

RANDY DeVITA

Guarding Mary

0550: Arrive Mercy Prep. Get site instructions. Start Activity Log.

Any guard at Tri-State Security could handle what my Area Supervisor has me doing. Yes, it's work ("Be thankful for work," my dad says. "You can't afford to be fussy"), but I've had my hopes pinned on the Atwater site, where there's an opening for a Security Officer 2. I'd been off foot patrol at the Town Centre Mall for two weeks, and even though I wrote an Incident Report and explained to the Area Supervisor what actually happened, leaving out Dana, as I didn't see how that mattered, and he said that he believed me, I was worried that I'd get a Notice of Personnel Action in my officer file. Then I'd never get clearance at Atwater.

Atwater Bock was Tri-State Security's golden account, the site everyone wanted to work. \$10 an hour, and the security officers all wore navy blazers and carried pepper spray. But Atwater built cruise missiles for the military, so there was a \$75 background check, a drug screening, and a lie detector test to pass. Still, once you got clearance at Atwater, you were set.

"Quit thinking about that place," the Area Supervisor said when he called.

He wasn't calling about the Atwater site, though. The regular security officer at Mercy

Catholic Preparatory Academy had taken a gambling weekend at the casinos up north, so the Area Supervisor needed someone to cover the day shift, 6A to 6P.

"I need another SO 2 in there, Dwight."

"When's Atwater?"

The life coach Lorne Sandvik, author of *Walking Away: The Quick Guide to Getting What You Want*, talks about the need to be direct. Life is too long and unfair to leave things to chance, he writes. Speak up.

"I'll work on it. But today I need a body at Mercy Prep."

I wanted to tell him forget it, I'm waiting for Atwater. But it'd been two weeks since Town Centre and I needed a paycheck. The Atwater site would come, I told myself.

Stuart Benton, a flex officer, worked the overnight shift at Mercy Prep. As I pulled up to relieve him, he leaned out the window of his minivan, rounded his lips, and hocked a loogie. Spots gummy as oysters littered the pavement under his van's window.

Benton handed me a Xeroxed sheet.

SITE RULES

1. BE IN UNIFORM.
2. DO NOT SLEEP DURING SHIFT.
3. GO AROUND THE SCHOOL AT LEAST ONCE EVERY

hour.

4. WHEN IN FRONT, PARK SO YOU CAN SEE THE MAIN ENTRANCE.

5. DO NOT LEAVE THE SITE DURING YOUR SHIFT.

6. IF YOU NEED A QUESTION ANSWERED, CALL FATHER WELLBECK.

"Gravy," Benton said. "Watch the front. Otherwise, drive back every hour, make sure their statue is okay."

"What statue?"

He blinked twice, as if I were a mirage. His eyes were red, stung with irritation, and the bags under them looked delicate as egg yolk. Benton leaned back, revealing on the passenger seat beside him a portable television, an electric Mr. Coffee machine, and a shoebox full of battered Tom Clancy paperbacks.

"Mary. Guard Mary." He rolled his eyes. "The Virgin Mary statue behind the school. Last year the graduating seniors from the football team hit it with toilet paper and shaving cream." Benton gripped the steering wheel and coughed so hard that his forehead flushed dark red. "Two summers ago they put her up on the roof," he croaked. He spit one more onto the pavement. "Naomi relieves you at 6P." Benton smiled and patted the door of his van with his open hand. "Got my security clearance, so I'm just waiting to hear about Atwater." He lifted his hand and crossed two thick fingers. "Let's hope prayers get answered."

0600: The shift begins.

I'd stopped that morning at an ATM to get money, but a check had bounced, so my wallet

now had only a tissue-thin receipt reading "INSUFFICIENT FUNDS." I could barely afford to keep gas in my '92 Lumina. The car—black as a closet, with patches of brick-colored rust in the wheel wells and a long, frozen crack across the bottom of the windshield—was plagued with gremlins. For one, the idle was too high. At stoplights the engine raced, and I had to ride the brake to keep the Lumina from creeping into the intersection. For another, when I turned on the air conditioning, the unit drew down so aggressively that the idle problem disappeared and the engine sputtered and died. Also, the driver's door jammed right after I'd bought the Lumina off a used car lot in Hamtramack, so I always had to climb in through the passenger's side. I meant to replace the front bumper, too, but those only matter when you hit something, and if I crashed the car that bad, I'd unscrew the license plate and walk away.

