's garden.

There, he saw Prentiss, who by this time was on top of the old woman. She had stopped struggling. Blood spurted from her neck as the ghoul was hungrily devouring her. Jack hurried over and kicked him in the side. Prentiss fell over clumsily onto his back, revealing the trowel blade stuck in his ribcage. Hensley had succeeded in stabbing him, an act that had proven to be useless under the circumstances.

Prentiss struggled to get to his feet and lurched toward Jack. In a moment, they were locked in mortal combat. Prentiss tried repeatedly to bite Jack, who desperately fended him off. Finally, Jack was able to grab the handle of the trowel sticking out of Prentiss's ribs and quickly jab it into his neck. The judge fell backwards onto the ground, with

Jack on top of him. Again and again, Jack plunged the blade into Prentiss's neck until there was nothing left to connect his head to his body but the neck-bone.

Jack got back up onto his feet and, breathing heavily, found another garden tool — a spade — which he used to complete the decapitation. Prentiss's body continued to squirm harmlessly as Jack moved a safe distance away and collapsed onto one of Mrs. Hensley's garden chairs.

Before he could rest, though, Jack heard another noise. The sound came from the street — someone was shouting. Then a car horn, once, followed by yet another noise — this, from the direction of the park a block away, was something he could not identify at this distance.

He got up and limped out into Mrs. Hensley's front yard. Almost immediately, he grasped the geometry of what was happening: two bodies, moving without purpose through a residential neighborhood late on a Tuesday evening, encountering the ordinary inhabitants of that neighborhood who had not been prepared for such a nightmare. The radius of the damage was limited by the time it had been happening, which he estimated at somewhere between forty minutes and two hours, and by the purposelessness of the movement, which meant no single direction was being pursued. They

were not hunting. They were simply wandering about. But they were dangerous.

Suddenly, Jack remembered what Ezili had told him: *The working is sustained by what you feel. When you are ready to be finished — it ends.*

Solomon's words came back to him, too: *The anger is eating the wrong man.*

My anger has been eating everything, Jack thought. More than a year of it, organized and maintained. The anger was the architecture and it had come crashing down and took the walls with it and now there are zombies terrorizing a neighborhood that has nothing to do with any of this.

Jack turned and walked slowly back to Mrs. Hensley's garden. He looked at her body, lying on the ground with a terrible wound in her neck and blood all around. She had been a retired schoolteacher, Marcus had said. She had a memory like a carbon copy. She fed birds.

She fed birds and planted flowers and played bridge with other old ladies in the neighborhood, and then encountered something that no experience in her seventy-two years had given her vocabulary for, and the reason she encountered it was sitting in her back yard staring at her.

At last, another thought arose — *I know how to end this.*

He had known how to end it since Ezili told him the day he met her. Even before that, really.

Since Solomon said it, across every Thursday session he had attended while he was locked up. He had known it in the abstract, but now, finally, he regarded the idea consciously. It was obvious. It was a natural law. It was simply a matter of the conditions being right.

He had not thought the conditions would look like this.

He sat back down in the garden chair and closed his eyes. He found the anger.

It was where he had kept it, in the place in his mind that he had assigned it — specific, organized, month after month of precise maintenance. It was there. It was real. He was not going to pretend it wasn't real, was not going to perform a peace he didn't have. What had been done to him had been done to him. Rachel had pretended to love him and then plotted to falsely accuse him of murder. Kevin had gone along with it because he wanted to continue an illicit affair and didn't want to take the blame for an accidental killing. Jorge had given into his lust and made his calculation. Prentiss had done the same. These were real things done by real people for real reasons and they were wrong. They were a profound and horrifying wrong, and anger was the correct response to them and it was real and present and his.

He thought about Patricia Huang's sister, in the courthouse corridor, starting to ask a question and then stopping. *Does it ever* — she had started, and then she had shaken her head and

thanked him and gone back to her family. He had thought at the time that the question was going to be *does it ever feel like enough.* He thought now that it might have been something else. *Does it ever end?* Or: *Do you ever let it go?*

He thought about what letting it go would mean.

