

A PREMISE AND AN INCEDENT  
**CHALK ON THE LEFT**  
A JEFF MERIDIAN THRILLER



THE SIGNAL

Cover

Title: Chalk on the left

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## Channel 16, Broken Format

03:41 local and the radio room felt like the inside of a wash

machine. Lights in the corridor buzzed through the frosted glass.

The VHF speaker gave me a steady squelch. I did the checks

including the ones nobody signs for. Channel 16 on the primary.

Volume to a hair under feedback. Recorder armed. DSC watch

icon lit green, though the backlight stuttered when the heater

kicked on. I tapped the logbook with a pen that didn't click right

anymore and wrote the date, then time, then "Routine watch, no

traffic."

Outside the window, the working harbor was a smear of wet

pilings and forklift beeps. The tide was still running out. Ebb

meant mud showing at the edges and a thin diesel sheen trapped

against the dock ladders. Next workable water 05:12, give or take

a lazy barometer.

At 03:41:27 the room jumped.

A carrier punched in hard, too hard, like someone sat on the

PTT. Not a clean MAYDAY cadence. No three beats. Just air

shoved aside, then broken words.

Fresh. Damp at one corner, like it had been placed with a

gloved hand that didn't care about fingerprints.

I yanked it free and unfolded it with stiff fingers.

Five words, written in block letters that weren't Luca's:

CHALK ON THE SALT. COUNT THREE.

My stomach dropped so hard I tasted old blood again.

That phrase was ours. A family signal from when Luca and I

were kids cutting through back alleys behind the fish plant, when

we needed to know if the other had been there and if it was safe.

Now it was on my windshield.

Now it belonged to someone else.

I looked up, scanning the lot, the fence line, the strobing light

that had stopped strobing. My handheld hissed at my hip, hungry

for a channel.

Two roads, one minute.

Go blind after the van and hope I caught the right turn—

Or walk this note into Malloy's hands and watch it become

"evidence" in a file that could disappear with a signature.

I held the paper so tight it creased, then reached for the

driver's door handle, already moving as Channel 12 crackled

behind me.

Every stand by was distance.

Malloy finally cut through, voice curt.

“Harbor Station Kestrel, wilco. Provide last known direction of travel. Over.”

“Outbound access road toward East Yard,” I said. “Over.”

A pause. Then his warning came, not a lecture, just a line item.

“My units are committed to the detention,” Malloy said. “Do not pursue alone. Over.”

Rook’s voice slipped in like he’d been waiting for the right gap.

“Port Captain, Rook Maritime can assist in locating the port contractor,” he offered. “We have safety personnel and yard access. Over.”

He never said he’d taken anyone. He didn’t have to. He just offered help the way you offered a cage.

Malloy didn’t answer him immediately. The tug problem was still chewing his time.

I stood in the service lane, handheld warm in my palm, watching the access road empty out. My mouth was still dry. My fingers shook, not from fear I’d admit, but from the hinge bite and the sprint.

I needed wheels. I needed a charging cable before this taped battery died in my hand. I needed to move before shift change at 06:20 flooded the quay with bodies and excuses.

I ran back toward my car, boots slipping once on a smear of algae at the lot entrance. The sodium light above my windshield buzzed, steady now, like nothing had happened.

On my windshield, under the wiper, a paper square waited.

“...may—” Static. A breath too close to the mic. “—day—”

The syllable came out bent. Battery sag hiss under it, a soft whining floor that rose when the transmitter keyed. At unkey there was a tiny click. I knew that click. Cheap handheld, old spring in the side button. Luca’s unit. The one I’d told him to replace before it got him killed.

I slapped the recorder to mark the segment. Red light held steady. The console’s clock was slow by eight seconds; I logged the time against my wristwatch and wrote both because auditors loved that kind of contradiction.

I keyed up on 16. Kept my voice flat.

“Mayday station, mayday station, mayday station. This is Harbor Radio. Received an incomplete mayday. Calling station, say again MAYDAY. Over.”

I waited on the squelch tail. Three seconds. Four.

The carrier came back, weaker, as if the radio was already tired.

“—Tell Ma... the chalk’s on the left—” Then a cough, and the rest got chewed by static.

It wasn’t a mayday detail. It was a child’s lie to make sure nobody else could fake his voice when adults were listening. Luca at nine, hiding under the kitchen table with a walkie-talkie, trying to be a spy. “Chalk on the left” was how he told me it was him and not some kid from the building.

My fingers went to the PTT without permission.

“Calling station, Harbor Radio. Roger. Say your vessel name. Your position. Nature of distress. Number of persons on board. Any injuries. Over.”

half-beat too long. Long enough to make it look normal. Long enough to make it hard to call a kidnapping.

The binocular hinge chose that moment to give up.

The barrels clacked apart, my hands pinching skin. Pain flashed white. I stopped, swore through my teeth, and shoved the hinge back together with bruised fingers, pressing hard until it aligned.

Those seconds cost me the van door.

A white service van, paint dulled by road grit, sat just beyond the gate. The side door slid shut. I heard the latch bite. Tires rolled, spitting brine-dark water from a pothole.

I hit the gate as it finally released. The metal was slick, cold, my palm slipping. I stumbled through, turned, and got a view of the van's rear for half a second: no company logo, just a peeling inspection sticker and a dent that made the right taillight sit crooked.

Then it was turning out toward the access road, blending into the service traffic that fed the port.

I fumbled my handheld up, thumb hitting the cracked PTT too hard. The speaker squealed a thin feedback thread before I got it under control.

"Port Captain, this is Harbor Station Kestrel," I said, forcing my voice into clean edges. "Request update—need unit to locate port contractor last seen near service gate three. Two hi-vis escorts, white van, no markings. Over."

The net was still jammed with the boarding mess.

"Say again," someone snapped.

"Stand by," another said, like it was a reflex.

The response was just carrier and a wet, scraped sound, like mic cloth rubbing a chin. Then a half-word.

"...don't—" and the transmission collapsed into a dead, unmodulated key-up. No voice riding it. Just a flat tone and my own heartbeat.

I counted in my head because panic doesn't like numbers and I do. One Mississippi, two. At seven seconds the carrier dropped. Nothing filled the space. The squelch opened and closed like a throat clearing.

I keyed again, slower.

"Calling station, Harbor Radio. If you can hear me, transmit your position in degrees and minutes, or relative to a known aid. If unable, key your microphone for ten seconds. Over."

No answer.

I pushed my chair back. The metal legs scraped. I leaned into the console and hit DSC.

The button was worn smooth. I felt the ridge of the plastic where thousands of thumbs had worried it. The screen flickered as I selected distress follow-up. I typed the format quickly, fingers deliberate: all stations inquiry, but I couldn't send a distress. Not without an MMSI or position. Not without something I could justify.

I tried anyway, hunting for an incoming alert log. Nothing. No MMSI burst. No GPS position packet. The absence hit like a punch because it meant three things and all were bad: the handheld's DSC function was off, the GPS wasn't feeding it, or somebody was sitting on the signal with a jammer or the antenna is busted. You couldn't jam a voice call cleanly without making a

I tore my binoculars down, searching for the Auditor again through the gaps between stacked pallets and a forklift lane. The sodium light above that lane flickered twice, then steadied. The camera on the corner pole tried to swing toward the commotion, its housing crusted with corrosion; it hesitated, then tracked late, like a tired neck.

The Auditor was gone.

06:11

I turned and ran.

My boots slapped wet concrete. My bad grip made the binoculars bounce against my ribs. My breath came loud, gritty; sand caught in my teeth when I inhaled too hard. Somewhere close, wet neoprene squeaked—dockworker boots, maybe, or someone moving fast in rain gear.

I cut between stacked pallets stamped with old shipping codes. The wood was swollen, nails rusted, edges splintered. A forklift lane opened up, painted lines faded and broken. A fork truck sat dead with its mast tilted, key missing, seat torn. Inez could have made it sing in ten seconds. I didn't have Inez.

Ahead, near a service gate, I saw them.

Two figures in hi-vis rain gear, hoods up, guiding someone by the elbows. Not dragging. Not rough. Procedure. Like a safety escort. Like they belonged.

The Auditor's clipboard case was tucked tight to their body.

"Hey!" I shouted, and my voice cracked on the last consonant.

One hi-vis head turned just enough to check me. No face. Just shadow under a hood. Then the gate buzzer sounded—electrical and slow. The magnetic lock lagged in the damp, holding for a

mess, but you could choke a cheap unit and make it look like panic.

I toggled to the antenna bearing page. The harbor array was old, a patched-together direction finder bolted above the roofline, corroded to the screws. Half the time it lied by ten degrees when the wind pushed the coax. Tonight it spun up with a reluctant whine.

A line crawled across the display. 112 degrees relative, give or take. Southeast. Toward the approach lane, the shoals, the slice of water that ate fiberglass when you got cute with the channel markers on an ebb.

I wrote it down with the time, and the pen finally clicked because my thumb pressed too hard.

AIS next. The screen was a pale ghost with burn-in from years of the same menu. Two tugs moving, a pilot boat loitering near the outer buoy, a freighter making a slow turn in the basin. And a gap.

Not a blank ocean gap. A gap where a small craft should have been if it was coming in on that bearing, at that hour, with that kind of radio desperation. No target. No MMSI. No name. Just water on the screen. AIS spoofing wasn't movie magic. You could do it with a box the size of a lunch box. Or you could just turn your AIS off and hope nobody asked.

I switched briefly to 12, the working channel for port ops. "Port Ops, Port Ops, Harbor Radio on one-two. Any traffic in the approach lane, southeast sector, bearing one-one-two from the station? Over."

The answer came after a beat, distant and bored.

“Port Patrol boarding complete,” the patrol voice said. Breath loud in his mic. “Commencing detention. Over.”

Mallooy answered, “Roger. Secure engines. Over.”

On the quay behind the patrol boat, a figure in a dark jacket stood with a clipboard case, angled away from the action like they were waiting for a bus. Not watching. Not making eye contact. Phone held down by their thigh like it was hot.

The Auditor. Still here. Still a loose end with legs.

They shifted as Mallooy referenced the detention form number on air. Like they’d been summoned by paper.

My instinct yanked me to them—grab the witness, anchor them to me, keep them from being filed away.

I didn’t go.

I stayed on the tug. I stayed on the order. I told myself the working net was protection. I told myself the harbor had ears now.

Chaos broke fast.

A line came flying off the tug, thrown hard. It didn’t land where it should. It looped low, caught the patrol boat’s stern quarter, and snapped taut with the tug’s drift. The patrol boat’s prop wash churned a dirty boil, rope fibers tearing, the line whining like a stressed cable.

“Line fouled! Line fouled!” Port Patrol barked. “Say again—”

Channel 12 filled with overlap.

“Stand by—”

“Break—”

“Port Captain—”

“Secur—”

The harbor stalled in sound.

“Harbor Radio, Port Ops. Negative on visual. Pilot boat reports no contacts. Over.”

“Roger. Standing by. Out.”

I flipped back to 16. The act of answering, logging, using the right words—it created an incident. Incidents got numbers. Numbers got audits. My file was still open. The Auditor loved paperwork the way the harbor loved rust.

And now anyone with a scanner knew Harbor Radio was awake and listening close. Anyone running something in the dark would tighten their own schedules around mine.

03:46. Fourteen minutes until shift change. If I routed this through the official channels, it would take ten minutes just to wake the duty officer, then another ten to get someone official to decide it mattered. Luca didn’t have that.

I sat back down hard, chair squealing, and pulled up the call recordings. Played the last transmission low, just enough to hear the artifacts. The click at unkey was sharp. The battery sag hiss swelled mid-carrier. The mic distortion on “chalk” had that same crackle on the “ch” I’d heard when he tested it in my kitchen, laughing because it made him sound like he was talking through a sock.

It was him. Or somebody holding his radio.

I reached for the desk phone. The handset cord was frayed where it twisted. I hated that it still worked because it meant the port could say the room was “maintained” on a form.

I hesitated one breath, then punched the extension I swore I’d

never use again.

I watched the tug's wheelhouse through the glasses. No one moved at the window. No head turn. No hand to a mic.

"Port Captain," I said, and my voice stayed flat because panic would get ignored, "transmission is not originating from wheelhouse. Recommend verify by visual: require bridge to key handheld on one-two with open mic for five seconds. Over."

It was a simple test. Cheap. Hard to fake unless you were actually there.

Malloy didn't answer right away. I pictured him weighing whether it was worth the argument.

Rook slid in before Malloy could.

"Port Captain, for safety, we discourage open-mic practices near running machinery," Rook said. "We can supply radio logs and training documentation. Over."

Training. Drill. He was already trying to launder the distress into a benign event that lived in a binder.

Malloy came back with steel in his words.

"Rook Maritime, you do not direct Port Captain procedures. GRAY WREN will comply with verification or be considered noncompliant under ordinance twelve-point-six. Over."

He'd cited the right number. Institutional navigation. He'd picked the one that let him move now and sort forms later.

Port Patrol came alongside the tug, hull paint scratched to bare metal at the rub rail. The patrol officer grabbed a stanchion. His glove slipped on wet paint. He recovered, jaw set, and stepped over.

Point of no return: boots on tug deck.

Captain Oren Malloy answered on the third ring, voice like a log entry that didn't care about my sleep or his.

"Malloy."

"It's Kestrel," I said. "I logged an incomplete mayday on one-six at oh-three-four-one. Family code in the voice. Bearing one-one-two from the shore array. No DSC burst. No AIS target in the approach lane."

There was a pause where I could hear paper move. Not surprise. Calculation.

"You logged it."

"Yes."

"You realize what that does to your... situation."

"I do."

"What do you want?"

I gripped the handset until the plastic creaked. In the room, the VHF squelch kept breathing. Time kept counting.

"I want you to move a boat without the ladder," I said. "And I want you to do it now."

Another pause. Then, quieter, like he'd turned his head away from whoever was in the room with him.

"Say the last part again."

I looked at the console. The red recorder light. The logbook with wet ink. My shift clock ticking toward 04:00. Ebb still pulling water away from anything stuck.

"Now," I said. "Or I call it up the chain and we both get buried in forms while somebody drowns."

Malloy exhaled once, controlled.

"Meet me at the outer gate in ten. Bring your bearing notes. Bring proof. And don't touch anything else in that room."

I stared at the rusted console like it could answer back.

"I already did," I said.

Silence, then: "Kestrel—"

A burst of static cut him off. Channel 16 opened on its own, a

thin carrier trying to come through again.

I didn't hang up. I didn't blink.

"Break-break," I said into the handset. My thumb was already

on the VHF PTT. "Malloy, I have traffic. Stand by."

I let the phone drop against my shoulder and keyed 16.

"Calling station, Harbor Radio. Say again your mayday.

Over."

The carrier came back, a weak key-up with that same click,

and a different voice leaned into the mic—too smooth, too close,

like it knew I was listening.

"Harbor Radio," it said, and it didn't say MAYDAY at all.

"You're working late."

03:46.

Channel 16 was still open in my ear like a mouth that wouldn't

close. That voice—smooth, close—had landed and left a smear

behind it. Not a mayday. Not even a pan-pan. Just a reminder that

somebody could key up and steer me.

I killed the transmit, left 16 on scan, and slid my chair hard enough the casters squealed against the grit. The harbor office didn't get cleaned. It got wiped down in the places auditors touched. Everything else wore a film of diesel and hand oil.

Port Patrol lights flashed in the distance, blue and white strobes bouncing off wet steel. The patrol boat came around the inner range marker, wake slapping against pilings. The tug's crew stopped pretending. A man in a soaked hood lifted a hand, then dropped it like he'd been told not to.

Lines were cast off anyway, slow, testing. The tug's stern

drifted a foot. Two.

Malloy's voice tightened one more notch.

"Port Patrol, board and secure engines. This is physical

detention. Over."

He'd crossed the line from audit to confrontation on a channel

full of captains who now had to decide whether to help or get out

of the way.

And me? I'd made it public. I'd also made myself the easiest

problem to solve.

06:02

I moved along the quay, keeping distance from the edge where

the tide wanted ankles. The concrete was pocked, aggregate

exposed. A discarded mooring cleat lay on its side, bolts rusted

through, like someone had ripped it up and walked off with the

hardware that mattered.

The binocular hinge loosened with each step. I kept squeezing

it, pressure blooming in my bruised fingers.

Malloy ran the net like he was writing it down.

"GRAY WREN, state your position and master. Over."

Another delay. Then the too-clean reply again.

"Port Captain, GRAY WREN is at inner range, master

standing by. Over."

The net crackled. Someone muttered, “She’s got nerve,” not meant for broadcast but caught anyway.

Malloy answered, and in his voice I heard him counting the forms.

“Detention order remains active,” he said. “All stations, maintain one-two. Port Patrol, proceed inner range, hold GRAY WREN. Over.”

The clue hit me then, belated and expensive. Under my own rebroadcast, under the engine noise, there had been that one syllable—half a name, half a breath. I knew it the way you know a tool by the weight in your hand.

Luca.

My mouth went dry enough to stick my tongue to my teeth. My thumb tremored on the PTT. If I said his name on air, I wrote his obituary in ink.

So I asked a question that sounded like procedure.

“Any station with original capture of distress at zero-five-three-seven, confirm if a second male voice is present under engine noise. Over.”

It wasn’t an accusation. It wasn’t family. It was audio.

“Port Captain,” Rook cut in, smooth as a laminated policy sheet, “I will provide records, safety management plan, and salvage claim forms. Harbor Station’s unauthorized transmission may constitute interference under—”

Malloy didn’t let him finish.

“Rook Maritime, stand by,” Malloy said. “You will provide records to Port Patrol at boarding. Over.”

The back channel wasn’t supposed to be for this. That was why it worked.

On the laminated card under the phone cradle—yellowed, corners curled—PORT OPS: URGENT NAV HAZARDS. The line that existed so somebody could say later they’d followed procedure. I dialed it from the desk landline, not my mobile. The desk phone sat under a layer of chalky corrosion on the screws. When it rang, the coil cord tugged like it wanted to snap.

One ring. Two.

“Port Ops,” Malloy said. No greeting. No name. Like a recorder was already running.