0700: Check statue. No incidents to report.

I did a mobile patrol in my car, following the two-track dirt access road around Mercy Prep. A low brick building, with a roof flat as a bunker, the Mercy Catholic Preparatory Academy sat on a hilltop that overlooked a development crammed with narrow ranch houses—shoeboxes with lids, my father called them. The statue was around the back of the school, in the middle of a cedar-chip garden. I did a visual—all secure—then pulled around front just as a dark blue Camaro peeled out of the parking lot and gunned down the hill. I parked in Benton's old spot. Smooth and dark as sealant, the blacktop sloped down to the main

entrance, which seemed miles away—the lot was enormous, with steel lampposts and uniform rows of white stripes that reminded me of the empty parking lot at the start of my shift at Town Centre. It and Dana seemed far away then, as if they existed only in my memory.

0800: Nothing to report.

Town Centre, a one-story indoor mall with anchor stores at either end, was built early in the sixties when people were moving out of the city. When I started working the site, they'd already closed the Sears in the north wing, leaving a J. Hudson department store at the south end, along with a Radio Shack, a Dollar Store, some tired-looking retail shops, and a food court that had only three restaurants left. Besides J. Hudson, the only places in the mall that kept all their ceiling lights burning were a few competing jewelry stores run by clever-looking immigrants with dark eyes and black mustaches. Rip-off artists, the janitor called them. The mall interior always seemed dim and gray, like a room full of smoke where you needed to open the doors and windows. Foot traffic at the mall during the day was light, and the people who did come to Town Centre were quiet and frustrated-looking, as if they couldn't find what they wanted. They'd mill around, dart into a store, buy something, then leg it out the door. No one at the mall actually shopped.

I did eight-hour shifts at Town Centre, on foot patrol as a visible deterrent for shoplifters and the few homeless men who in the summer drifted inside to sit in the air-conditioned food court.

Shoplifting was nonexistent, and I ignored the pilfering of ketchup packets and napkins at the condiment wagon in the food court; the homeless couldn't stand how dead the mall was during the day, and stayed inside only long enough to cool off.

I noticed Dana the first time she came to Town Centre. Inside J. Hudson's mall entrance was a computerized job kiosk. It must have been hard to use, because most people left before they'd finished the application. I'd overheard a pregnant woman argue with the manager behind the cosmetics counter, saying that she wanted a receipt. The manager, who had wet eyelashes and bright, thorny fingernails, kept telling her, "It's not an ATM, ma'am." The woman finally shrieked with rage and stormed out of the mall.

Dana hunched near the computer the entire time she did her application, squinting as if the screen were at a distance. Finally, she sat up and gave a small, secret smile. Afterward, she left the mall, and I watched her cross into the bright sunlight of the parking lot. She had the slender legs of a runner, and it occurred to me then that Dana could outrun anything.

Later that week I saw Dana working in cosmetics at J. Hudson, and felt overwhelming relief. I suppose I'd been praying for her to come back without realizing it. Soon, I'd memorized her schedule. When Dana worked the next day, I slept like a child before its birthday; when I knew she'd be off, just lacing my shoes became a chore. And I struggled with foot patrol, because my route up to the empty Sears and back kept me away from

J. Hudson for thirty minutes.

One morning I passed the J. Hudson entrance, and Dana looked up from her counter and waved. My feet grew heavy as rocks, the skin on my cheeks went numb, the entire length of the mall seemed open between us. Afterward, I modified my foot patrol, passing J. Hudson four times each hour.

0845: Father Wellbeck on site.

A green Oldsmobile turned into the entrance and sailed across the empty parking lot to where I sat in my car. The priest driving parked where all Benton's spit had landed and got out.