Not forgetting. He couldn't possibly do that.

Not forgiving, either. Not in the sense of releasing the people who had done it from the moral accounting of what they had done. Just — setting it down — the way Guillaume had set down the amulet after all those years of carrying it. The amulet was still there; the thing it contained was still real; the giving of it was not pretending that Théodore had not existed or had not done what he had done. It was just the end of the carrying.

He thought about Ezili at her kitchen table, her hands around her coffee cup, looking at him. He thought: I do not want to be a man who carries dead people.

And so he leaned back in the chair and breathed in deeply and then exhaled and let his anger go.

It was as if the weight of the sun and the moon and the planets had been bearing down upon his shoulders, and in an instant that weight simply vanished.

He sat quietly for a time. He breathed steadily, and at length opened his eyes.

Two streets over, Rachel stopped.

She was standing between two parked cars, having just ripped the throat out of a teenage girl who had been walking home from a friend's house. She stopped in the way that a zombie does when the working fails — simply ceasing. One moment the body was in motion and the next it was not. She collapsed on the cold asphalt between the cars, and was still.

In the park a block away, Kevin stopped. He was at the edge of the duck pond, in the tall dead grass of the bank, and he stopped and stood for a long moment in the moonlight with his eyes open and the park's ordinary life around him — a raccoon scurrying nearby, a cold wind across the water, the distant sound of traffic on the main road — and then he was on the ground and he was still.

And in the upstairs bathroom of his rented house, Jorge stopped moving, too, and fell on top of Ezili.

Jack couldn't see these things happen, but somehow he knew. Now that he had finally come to peace with the situation, he knew that the zombies would never hurt anyone else again. He watched Prentiss's limbs stop their impotent flailing, as if he needed the confirmation.

He picked up the phone and dialed 911.

"I need to report — " he started, and then stopped, because he needed to be accurate about this and accuracy required a moment.

"Multiple medical emergencies," he said. "In the vicinity of Corwin Street and the surrounding few blocks. I believe there are also people in the street who may have been attacked. Police and medical response needed."

He paused.

"My name is Jack Mercer," he said. "I live at 14 Corwin Street. I'll be here when you arrive."

He hung up, walked back over to his house and sat down on the front step.

He thought about Ezili, upstairs in the bathroom. He thought about the dish towel she had been holding when she opened the door the first morning, and about her hands, her eyes, her lips. He thought about what she had said, that first morning, when she had told him about Guillaume talking to the amulet.

Every night he talks to a piece of stone, she had said. *Every night.*

He reached into his jacket. He took out the amulet. It was still warm — the steady, sourceless warmth that had been there since Guillaume had given it to him — that had been there for twelve years before that. He looked at it in his palm.

He thought about Guillaume in his cell, maintaining the relationships that prison had not severed, talking with his fellow prisoners and with Dr. Solomon, trying to get on with his life as best he could. He recalled what Guillaume had said

about Claudette: she has asked me not to carry guilt. He thought about what Guillaume had said about whether it worked: some days.

In a way he could never do before, Jack understood his friend's dilemma. He closed his hand around the amulet.

He heard the first siren in the distance. Then a second.

He stood up and walked over to the sidewalk and waited for the police to arrive. The cold air moved through the street. Mrs. Hensley's wind chimes — she had wind chimes too, he noticed, copper ones, different from Ezili's but the same material — moved in the cold air and made their sound.

He clutched the amulet and wondered how he would explain all this. He had been a prosecutor. He had heard preposterous explanations before, but nothing compared to this.

He decided he would tell the truth. He would tell it completely and without mitigation and he would accept whatever consequence it generated, because accepting consequences was what he had believed in his entire adult life and the belief did not become less true because it was now being applied to him rather than to someone else.

This is what accountability looks like from this side, he thought.

The sirens were closer. He could see, at the far end of the street, the first flash of light.

