

Chapter One

THE CANNONBALL

Penn Station at 3:40 on a Friday in June has a smell all its own — pretzel salt and brake dust and the mingled cologne of two thousand people who have all decided, in the same hour, that they have earned the ocean. I stood under the big board with a duffel over one shoulder and watched the slot for the Cannonball stay stubbornly blank, the way it always does, right to the last possible minute, when it posts and the whole concourse lunges as a single animal toward one staircase.

I wasn't a weekender. I had the bag and the half-finished sunburn and the round-trip ticket, but I was riding out east to work, not to be seen not-working, which in that crowd is a different species altogether. The men around me wore quarter-zips in the colors of money and carried their golf bags like rifles slung muzzle-down. The women had straw totes that cost more than my truck. I had a canvas jacket I'd owned since before two of my friends were put in the ground, and a phone with the train app open, refreshing, refreshing, because the Cannonball doesn't stop at Jamaica, and if you miss it you spend the whole evening transferring through the dark with the drunks and the dishwashers.

While I waited I read the messages over again. They were three days old, and I'd read them often enough to have them by heart, which is a habit the work teaches you — you learn a client's words

long before you ever meet his face, and the words usually give away more than the man intends. Adrian Mercer. The name had reached me through someone I'd done a quiet job for in Sag Harbor, handed along the way these things always are, with the unspoken weight of a favor being spent. The messages were short and very controlled, which is a tell of its own. He had a property off the ocean in East Hampton. He believed someone was watching it. He had no use for the police, and no use for a "company" — I could hear the quotation marks he put around the word — he wanted a single person who would come, and look, and tell him the plain truth, and he was ready to pay for that truth a number so far past what the job was worth that I had counted the zeros twice. Men who feel watched are generally right about the feeling and wrong about everything underneath it. The size of that number suggested this one might run the other way.

Track 19. The animal moved. I went down into the heat of the platform with it, into the long aluminum sigh of the cars, and took a seat on the ocean side facing backward, which is a habit I no longer notice I keep. I had perhaps ninety seconds of quiet before she dropped into the bench across the little table from me.

She'd come down the aisle like something pursued — a backpack swinging off one shoulder and a hard case, roughly the shape of a cello, that she refused to surrender to the overhead rack or the conductor or God Himself. Her sunglasses were shoved up into a heap of dark hair. Her denim jacket had gone soft and pale along every seam, the way a thing does when it's the only one you own and you wear it through all four seasons. She weighed the rack, judged it a personal insult, and wedged the case upright between her knees. Then she put her phone to her ear and said, at a volume that took in the four rows around us, "No. No — you tell him that if he sends me one more text I will drive to Bushwick myself and set the amp on fire in the street. Because I mean it, that's why. Because I

am done.”

She hung up. She caught me looking, which I had been. I put my eyes back on my phone, because that is the arrangement strangers keep.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Say it.”

“Say what?”

“Whatever your face is doing.” And then she did my face back at me — jaw set, eyes polite and aimed carefully off to one side, a man very busy pretending to read a dark screen. It was a good impression; I’ve seen worse on a stage. “That one. The ‘I will not engage with the unstable woman’ face. It’s all right. Everybody owns a face.”

“I wasn’t —”

“I lost my sister this morning,” she said, in the same easy key, as though she were only telling me the time. “So I’m running a little hot today.”

I said the thing a person says. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, she isn’t dead.” The grin came up fast and pleased with itself. “She just didn’t get on the train. My twin. We’re meant to be a matched set, the pair of us, and you’d think a grown woman could deliver herself to Penn Station by four o’clock on a Friday, and you would be wrong about that.”

There is a version of me that is easy and warm and good with strangers, and I keep him folded in a drawer for occasions. The version that was out that evening — the one who’d spent fourteen months in places where loud and unpredictable was the last sound certain men ever heard — wanted to ride the two hundred minutes out to the last stop in silence and turn the job over in my hands until I understood its shape. But she had a way of filling a silence before it could form, and some part of me, the part I’d come east in order to get back, leaned toward it the way you lean toward a fire.

She read all of that off me in about a second and a half.

“Oh, you’re a serious person,” she said, delighted, the way you’d be at finding a folded twenty in last winter’s coat. “A serious, quiet, sit-with-your-back-to-the-wall person. They let your kind out east now? I thought there was a screening at the canal.”

The train hauled itself out — the tunnel, then the long gray climb through Queens, the rear walls of the row houses, the graffiti scrolling past like a language I half-knew. We slid through Jamaica for no one, the way the Cannonball does, while the locals on the platform watched us go, and somewhere past Babylon the world finally gave up on the city and turned green and low and scrubby, the pine barrens flickering at the glass, and the light began to do the thing it does out there: going wide and gold and faintly mournful, the way it knows it is about to reach water. Two rows ahead, a man in salmon shorts was explaining to someone that the Maidstone waitlist was “basically a hostage situation now” and that he would lower himself to Shinnecock if it came to that. No one on that train was poor. I was the nearest thing to it, and even I had a paid hotel room waiting at the far end of the wire.

“So what’s your line of work,” I asked, mostly to keep her from doing my face a second time, “that has you wrestling a cello onto the Cannonball?”

“It isn’t a cello.” She said it as if I’d insulted the case to its face. “It’s a rig. Straps, a spreader bar, the steel. I’m an aerialist.”

“A what?”