He had the same rail-straight posture I'd seen on the mannequins at Town Centre, and the creases on his black priest outfit were sharp. My own uniform was rumpled in a way that wasn't, strictly speaking, regulation. I rolled down my window.

"I'm Father Wellbeck." He touched his collar. "You security?"

I turned the ignition off and sat up straight. "Yes, sir."

"Where's our Sam?"

"Vacation, sir."

"They give Sam vacations, eh?" He had a thin smile. "Welcome."

He wore cologne, some brand Dana would have known. She called them flavors.

Wellbeck glanced at the entrance to the parking lot. "Has our football coach been in today?"

"No one's been here, sir." I left out the Camaro, as I didn't see how that mattered.

"Son, this isn't the Army. Call me Father."

The sun had climbed above a line of trees along the edge of the parking lot and because Father Wellbeck was too thin to block its light, I had to squint when I looked at him.

"Yes, Father." It felt wrong to say, though. When mom died, my dad threw all the religious stuff out of the house, except for a Gideon Bible he'd taken from a hotel room, something he kept strictly for referential purposes.

"Good," he said. Wellbeck ran his fingers along the seam of his collar as if searching for an opening.

"They've explained about our statue."

"Yes, Father."

Automatic agreement prevents unneeded arguments, Sandvik writes. It helps me, too, because split-second thinking puts me in a bad spot. Growing up, my dad said I'd never win any academic scholarships.

Wellbeck frowned. His face seemed narrow as a wedge. "Keep an eye out for Coach Greer's boys. It's a rite of passage with the graduating seniors. Last year we caught his boys. They were punished, of course, but nothing like they deserved. They think vandalizing our Virgin Mary with toilet paper and shaving cream is a harmless prank." He glanced down as if he might catch me smiling. "It's not."

"I've been going around the school once an hour."

Wellbeck shook his head. "Not enough. There's no quit in Coach Greer's boys. Stay on the offensive. Check on her every fifteen minutes. Guard Mary."

0900: *Minor injury sustained. Statue okay. All secure.*

When Father Wellbeck went inside, I did a foot patrol around the back of Mercy Prep.

The long edge of the roof blocked the sun, and the grass behind the school was still wet with dew. Nearby, a pair of robins hunted for worms on the dusky lawn. The Virgin Mary was in the shadows, too, with her hands closed in prayer and a mysterious smile directed at her feet. The statue was small—barely to my chest, maybe four feet high—but detailed, with folds carved in her robe, some long and wide, others narrow and deep, making it seem as if she were standing in a breeze. I touched the statue, but even in the dull morning heat, the concrete felt cool as the side of an icebox.

I bent closer. Tucked in a shallow fold of her robe was a small, unfinished wasp nest where—thin and wicked as an Atwater Bock cruise missile—a wasp worked inside one of the dark hexagonal combs. I blew on the ash-gray nest, and the wasp backed out, flared its wings, and tunneled into a comb above it.

I used a cedar chip to scrape off the nest, and after it landed in the garden, tried stamping it flat, but missed. When I stepped back to line things up, the wasp shot up in the air, and though I managed to swat it, and the wasp bounced away, heavy as a date, I tripped on my own foot and fell in the wet grass outside the garden. The wasp darted in and stung the back of my hand; I slapped with my other hand, but it seemed to know what I was going to do before I did it, and got me twice more,

on the forearm, through the fabric of my uniform. Finally, I clapped my hand down and crushed it.

The stings didn't hurt though—chills, some burning, a little swelling. My dad says that I don't have enough nerve endings to feel pain. He's right, I think. When I was twelve, he'd slammed the car door on my hand ("An accident, damn it!"), something I'd barely felt. I'd cried, of course.

But I was upset that my uniform was wet, so I pinched the wasp in half, then stamped the nest with my heel until I'd buried it in the garden. Afterward, I looked back at the school, worried Father Wellbeck had seen everything; but the school windows were dark and empty. No one, it seemed, was watching.