He looked down at the amulet in his palm and felt the warmth of it. He thought about what Théodore's ti bon ange had experienced in those years, held in the small dark object, aware but unable to act.

He held the amulet high above his head and then swung his arm down quickly, letting it go, smashing it to pieces on the sidewalk.

A police car stopped in front of the house. The door opened. Weston got out.

Weston, the man who had arrested him, who had sat across from him in the interrogation room and received his answers with the patient neutrality of a man who had been doing this for many years. Weston, who had taken Rachel's statement and built the structure of the case that had sent Jack to prison.

The two men looked at each other. "Mr. Mercer," Weston said.

"Detective," Jack answered.

They regarded each other for a moment in the January morning with the cold air between them and the sound of the ambulance arriving at the far end of the street and Mrs. Hensley's copper wind chimes making their whispering sound in the cold air.

"I think," Jack said, "that I need to tell you some things."

He took a deep breath and told Weston everything.

CHAPTER 20

REVENGE NEVER DIES

A few months later Jack was back in prison, having been given life sentences for the murders of Ezili, Mrs. Hensley, and the teenage girl Rachel had killed. These were to be served consecutively. Additional years were tacked onto his sentence for abuse of a corpse (four counts) and various other offenses. There was no chance he would ever be let back into the outside world again.

Detective Weston thought his story was absurd, of course. Marcus, too. Soon, Jack quit telling the story at all. Why bother if no one was going to take him seriously? Besides, although he was innocent of murder, he was guilty of the other crimes he was accused of, and it was his actions that had led indirectly to the deaths of innocents, so not even Jack himself could think of a good reason why he shouldn't be locked away for good. So he pled guilty and avoided both the death penalty and the prospect of being sent to an asylum. Honesty has its rewards, however meager.

Warden Harris knew of Jack's friendship with Guillaume and made sure the two men were kept far apart. Jack's cell

was located on a different floor on the opposite end of the facility, and their lunch times and exercise periods were kept separate. They never did see each other again, but they did manage to communicate through an intermediary — Dr. Solomon.

Jack had been back in the clink for about a month before he was reunited with the man who had given him the best advice he had ever gotten. The fact that he had spurned that advice caused him to feel a bit sheepish as he entered Solomon's office.

"Have a seat," Solomon said.

Jack sat in the soft leather chair across from the doctor. He crossed his legs and folded his arms over his chest.

"I had always hoped I'd see you again someday," Solomon said, "but of course I had assumed our next meeting would occur under happier circumstances."

"Me, too," Jack replied. "Things really went south in a hurry once I left here. I should've listened to you."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me exactly what happened."

"Don't you know?"

"I've read accounts in the news, but they seem rather hard to believe. I've also talked with your friend Guillaume, but to be honest, the things he told me are hard to believe, too."

"But you think you can trust me?"

"I think so, yes. Won't you tell me what happened?"

"Nah," Jack answered. "I'm sure Guillaume told you the truth. If what he told you sounded crazy, that means he got it right. I don't think there's much I can add."

Jack leaned back and folded his hands behind his head.

"I fouled up, big time. That's the bottom line. Physically, I was a free man, but mentally I was in a prison I had created for myself. You warned me I was headed for trouble. Anyway, now that I'm back in a physical prison again, what I'd like to know is — "

He looked at Dr. Solomon imploringly.

"I want to know how I can be free up here," he said as he unfolded his hands, leaned forward and pointed at his own head.

"Well, that's an easy thing for me to tell you. It's putting it into practice that can be difficult."

Solomon stood up, walked over to the window, and looked outside. From that vantage point, he could see the visitor's parking lot. He noticed a family — a young mother with two small children in tow — leaving their car and hurrying toward the entrance. Most likely, they were coming to meet with the children's father, incarcerated for who knows what and who knows how long.

"Life is often difficult for all of us," he said. "You've had a very rough time these last few years, but it could be worse,

and you should take care to do what you can to make sure it doesn't get worse.

