The Caller

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Extract

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ONE

Detectives Joe Lucchesi and Danny Markey stepped into the elevator that would take them to the sixth floor office of Manhattan North Homicide. They were three hours into an eight to four tour. A short skinny man shot in after them, jumpy and light on his feet.

'You know, I can read futures by your hands.' He had weathered skin and a droopy left eye. He stood an inch from Joe's chest and looked up at him with a gentle smile. Joe looked at Danny and held his palm out.

The man stepped back, banging his head on the elevator doors.

'Not your palm!' he shouted. 'Not your palm! The back of your hand! I will know you from the back of your hand.' Joe turned it over.

'The other one too. You too,' he said, looking at Danny. 'Both hands. Both hands. Many hands make Jack dull.'

Joe and Danny smiled and did what he said.

'You're laughing too early,' said the guy. 'This could be bad news, what I see here. This could be too many ducks spoiling the bush.'

'We don't want to hear no bad news,' said Danny. 'Right?'

'Right,' said Joe.

'Right,' said the man. 'But I'm not just the messenger here. You gotta appreciate that. I'm how it all begins. I'm what sets it all in motion. I'm, like, bang. And the future I see will start from right here in these nine stitches.'

Joe nodded slowly.

The man reached up and adjusted the purple crocheted hat on his head, pulling the ear flaps around so one of them hung in front of his face. He rotated it again, then looked back at their hands.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I'm seeing things. I definitely am,' said the man. 'My name is One Line, by incident. One Line. King of Madison Avenue. Your product in one line. Your brand in one line—'

'You were a copywriter?' said Joe.

'Your future in one line,' said the man, staring at the hands in front of him.

'OK,' said Danny. 'So what is it?'

The bell chimed and the elevator doors opened on the sixth floor. Joe and Danny got out. As the doors slid together, One Line pushed his face close to the gap.

'One line: you're fucked, both of you. Is that two lines? Could that be two?' The doors closed.

They laughed.

'Another EDP for the HPD,' said Danny. An EDP was an Emotionally Disturbed Person. The HPD was the Department of Housing Preservation and Development – one of their jobs was to give out Section 8 housing subsidies.

'Let's send him into Internal Affairs, let him tell *them* they're fucked,' said Danny.

'I'd like him to come up with a whole jingle for that,' said Joe.

Sixteen detectives worked in three teams out of Manhattan North Homicide, a modern open plan space with a small glass-walled office in the corner, shared by the sergeant and the lieutenant. The NYPD was one of the only law enforcement agencies in the country whose officers weren't put through regular fitness checks, leaving Sergeant John Rufo free to work his way up to 230 pounds and into his current predicament of trying to work his way back down.

'Your mental agility is being impaired,' he said, pointing at Joe and Danny with something beige speared on a fork.

'Is that tofu?' said Danny.

'No it is not tofu. It is marinated steamed chicken. Tofu. Gimme a break.'

Joe and Danny exchanged glances.

'It's eleven o'clock in the morning,' said Danny.

'Eat little and often,' said Rufo. 'Them's the rules.' He pointed to his plate. 'Vegetables, protein . . .'

'Yeah, boss,' said Danny. 'Tomato sauce, meatballs: I got it covered already.'

'How do you stay so trim?' said Rufo.

'You mean, "Have I been working out?"' said Danny.

Rufo rolled his eyes. Then poked his fork through his salad. 'Who's up today?'

'Me,' said Joe. 'And I eat well, by the way.'

'You gotta watch that French food,' said Rufo, looking up at him. 'It's tasty . . .' he raised a finger in warning, '. . . because it's rich. Your wife is genetically wired for it. You might not be. You're in shape now, but who knows down the line . . .'

Joe laughed. 'Yeah, Sarge, thanks for looking out for me.'

'A varied diet,' said Rufo, 'that's what—'

The phone interrupted him. 'Ruthie, yeah – put him through.' He nodded. 'How you doing? OK. Yeah. OK.' He listened, then scribbled on a notebook in front of him. 'Right away. Detectives Joe Lucchesi and Danny Markey. Yeah. Uh-huh. Take care.' He put down the phone. 'Gentlemen, we have a homicide on West 84th Street. Here's the address. Guy found in his apartment.' He ripped out the page and handed it to Joe. 'The Two-Oh is at the scene already.'

* * *

Joe and Danny crossed Broadway to the parking lot under the railway bridge.

'Who says "trim"?' said Danny.

'People who aren't,' said Joe.