1000: *Nothing to report.*

Each morning when Dana came for work at Town Centre, I made it a point to be in position outside the entrance to J. Hudson. She smiled at me when she passed, and sometimes turned to wave before she went inside. I was so confused and excited whenever I saw her that it felt like grief. I couldn't think of any way to speak to her—she was that beautiful. And it was too late to hide my bad posture, pot belly, or the cowlick above my forehead that I cut off every two weeks, only to have it spring back into place.

Sandvik writes that most problems solve themselves when we turn our back. But I was still surprised when, one afternoon three weeks after she started at the mall, Dana came up behind me while I was on foot patrol and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hi, security," she said.

Having the longtime object of my thoughts standing beside me made me nauseous. It was the first time I'd heard her voice, too, and as she talked, I got so eager to memorize details about her that my vision blurred, and I had to do a short knee bend to keep myself from passing out.

"What are these people doing in this mall?" she said.

"Nothing." My tongue felt like shoe leather.

"Plenty of nothing going on here."

I couldn't think of anything to say, but Dana touched my sleeve to show she was teasing. A spray of goosebumps lifted on my arm.

"Nice uniform," she said. "What kind of fabric is this?"

"Polyester."

"Bet it breathes well, though."

We were silent for a few moments. I heard the low, uneven tramp of passing footsteps, some homeless men arguing in the food court. I forced myself to look at Dana.

"How's J. Hudson?"

She shrugged.

"It's a job. I've had worse. When I was sixteen, I worked a summer job where I stood on the grass in front of a strip mall, wearing an orange construction vest and holding a sign advertising carry-out pizza to traffic." Dana ran her hand through her hair; I could smell her shampoo. "The sun baked the grass, me, everything," she said. "My hair hasn't been the same since."

"Sounds bad."

"The crappiest job ever."

She glanced at my uniform, then smiled as if we shared a secret.

I hit her with Sandvik. "Doing a job good matters more than having a bad job."

Dana lifted her eyebrows. "Heavy," she said. "Look, I've got to get back inside and sell more flavors. But I'll come see you tomorrow, okay?"

1100: Maintain security patrols as instructed.

I got sick thinking of Benton with his clearance, waiting on his call from Atwater, so I went to the football field and did wind sprints. Running sprints makes my legs burn and stops the buzzing in my head. But I'm incapable of running fast, one of those people who runs as if he's slogging through mud in oversized boots. Speed isn't the only thing there is, though. In the first chapter of *Walking Away*, Lorne Sandvik says, "No point outrunning your destiny—slow down."

I stood on the goal line. Across the field were the student sections—long, even rows of aluminum bleachers. A white canvas banner tied to the fence below the student bleachers carried the message, GO TEAM GO!! I did some knee bends, then got into a crouch.

In high school my dad berated me for being slow. "Slow in body is slow in mind." Freshman year, I'd been cut from JV, which was pure agony for him. My dad had his hopes pinned on my making varsity one day, playing for the same coach he'd played for, so he spent the summer after my freshman year coaching me through a series of drills designed to increase my speed and reflexes. Every night he carried his clipboard and

stopwatch out into the backyard. "Nimble there," he said, pointing at my feet wearing the athletic shoes he'd bought me. "Nimble here," and tapped his forehead. But before the end of the summer my dad abandoned the drills, depressed I think by the difference between his efforts and the results he'd logged on his clipboard.

I didn't bother taking a deep breath. After counting down from three, I started to run, slow and graceless, chopping at the air with my fists and elbows, knees high, my feet landing like bell weights. Sandvik writes that no matter how fast you run, you'll always be a step slower than you imagine; but when I crossed the fifty-yard line and stood in the middle of the field—chest heaving, legs burning, wheezing at the empty bleachers—the blood flooding my ears sounded like applause.

1200: Suspicious activity in front lot. Client property secure.

I went back to the parking lot, where I'd left my car. Directly overhead the sun broiled the pavement, and the air was blurry with heat. As I walked, the blacktop tugged at the rubber soles of my shoes. At the top of the parking lot, near Wellbeck's car, a group of seagulls fought with each other, springing into the air and landing again. A few stabbed at the pavement with their hooked beaks, pulling up Benton's dried spit.