"Somewhere, as we speak, there's someone who's starving to death. Statistically, that happens every three seconds or so. Other people are afflicted with terrible diseases or have been injured and are in tremendous pain. And still others are physically fine themselves but are watching, helpless, as a loved one is going through some ordeal, like that family out there that just entered the visitor's area. That woman's husband, those kids' father — he's in here doing time. It's a bad situation for all of them.

"Your situation is bad, too, but as people like to say, at least you have your health."

"Feeling tip-top," Jack said.

"When you got out of here before, your circumstances were pretty good, all things considered," Solomon continued. "But you were living in the past and were fighting the battles of the past. I've heard it said that ghosts are the souls of people who can't leave something here on Earth behind. Only when they can stop clinging to whatever it is they're attached to can they move on. I suppose that's what you'll have to do — give up the past and make the best of your life here."

Jack sighed and nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I think I understand now. There's really nothing else for me to do, is

there? I mean, other than to go on torturing myself. But I won't do that. My time as a victim is over."

Dr. Solomon smiled and the two men shook hands. Both of them believed that Jack was finally on the right track.

As the months went by, Jack got progressively better at accepting his fate. He asked himself what he would be doing if he was a free man. The answer, he knew, was that he would spend most of his time working. That was how he had spent his entire adult life before everything turned upside down. Hardly anything else interested him very much.

He soon discovered a way he could use his time productively. There was a library available for the inmates where he could do research on legal cases of interest and send his thoughts to the lawyers involved. At first, he wondered if this was a worthwhile activity, but to his delight, he found that some of the lawyers he used to work with were surprisingly willing to accept his assistance.

It was while thus engaged that Jack's life came to an abrupt end. He had been poring over a volume of criminal law and thinking through its implications in a case that had grabbed his attention when a deep voice interrupted his train of thought.

"Remember me?"

Jack looked up and saw a large man standing before him. He thought for a moment and recalled that this was the man who had blocked his path while walking around the yard early in his first prison term. The day he met Guillaume.

"Yeah, I think so," Jack said.

"I'm glad to see you're back in here." The man was smiling, but the smile was forced. He was agitated and twitchy. "I let you go last time, but that won't happen again."

Suddenly, the memories that had eluded him at their last meeting flashed back into his mind. The man's name was Gary Jordan — a habitual pretty crook who, a long time ago, had stuck up a convenience store and shot a cashier (who survived, fortunately.) Jack was the prosecuting attorney in the case. He won, and the man in front of him was sentenced to twenty years. It was one of Jack's first cases; small wonder he didn't recognize him right away.

Jack wasn't looking for trouble, but he knew that the appearance of fear was the quickest way to invite it. So he stood up and got directly in the big man's face. "Look here, jerky," he said, "I'm doing life this time. There's no chance of me getting away from you, so you've got nothing to worry about."

The tactic seemed to work as Jordan backed off and slunk away, but a week later, Jordan got behind Jack in line to go to lunch. Their cells were on the second floor of the facility; not

adjacent but close enough for Jordan to sneak up a few places in line. As they began descending the metal staircase to the ground floor, Jordan gave Jack a little shove.

Jack fell awkwardly and hit his head hard on the edge of one of the steps below. For him, that was the end. He continued to fall like a rag doll down several more steps, never quite reaching the floor below, but he was already dead.

Only one of the other prisoners had seen the shove, and he wasn't about to say anything. The guards had missed it, too, and after a perfunctory investigation, Jack's death was ruled accidental. He was buried in the same cemetery as Rachel and Kevin and Jorge and Prentiss.

Within a year, Jack's killer was released. He had served fifteen years and, as far as the prison authorities knew, he had been a model prisoner. His case was handled by someone Jack knew, a partner in the firm he had worked at early in his career. Like Marcus had done for Jack, Gary Jordan's lawyer arranged for housing — in this case, a modest apartment in a rough part of town. He also hooked Gary up with a job as a stock clerk at a thrift store.

