CHAPTER 1

Closing Time

Vincent Cole was on his back under a 2011 Buick when the past walked into his shop, and the first thing he noticed was the shoes.

They stopped six feet from the creeper. Black leather, hand stitched, with a shine that had no business on a concrete floor that smelled of brake fluid and old coffee. Nobody who came into Cole Auto Repair wore shoes like that. People who wore shoes like that sent someone else to pick up their cars.

“Be right with you,” Vincent said, and went back to the oil pan plug, which had been stripped by someone with more enthusiasm than skill.

“Take your time, Vinnie. I’ve waited nine years.”

His hand stopped on the wrench.

Nobody had called him Vinnie in nine years. His mother had, until the day she died, and then a man named Raymond Knox, who had done it for the pleasure of watching Vincent’s jaw tighten. Vincent lay still for a moment and listened to the shop. The compressor ticked as it cooled. A bus sighed past on Allegheny Avenue. Upstairs, in the office, his daughter’s chair squeaked on the linoleum, and the sound went through him like a cold nail.

He slid out from under the Buick.

Raymond Knox stood with his hands folded over the top of a cane he plainly did not need. He was fifty-one now, and he wore it well: silver hair combed back, a gray overcoat that cost more than the Buick, reading glasses hanging from a chain at his chest like a professor’s. He looked like a man who donated to hospitals. He smiled the way he always had,

warmly and with all of his teeth, and the warmth never once reached his eyes.

“You got fat,” Raymond said.

“You got old.”

“I got out.” He said it lightly, as if mentioning that he had changed barbers. “February. Six years inside, and not one of them was kind to my knees. You look well. The shop looks well. Honest work suits you.”

Vincent stood and wiped his hands on a red rag, slowly, one finger at a time. It was a trick he had learned in a different life, when the steadiest hands in the room were worth money. His hands were steady now. His heart was doing something else entirely.

“We’re closed,” he said.

“The sign says six.”

“The sign lies. It’s a very old sign.”

Raymond chuckled and took a cinnamon candy from his coat pocket. The wrapper crackled in the quiet. He had always eaten those, in cars, in alleys, in the front seats of vans with the engine running and a bank door two hundred feet away. The smell of cinnamon had meant danger to Vincent once. Smelling it now, in his own shop, he felt nine years fold up like a bad map.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” Raymond said.

“Then you’re lost.”

“Daddy?”

The voice came from the top of the stairs, and Vincent closed his eyes for exactly one second.

Nora came down in her school hoodie with a pencil behind her ear and a calculus textbook under one arm. She was sixteen, all elbows and opinions, with her mother's dark eyes and her father's talent for noticing everything and saying only some of it. She stopped on the third step when she saw the stranger.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't know we had a customer. Tommy locked the front, so I figured…"

"We don't have a customer," Vincent said. "This is a friend of mine from a long time ago. He's leaving."

"Raymond Knox." The cane tucked itself under his arm, and he came forward with a hand out and the shine of a man greeting a bride at a wedding. "And you're Nora. You've got your mother's eyes. I knew Claire, years ago. She was a lovely woman."

Nora shook his hand, because she had been raised to, and Vincent watched her face the way he watched an engine for the first sign of a leak. She had picked up the temperature of the room. Sixteen-year-olds can do that. They read a room the way dogs read weather.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Knox. My dad never really talks about the old days."

"Your father," Raymond said, "was the quietest man I ever worked with. I mean that as the highest compliment."

"What kind of work was it?"

"Nora," Vincent said. "Go upstairs. Finish your problem set."

"It's a textbook. It's not a set."

"Then finish your textbook."

She looked at him. He looked back. There was a short and eloquent argument in it, and she lost, but only by a margin. She went up the stairs one slow step at a time, the way people do when they want it known they

are going under protest. At the top she turned and said, “Nice shoes, Mr. Knox,” and shut the office door with a click that was neither loud nor quiet.

“Sharp girl,” Raymond said.

“Say her name again and I’ll put you through that wall.”

It came out lower than he meant, and flatter, and Raymond’s eyebrows rose with something close to delight. “There he is. I wondered if the old Vincent was still in there. A year ago I’d have bet money he was dead.” He sucked on the candy. “Let’s go outside. The alley, maybe. I’d hate to say what I came to say where a girl with such good hearing can listen at a vent.”

Vincent said nothing. After a moment, he walked to the side door and held it open.

* * *

The alley behind the shop was eleven feet wide and smelled of wet cardboard and the bakery two blocks down. It ran between the back of Cole Auto and a row of garages that belonged to people who had not opened them since the Clinton administration. A streetlamp buzzed at the far end. The light it threw was the color of weak tea.

Raymond leaned his cane against a dumpster and took out his phone. For the first time since he’d walked in, he stopped smiling.

“I’ll skip the part where I pretend to be here as a friend,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe it, and I’ve never been a good liar to men who know me. I’m here because I need you. I need you for one night. After that you can go back to your oil pans and your daughter, and I’ll never trouble you again.”

“No.”

“You haven’t heard it.”

“I don’t need to. It’s a bank, or it’s a truck, or it’s a jeweler who didn’t pay the right people. The answer’s no. I’m done, Ray. I told you I was done nine years ago, and you were there when I said it, and you nodded. I remember that you nodded.”

“I did nod.” Raymond held out the phone. “Look at this.”

Vincent did not want to look. Every instinct in him was a hand on his chest, pushing back. He took the phone anyway, because the alternative was to be a man who didn’t look, and he had spent a long time learning to be a man who did.

The screen showed a video, paused. It was a room with a bare concrete wall and a folding chair, and a single bulb overhead. A man sat in the chair with his wrists behind him. His shirt was torn at the collar. There was blood in the corner of his mouth, dried dark, and his left eye had swollen to a shine. He was holding up a newspaper in front of his chest with a hand that shook.

It was today’s Inquirer. Vincent could read the date.

The man in the chair was Teddy.

For a moment Vincent could not hear anything. The streetlamp, the bakery, the traffic on Aramingo, all of it dropped away, and what was left was a ringing in his skull and the fine detail of his younger brother’s face. Teddy had been born with their mother’s mouth, a mouth made for jokes and trouble. It was split now. Teddy had been bartending for six years at a place in Fishtown and sending Vincent a birthday card every year with a twenty folded inside, as if Vincent were the one who needed help. He had named his beagle after the thing you eat with soup. He was thirty-six years old and he had never in his life hurt anyone who didn’t ask for it.

“Press play,” Raymond said quietly.

Vincent pressed it.