“It’s Kestrel,” I said. “Time zero-three-four-six. I intercepted an incomplete distress on one-six at oh-three-four-one. Family code in the voice. Source is a handheld—Baofeng front-end overload, clipped limiter, battery sag. It matches Luca’s unit.”

I didn’t say Luca was my brother. My tongue tried to, and my teeth stopped it.

Paper shifted on his end. A pen cap clicked once, then didn’t click again. He was careful with his noises.

“Do you have an MMSI,” he asked, “a latitude and longitude, a vessel name, or a registered call sign.”

“No DSC. No MMSI burst,” I said. “No AIS target in the approach lane. Bearing one-one-two from the shore array. That’s what I have.”

“That’s not a position,” he said. Flat. “That’s a line.”

“It’s a line that came with a voice,” I said. “And a handheld that doesn’t idle on 25 watts for fun.”

“Port Captain, Harbor Station Kestrel. Advise caution: last transmission does not match expected wheelhouse mic signature. Possible remote patch or base station relay. Over.”

A beat. Then Malloy, colder now.

“Harbor Station Kestrel, acknowledged. Stand by. Over.”

He believed me or he didn't. Either way, he'd heard it on a channel full of ears.

The tug's crew moved. A line got tossed, not to the up—just to test. A step toward uncoiling. A glance to the yard. They were measuring how much the Port Captain could actually enforce.

Malloy came back, sharper.

“GRAY WREN, this is Port Captain. You are under safety detention. Do not cast off. Port Patrol is inbound to board. Acknowledge. Over.”

The reply didn't come right away this time.

A new voice slid in like it had been listening with a pen ready.

“Port Captain, Dale Rook, Rook Maritime Salvage. For clarity and safety, this operation is under salvage exemption pursuant to —” He didn't rush. He never rushed. “—hazard removal contract in effect. Any delay increases risk to navigation and personnel. I request we shift coordination to Channel one-four. Over.”

There it was. Split the room. Pull the serious talk off the working net. Give witnesses a chance to drift away.

I keyed up before anyone could agree.

“Negative on channel change,” I said. “Working net is Captain, confirm detention order remains active on one-two. Over.”

He let me hang there. In the background, a door closed. I pictured him in the Port Authority building with its Inoleum shine and taped-off corners where paint peeled like sunburn.

“Was the proper word used,” he asked.

“Mayday started. It got cut,” I said. “Then someone else keyed up on sixteen and spoke to me without initiating distress. That's not a prank.”

“You understand what you're telling me,” he said. “An unconfirmed transmission without position. No formal distress. No vessel identification. If I launch assets on that, I answer for it.”

“You answer for it anyway when bodies come up on the mud,” I said. The tide chart was pinned beside the console. Ebb arrow down, ink-smudged notes from my last shift. Low at 05:12. After that, the flats would be exposed and anything stuck would settle harder.

Malloy didn't rise to it. He never did. He moved his sentences like he moved paperwork: stack, clip, bury.

“Procedure,” he said, “is you file an incident report. You notify Coast Guard Sector through the chain. We request a broadcast and monitor for corroboration. We do not—” A small pause. He chose a word with handles. “—freelance.”

My mouth went dry, sudden. I swallowed and tasted stale coffee and the copper tang from biting my cheek earlier.

“The Auditor is on-site,” he added, like he was reading it off a whiteboard. “Daybreak compliance inspection. If your name shows up attached to an unsanctioned mobilization, it won't just be your shift. It will be your license.”

Across the basin, I could see the tug's masthead light still burning against the gray. Behind it, salvage yard shapes: a stack of tired fenders, containers with paint flaking off in sheets, a crane arm like a bent finger. Everything looked used up and still working.

I lifted my binoculars. Rust freckles on the hinge. The right barrel was a hair out of alignment, enough to make your eyes fight. I pressed it tight, bruised fingers squeezing the cracked leather wrap.

The tug's deck came into focus. Chipped paint on the bulwark. Fender faces crushed flat like old tires. A spring line lay coiled, frayed at the end, white fibers fuzzed from salt and sun. Crew in rain gear stood too still, pretending not to listen.

The net hissed again, then Malloy.

"Tug identified as GRAY WREN, GRAY WREN, this is Port Captain. Stand by. Do not get underway. Acknowledge. Over."

There was a delay—just long enough to be a choice.

Then a reply came in, too clean. No wheelhouse rattle. No engine vibration. No mouth too close to a cheap mic. It sounded like a desk handset in a dry office.

"Port Captain, GRAY WREN standing by. We are not underway. Over."

My gut dropped. The transmitter didn't match. The distortion was wrong—no preamp grit, no squelch tail hang. This wasn't their bridge. This was a base patch, somebody keying from ashore or from a different boat, feeding Malloy what he needed to hear.

I keyed up, careful. Controlled voice. No names that would burn anyone.

"There's a person on the water with a dying radio," I said. "That window closes in an hour. Weather's stacking. You can hear it on the squelch. The handheld's already sagging."

"I hear what you want me to hear," he said. Not cruel. Just accurate. "I need a confirmed position, Kestrel."

I leaned forward, pressed my palm to the desk. The plywood edge was swollen and soft under peeling laminate. The kind of soft that gave way when you put your weight on it wrong.

"You have resources," I said. "A patrol. A pilot boat. Something that can run a line along one-one-two and look. Outer flats. South of the spoil. Fifteen minutes."

He didn't say no. He never said no. He said all the doors and labeled each lock.

"Port Authority is touchy about unauthorized departures pre-inspection," he said. "There are standing agreements with contractors for recovery and hazard mitigation. If there is an incident in a designated area, it becomes their lane."

"Designated area," I repeated, because that was the word that snagged. He hadn't said channel. He hadn't said berth. He hadn't said anchorage. He'd said area like a map overlay.

Malloy's pen stopped moving. A small, clean stop. No scratch.

"I'm speaking generally," he said.

"You don't speak generally," I said. "You speak like a form."

A breath, controlled. Then he shifted. "Do you have any reason to think this is tied to... port operations?"

He didn't say salvage. He didn't say Rook. He didn't say the name of the berth I could hear in his throat when he avoided it.

I listened past his words. Past his steadiness. I listened for the missing noun.

My advantage—thinking I could hand this up to a captain and have it become official—died right there. It didn't make a sound. It just stopped being true.

"I have reason," I said, and it was an incomplete truth that kept me alive for another minute. "And I have a bearing. That's what I can give you without putting it on the air."

"You understand," Malloy said, "that if you keep this off the record, there is no automatic response."

"I understand," I said. My fingers were trembling just enough to make the phone cord tap the desk. I pinned it with my thumb.

"I'm calling because I need you to move something without lighting up a chain."

"Then you're asking me to break my own rules," he said.

"I'm asking you to decide who pays," I said. "Paper or people?"

Another paper sound. A page turned. He was building the wall higher while he talked to me. He was also checking the bricks for cracks.

He spoke again, and each word was clean. "There is a salvage zone flagged for hazard mitigation pending review."

My gut dropped. Not from surprise. From confirmation. Somebody had already drawn a box on a chart. Somebody had already claimed jurisdiction. Zones didn't appear because of weather. They appeared because someone asked for them.

"Pending review by who," I said.

05:49

I was out of the car before the net cleared. My boots hit the lot's cracked asphalt and slid on a patch of slime someone had tracked from the quay. I caught myself on a rust-stained signpost. The metal was cold enough to numb the palm through my glove.

The handheld was warm from use. The taped battery shifted when I ran, clicking against the case.

I cut toward the public quay, keeping my shoulders tucked like that would make cameras forget me. The security light buzzed overhead. The chain-link fence along the lot had a spot where somebody had bent the bottom up over time, steel wire frayed like split rope. I ducked through, snagged my jacket, tore a seam, and kept going.

Channel 12 lit up with voices.

"Port Captain, this is F/V Marnie, I got an AIS jump on that tug—went from inner range to three cables off the cannery in a minute. Over."

"This is Dock Boss Han, invoice on an 'emergency tow' came through at zero-five-one-five, number eight-one-seven-four-two, but it ain't on my list. Over."

"Any station, Rook always brings paperwork pre-signed," a pilot boat said, too casual. "Like it's ready before the job exists. Over."

I reached the quay edge and stopped short. The concrete was slick with algae where the tide kissed it. The edge dropped to mud that sucked at itself in slow bubbles. If I went down there, I'd lose a boot and then time. Time was the only currency in a harbor fight.

“Say again last, broken by feedback. Over,” someone else snapped, annoyed.

I keyed up before they could fill the space.

“Time of intercept: zero-five-three-seven local. Channel one-six. This rebroadcast is for safety-of-life and official action. Captain Malloy, Port Authority, confirm receipt and confirm action. Over.”

Silence. The kind that had weight. Then the sound of a professional choosing words like he was choosing where to cut.

“Harbor Station Kestrel, this is Port Captain Malloy. I confirm receipt of the rebroadcast. Cease further replay. Provide the original recording for chain-of-custody. Over.”

He’d come up fast. That meant he’d already been awake. Or already on edge.

“Roger, Captain,” I said. I didn’t say yes. I didn’t say where. “Confirm action on one-two. Over.”

There was a faint click before he answered, like he’d leaned closer to his mic.

“Action is as follows,” Malloy said, voice flat as a log entry. “Initiating safety detention pending investigation into distress fraud and AIS interference. Port Patrol will detain vessel associated with the report. All stations stand by for traffic. Over.”

I let myself breathe once. It tasted like diesel and wet creosote from the pilings.

My advantage was gone in the same second. My voice was on the net. My call sign was out of my mouth where anyone could pick it up and use it against me.

And I’d just painted a target on my own frequency.

Silence. Not dead silence. Busy silence. The kind where you could hear another line faintly ringing in his room and him refusing to pick it up.

“Captain,” I said. “Tell me where the box is.”

“I can’t,” he said, and it was almost gentle. “Not without it becoming a record. Not without it becoming—” He chose the safer word. “—discoverable.”

The Auditor. The word sat silently between us.

My jaw tightened until my molars ached. I could have told him Luca was my brother. It would change nothing he could do. It would change what he could do to me.

“What I can do,” he went on, “is advise you to file. Properly. So there is a trail when daylight comes.”

“And if there’s no one left to trail,” I said.

He didn’t answer. That was his answer.

I shifted my gaze to the key hook by the door. Three pegs, one empty. The harbor master’s ring gone. The spare gate fob was in the locked drawer under the console. The drawer key was on the same ring as my access badge. My badge had been clipped at HR two weeks ago, when my “situation” became a document.

Malloy’s voice lowered, just a half-step. “Kestrel. I will ask you once, and you will answer. Do you want me to log this call, or do you want me to forget you called.”

Binary. Log it and trigger the machinery that would grind until morning. Forget it and leave me alone with a bearing and a tide.

My throat clicked when I swallowed. “Forget,” I said.

“I can’t protect you,” he said, and it wasn’t a threat. It was a weather report.

“Break. This is safety-of-life related and official action required. I am rebroadcasting a recorded distress received at zero-five-three-seven local on one-six. Stand by. Over.”

“Harbor Station Kestrel, this is—” another voice started. I cut them off, tight.

“Stand by. Over.”

I held the handheld close and played the excerpt into the mic from my phone speaker, the cheap little grill buzzing as it pushed sound out.

The audio was ugly. Clipped breaths. A man trying to do DSC by memory and getting it wrong, numbers swapped, format wrong, the cadence off like someone reading a checklist they didn’t respect. A fake MMSI rattled out too clean. Then the mayday—no vessel name, no call sign, just position words that didn’t pin to anything. Cover-up language. “Taking on—” and then a hard chop, like somebody slapped the talk button twice. Engine noise masked a second voice beneath it, a single syllable, swallowed.

And under all of it, the transmitter signature that had been making my molars ache since I first heard it: overdriven mic preamp, the distortion that rounded consonants, and a squelch tail that hung half a breath too long. Base station. Not a wet handheld on a fishing boat. Not panic. Hardware.

The handheld’s speaker started to squeal. Feedback loop. I jerked it away from the phone, my thumb slipping on the cracked PTT. The squeal spiked anyway, a needle in the ear.

“Harbor Station Kestrel, cease. Cease transmission. You are causing interference. Over.”

“I didn’t call for protection,” I said. My hand slid to the bottom drawer. The lock was cheap brass, greened at the edges. “I called for a boat.”

“You won’t get it from me tonight,” he said. “Out.”

The line went dead with a clean cut. No linger. No apology.

In my ear, VHF squelch rose and fell like somebody breathing behind a door.

I stood. My chair rolled back and bumped the filing cabinet with a dull clang. The cabinet was dented where someone had kicked it years ago and never fixed it. The drawer labels were crooked. INCIDENT REPORT FORMS sat in the top one, waiting like traps.

I knelt at the console drawer and set the tip of my thumbnail into the lock seam. The brass was soft from age. It would give if I was careful. If I wasn’t, it would snap and I’d be stuck with a broken keyway and no job.

Malloj’s choice sat in my ribs: log or forget. He’d already forgotten on paper. That meant it was on me in steel and mud.

I slid the flathead from the tool cup—its handle chipped, the shaft freckled with rust—and eased it into the seam. Outside, the sodium lights buzzed and the tide kept pulling away from anything that couldn’t move.

I levered, slow, and felt the lock start to complain.

03:55.

The lock gave with a wet little pop like a mussel shell. I caught the drawer before it slammed back, palm flat on swollen plywood. The flathead trembled in my hand. I told myself it was caffeine. My mouth felt like I’d been chewing paper.

sun and hands. The PTT switch had a crack that caught skin if you pressed wrong. I'd wedged the stolen backup battery on with electrical tape from the desk drawer, the kind that left tar on your thumb.

Channel 12 hissed, working net busy with shift-change calls and tug traffic. A forklift clanged somewhere beyond the chain-link. Sodium lights buzzed above the lot, one of them strobing when the wind hit it just right. At the far edge, the public quay was a darker strip. Low water showed the mudline—slick, black, suctioned.

High water at 06:22. I'd watched the tide book enough times to know the harbor would lie differently in forty minutes. Things moved when the water lifted. Things slid free.

My thumb hovered over the cracked PTT.

I didn't go find Malloy. I didn't ask quietly. Quiet was a paperwork drawer. Quiet was where evidence grew legs and walked away.

I keyed up.

"Break-break, break-break. All stations, all stations, this is Harbor Station Kestrel on one-two, working net. Stand by for safety traffic. Over."

The squelch tail cut out. There was a beat where everyone decided whether to pretend they hadn't heard me.

"Harbor Station?" somebody said, skeptical. "Say your authorization. Over."

I didn't give it to them. I didn't have it.

Inside: pens that didn't write, a stapler with one jaw bent, and the spare gate fob on a coiled cord. The fob was old—plastic yellowed, the label half-peeled—Port Ops Gate 3. If I took it, the console camera would have a clean view of my wrist. If I left it, I'd be climbing chain-link in wet neoprene like an idiot.

I unhooked the fob and let the cord fall back into the drawer so it looked like it belonged there. The chipped console edge snagged my sleeve and left a white thread hanging. Another thing to catch later.

The admin wing ran off the radio room like an afterthought, a corridor of flaking beige paint and damp drywall that never quite dried. The tile was gritty under my boots. Somebody had tracked in sand and fish scales and left a dark smear that caught the sodium light from the transom windows. The air tasted like diesel exhaust filtered through stale coffee.

I kept my steps in the dead spots between cameras. Whoever installed them had trusted the corners. Corners always lie.

At 03:56 the night watch did what he always did: his radio went quiet for twelve seconds, then came back with a slow inhale right on the mic. Bathroom break or coffee cup. Either way, the patrol loop opened.

I slipped past the glassed-in clerk station. The overhead light in there buzzed like a tired transformer. A woman sat with her chin on her fist, eyes shut, the glow of a monitor washing her face. A paper schedule was taped crooked to the window: TIDE GATE LOCKDOWN WINDOW / 04:20–05:05 / SPRING LOW. Someone had circled it hard enough to tear the paper.

Her fingers twitched toward her keyboard as I went by.

and shiny. One wrong step and you sank to the knee, then to the thigh, and the outgoing tide would hold you like a hand.

The crane's structure loomed to my left—legs of steel, cross-bracing, ladders slick with algae. Under it was a maze of beams and shadows. Shelter. Also a trap if the spreader came down and pinned the space.

Inez grabbed my sleeve, a hard jerk. Her fingers were greasy, grip strong.

“Waterline or under,” she said. “Pick.”

The spreader dropped another yard. The cable sang. The sound made my teeth ache.

I saw the mud glisten where the tide had pulled back. I saw the crane legs, black against black. Either way, we'd pay.

I pulled my arm free, pointed with the hand that still worked, and committed before my brain could argue.

Under the crane—because at least steel didn't swallow you alive.

“Move,” I said, and we cut left into the lattice as the spreader kept coming down.

## The Recording That Burns

05:41

My radio shack badge had been dead for six months. The parking lot still knew my tires.

I sat low behind my dash, windshield stippled with grit, and held the handheld like a confession. The casing was chalky from

I stopped like I belonged. I leaned in enough that my breath fogged the glass, then tapped once—soft—on the frame.

Her eyes opened, unfocused. She didn't reach for the badge scanner. She looked at my collar, then my hands, then the empty spot where my badge used to hang.

“What are you doing here,” she said. Not a question. A bookkeeping entry.

I kept my voice low and flat. “Malloy asked for a permit packet. Salvage file. I'm late.”

Her eyes held mine for a beat too long. She knew my name. She wasn't going to say it. People didn't like naming a problem

when they weren't sure who'd be asked to sign.

“You don't have—” she started, and stopped. She glanced past

me toward the corridor cameras, then at the little red LED on her desk phone. It wasn't lit. No one was listening unless she made it

official.

“I'll put it back,” I said. It was the closest thing to a promise I

could afford.

She swallowed. “Second door. Left. Don't—” She shook her

head like that would erase what she was allowing. “Just... don't

leave it open.”

“Roger,” I said, because the word was habit and because it

sounded like I was on assignment.

I walked on before she could decide she cared about policy

more than sleep.