Gary's temperament was such, however, as to make long term success impossible. Though he had succeeded in convincing the parole board that he was sorry for what he had

done and had turned over a new leaf, he was in reality smoldering with indignant fury over his lost youth and was desperately hoping to make a big score to compensate for the years he had spent locked up. He couldn't abide the notion of spending the rest of his life grinding away in poverty, so he reunited with some old friends, ne'er-do-wells who had had life trajectories similar to his own, and together they spent their free time plotting to rob a bank in a suburban town a few miles away.

A month after Gary Jordan walked out of prison, another model prisoner — Guillaume Pierre — was granted his freedom, too. His first stop was Ezili's grave.

"I'm sorry, my darling," he said softly as he stood before her tombstone. "If I had it to do all over again, I'd do things differently."

He wiped away a tear, set down a bouquet of flowers, and headed off to visit Rémy. That night, Rémy and his friends threw a party to celebrate Guillaume's release. They danced and drank Kremas and Ti' punch and ate barbecued pork and smoked enormous joints.

"This man is my best friend," Rémy told one of the women in attendance. She was young and single, and the idea was that perhaps she and Guillaume would hit it off. "He and I used to do everything together. He's a man who is willing to

do whatever is necessary, no matter what happens. He is a *real* man."

"Am I, though?" Guillaume asked. "Am I really?"

"Yes," Rémy said solemnly. "I know that Ezili felt otherwise, and she tried to make you feel guilty about what you did. But what choice did you have? Théodore was beating your sister. Could you really have just let him get away with that?"

"No," Guillaume agreed, "I had to do something. But maybe there was another way to handle the situation. Perhaps I could've been smarter about it."

They partied late into the night and when Guillaume finally left, the girl went with him and spent the night in his bed.

The next day, Guillaume visited Rémy again. Neither of them had mentioned Jack the night before, but he was on both of their minds.

"I keep thinking about him," Guillaume confessed. "I feel guilty over what happened. If he had never listened to me, he'd be living free and easy right now. Instead, his life became a horror show and now he's dead. And it's all my fault."

"Man, you think too much," Rémy replied. "Life is unpredictable. There's no way to tell what will happen next.

Those people had done him wrong and they deserved to be punished. His problem was that he weakened too soon. If he had followed through properly, everything would've worked out all right."

Guillaume then spoke of a dream he had. "I could hardly sleep last night," he said. "I dreamt that Jack's soul had been refused admittance into the realm of the dead."

Rémy's eyes widened. "Did he meet Baron Samedi?"

"Yes. I have had this same dream three times since Jack was killed."

"This is serious," Rémy said.

"Yes, I know. I'm afraid of what it means."

"You know very well what it means. Jack's spirit is reaching out to you through your dreams."

"I've spent so much time in prison already," Guillaume said. "And Jack is dead because of this. I don't want to keep doing this."

"Jack died violently. The man who killed him had no right to do what he did. It was unjust. And because we are partly to blame for what happened, we must do what we can to help. What kind of man would refuse to help a friend? What kind of man would decline to seek justice?"

That night, they grabbed their shovels, met up with Rémy's friends, and went to the cemetery where Jack was buried to help him get his revenge.