I started mobile patrol. The ruts in the two-track behind Mercy Prep were baked hard as cement, and the idle climbed as the car lurched and dipped. Mary was fine, so I rolled past the

cedar garden and parked in the only shade left along the side of the school, where I dozed until the sound of a car horn woke me.

When I pulled around front, Father Wellbeck stood beside the open door of his Oldsmobile, gesturing frantically toward the bottom of the lot. The dark blue Camaro from that morning was parked beside a lamppost near the entrance. Inside the car were three teenagers, two in front and a longhair in back. The longhair pointed at me through the rear window, and I floored it, but the carburetor flooded and the Lumina stalled. The Camaro did a burn out, banged gears all the way down the hill, while Wellbeck shook his head as I fought to start my car.

1300: No incidents or unusual activity to report. Statue fine.

After Wellbeck left the site, I parked next to a port-a-john outside the gym and left the car running. It was dim inside the port-a-john, and I struggled to unfasten my pants, which were a size too small.

I stood counting over the urinal. I'd peed forty seconds once, and always liked to see if I could beat my personal best. But I need to concentrate when I'm counting, so when I heard the sick whine of the Lumina's alternator belt and the dull crunch of gravel outside the port-a-john, I lost track of my numbers. I banged out of the port-a-john and there was the Lumina, slow as a running child, coasting toward the bottom of the parking lot. Still, I was so sure I'd catch it that I stopped to fasten my pants, sucking in my stomach and fighting to hook the

little steel clasp; but then the cooling fan kicked on, the idle raced, and the Lumina picked up speed. I clutched the front of my pants as I chased the car down the hill. When I caught it, the driver-side door handle jerked out of my hand—jammed, of course—and the Lumina accelerated down the slope of the parking lot, headed for a crowd of seagulls milling around a lamppost.

I sprinted, grabbing at my pants to keep them up. But without my fists pumping, I couldn't make enough speed to catch the Lumina, so I swung my arms, built a rhythm. My shoes clodded. I huffed. Directly in front of me was the car, and through the back window, out over the hood, the lamppost loomed. I got ready to dive through the open driver's window, but my pants dropped and caught my ankles.

I landed in a heap and barrel rolled onto my back in time to watch the seagulls flap out of the way of the oncoming car. The Lumina collided with the lamppost so violently that the engine coughed twice, backfired, and stalled. Overhead, the seagulls wheeled in a ragged circle.

1400: Mobile patrols suspended.

I managed to start the car again, but the hood was crumpled. I backed the car off the lamppost and drove it around the lot; the steering wobbled and the car pulled to the left, and even though the high-pitched whistle from the belt had disappeared and, unaccountably, the problem with the idle was gone, I heard now a low, steady scrape coming from under the front of the car, something that sounded like a refrigerator being pushed across a

linoleum floor. Mobile patrol at Mercy Prep was out.

Sandvik cautions readers to not become discouraged with daily obstacles. "Failures are the highway to success," he writes, "so don't exit too early." I reminded myself that if I finished the shift at Mercy Prep, I'd make enough money to balance my checking account. And I figured my streak of rotten luck guaranteed the Atwater site would come through. Things always balance out.

1500: Nothing to report.

"Let's go for our ride," Dana said.

We'd been taking drives together at lunch every day that week. Dana refused to take her lunch break in J. Hudson. "I hate that place," she said. "It's death in there."

She drove a black Ford Explorer, with a spare tire mounted on the front right rim. There was a rosary hanging from her rearview mirror, a pack of Newport menthol cigarettes in the console cup holder, and a cherry-shaped air freshener in the ashtray—ordinary details that made her different from who I'd imagined.

Dana hunched her shoulders when she drove. If she'd been short, it would have made her look defensive, but because she was so tall, she looked vulnerable, as if she'd been punched in the belly and was winded.

I could tell she was distracted. Her driving made me so nervous that I looked for the seatbelt. Abruptly, she turned into the side street for a development I'd never seen.

"You didn't use the turn signal," I said.

"I just then decided to turn."