Second door, left. The Harbor Master's office. The brass plate

on it was scratched to silver at thumb height. The wood around the latch was swollen from years of wet coats and bad seals. The door

A motor whine rose through the dark, high and mechanical, not a boat engine. It started as a distant mosquito and became a throat clearing. Steel on steel. Gears taking load.

I knew that sound. Every dock rat did.

Container crane.

It wasn't supposed to be moving at this hour. They parked it with the boom over the water and the spreader locked up like a sleeping animal. You needed a key, a lockout tag, a checklist. Or you needed someone with the right remote and the nerve.

The boom pivoted. I couldn't see it at first. I heard it: the slow swing, the cable tension, the groan of a structure waking. Then a darker shape blotted out what little gray the sky had.

"Naomi," Inez said, and her voice went flat. "Up."

The spreader descended out of the dark, a rectangle of steel and dangling twistlocks. It came down toward the place we'd just crossed, not searching, not hesitating. The motion was too clean. Somebody was looking at a screen. Somebody had our last known position.

Over my handheld, on that private channel, the same mic distortion breathed again. A short burst. Then: "Down. Down. Hold."

My stomach tightened so hard it hurt. My mouth was dry enough to crack. I tasted blood where I'd bitten my lip.

Rook had warned them not to pursue onto energized infrastructure.

He hadn't said a word about pursuing with a crane.

The ground under my feet changed. Boards ended. The edge of the quay dropped to a strip of mud at the waterline, tide-sucked

stuck when I tried it. My shoulder went into it, gentle first, then harder. The frame creaked.

Somewhere down the hall, a printer spit a page and went quiet again.

I set the flathead against the latch seam and worked it like I'd worked the drawer: pressure, patience, no drama. The screwdriver bit into damp paint and lifted a curl. The smell under it was old latex and mildew. The tool slipped once. I left a crescent-shaped gouge in the jamb. Evidence that would last longer than my excuses.

The latch popped. The door opened a handspan and then snagged on the carpet hump. I toed it over the ridge and slipped inside, pulling it almost shut behind me so the corridor light didn't pour in.

His office was a museum of forms. Rolled charts in a cracked tube. A desk scarred with pen cuts. A half-empty can of WD-40 with the nozzle missing. A radio handset on a charging cradle, cord frayed where it had been yanked. Everything useful here had been used too hard and put away wet.

I didn't touch the desk phone. Calls were footprints.

The keys would be in the top drawer. They always were. The Harbor Master liked weight within reach. I slid the drawer out and it came with a gritty scrape, the runners full of sand. Inside were binders, a stapled packet with a red stamp—PORT AUTHORITY—VIOLATION HEARING—and a lanyard.

The lanyard was black nylon, edges fuzzed. The ring was heavy. Harbor master keys weren't supposed to be heavy. Heavy meant they opened more than doors.

02:45 Inez yanked the panel cover back on, not to be neat but to keep fingers from catching on it as we moved. She kicked the shed door open and we spilled into the blackout.

The quay was a different place without the sodium spill. Shapes became threats. Edges vanished. The only steady sound was the low slap of tide against pilings and the grind of line on wood as something somewhere shifted.

“Go,” Inez said.

We ran, boots thudding blind. I aimed for memory: three bollards, then the cracked yellow line, then the gap between the stacked pallets and the reefer unit that always leaked. The reefer’s fan was silent now, dead with the power cut. The air smelled like rot and old fish blood without the usual electrical tang covering it. Behind us, Malloy shouted again, closer, pissed now.

“Lights! Somebody get—”

He stopped. The blackout had taken his vocabulary. There was no order for darkness that worked.

The snap hook finally gave a full click—half-open, half-closed—and my handheld dropped a few inches on the lanyard, swinging into my ribs. The impact stole my breath. I grabbed for it and my injured wrist buckled, fingers grazing plastic instead of catching. The radio swung again, hard.

“Dammit,” I said, and kept running because stopping was worse.

02:46

I lifted it and felt the weight settle into my palm like a tool. Gate keys. Shed keys. A brass key with green corrosion. Two modern cut keys with “ASSA ABLÖY” stamped on them. And tucked behind the ring, half-hidden by a laminated tag, a permit card.

RESTRICTED—SALVAGE OPERATIONS.

BERTH: C-17 / PIER 4.

VALID: 02/11-02/14.

REQUESTOR: ROOK MARINE SALVAGE, LLC.

APPROVED: PORT AUTHORITY OPERATIONS / STAMP

02/11 16:08.

The stamp was fresh enough that the ink still looked raised. Someone had pre-approved a fence around a problem. C-17 wasn’t a tourist ship. C-17 was the working finger with the busted fenders and the tug berth, the one that went dark when the tide fell far enough to show the mud.

My throat tightened. I made myself breathe through my nose. Diesel and wet creosote. Rot from low tide working up through the pilings.

The ring clicked against the drawer edge. Too loud in a room that held secrets by inertia. I stilled it with my thumb. The tremor in my hand didn’t stop; it just moved to my wrist.

If the system was smart, keys weren’t just keys. The magnetic locks logged attempts. The gate reader could be told to refuse a job ID with a keystroke. Stealing this bought me access and started a countdown I didn’t control.

I pocketed the ring anyway. Point of no return. The lanyard slid against my jacket lining and left a cold stripe down my ribs.

The handheld on my chest jerked as the snap hook half-opened. The lanyard line slid and bit my neck.

Inez's hand went to the main breaker, then stopped. She looked at me, a question without words.

"You heard that?" I said.

"Yeah," she said. "Not for us."

"Do it anyway," I said. "Ninety seconds."

Her jaw tightened once. She shoved the breaker handle down.

The shed hum died like a throat cut. The warning light flickered, held for a heartbeat, then went dark. Outside, the sodium lights along the quay stuttered—one, two, three—and dropped out. The world narrowed to the pale smear of my phone screen and the faint glow of instrument LEDs inside the shed.

In the sudden black, the harbor changed shape. The water wasn't a surface anymore. It was a hole.

Alarms started at Port Control—distant, then closer as radios reacted. On 16, overlapping voices tripped over each other, everyone asking who was in charge now that the channel line was blind.

"Harbor Control, this is—"

"—say again—"

"—we're drifting—"

Malloy came back hard.

"All stations, all stations—maintain position. This is for your safety. Over."

Rook's voice, not on 16, smooth as a hand over a mouth: "Hold them. Keep them still."

He wasn't talking to Malloy. He was talking to equipment.

On my way out, I nudged the drawer shut. The busted latch didn't catch. It sat a quarter inch proud, a confession.

In the corridor, the clerk's window was dark again. Her head was down, but her eyes tracked my feet. She watched my boots like she was memorizing tread.

I didn't look back.

The radio room door was a gray slab with a magnetic lock that liked to pretend it was stronger than it was. I waved the spare fob. The reader flashed green, then hesitated. The lock buzzed longer than it should have, a hungry vibration that said: logging, logging, logging.

The door released with a sticky peel.

Inside, the consoles waited, LEDs steady, VHF squelch filling the gaps between other people's emergencies. The incident log screen was still open where I'd left it. My last entry was a timestamp and a channel note that didn't match what I'd actually heard. Paperwork was a weapon here. So was silence.

I sat, rolled the chair in without letting the wheels squeal, and put my fingers on the keyboard. Dry skin snagged on the keycaps. I changed one line—one—shifting a time by four minutes and swapping a channel reference so it would route to "equipment interference" instead of "unverified distress." Enough to slow the machine. Enough to make my fingerprints part of it.

The cursor blinked. It looked like an accusation.

I hit save.

Outside, a foghorn sounded from the breakwater on a long interval, and the building answered with a low rattle in the window frames. The tide was still dropping. The clock didn't care.

On the public VHF, Channel 16 squeaked hard, then opened with Malloy's voice, too loud, too close, like he'd keyed up right beside someone's mic.

"Break-break. Break-break. All stations, all stations, all stations—this is Harbor Control. Range light malfunction reported. All inbound and outbound traffic hold position. Maintain safe speed. Monitor one-six. Over."

He wasn't Harbor Control. He was wearing the phrase like a borrowed coat.

A tug captain came back, all anger and static.

"Harbor Control, this is Tug BARNACLE TWO. Say again—range light out? We got a tow on the wire and we're in the fairway. Over."

Malloy answered like he was stamping a form.

"Tug BARNACLE TWO, Harbor Control. Roger. Hold position. Do not proceed in channel until cleared. Over."

Rook's voice slipped in on another channel—lower power, cleaner. Not etiquette. Not for everyone. It wasn't even speech at first. It was a short burst, a clipped digital cadence like a remote command tone. My scalp tightened, the way it did when a frequency sat wrong in my head.

Then a voice, controlled, close-mic, the same distortion I'd heard on the coded mayday: a slight rasp at the top end, a consistent clip on plosives, like the mic grille was dented on one side.

"Spreader down," the voice said. "Slew port."

My gut dropped. I knew that mic. I'd heard it when my brother was supposed to be nowhere near the water.

I stood, slid the spare fob into my pocket with the key ring, and pulled my jacket closed over the weight. The lanyard buckled against my ribs when I moved. It felt like a shackle and a handle at the same time.

I killed the radio room light on my way out, because darkness buys you seconds if someone's watching on a delay. The corridor swallowed me. The admin wing ended in a steel door with chipped paint and a push bar worn to bare metal.

Beyond it: the working harbor, cameras on poles, wet concrete, and wind that carried grit off the yard.

I put my hand on the push bar and listened—one beat—for boots, for radio chatter, for any change in the building's breathing.

Nothing.

I pushed through.

04:07.

The admin door slammed behind me and the yard took over—diesel exhaust sitting low like a bad decision, low-tide rot crawling up from the mud flats where the water had peeled away. Sodium lights buzzed on poles, their housings pocked with rust. Everything wore a film: oil, grit, fine spray that turned into crust. My boots hit wet concrete. The first step skated. I caught myself on a stanchion with chipped yellow paint and left a smear of glove rubber on it.

If Luca was in the shallows, the ebb would do what police couldn't: pin him. It would drag him into the mud line and hold him there until the next flood decided he'd paid enough. If he'd punched outside the breakwater, the weather would take a cleaner bite. Wind had teeth out there. It didn't need a gun.

Inez's elbow brushed my ribs as she leaned closer to the breaker bank. Oil streaked her sleeve, tacky against my coat. In the cramped heat of the shed our breathing fell into the same rhythm for two beats—inhale, exhale—because it was easier than fighting for air.

Then she moved and the spell broke into work again.

"Range light feed is separate," she muttered. "They didn't cheap out."

"That means alarms," I said.

"Means we get ninety seconds if you can move."

"Can you?"

She didn't answer. She stripped the scrap wire with her teeth, spat out the bit of insulation, and jammed the bare copper into a lug like she was making a bad decision on purpose. The screwdriver bit into the terminal screw. Her knuckles were scarred, nails broken short, hands sure.

I braced the panel with my left hand. My injured wrist tried to help and slipped on grime, sending a flare of pain up my arm. I hissed through my teeth.

Inez glanced at my hand. Just the glance. Then she shifted her body so I could lean more weight on the stable panel edge instead of gripping. It was nothing. It was everything we had time for.

"Ready," she said.

02:44

I listened, because listening was the only advantage I still had that didn't require permission.

A forklift clattered past, tines high, tail light dead. The operator didn't look at me. Nobody looked at anybody unless they had to. The yard ran on task, not curiosity.

I cut between stacked crab pots—plastic cages scabbed with barnacles, rope ties swollen and stiff. A line lay across my path like a tripwire. I stepped over, heel caught on frayed strands, and my knee jolted. The rope rasped my palm when I grabbed it to steady. Brine-stiff. It bit through the thin glove and found skin anyway.

I kept moving. No time to bleed neat.

Under the catwalk, something scraped: barnacles or chain links, hard on hard, a sound that got into your molars. The catwalk grating was wet with algae at the edges where boots didn't tread. I took it anyway. Shorter line to the dock gate. Faster to the slips.

Halfway across, my pocket vibrated. I didn't stop. I fished the handheld out with my good hand and kept my eyes on the slick metal.

Inez's number wasn't in it. I didn't keep names. I kept patterns.

One bar of signal. Of course.

I thumbed the call. One ring. Two. A burst of static like a cigarette lighter too close to the mic.

"Yeah?" Her voice was tight, winded, shop noise behind it. She didn't say my name.

"I need you at the south dock gate," I said. "Now. Bring—" I glanced at a pallet jack with one wheel wobbling, a chain hoist hanging from a beam, its hook rusted shut. "Bring cutters. And a jumper pack."

stained. It slid under the lip and pried, and the cover came free with a screech of metal on metal that made my teeth itch.

Inside, the breaker bank was labeled with smeared black marker and laminated tags that had curled at the edges. RANGE LIGHT—FRONT. RANGE LIGHT—REAR. QUAY LIGHTS. GATE MOTOR. RADAR REPEATER.

There was a fresh inspection tag zip-tied to the harness bundle. Clean white plastic, no algae stain, punched with a date. My eyes snagged on the signature.

Not the name—names lied. The loop of the “G,” the straight angry line through the “t.” I’d seen it on port authority logs when I still had a desk and access that didn’t require theft. The auditor’s initials were on the bottom line. The person who asked too many questions and filed too neatly.

My throat tightened around the flashlight. I pulled it out, swallowed once, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“Do it,” Inez said, not looking at me. She had a length of scrap wire in her hand, the insulation cracked. “Photograph later.”

“Now,” I said. My fingers fumbled my phone out. The screen didn’t like my wet hands. It took a second too long to wake. The tremor in my wrist made the camera jitter.

I framed the tag. The date. The signature. The inspection code: PA-INS-4472. The clip held for half a breath.

Click.

It felt loud even though it wasn’t.

Outside, footsteps scuffed on the boards. Not a run. A controlled walk. A boot heel with confidence.

Silence. Not refusal. Calculation.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“Not on—” I stepped off the catwalk, boots hitting a patch of wet plywood laid over a puddle. The plywood flexed, swollen at the edges, and my ankle rolled. My stomach dropped. I caught myself on a railing with peeling galvanization. “Not on an open line,” I finished.

“You’re on a cell,” she said, like I was the one being cute.

“Scanners pick up more than you think.” I kept my voice low, even as I jogged. My mouth was dry. “South gate. Ten minutes.”

“Ten?” A laugh, no humor. “You running or teleporting?”

“I’m running.”

A click. The call stuttered. Three chopped syllables and a dead line.

The signal had given up or somebody had decided for it.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and dropped into the lane between the fuel tanks and the net shed. The fuel tanks were painted white once. Now they were streaked with rust tears and safety placards curling at the corners. A hose lay coiled beside them, cracked, smelling like old gas and rubber. If it was pressurized, it would fail. If it wasn’t, it would trip me. Either way, it was a hazard with paperwork behind it.

I saw the gate ahead: chain-link stretched across the access road to the south docks, topped with barbed wire gone orange and flaking. The bars were fat with corrosion, like teeth with plaque. A keypad sat in a metal box, lid denied. A reader pad beside it, scuffed where countless fingers had missed and cursed.

the hinge of the cutters against the hasp, not the lock, and tried to shear the weak metal instead of the thick.

The first squeeze did nothing but make the tool complain. The second made the hinge shift half a millimeter. Her shoulders set. She exhaled once, hard, then leaned in and the hinge gave with a snap that rang down the dock like a struck buoy bell.

A camera on the corner of the nearby warehouse whirred and turned. Its housing was sun-bleached, but the lens glinted wetly as it tracked.

“Camera,” I said.

“I saw it,” she said. “Door.”

I got my fingers under the shed door edge. Swollen plywood had warped into the frame; the bottom dragged like it didn’t want to open because it knew what was inside. My wrist protested. I shifted to my other hand and pulled. The door broke suction with a wet pop.

Warm electrical hum and the smell of old insulation hit my face. The inside warning light over the panel flickered, dim as a dying ember, like the shed couldn’t decide if it had power.

Inez slipped in first. I followed, shoulder catching the jamb. The shed was too narrow for two people and a conscience. A rusted clipboard hook hung empty. A thin puddle lay on the floor, reflecting our legs in a warped way.

I clenched my flashlight between my teeth. The metal tasted of old pennies. My mouth went dry instantly.

She popped the panel cover with her battered screwdriver. It wasn’t a proper electrician’s tool—flat blade chewed, handle

My advantage had been simple. Keys equal access. Fobs open doors. Codes open gates. I had both.

I pulled the ring from my pocket, the spare fob heavy and cold. I slapped it to the reader.

Green flash.

Then the reader chirped again—fast beeps, a stuttering error tone like it was laughing at me. The display blinked: ACCESS DENIED.

I tried again, slower, holding it steady.

Beep-beep-beep. Denied.

My throat tightened. The lock didn’t care about my hurry. It cared about its settings, and somebody had changed those.

A tiny camera above the keypad whined. The motor rotated with a smooth, deliberate sound, like a head turning in a quiet room. The lens centered me. A faint red IR glow winked at the edge. Recording. Timestamped. My face going into a folder with an invoice number and a chain of custody.

The gate box clicked as the system logged my failed entry. I could almost see the line populating: 04:07:32 — KESTREL, NAOMI — DENIED.

So much for quiet.

I backed half a step, eyes scanning. To my left, the fence ran along the fuel tanks toward a service alley. To my right, it met a concrete jersey barrier tagged with peeling paint. Beyond it, the dock road dipped toward the slips. Past that: masts, work lights, moving silhouettes. Time and tide.

Containment meant funneling. It meant we'd get one lane, not ten.

Inez got ahead of me on the ladder, fast and sure. She didn't look down. She didn't waste any motion checking if I was there. She assumed I'd keep up. Logistics as care.

My injured wrist lit up when I hit the top and swung onto the quay. The joint didn't like weight at that angle. My fingers went numb around the ladder rail, then came back with pins and a small tremor that made the lanyard clip chatter against my coat zipper.

We ran.

The quay boards were creosote-dark and wet, and every third plank had a swell to it like it had drunk too much tide and couldn't spit it back out. I felt the give through my soles. The sodium lights buzzed overhead, their lenses filmed with salt crust and fly specks. Bollards sat like black teeth, wrapped in frayed line and plastic chafe guard that had split into curled white ribbons. A discarded glove, stiff with brine, lay by a mooring cleat like a small dead animal.

