

CHAPTER ONE — The Body

Detective Mara Coyle had a rule about Saturday mornings, which was that nothing good ever happened before ten, and Ray Ostrowski had a rule about Mara's rules, which was that they lasted exactly as long as it took the phone to ring.

It rang at 8:52, right in the middle of a chess move she'd been putting off for two days — a correspondence game against her son Danny that had been running, unhurried, across their kitchen table for the better part of a month, the two of them treating each move like it deserved to be thought about properly instead of rushed. She left her queen exactly where it was, mid-hover over the board, and did not get back to it for three weeks.

"Lakeshore," Ray said, when she picked him up outside his apartment eleven minutes later, coffee in each hand because he'd learned years ago that she would forget her own. "Big house. Older guy. Housekeeper found him."

"Natural?"

"That's what the uniform's saying. Guy had a heart thing. But somebody upstairs wants a detective to look at it before the ME signs off, and somebody upstairs is Pham, so." Ray shrugged, which from him was practically an essay.

Mara took the coffee and didn't ask why their captain wanted eyes on what sounded, from eleven words over dispatch, like the least interesting call of the year. She'd worked with Warren Pham long enough to know that when he asked for something in that particular flat voice, it usually meant somebody with a title had asked him first.

Lakeshore Road curved along the water in a way that made the houses look posed, like they'd been arranged for a photograph and then people had simply moved in around the arrangement. Simon Blackwood's house was pale stone with dark green shutters, a wide covered porch, and a For Sale sign that wasn't there — Mara noted the absence out of habit, the way she noted everything that wasn't rather than everything that was, because absence was where people hid things.

The housekeeper, a stout woman in her sixties named Ines Calloway, sat on the porch steps with a blanket around her shoulders that a patrol officer had clearly given her, because it had BELLHAVEN PD stenciled across the back in reflective letters. Her hands were shaking around a paper cup of water she wasn't drinking.

"I've worked for him eleven years," she told Mara, before Mara had asked her anything. "He doesn't miss his coffee. Not once. Seven-fifteen, every morning, on the porch if it's

warm enough. I came in this morning and it was so cold in there I thought a pipe must've burst."

"Cold how?"

"Cold like winter. He keeps it — kept it — seventy-one. Always seventy-one. I checked the thermostat before I even found him, because that's the kind of thing you notice first, isn't it, the wrong thing, before you notice the real thing." She pressed the back of her wrist to her mouth. "It said sixty. And the window in his study was open. He never opens that window, not since the lake flies got bad two summers ago."

Mara wrote sixty and window open in a notebook that already had thirty years of other people's worst mornings pressed into its pages, then went inside.

The study smelled of cold air and, underneath it, something that would not be there in a few more hours: the particular chemical hush of a person who had very recently been alive. Simon Blackwood lay on his side near the window, one arm outstretched toward a low table where a cordless phone sat charged and untouched. He was fully dressed — gray sweater, reading glasses pushed up into thinning hair — as though he had simply decided, mid-evening, mid-motion, to lie down on his own floor.

Otis Farrow, the county medical examiner, was crouched beside the body when Mara came in, and he didn't look up.

"Before you ask," he said, "yes, I know his history. Paroxysmal atrial fibrillation, on medication for it going on nine years, cardiologist's notes are three inches thick. Man his age, condition like that, dies on his study floor on a Friday night — I could write you the death certificate from the doorway."

"But you haven't."

"No." He finally glanced up. "Lividity's consistent with the position we found him in, no surprises there. Skin's cool — but the room's cool, so that tells me less than it usually would. Rigor's — " he flexed two fingers of the dead man's hand experimentally, " — partial. Jaw and neck, not yet the extremities. Which is consistent with a lot of windows, Coyle, and I'm not going to hand you a time on a body I haven't opened up yet."

"Ballpark."

"You know I hate ballpark."

"I know you're going to give it to me anyway."

Farrow exhaled through his nose, the closest thing to a laugh Mara had ever gotten out of him at a scene. "Given the room temperature — which, again, is not the room

temperature it's supposed to be — somewhere between eight last night and two this morning. Wide window. Don't quote me, and for God's sake don't put it in a report."

Ray, crouched by the desk, held up a small brown pill bottle by its edges with a gloved hand. "Digoxin. Prescription's his. Refilled — " he squinted at the label, "— eleven days ago. Sixty-count bottle."

"How many left?"

Ray tipped it gently. Counted under his breath. "Forty-one."

"Nineteen pills in eleven days," Mara said. "That's under two a day."

"He was on a once-a-day dose," Farrow said. "According to the cardiologist's notes stapled inside that folder on his desk, which I already looked at, because unlike some people I read the paperwork before I touch the body." A pause. "So, no. That's not right. That's about eight days too many pills gone."

"Could the housekeeper have miscounted the refill? Pharmacy error?"

"I called the pharmacy myself while you two were still in the driveway," Farrow said, with the mild, weary satisfaction of a man who liked being two steps ahead and rarely got the