CHAPTER 1

The Package

Lakewood, Ohio. Monday, March 2, 2026

Claire Donovan climbed the stairs to her apartment the way she always did, counting.

Forty-seven steps from the street door to the third-floor landing. Twelve, a turn, fourteen, a turn, twenty-one. She had counted them every day for six years, and the number had never once changed, which was the whole point. Her father had taught her the trick when she was five. Count it and it can’t surprise you. She was forty-seven years old now, the same as the number of stairs, a coincidence she tried not to think about.

Today the stairs did surprise her. At the top, leaning against her door, sat a brown padded envelope the size of a paperback book.

She stopped with her key half raised. Nobody sent her mail anymore. The magazines that used to buy her features had folded or been swallowed, and the ones that survived paid in exposure, which was a word she had learned to hear as a kind of insult. The last real thing the post office had brought her was a notice that her health insurance was ending. The Ledger in Port Calder had laid her off in 2019, along with half the newsroom, and she had been freelancing since, which was a polite word for being poor in several cities at once.

She picked the envelope up. It weighed almost nothing. The address was printed in block capitals, in pencil, by a hand that had pressed hard. Her name was right. Her street was right. The postmark said Toledo, February 25. There was no return address.

Inside the apartment she put the kettle on, because her hands wanted a job, and then she tore the flap.

Three things slid out onto the kitchen table.

The first was a cassette tape, a Maxell C-60 with a yellowed label. The label said nothing. The second was a sheet of paper folded in thirds, and the third was a smaller envelope, so old that the paper had gone the color of weak tea. In the corner, in faded green ink, were the words DUNMORE FALLS STEEL COMPANY. PAY ENVELOPE. Under that, a little grid with boxes for hours, rate, deductions. Someone had once been paid in this. Someone had once been a person with a Friday.

She opened the folded paper first. It was a note, in the same heavy pencil.

> *Ms. Donovan. You don't know me. I know you. Listen to the tape, then look at the map. Find the others before the police do. I am sorry to put this on you. I haven't got anybody else left. L. V.*

She read it twice. The kettle began to scream and she let it.

Then she opened the old pay envelope and took out the map.

It was drawn on the back of the same kind of pay slip, pencil on thin brown stock, and whoever had drawn it had a steady hand and a great deal of patience. A railway line ran diagonally across the page with small crosshatched ties. A building was marked SWITCH SHACK. A tall, narrow shape beside it was labeled, in tiny capitals, TOWER. A dotted line ran from the shack to the tower, and along the dotted line someone had written a single number: 41. Beside it, a little arrow pointed north. In the lower corner was a compass rose, drawn with real care, the kind of flourish a person adds when they have a lot of time and not much else.

She noticed the numbers because she always noticed numbers. The sevens had a short bar through the stem, like the sevens in her high school French textbook. It was a European habit, an old-fashioned one. Nobody she knew wrote sevens that way. She turned the sheet over. On the back, in the same pencil, were three words.

Where it began.

She had no idea what that meant, and no idea what it was a map of, and the dread she felt did not seem to care.

She switched off the kettle. She put the map back in its envelope, and then she stood in her kitchen for a full minute, listening to the radiator tick.

She did not own a cassette player. That was the first practical problem. The second was that she knew exactly where one was.

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The hall closet held three boxes she had never unpacked since her mother died. Claire dragged them out in order, the way you pull a bandage, and found what she wanted in the third: a silver Panasonic radio with a tape deck, the one that had lived on the windowsill above the sink in the house on Ridge Road for thirty years. It still smelled of her mother's kitchen. Dish soap and burnt toast and the faint sweet edge of the cheap menthols Maureen Donovan had sworn she'd quit in 1994.

Claire carried it to the table, found an outlet, and pressed the cassette home. The deck made a sound like a small animal clearing its throat. She pressed PLAY.

Hiss, first. Long, soft, patient hiss. Then a click, and a cough that went on for far too long, and then a voice.

"Is this on? It says it's on."

It was an old man’s voice, low and dry, with a rasp in it like a rope being drawn across a rail. A pause. The sound of someone drinking, or trying to.

“Ms. Donovan. My name is Leonard Voss. If you’re listening to this, I’m dead, which I hope is the case, because I’d hate to have gone to all this trouble for nothing.”

Claire sat down.

“You’ll know the name. Maybe you don’t. You were a little girl. In March of 1987 I helped rob the Great Lakes Savings and Loan on Front Street in Port Calder. Three of us went in. One of us got caught. That was me. I did eleven years of a fifteen-year sentence, and the one thing I never did, in all that time, was say where the money went or who else was in the car. I want you to know I wasn’t being noble. I was being scared. Those are easy to mix up from the outside.”

She knew the story. Everyone in Port Calder knew the story. It was the one the town told itself the way other towns told stories about floods: the day the bank was robbed. Nine hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars, gone in six minutes. A million, people said, rounding up, because a million sounded better. Two men had never been found. For years kids had dug in the dunes at Cedar Point looking for it.

“I’m in a hospice in Toledo,” said the voice on the tape. “The nurses are kind. They think I’m writing letters to my sister, who’s been gone since 2011. Let them think it. I don’t have long, and I want to say this once and say it right.

“The two men I worked with are alive, or one of them is. I don’t know about the other, and I’m not going to give you names. Names are what got people hurt, back then. I’ll give you what you need. There’s a map in the envelope. The man who drew it was a better

draftsman than any of us, and he drew it for me in the last hour before the end, and I kept it for thirty-nine years. I never went. I'm ashamed of that. A man who is watched for most of his life gets in the habit of staying very still.

"I want you to find them. Both of them, if you can. And I want you to understand something before you start. The number in the newspapers." He stopped. The cough took him again, worse, and Claire found she was gripping the edge of the table. "Don't trust the number. That's all I'll say about it. You're a reporter. You'll know what to do with a number that doesn't sit right."

Something clicked, maybe a lighter, maybe a pill bottle.

"I picked you for a reason. I read the piece you wrote about the Dunmore Falls pension fund. You wrote that people will forgive a thief faster than they'll forgive the man who kept the books. I read that three times. I thought, that's someone who understands how this works. And you've got your own reasons, Ms. Donovan, though you may not know it. You'll find them."

Claire looked at the old pay envelope sitting on her table. Her fingers had gone cold.

"One more thing, and listen close, because it's the only advice I've got. Find them before the police do. And I don't mean the ones with the state seal on the door. I mean the badge that was already in the room. It was in the room in 1987, and I'd bet my last breath it's still in the room now. Don't tell anyone who wears one. Not even the ones you think you can trust. Especially them."

The recording went quiet. For ten full seconds there was only hiss, and the sound of a man trying to breathe through something heavy.