The power shed squatted beside the gate track. Concrete skin, chipped. A corroded hasp held a padlock swollen with rust, shank pitted, keyway packed with grit. A faded stencil on the door: RANGE LIGHT FEED — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

“Two minutes,” Inez said. Not a promise. A budget.

02:42

She dropped to a knee, bolt cutters coming up from under her coat like she'd been born with them. The jaws were nicked and shiny at the bite, handles taped where the rubber had split. She put

My palm burned where the rope had cut me. I flexed my fingers and felt the sting bloom. Grip would be worse now.

Climbing would cost more.

A forklift backfired somewhere behind me—sharp crack—and my body flinched before my brain caught up. The yard didn't give warnings that mattered.

The camera held steady on my face. No pretending I was lost. No “wrong gate” excuse. Not with the denial beeps on record.

Breach the fence and run, loud and visible, and let port security come hunting with my name already on their screen.

Or retreat into the yard, buy a different kind of access—power, code, or a form with Captain Malloy's signature—and spend minutes Luca might not have.

I stared at the barbed wire, at the rusted teeth, and at the small red dot watching me decide.

## Mud Flats and Paperwork

03:41

The yard ended in a ragged line of rock and broken timbers. After that it was flats—black mud, eelgrass like wet wire, puddles with diesel rainbowing on top. Sodium lights from the pier made everything the color of old bruises.

04:22. Tide turn.

Forty-one minutes, and the harbor would start pouring back into its own veins. The channels would fill first. Then the cuts. Then the wide slick where people thought it stayed shallow.

If I handed the radio over, I kept my legs free and my face out of the cameras—maybe. But I lost the only record that hadn't been edited by people like Malloy.

If I bolted, I became the incident. They'd have reason to grab me. To call it safety. To call it procedure.

I looked at the clipboard again, burned CHALK-3 into my head, and made my choice with my body, not my mouth.

I clicked the handheld's lanyard loop onto Inez's frayed line, felt the snap hook bite and stick, and stepped back from the barge edge like I was complying—then turned and ran for the narrow gap toward the gate, gambling my wrist, the failing hook, and eight minutes of borrowed time.

02:41

My boots hit the rusted ladder and the ladder answered with a flex that wasn't supposed to be there. Each rung had a crust of old paint and barnacle grit, slicked over with mist and diesel sheen from the barge below. The lanyard line slapped my ribs as I climbed. The rusted snap hook on the end kept half-opening, like it wanted to let the handheld go.

Behind us, Malloy's shout cut across the dock, clipped like he was reading it off a card.

“Stop. Stop where you are.”

Rook didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. His tone carried farther because it sounded like policy.

“Do not pursue onto energized infrastructure,” he said. “We do not create a second incident. Captain Malloy—containment. Documentation. Standing by for compliance.”

I pulled the handheld VHF up from my jacket. The belt clip was green with corrosion, cracked where it met the case. It had already tried to jump ship twice tonight. I taped it to my strap with a strip of frayed electrical tape I'd stolen off a maintenance cart. The tape stuck, but it didn't trust me. Nothing did.

The evidence pouch rode inside my coat, zipped and pressed to my ribs. Waterproof, heat-sealed, the microSD inside like a tooth. The coded mayday that had Luca's problem braided into it. If I went under, it stayed with me.

I stepped off rock and onto mud.

The first foot sank to the ankle like the ground took a bite. I yanked it back with a wet pop, boot rim smeared and louder than I wanted. Quiet went fast out here. Every move made a sound: suction, squelch, rope-fiber eelgrass snapping under heel.

High ridges of eelgrass ran like seams. If I stayed on them, my boots would land on root mats and broken shell. Less suction. More steps. Slower.

Straight across was shorter. It was also a slick sheet with nothing to spread my weight. If I lost a boot, I lost speed and skin. If I went down, I'd come up painted and obvious under sodium lights.

Speed, then.

I cut across.

Mud climbed my soles. Each step had a delay, like the flats were thinking about whether to let me go. My breath came in hard pulls; it tasted like low-tide rot and exhaust from somewhere upriver. Grit got between my teeth. I kept my mouth shut and let the jaw ache.

Rook watched my face, not the paper. He wanted the moment I understood.

“You recognize it,” he said. Not a question.

I forced my voice to stay flat. “I recognize paperwork.”

Malloj shifted his stance. He didn’t block me yet, but he moved in a way that closed angles. Containment. He wasn’t rushing. He was positioning.

“Hand me the device,” Malloy said. “Now.”

Inez’s hand brushed my elbow. Quick. Logistics, not comfort. She slid something into my palm: a strip of frayed line with a rusted snap hook on it. A lanyard. The snap hook’s gate stuck halfway open.

If I clipped the radio to it, it might hold. Or it might fail at the worst moment. Everything here failed at the worst moment.

She tilted her chin toward the utility box by the gate. The conduit ran from it toward the range light circuit, disappearing under a rusted ladder and into shadow. Power was there. Control was there. A way to blind cameras or pop a lock—if we could touch it.

Malloj’s voice hardened one notch, the way a channel goes from static to clear.

“Ms. Kestrel. Last instruction. Surrender the handheld.”

Rook’s pen hovered over the signature line like a hook.

“Or,” Rook said, “we do it the long way. Incident report. FCC referral. Employment review. Your brother gets folded into it. Slow. Thorough.”

My skin went tight over my knuckles. My injured wrist trembled once, and I hated it more than pain.

Half-buried timbers broke the surface—old pillings, rotten and barnacled, sawn off and forgotten. The barnacles scraped when my shin brushed one. It felt like somebody dragged sandpaper down my leg through denim. Warm sting, then the cold bit it clean.

Behind me, the yard’s camera didn’t matter anymore. Out here, the record was footprints and timing.

The VHF rode in my left hand, thumb on the power knob, antenna angled down to keep it out of the drizzle. The screen had a hairline crack and a fog of condensation at one corner. It still had signal. For now.

Squelch broke and rolled back. Channel traffic bled through, clipped and formal, the way people got when their words could be played in a hearing.

“—Harbor Control, this is Tug MASON on one-six. Request traffic advisory, inbound Fish Pier. Over.”

A reply came a second later, clean enough to be official. Too clean. Then a quick blur at the edge—something stepping over the protocol, a second transmission riding the tail end like a bad splice.

I stopped.

Standing still in mud is a choice. It gives the flats time to grab you. It also gives you time to listen.

I hunched, turned my shoulder to the wind, and cupped the VHF against my chest to block the drizzle. My right hand dug into the jacket pocket for the spare AAs by habit, fingers brushing cold cylinders. I didn’t pull them yet. Exposure time mattered.

The Harbor Control voice came again—same cadence, same words you’d expect.

Rook tapped the paper with a pen. The pen was cheap, the clicker chewed.

“Cooperation statement,” he said. “Voluntary relinquishment. Hazard mitigation. You’ll like the last clause.”

“Read it to me,” I said.

“Doesn’t work like that.”

Of course it didn’t.

I moved to the barge edge, careful of the algae-slick steel. My boots slipped a fraction. Pain shot from my wrist up into my forearm. I compensated, weight shifting, and felt how tired my legs already were.

The headlamp tracked me. The man stayed behind, close enough that I could feel his heat through my jacket when the wind dropped.

I leaned forward until the clipboard’s top sheet came into focus.

Invoice number in the corner: RS-4471-HM.

Under it, a line item that wasn’t for boom or absorbent pads.

“Tow dispatch: NB-12 / ‘CHALK-3’.”

My throat tightened. CHALK-3. That was the checksum phrase buried in the coded mayday. The same odd little tag that had made my ears prick in the first place. Not a name. Not a place. A key.

It sat on his paper like he’d printed it off a system that should never have been connected to distress traffic.

I read lower, letting my eyes do what my mouth couldn’t.

Partial container reference: “MSCU 3—7—” the middle digits smudged as if someone had thumbed them on purpose.

But under it, in the half-second where the mic opened and the carrier hit, there was a grit I recognized. Not noise—distortion. A specific kind of fuzz on the plosive, like the mic diaphragm was dented and never fully recovered. I’d heard it for years. A base station with a bad limiter or a cheap preamp patched in. It lived in a shed on the east breakwater.

That shed was supposed to be dark at this hour. Its operator had a strict schedule and a supervisor who cared about overtime sheets.

Unless somebody else was keying it.

Unless the voice was coming from somewhere that wanted to sound like Harbor Control without being Harbor Control.

My throat went dry. I swallowed and it didn’t help. My fingers tightened around the radio until the cracked case creaked.

The next transmission hit.

“Harbor Control to all stations, break-break. Security exercise in progress near Fuel Farm access. Maintain distance. Wilco. Out.”

Exercise. The word was a form. A shield. It didn’t belong at 03:41 unless someone needed an empty patch of water and a reason nobody should call about lights or boats moving wrong.

That clue cost me twelve seconds. Fifteen. I checked my watch anyway. 03:41:52. I forced my feet to move again, lifting slow to break suction before it could win.

My boot almost stayed.

It happened mid-stride, a patch of mud slicker than the rest. My right foot went down and kept going. The flats sealed around

Rook lifted one hand in a small, calming gesture, like he was managing a meeting that had gone off agenda. "You're making this expensive," he called. "We can make it administrative." I kept my eyes on the clipboard, not his face. Clipboards meant paper. Paper meant numbers. Numbers meant patterns. "Administrative kills people slower," I said. Rook's smile didn't show teeth. It showed patience. "Slower is kinder. Sign, and you walk." He stepped closer to the edge of the quay, close enough that the sodium light caught the plastic sheen of his jacket. He set the clipboard down on the concrete lip, angled toward me like an offering. The paper on it fluttered once in the wind off the water and stuck again under the weight of a metal clip dulled by scratches. Malloy spoke at his shoulder, quiet, like a notation in a report. "Ms. Kestrel," he said. Blunt. Old-guard. "You will present identification and surrender the transmitting device for evidentiary preservation." Evidentiary preservation. The same phrase as before. It wasn't about truth. It was about custody. "I didn't transmit," I said, and hated how thin it sounded. Malloy's eyes didn't blink. "Then you have nothing to fear from a log." Fear wasn't the word. It was leverage. If he took my handheld, he took my one clean edge—timestamps, audio, the ability to prove who said what.

it, cold pressure up over the laces. When I tried to lift, it held like a hand. Panic wasn't a thought. It was body. My gut dropped. My breath snapped and I tasted bile. I shifted weight forward, found the eelgrass seam with my left toe, and used it as a brace. I twisted my trapped foot sideways, not up. The suction released with a thick pop that sounded like a gunshot in my head. Mud slung off and splattered my calves. Not quiet now. Not clean. The boot came free, but it left a hollow that filled with oily water. My jeans were already painted up to the knee. The mud made every step louder, wetter. It also made me visible; the sodium lights caught sheen where fabric was soaked. Advantage gone: clean footwear, stealth. Anyone with eyes could track me across the flats like a chalk line. Ahead, a magnetic service gate stood on the far side of the flats, two hundred yards of chain-link and a keypad box under a lamp. It might as well have been on the moon from here. No path. No dry ground. Just a channel cut I couldn't see until I was on it. The flats dipped. My next step went off solid into liquid. Cold punched through denim. Knee-deep. Then deeper as my foot found the bottom late. The drainage cut was still wet from the last tide, a narrow trench running toward the main channel. Water surged against my shin and tried to take my leg with it. I threw my weight forward, slapped my palms into mud, and crawled out like an animal.

backing, the screws orange with rust. A padlock on the utility box hung green and furry.

She'd already mapped it. In her head, everything was a circuit.

"Two minutes," I said without turning.

02:37

Malloy spoke on 12 now, and the whole harbor listened whether they wanted to or not.

"Port Control to all stations. Break-break. Effective immediately: radio silence in the safety zone except authorized traffic. Unauthorized transmissions will be documented for evidentiary preservation. Port Control standing by. Out."

There it was. The point where the rules became a weapon.

If I keyed up now, I wasn't just asking for help. I was an offense.

NORTHBAY, obedient, went quiet.

The man with the headlamp finally moved. One step, slow, like he was proving he didn't need speed. He kept the light on my face and lifted his other hand. Palm open. Not a threat. A demand.

"Radio," he said. His voice was rough from cigarettes and cold. No stutter now. "Hand it."

I didn't.

From the quay, Rook's voice carried without radio. He didn't need amplification. He used distance as a courtesy.

"Naomi."

Hearing my name out loud made my gut drop again. My mouth went dry so fast my tongue felt too big.

Malloy didn't react. That was the worst part. He'd already known too.

Wet soaked into my pants and climbed. My jacket hem dunked. The pocket with the spare AA cells went under.

"Damn it," I said to nobody, voice eaten by wind and distant engines.

I got to my feet on the far lip, dripping. The evidence pouch pressed hard against my ribs, still sealed, still warm from my body. I patted it through the coat. Intact.

My pocket felt like a cold sponge. The AAs inside would be wet now. They might still work. Or they might die when I needed them most. Either way, I'd committed. Turning back meant crossing that cut again, slower, colder, and arriving after 04:22. The flats would fill behind me and erase the line I'd made. It would also trap me out here if I hesitated.

I checked the VHF.

Battery icon: down one bar.

Of course. Wet and cold always charge a fee.

My hands started to shake. Not big tremors. Fine ones, like my nerves had gone loose in their housings. I clenched and unclenched, trying to get feeling back. The rope burn in my palm stung worse when the cold hit it, the skin split and raw.

A headlamp blinked in the distance.

Not on the pier. Not on the road. On the flats, low and moving, bobbing in a line that cut for the same far-side gate I was aiming at. The light dipped, paused, dipped again—somebody picking their way across like they knew where the cuts were.

Nobody should be out here at low tide unless they had a reason.

He didn't shout across the gap. He used a working channel. My handheld scan snagged him on 68 like a hook.

"Port Control, this is Rook Salvage Coordination. Roger containment. I can assist with hazard mitigation and documentation. Over."

Smooth. Solutions with teeth.

Malloj answered on 68 with the careful tone of someone who'd practiced saying no in ways that sounded like yes.

"Rook Salvage, Port Control. Roger. Stand by for tasking. Over."

"Wilco," Rook said, and the word sounded like a hand sliding toward your back.

He looked up at the barge. At me. Not at Inez; not at the man with the headlamp. His eyes pinned the radio in my hand like it had a serial number he already knew.

He raised the clipboard, not to show it, just to make it visible. A lure.

Inez's fingers worked the cutters again. The hinge squealed. My wrist screamed under the pressure and then the cuff sprang open with a wet snap that made my breath hitch.

Relief didn't come. Just new space to be caught.

I flexed my hand. Blood returned in needles. My grip was already compromised. The handheld felt heavier.

Inez didn't celebrate. She only shifted her body between me and the headlamp, moving like she was just another piece of wreckage.

"Power shed," she mouthed. Her eyes flicked to the conduit runs along the quay—thick gray pipe bolted to swollen plywood

I froze, knee-deep mud on my pants and no cover but darkness that wasn't dark enough. The lamp swung once, as if searching, then steadied and kept coming.

Inez might have beaten me to the rendezvous. Or someone else had.

If I keyed up and called her, it would be clean and quick. It would also go into a log somewhere, a time and a call sign tied to my voice, and that "exercise" advisory would suddenly make sense.

If I stayed dark, I could close fifty yards without giving my position away—if the mud let me.

The headlamp bobbed again, closer now, and I brought the VHF to my mouth anyway, thumb hovering over transmit as the battery icon winked like a warning.

03:53

The headlamp dipped again and I saw the cut before I saw her—black water laid in a seam between mud banks, thin as a knife line. The light slid over a half-submerged skiff nosed in like it had crawled here to die. Chipped white paint. Green algae slick on the gunwale. A bow eye rusted orange. The rope on its cleat was frayed to hair.

I kept my VHF down at my chest. Thumb off transmit. I stepped where the mud was firmer, testing with my heel, and closed the last twenty yards.

The headlamp snapped toward me.

"Don't," a voice said. Fast. Flat. "If you're Port, you're late and you're wet."

My name wanted to come out. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

I chose a lie that would buy minutes and cost me later.

“JUNE STAR, NORTHBAY. I am a harbor worker. I do not have safe access to my ID. I have an aggressor on deck. Advise you maintain distance. Over.”

Not a name. Not yet.

A sound came from the quay that didn't belong to any engine. A tire rolling slow over gravel. No siren. No light bar. Just presence.

A patrol truck eased along the waterfront with its headlights off until the last second, then blinked on to wash the barge face and the gate and the wet edge of the pier. It stopped in the one place that mattered: where the access path to the power shed ran narrow between stacked pallets and a rusted dumpster.

The driver door opened without a slam.

Malloy stepped out in a dark jacket with reflective PORT CONTROL on the back, the letters dulled by years and salt and bad laundering. His cap brim hid his eyes until he looked up. He didn't wave. He didn't hurry. He just stood where every option would have to pass.

He lifted a handheld to his mouth, but he didn't transmit. He let me see it. Let me know he could talk and chose not to.

A second figure moved from behind the truck, and the harbor changed shape around him like it was making room.

Hi-vis jacket too clean. Hard hat with scuffs that looked placed, not earned. Clipboard hugged to his chest like a shield. Dale Rook could walk into a funeral and make you sign a waiver.

Not Port. Not anyone official. Inez Sato looked like she'd been assembled from surplus—oil-smearred hoodie, neoprene pants scuffed white at the knees, hair jammed under a beanie. She was crouched in the skiff with her elbows deep in a mess of wiring that didn't belong on anything that still floated. A battered plastic case sat open beside her, guts out: cells, leads, a cheap crimp tool with the paint rubbed off the handle. A crimp connector flashed dull tin in her fingers.

“You Inez?” I asked.

“Depends.” She didn't look up. She bit the connector, pulled it free with her teeth, and shoved it onto a red lead like she could intimidate metal into holding. “You paying, or you bleeding on my boat for free?”

“I need a battery pack for a handheld,” I said. “And a ride to the debris field. Before 04:22.”