The houses in the neighborhood were all enormous two-story brick mansions with perfect lawns running down to the sidewalk. Dana parked on the side of the road, in front of a mailbox.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Dwight?"

"Not at present."

Dana laughed, which seemed to surprise her.

"I like the way you talk, Dwight," she said. "You're all right."

The closest I'd come to having a girlfriend was Jessica Crupi in the eighth grade. Her parents ran a boarding stable, and Jessica used to always draw pictures of horses on my book covers in homeroom. She'd give each horse long, girlish lashes and say, "Such a beautiful horsey." She made me frantic. I found her parents' address in the phone book and sent her an anonymous Valentine's Day card. But when Jessica brought the card to homeroom and showed her friends, I learned that I'd signed it, "Your Secret Admiral," something Jessica Crupi and her friends repeated all day.

"No girlfriend?" Dana lifted a cigarette out of her pack. "What keeps you busy?"

"Atwater," I said, and explained things to her.

"You're lucky to have one thing," she said. "Me?" She waved her cigarette. "I'm everywhere."

"Sandvik says—"

"Dwight, I'm pregnant." Dana fumbled to light her cigarette, then exhaled a cloud of smoke and waved it away. "I don't even know the father."

I could barely speak. It felt like a door had slammed.

"What will you do?"

Dana waved her cigarette under the windshield glass. "Have it, abort it. Keep it, give it up." She dragged from the cigarette, and her lips trembled. "I have so many choices." Then she said, "I need you to look the other way now. I'm going to cry."

But she stuck her chin out, and that seemed to stop it.

1545: Coach Greer on site. Patrols modified.

The football coach drove a black jeep with polished chrome rims and a navy-blue canvas top. The jeep's knobby tires whirled on the pavement as it accelerated in a straight line up the hill, pulling up to where I was parked in front of Mercy Prep. The coach shut the jeep off and swung out.

"You security?"

The coach—square jaw, straight teeth, white hair cut military-style, clear blue eyes—was tall and athletic; but he looked out of proportion, with his large head and thick neck dominating everything below his shoulders.

"I'm covering for Sam," I said.

"Welcome to the team." His voice was loud, and he projected it so forcefully that the cords in his neck stood out like cables straining to keep his head from blasting off. He glanced at my car. "Looks like one of my linebackers got you there."

"Somebody backed into it," I told him, leaving out the lamppost, as I didn't see how that mattered.

He nodded. "You see Father Wellbeck today?"

"He left."

He put his hand out quickly, as if he'd just remembered.

"Coach Greer." He squeezed my hand so hard that I felt his grip in my elbow. "Wellbeck on you about his statue?"

"A little."

He pulled at his jaw. "Father Wellbeck is a good guy, plenty of morals. But we're not always on the same team." He stared at the front of my car. "His statue is okay, right?"

I told him it was.

"Good." He cracked a smile. "Wellbeck talks about education making men out of boys. But what boys need to learn is strength, because in this world you've got to take before you can give.

Coach Greer talked the way I imagined Sandvik would have if he'd ever made a tape. I responded to Coach Greer's intensity—with his voice raised and his cold, hard eyes fixed on me, I felt swept up. Probably there had been thousands of boys he'd given his attention, and who were now all sorts of men.

"You haven't seen anyone, right?" he said.

I mentioned the dark blue Camaro, and Coach Greer scowled.

"Longhairs."

He squatted down and made a diagram in the dirt with his finger.

"Here's Mercy," he sketched. "The entrance, the parking lot, the football field. Back here you've got the garden with the statue."

His eyes gleamed, and for a moment I felt as if I were in the huddle with my dad.

"Hear me?" Coach Greer tugged my sleeve. "Look, I don't know anything about security, but I know about getting a team across the goal line." He grinned wildly, rapped his head. "I coach minds, not just bodies, so I know how these boys think. In this case it's a numbers advantage. They'll keep you off-balance with screens and reverses, attack off-tackle, wear your defenses down until they find the weak spot." He stabbed his finger in the dirt. "Play their game, you'll lose."

He brushed away all of Mercy Prep except for the garden, then made a cross where the statue of Mary was.