“I hang from things,” she said, “beautifully, while people drink. My sister and me — the Reyes Sisters, you won’t have heard of us, no one has — we do silks, a little dance, a little patter, and one trick at the close that makes the whole room forget to breathe, because for a second it looks like one of us is finally going to come down wrong and die right there over the appetizers. We’ve done it since we were six. Birthday parties first, then cruise ships, then festivals nobody’s heard of either, and now there’s a residency in Montauk all

summer that pays in actual American dollars, which in my whole adult life has not once happened before.” She rapped her knuckles on the case. “Hence the steel. Hence Bushwick, hence the amp, hence the phone call. It’s a long story and most of it is about money.”

“It sounds like a long story.”

“They all are. What about you, serious person — what do you do, when you aren’t guarding rich men against their own imaginations?”

I told her some of it. That I’d been a soldier and then I wasn’t; that I did security work now, which is mostly walking through expensive houses telling the owners the truth about their cameras and their locks and the gap between what they’ve paid for and what they think they’ve bought; and that I wrote, too — ghostwrote, the parts of other people’s books they hadn’t the patience to write for themselves. I told her it was duller than it sounded, that most days ran two hours of real work smeared thin across ten, and that I wasn’t sure what I’d do with my hands if I didn’t have the writing to fall back into when the rest of it went quiet.

“Don’t tell me you’re an influencer,” she said.

“No.” It pulled a laugh out of me, which surprised the both of us. “I share a house with a guy. Out in Springs. He’s the writing half, mostly. He’s the reason I’m out here at all.”

“A guy.” She lifted an eyebrow a careful quarter-inch. “Go on, then.”

“His name is Mathias Wouters. He’s Belgian. He worked homicide for thirty years — Brussels to begin with, then more or less anywhere they’d fly him — and now he’s retired, supposedly, except that people still send a plane when they’ve got something the police already handled and got wrong. He is the single most irritating human being I have ever shared a kitchen with, and he is almost never mistaken. He notices things. The way you just noticed

me, except he does it to whole rooms, to entire families, and not one of them ever feels it happen.” I shrugged. “He’s about five and a half feet tall, he irons his jeans into a crease you could slice bread with, and he’ll hold forth for an hour on the correct making of a single small coffee. People underestimate him the instant they lay eyes on him. It’s the finest weapon he owns, and he keeps it polished.”

She had gone quiet now, the first real stillness in her since Penn, leaning over the little table, the case forgotten between her knees. “All right, now I like you,” she said. “I’m a true-crime girl, I’ll own it. I’ve got the podcasts, I’m down in the subreddits at two in the morning, I’ll lose a whole night to some woman in Boise with a whiteboard and a laser pointer and a theory. Tell me one. Tell me the one that made your little Belgian famous.”

So I told her about the Ashford business, because that was the one that made him — the case people out here still half-remember and mostly get wrong. An old man up on the North Shore had died quietly at his own dinner table; the household that swore on everything holy it was nothing but his heart finally giving out after eighty hard years; and the soft-handed grandnephew who would have walked away clean and obscenely rich if a small Belgian nobody, present only as a houseguest’s houseguest, hadn’t decided he disliked the way the wineglasses had been washed and dried and shelved before a single soul had thought to call the thing a crime. I gave her the whole shape of it — the wrong man who very nearly confessed partway through the case, the second death that turned it inside out, and the quiet, terrible swerve at the very end that no one in that house saw coming, least of all the person it came down on. She listened the way children listen, lips parted, forgetting to blink, and we were so far down inside the story that neither of us marked the train slowing, or the conductor already calling East Hampton up the line, until the brakes took hold beneath us and eased us forward against the seats.

“Wait, we’re here already?” she said, and then, in a prim little voice that mocked its own prissiness, “Why, where does the time go.” Then she was herself again, all business. “Hold on —” She spun the phone camera around to face her and set to work, lining her eyes, painting her mouth a red that had no earthly right to be that red, studying the result with total, shameless concentration, as if she were alone in the car.

I shouldered my duffel. The platform slid up alongside the windows, Railroad Avenue and the cab line and the long gold evening laid out over the village, and the weekenders gathered themselves for the second lunge of the day at the doors.

She rose when I rose. Out on the platform she put her hand out, brisk and businesslike, and I took it, and her grip was a working grip, the palm ridged hard from years of rope and bar, a hand that earned its keep by holding on.

“This was nice,” she said. “I’ll behave better next time. If there is a next time.”

“There will be a next time,” I told her. “I have to meet this twin of yours.”

That set us both laughing, and for half a second something shifted behind her eyes — surfacing and then sliding under again, a fish turning over in black water — and then she was just a girl on a platform once more, squinting into all that gold.

“You’re sweet,” she said, already stepping backward into the crowd. “But you had me pegged right at the start, back in the car. I don’t belong to your world. And whatever it is I do belong to drags its trouble along behind it on a rope — believe me, no one alive knows that better than I do.”

“You could at least leave me a name,” I called, because she was nearly gone into the surge of straw totes and golf bags.

She cut a look back over one shoulder. A small dimple set itself into either cheek.

“Houdini,” she said, and the crowd closed over her, and that was that.

I stood there on Railroad Avenue with the cabs idling and the cold green smell of the ocean coming up over the rooftops, and I did not have the first idea — not the smallest — what the coming two weeks were going to cost me, and her, and a dead man I had not yet met and would spend longer than I care to admit failing to understand, before I laid eyes on Houdini a second time.