That made her pause. Just long enough to hear the harbor behind us: a distant diesel idle, the buzzer of sodium lights, the constant thin VHF squelch from somebody's base station scanning. The tide made a small sucking noise at the mud edge, like it was chewing.

“Debris field where?” she said.

I didn't answer that. I lifted my VHF so she could see it. The battery icon sat one bar lower than it had a minute ago.

“I can give you the file,” I said. “Not the card. The file.”

Now she looked up. Her headlamp washed my coat, my hands, the evidence pouch bulging under my ribs. Her eyes were dark and too awake.

“Recording,” she said, not a question. “The mayday.”

My handheld scan chirped and landed on 12. The squelch opened just long enough for the harbor to feel smaller.

Malloj again, lower now, not for the world, for someone. "Port Control to NORTHBAY. Roger your mayday involvement. Do not render assistance until Port Control assesses hazard mitigation. Over"

The words hit my teeth. Hazard mitigation. Secure evidence. The harbor as a file cabinet.

The headlamp tilted a fraction. The man with it was listening too.

Inez's mouth came close to my ear again. "Containment."

"Yeah." My throat stuck. "He's closing the doors."

My gaze slid past the spool rack. Beyond the barge edge, the quay was a smear of sodium light and wet concrete. The chain-link gate that led toward the shore-side power shed sat in darkness—until a pinprick of red appeared at the keypad.

A magnetic lock clicked. Not loud. Final.

"Camera," Inez breathed.

A dome camera on the pole near the gate swiveled with a delayed, lazy compliance. The motor whined, then stopped as it pointed at the exact path we'd been counting on.

02:35

I forced my eyes off it and onto the handheld. If I stayed on 16, Malloy could bury me under "unauthorized transmissions." If I went to 12, I'd be in his room.

NORTHBAY tried again on 16, pressure rising.

"JUNE STAR, NORTHBAY. Identify yourself. Over."

I didn't flinch. That cost me. People who don't flinch get remembered.

"You want it," I said. "You get me there."

Inez's mouth pulled sideways. "That's not a trade. That's you handing me your problem."

"My problem already has a clock."

She snorted and went back to the wiring. "Everything has a clock. My clock is my skiff doesn't go dead in the channel while your friends shoot at me."

"They're not my friends."

"Sure." She dug the crimp tool under the lead, squeezed. It made a cheap, soft click. She frowned at it like it had offended her. Squeezed again. Another click. The connector still didn't bite. She shoved it anyway and wrapped it in electrical tape with the speed of someone who'd made bad connections look good long enough to get paid.

The skiff rocked under her weight, water slapping the hull through a crackle of barnacles.

I pulled the evidence pouch out just enough to get fingers on the microSD sleeve without showing her the label. My hands shook worse now. Fine tremors. The cut in my palm from the earlier rope burn had opened at the edge. Blood, thin and bright in the headlamp's beam.

Inez saw it. Her gaze stayed on my hand a beat too long. Not concern. Inventory.

"Full file," she said. "Now."

"No," I said. "Clip."

Her jaw worked. "Clip costs me time."

I chose every word for how it would age in a log. Not a mayday anymore. A report. Something that didn't ask them to die for me.

The headlamp stayed pinned on my face. The man behind it didn't move in. He didn't need to. He had time and a lock that would hold longer than my arm.

Inez leaned hard on the cutters. Metal squealed. The cuff around my wrist gave another hair.

On 16, the tug's reply came clipped, annoyed.

"JUNE STAR, NORTHBAY. Roger. Advise your identity and the nature of the incident. Over."

Identity. The word had weight. It wasn't just him. The channel felt crowded all of a sudden, like someone had opened a door and bodies were waiting in the hall.

Before I could answer, a new voice cut in with the clean cadence of someone who'd written memos about emergencies but had never had bilge water in his boots.

"All stations, all stations, all stations. Port Control. Break-break."

Malloy. I'd heard him in hearings with a mic and a smug little cough before he spoke. This was the same man, only now he had a skiff and a badge and a net.

"Port Control to all stations. Establishing a temporary safety zone: Outer Pier, Range Light A through Berth Seven. All nonessential movements hold position. No alongside operations. Maintain a listening watch. Only authorized traffic transmit. Port Control standing by on one-two. Out."

He said Out like a gate closing.

"Original costs me control."

Inez leaned forward, close enough I got wet neoprene and old diesel off her sleeves. "You don't have control. You're standing in mud at three-fifty-four talking like you still work a console."

I kept my voice level. "I know what I heard."

"Then you know it's either real or it's bait. Either way, people will be moving."

"Play it," I said. "Ten seconds."

She held her hand out without taking her eyes off me. I put my phone into it, not the microSD. The screen was spidered at one corner and smeared with my thumbprint. My VHF stayed in my other hand, knuckles white.

"Volume low," I said. "No speaker."

She rolled her eyes and jammed a wired earbud into her ear, the kind that came free with a cheap phone. She handed me the other bud like a dare.

I took it. Our fingers touched. Her skin was cold, callused. Mine was slick with mud and blood. The contact lasted a half second too long because she didn't let go first. Then she did, like she'd caught herself.

I tapped the file. The waveform on my screen was a jagged line—clipped peaks, a dirty floor. I scrubbed to the segment I'd marked in my head: where the voice forced protocol and the transmitter betrayed itself.

The earbud hissed. Then the mayday, thin and close, as if the mouth was right on the mic.

"Break-break, break-break—" the voice said, wrong cadence, too urgent, like it had been practiced. "Mayday, mayday, mayday

Not render assistance.

My spine went cold in a way my body tried to deny. That phrase wasn't tug talk. It was paperwork talk. It was someone who thought the harbor was a filing cabinet.

Rook.

The headlamp under the spool moved again, tracking up to my face. The man with the stutter handset didn't shout. He just let the light sit there, steady, like a finger.

Inez leaned in until her mouth was close to my ear. "If that cuts, we run. Gate. Shed."

Her breath warmed the shell of my ear for half a second. Then she pushed away, putting all her weight into the cutters. The hinge gave a millimeter with a wet squeal.

On 16, NORTHBAY waited. The channel demanded my next word.

If I kept answering, the tug stayed pulled away—but I fed the log with lies that could bury me.

If I went silent, the tug might swing back toward the barge before Inez got me free.

The headlamp didn't blink.

I raised the handheld, thumb hovering over PTT, and chose which danger I could afford.

02:33

My thumb found the PTT like it was a trigger.

"NORTHBAY, JUNE STAR. Break. I am not abandoning. I am on the barge, port side, aft of the spool rack. One person with a light has eyes on me. Request you stand off the barge. Do not come alongside until you have law enforcement on scene. Over."

—vessel—" A swallow. "—vessel Green Heron... position five-zero—"

It stumbled. Not panic. Deliberate. A digit missing where it should be clean, like someone didn't want the MMSI to resolve in a database.

I paused it with my thumb. "Hear that?"

Inez didn't answer, but her eyes had narrowed. She was listening with her face.

"The 'break-break' is wrong," I said. "Distress doesn't lead with it. That's for priority traffic. Someone wanted everyone to stop talking before they pushed the rest through."

"That could just be a moron," she said.

I shook my head once. "Listen to the mic."

I played half a second back. The audio peaked on consonants. The high end was shredded, like the mic element was cracked or the windscreen was torn and the capsule was getting hit direct.

"That distortion," I said. "It's a cheap handset with a falling electret. Not a fixed mount. The clipping's consistent. That transmitter's been like that for weeks, maybe months."

Inez's eyes flicked away and back. A check against her own memory. A list of who sounded like that on the water. She didn't like what she found.

"And there's a gate tone," I added. "Squelch tail too short. They were riding the PTT like they were scared of being direction-found."

Inez pulled the earbud out hard enough to sting my ear. "Okay," she said. She didn't say okay to me. She said it to the problem becoming hers.

packet—grease, stolen from some maintenance kit. Logistics as care. She tore it with her teeth and smeared it on the hinge, fingers slick, then worked the joint with brutal little twists.

Our hands overlapped on the handle, her knuckles rapping mine. Warmth through wet fabric. For two seconds it was just leverage and breath in a tight space.

Then the searching man's headlamp sliced under the spool.

The beam hit our boots. Lit the frayed cuff of my pants, the shine of the handheld's antenna. It paused, as if the light itself had decided to think.

My stomach dropped. My mouth went sand-dry.

On the radio, the tug captain came back, voice harder now, trying to own the channel.

“JUNE STAR, NORTHBAY. Roger your position and description. We are getting underway. Remain on one-six. Advise if you are abandoning to a life raft. Over.”

He'd committed. Good. He'd also ordered me to stay talking, to keep the record alive.

Before I could answer, another transmission slid in—not on 16. The handheld's scan feature was on, a mistake I'd meant to fix, and it caught a sliver of working traffic between squelch drops. Channel 12, maybe 68. Short. Clipped. Same scratch in the consonants as the earlier “keep it that way.” Same cheap mic pushed too hot.

“—NORTHBAY, switch plan. Secure evidence. Do not render —” The last word got eaten by the scan hopping back toward sixteen.

Secure evidence.

I took the phone back and killed the playback. My battery icon on the phone dropped a sliver. One more cost, paid in quiet.

Inez snapped the plastic case shut and shoved it under the thwart. Then she dragged a battered lithium pack out from under a tarp. It was wrapped in duct tape. The casing bulged slightly in the middle, swollen like a bruise. The leads were stiff from old heat shrink.

“This'll run your handheld,” she said. “If it doesn't cook it.”

“Any other options?” I asked.

She smiled without humor. “Sure. Swim.”

I held out my VHF. She took it from me like she'd done this a hundred times, flipped it, found the charging port, and jammed in a connector that didn't match until it did. The cable had a kink where copper had almost given up. She twisted the plug until the screen on my VHF blinked and the battery icon changed to a lightning bolt.

Then it flickered.

Inez's thumb pressed on the connector. The bolt held. She released. It flickered again.

“That connection's garbage,” I said.

“It's a connection,” she said. “Don't tug it. Don't look at it wrong. Don't breathe on it.”

I watched her taped crimp joint. The cheap connector she'd forced was under the tape, pretending to be solid. It wasn't. One hard jolt, one wrong wave, and my handheld would go dead at the worst time.

“I need it stable,” I said.

He started searching like he had time.

Deck lockers first. He kicked one swollen plywood hatch that didn't sit flush, pried it with his boot, and it popped with a tired crack of paint. His light went in. Empty. He moved to the lashings, ran his hand along a rope that had gone stiff with brine, then traced it to where it disappeared under the spool we were pinned behind.

Inez's eyes flicked down. Under the winch housing, where we'd shoved them earlier: bolt cutters, red paint chipped to bare steel, jaws half open like a mouth that wouldn't close.

She reached, careful, fingers sliding on greasy grit. Her nails scraped metal. The cutters came free with a soft clank that sounded like a church bell in my head.

She put them to the zip-tie binding my wrists. Squeezed.

Nothing.

The pivot hinge was seized with salt. The handles flexed. The jaws didn't.

Inez's lips tightened. No comment. Just a shift of her grip, thumb braced against the hinge pin, trying to break the corrosion. Her breath came out in short bursts, smelling faintly of old coffee and diesel.

"Left," she mouthed.

I angled the cutters for her, my bad hand shaking as it took the cold weight. The metal bit into my palm where the skin had already gone thin from rope burn. Pain flashed clean and hot. I didn't make a sound.

"Hold," she mouthed back. Then, without looking at me, she dug in her pocket and came up with a torn rag and a tiny foil

"You need it now," she corrected. "Tide doesn't care about your standards."

She kicked her boots against the mud and slid the skiff deeper into the cut. The hull made a wet scrape. She grabbed the brine-stiff bow line, the rope fibers swollen and abrasive, and heaved.

"Brace," she said.

I put my shoulder into the gunwale. Cold paint flaked under my coat. The skiff moved an inch, then stuck. The mud held it like a suction cup.

"Again," Inez said.

We pulled together. Our hands ended up on the same section of rope, hers over mine because she went for leverage without asking. The rope bit into the cut in my palm. Pain flashed clean and hot.

"Don't be delicate," she said, breath tight, close enough I felt it through the shared earbud cord still hanging between us like a leash.

"I'm not," I said, and yanked.

The rope slipped on the cleat with a wet pop. My hand skated forward. The fibers sawed into my skin. Blood went slick across my palm. I hissed through my teeth and held on anyway because letting go meant losing it and the skiff with it.

Three beats later, the skiff broke free with a loud slurp that sounded obscene in the open flats. The noise carried. The headlamp beam shivered on the water.

Inez froze, listening. So did I. Somewhere out on the flats, a faint clink answered—metal on metal. Not a gull. Not the tide.

"Get in," she said.

I keyed again, and made my voice smaller, thinner, like a man with water at his knees. No theatrics. Just breath cut short.

“NORTHBAY, JUNE STAR. MMSI unknown, DSC failure. Repeat position five zero degrees zero three decimal eight north, zero zero one degrees one eight decimal two west. Blue hull, white wheelhouse, Gardner six-cylinder, single screw. Water ingress aft, pumps not keeping up. Over.”

I hated myself for the specifics even as I said them. Blue hull, white wheelhouse—June Star wore that paint. I’d watched her in and out for years, watched her scrape fenders and flirt with the red can outside the shoal. Gardner six-cylinder was the kind of detail that made a lie stick in a tug captain’s mind. It also made it auditable when daylight came and someone asked why June Star was tied up safe at Pier Three.

The tug captain didn’t answer right away. In that silence, the barge got louder. The tug’s engine note changed; a low diesel growl climbed pitch as someone put it in gear. A line came up with a wet creak.

Half their boarding crew peeled away like I’d yanked a leash. Two men ran toward the tug’s ladder. One shouted something that fell into the engine noise.

One didn’t move.

The man with the stutter-PPT handset stayed. He turned his head, slow, toward our end of the barge. Not toward the tug. Toward the sound the handheld had made when it chirped. His headlamp beam dipped, then rose, like he was checking reflections. He was listening for the wrong thing: not the mayday, the room it came from.

I swung a leg over the gunwale and dropped into the skiff. The bottom was gritty with sand and old bait scales. Water seeped around my boot. I kept my injured hand close, flexing my fingers. Grip reduced. Every pulse of pain reminded me what I’d pay later for needing speed now.

Inez shoved off with an oar that had been patched with a sheet-metal screw. The blade hit the mud, levered, and the skiff slid into the cut. The water took us, reluctant, then gave.

Point of no return. I felt it in my gut as the flats behind us became distance and the channel ahead became commitment.

“Your file,” Inez said, settling the oar and reaching for her phone. “When we’re afloat. You said.”

“Conditional,” I said. “I send when I see the debris field.”

“And if you don’t?” Her tone stayed light. Her eyes didn’t.

“Then you got ten seconds and a direction to forget.”

She made a sound that might have been a laugh if it had any air in it. She thumbed her phone open. The screen glow lit her jawline, the grease smudge on her cheek, the cracked nail on her thumb.

“Name,” she said. “So I know who to request the transfer from. Don’t give me ‘Unknown’ like a cop.”

The skiff nosed out of the cut toward darker water. The taped lithium pack shifted under the thwart. My VHF’s charging bolt flickered again as the cable jostled.

Inez held her phone between us, waiting.

“Naomi,” I said, and tasted metal, dry mouth.

“Last,” she said.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is motor vessel JUNE STAR, JUNE STAR, JUNE STAR. Position five zero degrees zero three decimal eight north, zero zero one degrees one eight decimal two west. Taking on water, engine disabled. Four persons on board. Require immediate assistance. Over."

The deckhand's boot froze on the wet grit. His headlamp stopped its lazy sweep and snapped toward the harbor mouth like light could travel that far.

Across the barge, the tug's deck came alive. A figure in a hi-vis jacket broke into a run. Another went to the bits, hands already on a line that had trayed white where it rubbed steel. A third man yanked a fender, rubber scabbled and patched with duct tape, and threw it toward the tug's side.

It bought me exactly what I asked for: reaction time.

A voice came in over me, cutting in hard, clean transmitter, good gain, no stutter. Tug captain. He didn't waste words.

"Break-break. Break-break. Stations, silence on one-six. Mayday station, this is tug NORTHBAY on one-six. Say your MMSI. Say again your position. Vessel description. Over."

He stepped right on the weak tail end of my last syllable. Not rude. Trained. He was doing what my old supervisors used to demand: make the report pin down into something you can hang paper on later.

My throat tightened. I tasted penny-metal.

Inez's fingers found my wrist. Two quick taps: Keep them moving. Four minutes.

The channel widened. Somewhere ahead, a foghorn sounded over a dumpster. Behind us, another headlamp blinked once on the flats—higher now, closer to the cut we'd just left.

Inez's thumb hovered over her contact field.

I could lie and buy a sliver of privacy, or tell her the truth and risk that my name tripped a flag in somebody's system while my radio line was one bad crimp from going dark.

04:07. Tide height just barely bought us the cut.

Inez thumbed the choke and yanked the cord. The outboard answered with a cough that sprayed fuel stink and then nothing. The boat lost its forward pull and started to yaw, the current shouldering us like it wanted us back on the flats.

"Again," I said.

"I heard you." She lifted the cowl. The latch was swollen with rust and she had to smack it with the heel of her hand.

"Corrosion. Line's crusted."

"04:22," I said, watching the channel markers slide past too slow.

"Don't narrate the clock at me." She leaned in, face close to the engine, and the sodium lights drew a sharp edge on her cheekbone. "Hand me that."

The only tool we had was a screwdriver that used to be Phillips. Now it was a soft, rusted wedge. I passed it with my good hand. The cut on the other one throbbed, heat under the bandage. Every time the skiff rocked, the pain wrote its own tally.

Inez jabbed the screwdriver under a clamp and twisted. The clamp didn't move. The rubber line did, cracked and stiff, and

it with my sleeve, smearing grime. The battery indicator blinked one bar lower than I wanted.

Channel knob to 16. Volume down, then up just enough. My thumb found the PTT.

The deckhand took one step closer. Zip-ties rattled soft against his wrist.

02:26.

I had one move before he rounded the spool.