'It's unbelievable,' said Danny, 'we get sucked into food talk every time we go in his office. I wind up starving.' Danny was short, wiry and had no extra weight. He'd been wearing the same suit size since he was eighteen. He had pale skin and fading freckles, light brown hair and blue eyes. Joe was six-three, dark and broad.

Joe stopped. 'Aw, shit . . .'

'What?' said Danny.

'Would you look at that?' Joe walked over to a silver Lexus. 'That fucking shit.' He pulled his keys out of his pocket and opened the door of his car, popping the glove box. He took out a cloth and started rubbing at a lump of tar on his windshield.

'I've a pain in my fucking ass with that crap,' he said. He looked up at the bridge from where the tar dripped in the heat.

'Least it was a fresh one,' said Danny. 'How come you don't have the ghetto sled?' The ghetto sled was a detective's B-team car, the one he could park two blocks from the projects and not have to worry about.

'We got a meeting at Shaun's school today, I'm going straight there. Or at least I would have been. Anna's going to have to go it alone.' Shaun was Joe's eighteen-year-old son.

'She won't like that,' said Danny. 'What's he been doing now?'

Joe shook his head. 'You name it.'

'He's been through a lot.'

'Yeah, but it's fucking wearing me down. And Anna doesn't need this kind of shit, going up to the school every month to answer to this asshole teacher fifteen years younger than us.'

'Shaun's a good kid,' said Danny. 'He'll be in college next year, you won't have to worry. Try having four under ten. I love them, but, man . . .' He breathed out. 'Now, come on. Say goodbye to the nice car and get into the shit one.' There was a pool of five cars at Manhattan North. Any damage during a tour and the driver was left to face a bawling out by Rufo. The newer the car, the more likely Joe would take the wheel. Today, they had the oldest car – a grey Gran Fury; 'You get a scratch on it, who gives a shit?' said Danny. They pulled out and joined the traffic heading south on Broadway.

'Can I ask what happened with Dr Mak?' said Danny.

Joe grunted. 'I staggered in, I got more Vicodin, I walked out.'

'That's it?'

'That's it,' said Joe.

'You mean that's all you let it be, right?'

'Who are you? Psych services?'

Danny ignored him. 'I'm guessing you went

in, told him you were real busy, just needed a prescription, gotta go.'

'What else am I going to do?' said Joe.

'Let him treat you,' said Danny.

Joe had TMD – Temporo Mandibular Joint Dysfunction. The least it would do was make his jaw crackle when he opened his mouth, the worst – spark excruciating pain all over his head. For years, Danny had watched him pop over-the-counter painkillers and decongestants. He'd recently moved on to Vicodin.

'It's getting worse,' said Danny.

'Yeah, so are you.' Joe turned away. Yesterday's phone call had jerked him back too far – to events he had spent wasted months trying to forget: the botched rescue of an eight-year-old kidnap victim and the near-destruction of his family. The little girl had been returned to her heartbroken mother and the two clung to each other, happily, desperately. Seconds later, the scene turned to graphic, bloody images he still couldn't shake – the kidnapper had blown them up in retaliation for calling the cops. Joe confronted him moments later and pumped six bullets into his chest. His name was Donald Riggs.

After the case, Anna wanted Joe to take time out. She was offered a job in Ireland and they went with Shaun. After eight great months, everything went wrong. Donald Riggs had an associate – Duke Rawlins – a killer he had spent years on

a murderous spree with, someone who wouldn't let Riggs' death go unavenged. Fresh from a maximum security prison, he had caught up with Joe and tried to destroy his family. During their time in Ireland, Shaun's girlfriend, Katie, had been murdered. Shortly after, Rawlins had abducted Anna and left her so physically and mentally scarred, she struggled every day to get past it.

They pulled up by the patrol car outside the apartment block on West 84th Street. A well-dressed couple stood under the green and gold awning, aware something was going on, but more concerned about where they were going for brunch. The doorman inside was a neatly groomed older man with a moustache and a badge that read 'Milton'.

'Terrible,' was all he said, shaking his head, gesturing with a white gloved hand to the elevators.

'Has someone spoken with you yet?' said Danny.

Milton nodded.

'All right,' said Danny. 'We'll be back down to you in a little while.'

'Why were you shouting at him?' said Joe when they got into the elevator.

'Didn't he look a little deaf to you?'

Joe raised his eyes to the ceiling. They got out at the third floor and walked down a grey tiled hallway to apartment 3E. A detective in a navy

blue suit walked out, his eyes on the notebook in his left hand. His right hand was pressed to his stomach. He turned slowly their way. Danny and Joe made their introductions.