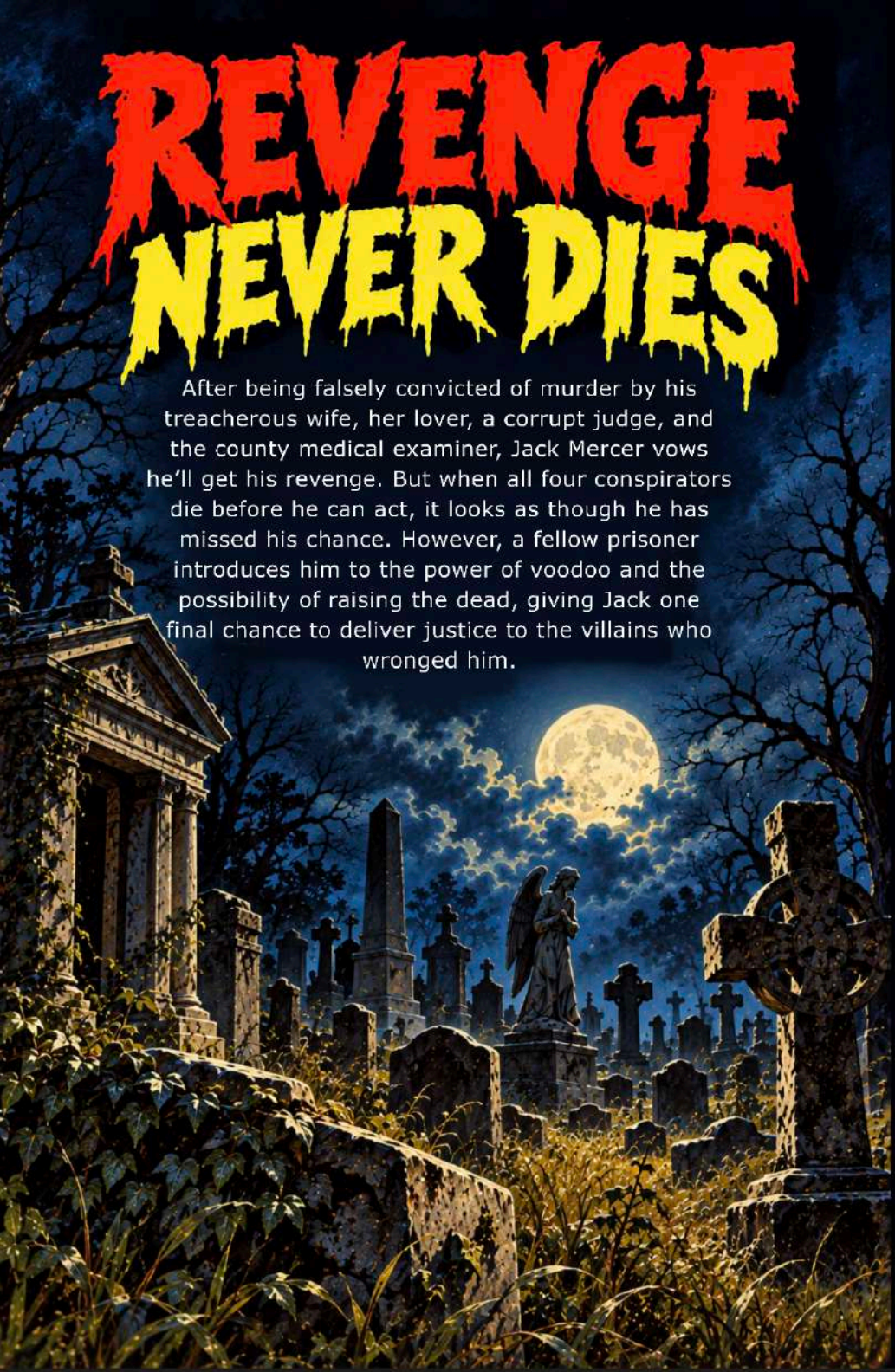
THE END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The author of this book is a man who needs no introduction. Vigorous, virile, and above all humble, he hails from the crown jewel of the midwest (Marion, Ohio) and now resides in Parts Unknown.

Author of *Love Me, Love My Monster*, director of *Bum Man — Hero of the Homeless*… he's your friend and mine — Floyd "Good to his Mother" Jones.


REVENGE
NEVER DIES
After being falsely convicted of murder by his treacherous wife, her lover, a corrupt judge, and the county medical examiner, Jack Mercer vows he'll get his revenge. But when all four conspirators die before he can act, it looks as though he has missed his chance. However, a fellow prisoner introduces him to the power of voodoo and the possibility of raising the dead, giving Jack one final chance to deliver justice to the villains who wronged him.