False mayday on 16, risk a file with my name on it.

Or keep my mouth shut and let their hands find me.

My thumb pressed the PTT halfway and stopped, waiting on my own choice.

02:27.

My thumb went the rest of the way down.

The handheld gave me that half-second squeal of the squelch tail, then the set's own little click like a cheap pen. I kept it tight to my thigh, speaker turned in, so the glow wouldn't sell me.

Inez's shoulder pressed my ribs. She didn't look. She listened.

I didn't have a proper red button for DSC on this junker. No MMSI programmed. No legal distress burst. But it did have a "CALL" function some genius thought would impress buyers: a faux-selective ping that hit the local repeater as a generic alert if you held it long enough. Harbor toys. Harbor lies.

I held it.

The set chirped a rising tone that made my molars itch. I counted two, three—cut it before it could loop again. Any longer and it would sound like exactly what it was.

Then voice, because voice is what moves bodies.

then the clamp finally gave with a grit-pop. Fuel dribbled, black in the light.

"That's not supposed to—" she started.

"Less talk," I said.

She shot me a look and then stripped insulation off a short length of scrap wire with her teeth. The wire had green crust on it, copper turned mean. She bridged two contacts on the starter solenoid, careful and fast, like she'd done it with worse.

"Hotwire it?" I said.

"Bypass," she said. "Words matter."

She touched the wire. The engine kicked once, then caught. It ran rough, like it was chewing bolts, but it ran. The skiff surged forward, bow lifting, my stomach dropping a fraction with the acceleration. Inez kept the wire jammed in place with the rusted screwdriver, handle wedged under the cowling lip like a splint.

"Temporary," she said, not looking at me.

"Everything is," I said.

The channel narrowed. On either side, pilings rose out of the water, slick with algae and striped with barnacles that scraped when we brushed too close. The wake slapped the wood, sending up a spray that tasted like old creosote and low-tide rot.

My handheld VHF sat between my boots, strapped with frayed line. Its charging cable was a bad crimp and a prayer. I brought it up, thumbed the volume until the squelch hissed like an angry leak.

Channel 12 was Port Operations, morning shift waking up.

"Port Ops, this is Tug Seventeen, inbound Berth Three with barge, over."

Naomi Kestrel, I told myself. You can't see your brother's name in a tube if you're zip-tied to a stanchion.

A handheld chirped again. The stutter-PPT radio. He was closer to our side, searching. I leaned my head a fraction, ear turned like it could pull signal through steel.

“—any traffic on sixteen?” he asked. He didn't say who he was asking. No call sign. No record. Just business.

The reply came immediately. “Negative. Keep it that way.” I knew that voice, too. Not the man. The transmitter. The mic distortion rode on the consonants like a scratch on vinyl. Same fingerprint as the mayday. Same cheap radio pushed past its limits. Costly clue. Confirmed.

My mouth went drier. I swallowed and felt nothing happen. Inez's fingers found my sleeve, pinched once. A question without words: Are we moving or dying here?

Ahead, a deckhand's boot scraped near the spool. Close enough that I could see the algae smear under his sole. He paused. Headlamp swung.

I held my breath. My injured hand tremored against my ribs. The VHF there felt heavier than it had any right to.

I could stay silent and trust steel and luck for thirty seconds. Or I could make sound—clean, official sound—and drag their attention away from our pocket.

But once I keyed up on 16, I wasn't just talking to them. I was lighting a screen in a watchstander's shack. I was putting my old life back on the record.

I pulled the handheld out, palmed it low against my thigh to hide the glow. Wet grit had worked into the speaker grille. I wiped

“Tug Seventeen, Port Ops, roger. Hold short of the turning basin. Pilot delayed. Standing by, over.”

“Tug Seventeen, Wilco. Out.”

I flicked to 14. Terminal traffic. Same clipped voices, same tired patience. Bureaucracy on a loop. It would be comforting if it didn't kill people.

The handheld stuttered once. A brief, digital chirp pushed through the squelch—DSC. Short. Not followed by a voiced distress. No “Mayday.” No coordinates. Just a burst like a knock at a door and no one answering.

I stared at the screen. No decoded message. My set was cheap and half-broken; it didn't always catch the payload. But I caught the cadence. That rhythmic stutter in the carrier. The same mic distortion I'd heard earlier, a slight flattening in the highs like someone talking through a damp sock over a base station.

Same transmitter family. Same habit.

I logged it anyway. 04:09:18. DSC burst, unvoiced. Possible test. Possible ping.

Inez cut the throttle and angled us toward shadow.

“You see that?” she said.

Ahead: a pier belly, low and black, with drips of creosote falling slow from the beams. The pier's edge hid the shoreline cameras mounted on rusted brackets. I'd seen them in daylight, glass domes with salt-crazed seams.

“Back route,” she said. “No eyes.”

“No eyes,” I repeated, and pictured the trade. Hiding bought us time from optics and sold it to the water.

I needed to be sure. Sure meant closer.

I slid my knee forward a few inches. The deck was slick. My pants soaked through immediately. I pulled my weight over my good hand and kept the bad one tucked tight, useless. The spool smelled like wet iron and old grease. A frayed rope end hung from it, brine-stiff, fibers like wire. I caught it with two fingers and used it to steady myself. It cut my skin anyway.

Inez's shoulder brushed mine. Warm through wet neoprene. She didn't look at me. She watched their feet.

One deckhand crossed our line of sight. His headlamp beam swept, caught the swollen plywood, flashed off a puddle, and moved on. His knife handle was chipped. His gloves were split at the knuckles, taped with electrical tape that had gone gummy.

"Split up," the older voice said, close now, not over the radio. "You. Port side. You. Find the deck box." He sounded like he'd say "port side" even in bed.

A fourth man stayed on the tug, hauling a line over with a gaff hook. The line was frayed, core showing where it had chafed on cleats. He made it fast with quick turns around a bitt. Knuckles red from cold and rope burn.

They were going to secure the barge and call it "under tow." Once they did, the paper story became physical. Everything on this steel became "salvage," "recovery," "lawful custody." Dale Rook could bury a body under compliance forms and a clean signature.

02:21. Six minutes, maybe, before they had a tow connection that held.

We slid under the pier. Sound changed. The engine note flattened, trapped under wood. Drops hit the water with hollow ticks. The smell turned heavier—wet timber, diesel sheen, and something sour from a trash pocket caught on a piling.

Floating junk rode the current under here like it owned the place. Plastic bottles, a swollen plywood scrap, a frayed rag that might've been a shirt. A torn net drifted, its strands shining with slime.

"Prop—" I said.

Too late. The outboard tone jumped, went high and angry. The skiff shuddered as if it hit bottom, then started to spin. Inez killed throttle hard and we lost forward motion. Current took us sideways toward a piling.

"Hold," she snapped, grabbing the oar. She shoved off the piling just before we kissed it. The barnacles on the wood were close enough I could hear the scrape.

The engine whined again when she tried to feather it. Something was wrapped.

Inez looked at me. "Your hand's already—"

"Stop," I said. I didn't want her saying it like she cared. It would make it real.

I leaned over the stern, braced my knee against the transom. The water below was black with reflected sodium light broken into jittery coins. I plunged my good arm in first, then the injured one because I needed both.

Cold punched up my sleeve. The cut hit water and fire ran down to my wrist. My fingers went numb fast, then useless.

“—on seventy-two. You got eyes?” The last word flattened into fuzz. Loose antenna? Bad connector? Or the speaker grille clogged with grit.

I held still, counting the seconds between their transmissions, tracking the rhythm like a heartbeat you don't want to admit you can hear.

The second radio answered. Different squelech tail. Cleaner audio, higher gain. The voice was older, practiced, the kind that talked like everything was routine because that was safer than truth.

“Roger. Stand by. Don't touch the tube until I see it.” No “Over.” Again. Because they didn't think anyone official was listening. Because they thought the only ears out here were theirs.

Manifest tube. Deck box. The words snapped into place with the earlier coded mayday in my head. That transmission had been clipped and wrong, protocol broken in the same spots. Whoever had called had skipped the formalities the same way—like rules were for people who got paid by the hour.

Another key-up. A double key, fast. PTT switch bouncing. You could hear it: carrier up, carrier down, carrier up again like a stutter. The voice came with it, too close to the mic, breath hitting the capsule.

“—move. Move, move. We're on the clock.”

My stomach dropped and held there. That stutter. That exact stutter had been on the mayday. Not the words—the hardware. Loose PTT, worn contacts, someone squeezing too hard because their hands were wet or shaking. The same squelech tail after, the same clipped consonants.

I felt the prop blades by touch, the edges nicked. A line of trash bag plastic had twisted around the shaft, tight as a tourniquet. A strip of netting too, thin but strong. I hooked it with my fingertips and pulled.

It didn't give. It sliced into my cut through the wet bandage. I bit down until my molars complained.

“Naomi,” Inez said, low.

“I've got it.” I lied because lying was faster.

I slid my hand down again, found the knot point where the plastic had cinched. I tore at it. The plastic stretched, then snapped, recoil slapping my knuckles. My sleeve came up soaked, heavy and cold. The net still held.

Inez held the skiff steady with the oar, muscles tight in her forearm, grease and water streaking her skin. We were close enough under the pier that our shoulders nearly brushed when she leaned. She smelled like warm metal and old coffee.

I found the net's lead line and tugged. It dragged across the prop and finally slipped free with a slick, reluctant release. My cut screamed. I hissed air through my teeth.

I lifted my hands out. Water poured off my sleeves and drummed on the aluminum. My bandage was dark, clinging. Blood diluted fast, turning pink in the drips.

“Done,” I said.

Inez nodded once. No thank you. Logistics only. She bumped the throttle. The engine caught again, rough but turning clean.

We slid out from under the pier into open water. The wind had teeth here; it pushed small chop against the hull and made the skiff rattle. Sodium lights buzzed overhead, their glare showing slick

“Here,” Inez breathed, barely moving her mouth.

“Yeah.” My throat was dry. Dry meant scared. I tasted old coffee and low-tide rot through it.

Boots thumped above the gunwale. A deckhand swung over first, fast, body low like he’d done a hundred boardings. He had a work knife on his belt and a short gaff in his hand, not for fish—hook to snag lines, hook to snag people. Two more came after him, one carrying zip-ties looped over his wrist like pale bracelets.

Their soles skated on algae. One of them corrected with a hand to the deck, palm slapping wet steel. Nobody laughed. They were here to do a job before it turned into paperwork.

A bolt cutter came over last, tossed rather than carried. It hit with a clang that rang in the spool’s hollow core, bounced once, and slid across the deck, black jaws open like it was hungry. It kept sliding, slow and stubborn, until a boot clipped it by accident. The deckhand swore under his breath and kicked it away without looking. The cutter skittered under a winch housing and vanished.

Good. A tool that disappears is a tool you trip on later.

A handheld VHF cracked somewhere on their side. Squelch burst, a hiss like tearing Velcro.

“...check, check—” The voice was close enough to feel through the steel. Cheap mic. Electret capsule, pushed too hot. Hard clipping on plosives. A squelch tail that hung a fraction too long, like the radio’s too lazy to shut up.

They were listening on 16 first. Everyone listened on 16. It was the rule and the habit. Then the same radio clicked—no “Over,” no call sign—and jumped to a working channel.

patches where diesel lay on the surface in thin rainbows. My wet sleeve stuck to my forearm. The cold made my fingers stiff.

04:12. The clock was a weight behind my eyes.

We ran the narrow channel hard, skimming past a line of moored workboats with chipped paint and names flaking off. One had a frayed spring line creaking as the wake tugged it. A discarded neoprene glove hung from a cleat like it had been nailed there.

Inez kept the bypass wire pressed with the screwdriver. The wire was already warming. I could smell it: insulation heating, a faint sharpness under the fuel and rot.

“Don’t let that slip,” I said, meaning more than the tool.

“Hands busy,” she said. “Eyes busy. You want to help, watch the radio and the water.”

I did both. My handheld’s speaker hissed, then cleared. Channel 12 again.

“Port Ops, Port Ops, this is Patrol Two. Conducting routine shoreline check. Requesting traffic advisory, over.”

“Patrol Two, Port Ops, roger. No reported hazards. Keep clear of inbound tug traffic. Standing by, over.”

Patrol Two. Not my friend. Not my enemy either. Just a form with a propeller.

We crested a small chop and the debris field showed itself in broken pieces ahead, caught where current met piling forest. Foam blocks bobbed like teeth. Pallet wood, dark and swollen, spun slowly. A torn tarp snagged on a crossbeam, flapping its edge in the wind, making a wet snapping sound.

“04:16,” I said. My throat was dry enough to stick.

I looked at my VHF. Then at Luca's taped mouth and Hale's bleeding wrists and the compliance hold stamp melting in oily water.

Transmit, and invite the whole harbor.

Or stay quiet, and race the crew coming down on us.  
My thumb pressed—halfway—then stopped.

## Range Lights Out

02:18

The tug came in like it owned the water. Stubby bow, working lights taped and smeared, hull paint scabbed down to primer and orange rust. Its fenders hit the barge with a wet squeal that set my teeth on edge. The rub rail bit, metal on metal, and the barge shivered under my boots.

Sodium lamps along the harbor line buzzed like bad ballast. Their light flattened everything—no shadows deep enough to hide in, just glare and the shine of diesel sheen in puddles. Algae slicked the deck plates where the last tide had licked. Dropping tide now. The barge sat lower. The gap between tug and barge widened and narrowed as they worked the push, like jaws testing a bone.

Inez and I were already tucked behind a corroded cable spool and a stack of swollen plywood dunnage. The plywood edges had ballooned and split, nails furred white with corrosion. My injured hand pressed against the spool flange. Cold steel. My grip didn't trust me.

Inez eased in. She didn't cut the engine all the way—kept it idling, ready to run. That choice kept us mobile and kept the noise up. Everything cost.

I stepped forward, boots grinding grit embedded in the skiff's floor. The sand from the flats had worked into every seam. It made a sound like teeth.

I leaned out and grabbed a piece of foam, pulled it close. It was stenciled once, now rubbed off, paint flaked and crazed from sun and water. Useless.

Another piece drifted near. Pallet slat. I hooked it with a boat hook that had a bent tip. The metal had a bloom of rust and the handle tape was peeling. I pulled the slat over the gunwale. It thumped down, sending the skiff into a tilt.

"Careful," Inez said. "You're loading the wrong side."

"Noted," I said. I flipped the slat. Nothing.

Then I saw it: a longer beam, maybe part of a crate frame, lodged against a piling. The beam's paint was chipped, a corporate blue under layers of gray grime. Letters stuttered along the side.

I moved toward it. The skiff bumped the piling and barnacles scraped aluminum. The beam was higher than the gunwale. To see the far side, I'd have to climb up.

My injured hand curled, reluctant. My fingers trembled once and then stopped, like they'd made a decision without me.

"I need eyes on the other side," I said.

"Don't fall," Inez said, which meant: don't make me choose between you and the motor.

I planted a boot on the skiff's forward seat. The vinyl was cracked, edges curled. I reached for the beam with my good hand,

Inez grabbed Hale under the armpits and dragged him toward the opening. Her hands worked like she'd done this before. Luca tried to help with his one free wrist, fumbling at his own ties, eyes wild.

My radio was a brick against my ribs. Battery indicator already down one bar from listening under steel and pushing squelch. If I transmitted, my carrier would be a flare. It would also be recorded. It could force response beyond Port Security. It could also bury Luca under "rescued smuggler" the second anyone in uniform saw him.

The water rose to my elbows. Cold seeped through my sleeves. My injured hand cramped around the door edge. Grip compromised, slipping.

I keyed the VHF to wake it. My thumb hovered over transmit. Proper protocol lined up in my head like a checklist I didn't want to sign.

Pan-Pan would bring help without the full search-and-rescue machine. DSC distress would light up every screen and log every ID. Either would put my name in a file that Captain Malloy could stall or weaponize. Radio silence meant we dragged them out ourselves before boots hit the deck overhead.

Above us, something heavy thumped. A footstep on container top? Or a deckhand on the frame.

Inez met my eyes in the headlamp's weak cone. Her face was wet with spray and sweat. Her jaw worked once. She didn't say please.

"Naomi," she said. "Now."

tested it. It shifted, slick with algae. My shin bumped the gunwale and pain lit a line down my leg.

I pulled myself up anyway. My injured hand had to take weight. The cut protested hard, heat and pressure and then a numb float as adrenaline stepped in. The beam rolled a fraction under my palm. My wet sleeve made everything slick.

"Naomi," Inez warned, voice tight now.

"I've got it," I said again, and meant it less.

I twisted my torso, keeping my center low. The beam's far side came into view under the sodium glare. Stencil. Black letters. Crisp enough to hate.

DALE ROOK SALVAGE.

Below it, smaller print. Invoice line. Partially rubbed. The numbers were smeared, paint missing where something had scraped it hard.

I fished my phone out with my good hand. Thumbprint wouldn't take on the wet screen. I wiped it on my jeans, which were already damp. The camera opened. I snapped a photo. The timestamp burned into the file like a receipt.

I zoomed. The invoice number sharpened, then pixelated. I adjusted angle, leaned closer, and the beam rolled again.

My bad hand slid. My boot skated on grit and wet vinyl. My stomach dropped. I hit the piling with my shoulder and my shin slammed the beam edge. A bright, blunt pain bloomed. I caught myself with my forearm, teeth clacking.

"Jesus," Inez breathed.

I didn't answer. Answering would make it a fall instead of a stumble.

“With what?” I shoved the door wider. The metal edge scraped my knuckles. More blood, warm in cold water. The opening yawned into a darker cavity that led—if the box was built the way I thought—to an access corridor between the container wall and whatever they’d built inside. A path out, maybe. Also a funnel. Water poured harder once the seal broke. It didn’t just creep now. It pushed, a steady shove against my forearms. The sound filled the space, loud enough to travel up through the ribs and out into open air.

Outside, through the steel, I heard a change in engine pitch again. Not strain. Decision.

My handheld VHF, half-dead under the container, spat a clear burst as if the tug’s own transmission punched through the steel.