'Tom Blazkow from the Two-Oh,' he said. The twentieth precinct covered everywhere from 59th Street to 86th Street, west of Central Park. Blazkow was in his mid-forties and bulked-up, with a grey buzzcut, a massive jaw and bloodshot blue eyes. He turned to the detective walking out of the apartment behind him.

'This is my partner, Denis Cullen.'

They all nodded. Cullen was in his early fifties and dressed in a limp brown suit and a tie from a bowling league with a stars-and-stripes pin. He had pale red hair thinning on top and broken veins across his nose and cheeks. He looked eager, but worn out.

'So what have we got?' said Joe.

Blazkow spoke. 'Ethan Lowry, graphic designer, DOB 04/12/71, married with a young daughter. 911 got a call from his diet delivery people. Every morning, they bring his meals for the day. He didn't open the door. First time in eleven months he didn't. Delivery guy saw a drop of blood in the hallway, got a bad smell.' He pointed to a pale, wheezing teenager. 'The two uniforms tried the bell, banged on the door, no answer, went around the back, climbed up the fire escape, couldn't see nothing through the

window, so they called ESU. Body was right inside the front door. No sign of forced entry. Balcony door was locked. No response from the wife's cell phone. We got a uniform down by the elevators. He knows who to look out for. You're going to have to knock.' He pointed to the apartment. 'Careful going in. You might slip on a chunk of face.'

Joe reached into his jacket pocket for a handkerchief and a small bottle of aftershave. He shook some drops onto the white cotton and held it to his nose, taking in a few deep breaths. He knocked on the door and they walked carefully into the apartment. Ethan Lowry lay on his back, naked, his body pressed up against the baseboard behind the door. His arms were stretched out above him. His head was turned to the right, but there wasn't much of a face to face that way. Ethan Lowry had been savagely beaten, more blows than were needed to kill someone who had clearly been finished off with a bullet. The damage was entirely to his face. Where the skin wasn't plumped up and tight, it was pulped. His nostrils were plugged with dried blood.

'What's in his mouth?' said Danny.

'His mouth,' said Joe.

'Aw, Jesus,' said Danny, leaning in closer. Lowry's mouth looked like it had been turned inside out. It covered his whole chin and left side of his face like raw meat. Only one tooth was

visible. The rest were hidden under the swollen mess, broken or lying alone on the floor beside numbered evidence cards. Joe sucked in a breath. The skin was split at Lowry's left eye socket where a gun had been fired point-blank.

'Hey,' said Danny to Kendra, a smiley, bulky crime scene technician, who was squatting on the floor beside him.

'Hey, Joe, Danny. I'm having an *MTV Cribs* moment. Here is the hallway. And this is where the magic happened. See all this?' She gestured around the body and in an arc above it. 'We've got expirated mist on the floor, on the wall. We've got cast-off blood on the ceiling. We've got it all basically. Over there we've got high-velocity spatter from the gunshot wound. Small caliber.' She shook her head.

'And—'

'God bless you, but God slow you down too,' said Joe. 'Just give us a moment.'

'Sorry,' she said. 'I get so—'

'Cheery,' said Danny.

Kendra turned to him. 'I love my job,' she said. 'And if that's an emotion that for some reason confuses you . . .' She shrugged.

'How could you not love this?' said Danny, pointing to the body. Beside Lowry's head was a black, blood-streaked cordless phone. Joe put on a glove, picked it up and hit the dialled calls button.

'Someone was alive in here last night at 10.58 p.m.,' said Joe. He took down all the incoming and outgoing calls.

'Let me call Martinez,' said Joe. 'Unless you'd like to.' He smiled. The year before, on his year out, Aldos Martinez filled in as Danny's partner. Now, with Martinez's partner, Fred Rencher, they made up the D team at Manhattan North, the only four-man team.

'Hey, Martinez, it's Joe. Do me a favour – could you do a victimology on an Ethan Lowry, 1640 West 84th Street, DOB 04/12/71. Thanks. Great. See you in a little while.' Joe paused and looked over at Danny. 'Yeah, he's here. You need to talk to him?'

Danny shook his head violently.

'Oh, OK,' said Joe. 'See you later.'

'What did he want?'

'Just to say he misses you.'

'Look at this,' said Danny. He was crouched down beside Lowry's wrists, pointing with his pen to a series of holes in the floorboards. 'His arms must have been restrained by something hammered in here. There are two holes on each side of each wrist.'

'Did you find anything he could have used to do this?' said Joe to Kendra.

'Unh-unh,' she said. 'Perp's not going to leave them behind – my guess is they're his special toys.'