“Break-break, break-break, all stations, all stations, this is Tug Kestrel Two on one-two. Tamper event received, container ID KMXU eight-seven-four-one-six-two. Request Port Control advise. Over.”

Container ID spoken aloud. They’d just logged it into the harbor’s ear.

Port Control came back fast, tighter now.

“Tug Kestrel Two, Port Control. Roger. Hold position. Stand by for Port Security response. Do not proceed until compliance cleared. Over.”

Hold position meant they’d stop right here and send bodies. Proceed meant they’d clear jurisdiction and make it someone else’s paperwork. Either way, we were under a steel box filling with water with two bound men and one way out we’d just opened by tripping a sensor.

I took two more photos, different angles, chasing the last digits. Invoice: 41—?—8. The middle was gone. I could work that later if I had the full company format. If I got to later.

I climbed down wrong, favoring my shin. The moment my boot hit the skiff floor, it complained. A limp arrived like a bill due.

“Give me a piece,” Inez said.

“Physical,” I said. “Yeah.”

I grabbed a broken placard nailed to the beam with corroded staples. The plastic was cracked, edges sharp. It took effort to pry; the staples squealed and then snapped, one staying embedded like a tooth. When it came free, it came too free. I jerked backward and nearly sat down in the bilge water.

The skiff rocked hard. Water lapped over the gunwale and spilled inside. The placard was bigger than it looked. I shoved it under the thwart, but it shifted our center. The boat sat wrong.

“We’re riding like a drunk,” Inez said.

“Keep us alive and complain later,” I said, and my voice came out flatter than I intended.

04:19. We had proof. We also had a skiff that wanted to roll and a bypass wire heating under a rusted screwdriver.

My handheld VHF sat heavy in my palm. The decision was a rock in my gut. If we left now with no call, no record, it looked like what it was: sneaking. If I made a safety call, even a clean one, it put me back on the board. Port logs didn’t forget. Auditors didn’t either.

I swallowed and tasted blood from where I’d bitten my cheek. I keyed up on Channel 12. Kept it clipped. Proper.

then nothing. My advantage—the clean read of a voice—was buried under panic breathing and steel vibration.

I shifted to Hale. His badge lanyard dug into his neck. The compliance hold form was still pinched between his fingers, soaked now, ink bleeding. Proof dissolving in real time.

I made the call that cost us later.

“Hold him,” I told Inez. “We take him too.”

Inez’s face went still. Not agreement. Not refusal. Calculation. Then she jammed her knee against Luca’s hip to keep him from sliding out and planted her boot against the frame. Her body locked into the job. Shared breath in a space too small. No room for doubt. No room for clean.

I dug my fingers under the patch edge and found the internal door seam behind it. A gasket swollen with water, stuck. There was a tiny black puck mounted near the seam—too neat, too new. A sensor. The kind that doesn’t scream. The kind that sends.

Point of no return sat under my fingernail.

“Fast,” Inez said.

I pulled.

02:29

The gasket tore with a wet rip, like tearing meat off a bone. The hinges complained, corroded and tight, then gave. The door opened past a hand’s width and something in the seam chirped—small, almost polite. A relay click followed, deeper, final.

My mouth went dry again. My gut dropped hard enough to make my vision narrow.

“That’s a ping,” I said.

Inez’s eyes cut to the puck. “Kill it.”

“Port Operations, Port Operations, this is skiff Kestrel, safety call, over.”

Inez’s head snapped toward me. Her eyes said: why. She didn’t speak.

“Skiff Kestrel, Port Ops, go ahead, over.”

My mouth dried further. I forced the words out like pulling line through a jammed fairlead.

“Port Ops, skiff Kestrel. Hazard debris observed in vicinity of Pier Nine east pilings, floating timber and foam. Recommend caution for small craft. Standing by on one-two. Over.”

A beat. The radio hissed around their silence.

“Skiff Kestrel, Port Ops, roger hazard. Provide position in degrees and minutes, over.”

There it was. The net tightening. If I gave exact coordinates, I drew an arrow. If I didn’t, I looked like I was playing games on a recorded channel.

I looked at the shoreline. Cameras. Lights. The pier we’d hidden under. Patrol Two out there somewhere with a clipboard brain.

Inez leaned in close, voice low enough it wouldn’t hit the mic. “Don’t.”

I didn’t answer her. I answered the radio.

“Port Ops, skiff Kestrel. Position approximate: east side Pier Nine, between pilings E-3 and E-5. Unable to safely provide GPS at this time. Over.”

“Skiff Kestrel, Port Ops, roger. Patrol unit will investigate. Remain clear. Out.”

Out. Clean. Logged.

If I keyed up now, my mismatched antenna would spit a distorted carrier that a direction finder could smell. If I stayed silent, I'd be blind and deaf under a moving steel box. The water slid again. The angle changed. The black sheet crept toward my elbows, carrying grit and oil. It made my skin crawl. Inez freed Luca's right wrist. He yanked his hand back like it was on fire and immediately tried to pull his taped mouth free with his fingers. His hands shook too hard. "Don't," I said, and grabbed his forearm. My cut palm slipped on his sweat. "Wait." He looked at me like he wanted to argue. He couldn't. The tape held his words hostage. Hale thrashed again, panicking now that Luca was moving. His shoulders shoved into Luca's back, shifting weight in the compartment. The plywood frame creaked. Something small and plastic clattered in the water under us. I looked down. My serrated blade had dropped from Inez's grip when the container jolted. It hit the oily water and sank out of the headlamp beam like it wanted to disappear. "No," I said, too sharp. Inez's eyes flashed. She didn't apologize. She reached for her snips again and forced them open with both hands, tendon strain showing at her wrist. "Naomi," she said. "Pick."

I swallowed blood taste from my split knuckle. I leaned my head close to Luca's tape, ear near his mouth, risking everything outside. His breath was ragged, noisy, masking any attempt at numbers. I could just make out a hissed consonant,

My thumb came off the transmit key. My hand shook once, small and fast. The cut throbbled again now that adrenaline was leaking away. Inez exhaled through her nose. "You just put your name back in their inbox." "I put a reason," I said. My shin pulsed with each heartbeat. I shifted weight and the limp sharpened. "It matters." "Not to the kind of people you're worried about," she said, and then she turned back to the engine. The wire under the screwdriver had a faint curl to it now, insulation softening. The battery pack under the thwart shifted with the swell. The taped connection crackled. My handheld speaker popped as if someone keyed nearby without speaking. Squelch opened on a faint carrier—steady, unvoiced. Not Channel 12 chatter. A presence sitting on the frequency like a parked car with the lights off. I stared at the radio. The hair on my forearm lifted under the wet sleeve. "You hear that?" Inez said. "Yeah," I said. "We're being scanned." The outboard sputtered once. The bypass wire must've moved. Inez jammed the screwdriver harder, knuckles white. The metal tool slipped a millimeter and the engine note wavered. Above us, a mechanical hum bled into the air, low at first, then building. Not a truck. Not a generator. Rotors, chewing the dark. I looked up at the sodium glare and the underside of the pier lines. "Move," I said.

My cut hand fumbled the serrated blade out of my pocket. The handle was slick. I wiped it on my thigh. It didn't help.

Inez brought her snips to Luca's wrist tie. The jaws closed. Metal met plastic. The hinge seized halfway.

"Come on," she hissed, and forced it. The rusted pivot bound hard, then gave a millimeter and stopped again.

Tool failure at the worst time. Of course.

"Use mine," I said, and pushed my blade into her hand. Our fingers overlapped on the grip for a second. Her skin was cold. My breath caught, stupid and physical, and then the container jolted again and the moment snapped into work.

She sawed at the tie with the serrations. The blade skated once and nicked Luca's wrist. A thin line of blood welled. Luca didn't make a sound. He just stared at Inez like he was memorizing her.

I leaned in for Hale's hands. My radio pressed against my ribs, heavy. Under steel, it was mostly static, but I couldn't stop listening. Habit. Need.

A squelch break cut through the mush.

"...Kestrel Two, Port Control. Roger. Maintain slow ahead, hold within berth until confirmed. Over."

The tug's bridge answered, and even through interference I caught the rasp at word-start, the same dented mic signature.

"Port Control, Kestrel Two. Wilco. Standing by. Over."

Wilco. Will comply. Like the harbor was a checklist and they were ticking boxes.

No names said. No container ID repeated. They were keeping the record clean while they moved anyway.

Inez shoved the throttle.

The skiff hesitated, bow lifting wrong with the placard's weight, and the hum overhead grew louder like it was coming straight down on us.

04:18

The hum dropped into the gap between piles like it belonged there. A hard, steady note. Then light—white, flat, mean—snapped on and cut a rectangle through the dark under Pier Nine. The beam found the skiff like it had been waiting for the word.

The drone came down from above the deckline, a black box with four rotors and a camera eye hanging on a gimbal. It held itself stupid-still in the moving air, spotlight bolted to its belly. The sodium lamps buzzed behind it, making its edges swim.

Four minutes to the tide turn. I could feel it in the tug on the painter line and the way the scum line on the pilings looked higher every time the beam swept past. When it turned, the channel would tighten and speed up. Hiding spots would go away. Mud that was soft now would pull like glue.

Inez saw the same math. Her hand stabbed the kill switch.

The outboard died. The sudden quiet made my ears ring. Without the engine's vibration the skiff felt lighter, wrong, like a shopping cart with one wheel off the ground. We drifted sideways on the set, slow at first, then a little faster as the current took the bow.

"Line," Inez said.

"I see it." Fouled rope hung below the surface, a gray braid with barnacles on it, waiting to wrap a prop that wasn't turning. We didn't have that problem now. We had new ones.

He mouthed around tape, barely audible through the gap.  
“Hale.”

I didn't know if it was true. It didn't matter yet.

“SC-4417,” I said. “That's Rook?”

His gaze cut to Luca, then back to me. A tiny nod. Then, like a man filing a report even in a hole, he forced out one more thing, a partial truth with teeth.

“Invoice... nine... seven... two... one... K.” The last sound was swallowed by tape and his own breath.

Inez leaned in, close enough that her shoulder pressed mine. The cramped space made heat between us. Her hand steadied my wrist for a second, fingers on my pulse like she was checking a line, not touching me.

“Move,” she said. “They tow, this turns into a coffin.”

02:26

The tug took strain.

You feel it under steel before you hear it. The container's belly tightened. Ribs vibrated. A long groan ran through the frame and into my teeth. The compartment shifted half an inch against my shoulder. Water that had been sitting in a channel rolled toward us in a dark sheet.

Inez braced her forearm against the frame to keep the patch from slamming shut. Her headlamp beam shook with the vibration.

“Cut Luca first,” she said.

Hale—if that was his name—made a choking sound and kicked once, the movement jerking Luca's bound body. The zip ties bit deeper. Luca's eyes squeezed shut with pain.

The battery pack under the thwart shifted with the swell. Its casing had swollen from too many charges, the plastic bowed like a bad blister. I'd wedged it under my knee to keep it from sliding into the bilge. The spotlight made it gleam dull and tired. When the skiff rocked, it moved anyway, and the taped lead tugged at the handheld's plug.

If the plug came out, my only clean record died with it.

I slid my knee harder against the pack. The plastic creaked.

“Don't fight the tide,” Inez muttered, not looking up. Her hands were on the gunwale, fingers splayed, feeling drift and angle like she could read it through splinters and chipped paint.

“Let it take us behind E-5.”

“E-5 has a ladder,” I said.

“E-5 has shadow.”

It used to. The drone's beam made its own weather.

The placard—laminated, cracked at one corner—shifted under my other leg with each bump. Every scrape of barnacle against hull shivered up my shin. The cut in my palm pulsed, wet inside my glove.

The drone's camera gimbal ticked, micro-adjusting. I heard the little servo whine, and beneath it a faint carrier tone like someone sitting on a frequency with their thumb on the edge of transmit.

I lifted the handheld to my mouth. The radio was slick from diesel sheen and my blood. Channel 12 was Port Ops' working channel. They'd already logged me once.

Choice: silence and let the light do all the talking, or transmit and make a paper trail that somebody would have to shred. I keyed up.

I leaned in until my headlamp beam washed Luca's face. The air in the compartment was hotter, used. Sweat, tape adhesive, urine fear. Luca tried to speak. The tape made it a wet, muffled mess. His eyes flicked past me, toward the outer dark, like he could hear the tug through steel too.

I asked the only question he could answer without words.

"Did you transmit the mayday?" I said.

Luca's gaze held mine for one beat. Then he shook his head. Small. Controlled. No.

Behind him, the auditor made a sound against his own tape—hmm—insistent. He twisted his bound hands up as far as he could, showing me something pinched between his fingers.

A folded form. Damp. Stamped with a red rectangle that said PORT AUTHORITY—COMPLIANCE HOLD. A handwritten reference number under it: SC-4417. Salvage claim. The ink had bled where it touched wet.

Inez saw it too. Her jaw tightened.

"That's heat," she said.

"It's leverage," I said, though the word felt thin.

I reached in, careful. The plywood edge had splinters. One caught my knuckle and tore it. Blood again. The compartment didn't care who I was. It took what it could.

I slipped two fingers under the auditor's tape at the corner and pulled it down just enough to clear his nostrils. Not his mouth. Not yet.

He sucked air like it was a resource. His eyes didn't thank me. They counted me.

"Name," I said.

"Port Authority Patrol, Port Ops working, this is skiff—" I stopped. No registered call sign. Just my stupid human name and a boat that wasn't mine on paper. "—small skiff east side Pier Nine requesting instructions. Over."

The drone didn't answer on VHF. The drone answered with a speaker.

Its voice came out tinny and amplified, bouncing off wet pilings. Bureaucratic, clipped, not quite human. The words were clean. The mic wasn't.

"Naomi Kestrel, heave to. Stand by to be inspected."

My stomach dropped like the skiff had lost a plank. The beam held on my face. It saw every flinch.

I didn't look at Inez. I kept my eyes on the drone, on the camera eye that didn't blink.

It wasn't the words that hit. It was the sound under them.

Cheap condenser mic. A dented diaphragm. A rasp on sibilants. The exact same distortion I'd been hearing in the clipped mayday fragments—like someone had soldered a bad joint and learned to live with the hiss.

The net wasn't outside the system. It was inside it.

My mouth went dry. I swallowed and tasted low-tide rot coming up from the mud under the pier. Somewhere above, a foghorn sounded once, late, like it had been paid to warn the wrong people.

Inez's head turned just enough for me to see her jaw set. "They said your name."

"Yeah," I said. My voice didn't carry. The drone didn't need to hear it.

Inez adjusted, planted her boot on the rubber mat like a brace even though we were half a meter away now, and levered again. The bar held this time. Metal gave with a tired complaint.

She peeled the patch back.

Inside was not empty space. It was an improvised compartment, framed with plywood that had swollen and darkened at the edges, bolted with hardware that didn't match. Zip ties crossed the opening like cheap rigging.

A face stared out at me from the black.

Luca. Eyes open, pupils wide, cheek bruised yellow-green. Tape across his mouth, damp at the corners. His breath came ragged through his nose, whistling. His wrists were bound tight enough that the skin bulged around the ties.

Behind him, wedged sideways, another man. Suit shirt torn at the collar, tie gone, glasses still on somehow. His expression was flat, even with panic in his eyes, like he was watching a balance sheet collapse and trying to find the column to blame. An ID lanyard was looped around his neck. The badge had Port Authority colors and a number printed too large: AUD-3179.

My stomach went heavy. An auditor. Here. In the box.

Inez's hand went to her snips. Diagonal cutters with rust at the hinge, the handles taped. She opened them, tested the bite on nothing.

"Cut," she said.

"We don't—" My voice came out too loud. I swallowed it down. "We don't cut everything."

Her look was sharp.

"Naomi—"

"You didn't tell me it was like this."

"I didn't—" The sentence died. The truth had too many hooks.

"I didn't think they had you integrated."

"Who is 'they'?" Her eyes flicked to my radio, then back to the light. "Naomi Kestrel isn't a skiff. That's a person on a list."

"Stand by means stand by," I said, and my thumb hovered over transmit again. "If I comply, they take the placard. They take the

radio. They take—"

"Your brother," she said, not asking. It wasn't sympathy. It

was inventory.

I didn't answer. I adjusted my grip on the placard, feeling the cracked laminate bite into my glove.

The skiff bumped a piling. Wood groaned. Old creosote bled

black where the beam hit it. The impact shoved the battery pack under my knee. The swollen casing slid, and the taped lead jerked

hard enough to pull the handheld's connector halfway out.

Static hissed in my ear. The display dimmed a notch.

"Naomi," Inez said, and she reached across. Her hand closed over mine—hard, practical, fingers clamping down on my

bleeding palm to stop it shaking, to stop it from dropping the placard. Her skin was cold from spray and metal. Our wrists

knocked. For a half second our breath hit the same pocket of air under the pier, hot and thin.

Then the skiff rocked again.

The placard skated toward the gunwale, edge-first, sliding over chipped paint and grit. I lunged with my bad hand and felt

the cut open wider under her grip.

Inez crawled first. Her headlamp beam slid over ribs and housings, catching scuffs, grease, the shine where hands had been. The air under there was cold and wet and tasted like low-tide rot and old diesel.

I followed, elbows on slick steel, boots searching for grip where algae had made everything honest. My cut palm touched a burr on a crossmember and split again. Heat flashed up my wrist. Blood smeared on the underside like a signature.

“Keep moving,” Inez breathed, close enough that her words hit my cheek.

02:23

The patched panel was the first thing that didn't belong.

Container paint is a lie anyway—layers of old company colors over rust, over impact scars—but this patch was new metal with an older paint job sprayed too fast. The overspray had a different grit. The edge was sealed with a bead that hadn't fully cured, still rubbery in spots. Fresh.

Inez ran her fingers along it, then brought them back and sniffed. She made a face.

“Still off-gassing,” she said. “Recent.”

A service gap sat behind it, just wide enough to take an arm if you didn't mind losing skin. Inez set the pry bar in. The chipped tip bit, then slipped. The bar snapped down and rang against the frame.

I froze, throat tight.

Outside, somebody laughed on the tug deck. A shout, then a thump of something heavy dropped. Our noise got swallowed in theirs, but not by much.

The drone dipped, spotlight tightening. The speaker crackled again.

“Naomi Kestrel, heave to. Failure to comply will result in enforcement action. Stand by.”

Enforcement action meant forms, cuffs, a supervisor who'd smile while taking my radio as “evidence,” and a chain-of-custody that could snap in a quiet office. It meant my earlier call and this moment would be written up by someone who knew my name before I spoke it.

If we ran, we'd look guilty. We'd be guilty in the only way that mattered: moving under light. And the tide was about to turn, make the channel faster, narrower. The mud would rise and take the skiff if we misjudged. Fouled line waited to wrap anything that tried to punch through blind.

Inez's hand stayed on mine, pressure like a vise. “Tell me which,” she said. “Because I'm not staying under that thing.”

The radio plug was half-seated. One more bump and it would pop free.

I stared into the drone's camera eye until my eyes watered.

Comply, and let them erase us on paper.

Or run now, through a channel that would be different in four minutes, with the only physical evidence trying to slide into black water.

I took a breath that tasted like diesel exhaust and wet rope, and I moved my thumb toward transmit.

## Salvage Rights

02:14.

My phone screen ate my last dark. I kept it cupped in my palm, brightness slammed down, red record dot on a voice memo like a wound you're supposed to ignore. Cold pulled the charge out of the battery in visible steps. Every minute was a percentage.

We wedged into the piling field behind creosote-black timbers and barnacled dolphins that had eaten a hundred hulls. The water worked at the posts with a wet suck. A loose length of frayed line sawed back and forth with each lift, rasping like a file. The smell was low-tide rot and diesel sheen, with wet neoprene from Inez's jacket every time she shifted.

Inez held herself tight against the timber, chin tucked. Her eyes tracked reflections, not boats. "Clock?"

"Slack 02:52," I said. My mouth felt dry. "After that the set runs under the barge line. Noise carries. We get pinned out."

She nodded once. No argument. She'd do the math later, when it could kill us.

I didn't transmit. I kept the handheld off, earbud in, and scanned like I was back in the radio room with my name taped to the console. Channel 16 popped with the usual—weak stations, clipped calls, someone with a bad antenna apologizing with every "Say again." Channel 12 was Port Ops, the language of permissions and denials. Channel 13 was bridge-to-bridge: short, sharp, no extra words.

VHF squelch. Then the slide into voice.

54

knee went down on the mat. It squished water out in a cold line against my pant leg.

"Two minutes," she said, glancing up at the tug. "Before they take it."

I listened instead of looking. Engines changed pitch out there—one notch higher, then a settling, like they'd shifted to engage hydraulic load. Pre-tow checks. The harbor has a sound for every step.

Point of no return lives in sound.

"We go now," I said.

Inez didn't argue. She got her pry bar—a chipped length of steel with one end ground flat and the other end still showing old paint. She set it under the latch lip. The metal squealed when she levered. The noise crawled under my skin. She stopped. Waited for the sodium light to buzz and cut, for the forklift to pass, for the tug's deck crew to shout over their own engines.

When the light blinked and the world went half-dark, she pushed.

The latch popped with a wet click.

We didn't take the easy exit back. We went forward, into the void under the box, because my ear told me we were out of minutes. The underside swallowed us. The last strip of open berth behind my heels looked too far away already.

The radio in my hand lost Port Ops in a smear of static as the container's belly wrapped around it. Steel turned signals into mush. My advantage thinned to nothing, and all I had left was what I could hear through metal and bone.

67

“Requesting clearance to take strain on unit... stand by for movement. Over.”

No container number. No berth identifier. No job ref. People running clean runs say the names. People running dirty ones leave things out.

Inez watched my face, not the radio. Her eyes flicked once toward the cameras bolted to the light poles. Black domes, pitted and streaked, pointing where the lines of traffic were supposed to be.

“You hear him?” she mouthed.

I nodded. My mouth was dry enough to stick to my teeth. I didn't say what I knew. Saying it made it real.

A forklift trundled past on the apron above, reverse alarm chirping. The driver's cab light flashed blue-white as he turned his head. Sodium light buzzed, cut out, came back. The camera dome shifted a degree, tracking motion.

Inez pulled a short jump lead from her pocket. Two alligator clips at the ends, metal jaws furry with green corrosion. She held it up like a joke.

“Latch is dead,” she whispered. “Or pretending.”

We reached the access point under the container's overhang. A service hatch set into the frame, paint swollen and blistered, a pad eye with a corroded latch that should have been locked. The latch had been worked recently. Fresh tool marks on old paint. Somebody had been in a hurry and didn't care about cosmetics.

Inez laid her rubber mat under the hatch lip and pressed her shoulder into the space. The steel was wet enough to bead. My

“Port Ops, Port Ops, this is tug Rook's Pride, working near Berth Nine. Safety brief complete. Confined space permit verified. Request temporary exclusion zone, 30 meters off our stern. Over.”

A supervisor voice. Steady. The kind that made people nod and sign.

Port Ops came back, bored and bright. “Rook's Pride, Port Ops. Roger. Exclusion zone granted until zero-three-zero-zero. Advise when secured. Over.”

“Wilco. Out.”

The PTT release had a bounce. Tiny double-click under the tail. The handheld's compressor hiss sat under his consonants like sand in gears. I'd heard it before, threaded through a mayday that wasn't a mayday. Same signature. Same person holding the button.

My thumb tightened around the phone. My battery slid to 47%.

Inez leaned closer, not looking at me. Her shoulder brushed mine, wet fabric cold through my sleeve. “That him?”

“Yeah,” I said. “He can request zones. He can write the report that makes the zone exist.”

“You're shaking.”

“Cold.”

She didn't call it a lie. She just shifted her weight so her body blocked my hands from the open water, like she was shielding a flame from wind.

Ahead, through a gap between pilings, a tug nosed in under sodium dock lights. Paint blistered along the bow. The rub rail was chewed down to raw metal in spots. A deckhand in a reflective

“Stay off the deck,” she said. “You slip, you’re loud.” Her headlamp was chewed up at the strap, lens fogged. She tapped it twice. It stuttered on, dim, then steadied. The beam was a tired cone, not much, but it was ours.

Above us, the tug’s work lights painted the top corners of the box. The underside was all black geometry: crossmembers, twist-lock housings, drain channels that held diesel sheen like thin glass. Condensation dripped in slow ticks off a seam. Each drop hit metal with a soft, stupid sound.

I unhooked my handheld VHF and thumbed it on without transmitting. The antenna was wrong for it—mismatched, bent near the base, wrapped once in electrical tape that had gone gray and sticky. On transmit, it would spit harmonics. On receive, it would pull in ghosts. Advantage and liability in one corroded tube. Channel 12. Port Ops lived there in this harbor when they bothered.

Squelch hiss. Then a voice, clipped, tired, trained to sound bored.

“Port Control, Port Control, this is Tug Kestrel Two, on one-two. Over.”

My stomach did a small drop. Not the name. The mic.

The bridge radio had a rasp at the start of each word, like the mic element was dented, diaphragm flexing before it caught. I’d heard that exact distortion on the coded mayday earlier. Same model, same damage pattern. Not a coincidence. A crew that shared gear, or one bridge set being moved around like a tool.

Port Ops answered with bureaucracy in it.

“Tug Kestrel Two, Port Control. Go ahead. Over.”

vest hauled a line that looked like it had been patched with three different kinds of twine. Working harbor. Nothing matched. Everything held anyway, until it didn’t.

A man stepped onto the dock with a hardhat and a clipboard. Reflective vest over a rain jacket stained in tide lines. Dale Rook. He didn’t carry a gun. He carried authority like it was a tool belt.

He pointed with his pen, not his finger. “PPE on,” he said. “Gloves. Eye pro. We’re not doing hero work. We’re doing compliance.”

One of his crew laughed like it was a joke. He made them sign something on the clipboard. He checked a tag on a shackle and tapped it twice, like the tag could answer.

My gut dropped when I saw it.

A jacket, slung carelessly over the wheelhouse handrail, sleeve hanging down. Gray work coat with a cheap reflective tape strip scuffed to dull. Tear at the right elbow, stitched tight with black thread that didn’t match. A patch on the chest, half-peeled: LUCA in block letters, the L cracked.

My tongue stuck to my teeth.

Inez followed my stare. Her face went still. “That’s him.”

“Yeah,” I said. I didn’t like how quiet my voice went.

We couldn’t pretend. Not after that. Not after the way Rook’s crew moved like they’d rehearsed it, like there was a checklist and the checklist was the law.

02:19.

The tide was still ebbing, but you could feel it easing, the pull changing shape around the pilings. Slack wasn’t peace. Slack was the hinge before everything swung hard the other way.

## A Bad Tow in Rising Water

02:18

The phone was already in my hand. I pinched the side button until the screen went dead and shoved it deep in my jacket, under the torn pouch seam, like I could bury sound in fabric.

The boots on the ladder didn't slow.

"Under," Inez said.

She didn't point. She didn't have to. The working face of the terminal ran along the berth with gaps under the container overhang where the sodium lights missed. Every third lamp buzzed like a bad transformer and cut out for half a breath, then came back harsh and yellow. When it dropped, you could move. When it flared, you froze.

I followed Inez along the fender pile. The timber was black with creosote and scored by barnacles. It grabbed at my sleeve and left grit on my skin. A frayed tagline hung from a bent cleat, wet and stiff. I took it because it was there.

It burned my palm when I used it to drop down to the lower catwalk.

I didn't let go. If I let go, I'd hit the algae-slick steel, and the sound would carry. The rope fibers bit through my glove seam anyway. My cut hand—old cut, new cut, they were starting to feel like one—went numb at the edges and then throbbed when I got weight on it.

Inez slid a scrap rubber mat from under her jacket like she'd stolen it from a fish plant floor. She slapped it down on the wet steel where the catwalk met the container's shadow.

"Goal," Inez murmured.

"Identify the tug. Time the move. Get proof," I said. "Before 02:52. Before they tuck it below."

"And then?"

"And then we decide how ugly we want this."

A working boat pushed past on the channel, engine noise thick and forgiving. A foghorn out by the breakwater called on a long interval, each blast a metronome through the haze. Inez watched the gap between horn and engine like she could thread a needle with it.

"Now," she said.

We slid out from behind the timbers on the downbeat of noise. Hands on wet wood. Knees on slime-slick cross-bracing. My cut palm burned when it found grit. I kept my phone tight against my chest, screen facing in, like it could give us away by breathing too loud.

We moved low, using stacks of chipped fenders and hanging lines as cover. The ropes were brine-stiff and heavy, frayed in places to pale fuzz that caught on my sleeve. I hooked a finger around one, tested it, then used it to steady my weight on a swollen plywood maintenance float that flexed under us with a soft groan.

The float wasn't bolted right. It shifted sideways as I stepped, and my knee drove into a rusted cleat.

Pain flashed white. I bit down hard enough to taste metal.

Inez's hand shot out and caught the back of my jacket. Her grip was sure, thumb pressing into my spine, pulling me into

“Mayday, mayday, may—” followed by the harsh, unmistakable DSC alarm tone I’d recorded earlier, the one I couldn’t stop hearing in my sleep. It wasn’t loud. It didn’t need to be. It carried across water like an accusation. On the tug, everything paused. The crane stopped mid-lift. A deckhand’s head snapped up toward our light. Rook’s face turned slowly, not startled, just deciding. His eyes found the barge’s lit patch. Found us in it. Flat recognition wiped his expression clean. “Naomi Kestrel,” someone said on the tug—half question, half confirmation—like my name was already on a form. Boots changed direction. Steel rang with each step, coming toward the sound with the confidence of people who believed the harbor belonged to them. My hand dove into my pocket for the phone. The recording kept playing, my own clipped voice making me sick. Inez’s hand closed over my wrist, not stopping me, anchoring me. Her grip was cold and sure. “Pick,” she said, eyes locked on mine. “Now.” Kill the sound and bolt—risk leaving the recording, risk leaving her. Or let it play, use it as bait, draw them away from the tug and buy Luca seconds, and put myself where Rook can write whatever happens next. Boots hit the barge’s ladder. Metal creaked under weight. I swallowed hard, tasted blood again, and made my thumb choose.

balance before I pitched into the gap. Her breath hit the side of my face. Close. Warm. Fast. “You climb like you hate gravity,” she said, voice almost nothing. “I hate noise,” I said, and a chain clinked like it was laughing at me. She didn’t answer. She just tightened her hold until the chain stopped moving. The derelict barge waited down-current, until, a long dark slab with a low freeboard and a deck that looked soft in places. Its paint had bubbled and peeled in scabs. The access gate had a hasp swollen with rust, padlock gone but the metal fused where it mattered. Inez pulled out a little pry-bar multi-tool, corroded at the hinge. The edge was nicked. She worked it into the seam with careful pressure, wrist twisting slow. The metal complained, a thin squeal that made my scalp prickle. She froze. Listened. Then leaned in, putting her shoulder into it. Pop. The hasp gave. Too loud in my head, but the harbor kept talking over it—engines, horn, distant shouts. “Tool’s a snitch,” she murmured. “Still works,” I said. “For now.” We climbed. Algae slicked the ladder rungs. My gloves were gone—dropped earlier, lost to the mud we couldn’t splash into without advertising ourselves. My bare fingers found cold steel

The hasp we'd pried open earlier swung with the barge's motion. It clicked against metal. Soft. Regular. A metronome counting down our luck.

Inez reached back, found it by feel, and jammed a strip of frayed rope through it to stop it swinging. Her fingers worked fast. Practical care. No wasted motion.

The tug's deck crew began the lift. A small crane arm swung out, hydraulics whining. A hook descended. A strap tightened around the wrapped load. The pallet jack rolled away, squealing its relief.

Rook's voice cut through, close enough now that I could hear breath. "Slow. No unsecured loads. We do this clean."

Clean. On paper.

We held our bodies still and watched.

A light snapped on above us.

White and hard, mounted on a bent stanchion at the barge's edge. Either motion-sensor or somebody hitting a shore box switch. It washed the deck in a sudden rectangle, pooling in puddles, turning our wet sleeves into reflective threats.

My mouth went cotton-dry. My fingers shook against the phone case. My stomach dropped like I'd missed a rung.

I clamped the phone tighter to kill the screen.

Pressure shifted it in the torn pouch.

A button caught.

Sound erupted from my pocket—tinny speaker, high and wrong in the gap between engines.

and slipped. I had to clamp harder, skin dragging. The cut in my palm opened again, wet heat under cold.

Halfway up, my waterproof pouch snagged on a bolt head. I felt the tug at my belt, sharp and wrong. The seam tore a little, just enough to make the inside vulnerable. The phone shifted. The screen woke. A small rectangle of light pressed against my shirt.

I flattened it with my forearm and kept moving.

02:27.

We rolled onto the barge deck and stayed down, bellies to puddled steel. The deck was gritty with rust flakes. A warped coaming ran along the edge, giving us a line to hide behind. Inez crawled to my right, careful, knees sliding, not lifting.

We left the pilings' cover. No easy retreat now. If we went back, we'd be silhouetted in open water.

We got to a rusted winch drum and tucked in behind it. The drum's cable was gone, only a stub of frayed wire rope left, ends splayed like broken teeth. It snagged my sleeve as I settled. I didn't pull away. I let it catch. Less movement.

From here, the tug's deck was a stage under sodium strips. Rook stood with his clipboard, pen poised. He didn't shout. He didn't need to. People leaned toward his voice.

"Shackle tag verified," he said. "Load test per spec. Nobody touches it without gloves. We log it. We report it."

A deckhand held up gloved hands like a priest showing clean palms. Another rolled a covered shape across the deck on a pallet jack that squealed with every push. The load was wrapped in a tarp and cinched with straps, corners hard under the fabric. Heavy enough that the jack's wheels left wet tracks.

Rook's handheld came up near his mouth. Not VHF cadence. Too casual. Too private. Low power. I could hear the cheap mic distortion when someone else answered—tinny, overdriven, like talking through a wet paper cup.

“—copy,” the second voice said. One word. That was all.

My throat went tight.

I knew that distortion. I'd heard it on a late-night call when Luca borrowed my old handheld and laughed at the squelch tail, said it sounded like a dying gull. Same cheap speaker. Same overmodulation when he got close.

Inez watched my face more than the tug. “You heard him.”

I didn't want to nod. My neck did it anyway. My mouth was dry enough to crack.

02:33.

Rook angled his clipboard toward a deckhand. “Sign here. Chain of custody. Salvage claim filed. If anyone asks, we found it adrift. We secured it. We notified.”

He said it like a lesson. Like he was helping them stay employed.

I brought my phone up, camera angled through a gap in the winch frame. I started another recording and kept it low. Timestamp visible. I counted PTT clicks. I listened to phrasing. Lies had rhythm. His did.

To see the tug's name, I had to shift two inches left. My knee screamed when it took weight. I swallowed the sound and tasted blood where my teeth had cut my cheek earlier. The barge under us bumped its mooring with a hollow boom.

Not loud. Not nothing.

On the tug, two heads turned. Then three. A pause went through the crew like a hand squeezing a line.

Rook didn't flinch. He just stopped writing and looked out over the water, eyes scanning the dark like he was checking for a safety hazard. His face was relaxed. Curtious. Managerial.

My phone trembled in my hand. I forced it still and kept recording.

“Keep going,” Inez breathed.

“If I stop, we get buried,” I said. One sentence. The only recap my brain allowed. Malloy's forms would eat us alive without audio.

Rook's crew guided the covered load toward a hatch. The hatch coaming was scuffed to bare steel. They moved like trained hands around a problem they'd been told not to name.

02:41.

We repositioned as the tug shifted, lines creaking. The barge flexed under my weight, a tired animal. We crawled along the coaming, staying below the edge, trying to keep the winch between us and their lights.

A deck plate under my left hand bowed a fraction and popped back. It wasn't a full clang, just a flexing complaint. I froze until my joints ached.

Inez's multi-tool—the same one—hung from her belt on a loop. It tapped the coaming once when she moved. She grabbed it and held it tight against her hip, palm flattening it like she could smother sound.