"Don't play their game. Play a prevent defense. Stay with the statue." Coach Greer dusted off his hands and lifted a finger. "Focus on the one thing—guard Mary."

1600: No activity to report. The Virgin Mary is secure.

Coach Greer jumped in his jeep and drove off site. The air stuck in my throat as I walked around to the back of Mercy Prep. It was the hottest part of the day, and the lawn seemed drained of color, pale as dust. The only shade in the back was under a pine tree, where I heard the busy peep of chicks.

Inside the nest I could see the tiny yellow beaks. Above them, a robin hopped from branch to branch, crying out in alarm while a second robin glided down from the tree and streaked across the lawn as if to draw me away from its nest. But I stayed in the shade of the pine tree, guarding Mary.

1630: Nothing to report.

After Dana told me she was pregnant, I daydreamed of rescuing her. What if she had the baby, I thought. The child would need a father.

"I can't give him up," Dana said the next week, leaning her forehead on the steering wheel. We were parked in the same development again. Dana touched her stomach, and I felt the frantic collision of my heart against my chest.

Yes, I almost blurted out. Keep the baby.

Dana looked up, and I saw that her eyes were red with tears.

"Dwight, let me use your cell," she said. "I want to check my answering machine. If he left a message, I'll call him; if he didn't, I'll never talk to him again."

It was the other him she meant.

I rubbed at a spot on the dashboard with my thumb. The cell was the site phone for Town Centre and belonged to Tri-State Security, meaning unauthorized calls violated policy. But I wasn't going to tell her that. Dana needed to hear Sandvik, from the last chapter of *Walking Away*: "What you walk away from, you control; what you don't walk away from, controls you."

Dana touched my sleeve.

"Please, Dwight."

She dialed her number at home, then stared out the windshield as she listened. Her features tightened as if she were in pain. Finally, she handed the phone back.

"Nothing," she said.

Good, I wanted to say, but it came out strangled.

"God, that's not what I wanted," she said. Dana started the car. "Let's just go back, Dwight."

1700: Patrols suspended.

The sky grew black. Leaves on the trees turned and showed their pale backs. The low clouds roiled. Thunder clapped.

I left Mary and rushed back around to the front of the school, only to find the Lumina had been assaulted by toilet paper and shaving foam. Tires squealed at the bottom of the hill. Across the lot, the seagulls huddled together, quiet and still, turning their beady eyes to the sky and blinking each time lightning flashed.

Then the air grew cool, and a wall of rain swept across the blacktop. I dashed to my car, dove in, and rolled up the windows. Gusts of wind rocked the car, and rain exploded against the windshield, battered the roof. Inside, the car became loud with what sounded like applause.

Soon, the storm broke and slowed to a bitter drizzle. The Area Supervisor called.

"I got a real mess here, Dwight," he said. "Your relief, Naomi, called off. There's been an accident, a pileup. She's okay, but her car is a wreck. I need you to pull another shift. Can you stay on site till 6A?"

The sun strained to break through the spent, gray clouds, and patches of light gleamed on the surface of the lot.

"What about Atwater?"

"Atwater? Benton got it. Stop with Atwater. It's like you got something stuck on that brain of yours. I got a real mess here."

The Area Supervisor sighed.

"Listen, Dwight. Honestly, I don't know how to make Atwater happen. The Incident Report from Moxley's don't look so hot. It'd take a miracle." He laughed. "If you're a praying man, maybe put in an order. But it's out of my hands, understand?"

The seagulls were returning to the parking lot, landing in puddles and milling around the lamppost.

"Forget Atwater," he said. "Get it out of your head. A place like Mercy Prep—nobody looking over your shoulder, you're the boss. You give thanks for a site like that, am I right?"

I stared at the low roof of Mercy Prep. I wanted to tell him forget it, I quit.

"Look, I can't get another officer out there till morning. Can you stay? Dwight, you there?"

1730: Nothing to report.

When Dana stopped coming to work at J. Hudson, they put another woman, from menswear, behind the cosmetics counter. For the next week, every time he passed me, the janitor at Town Centre said, "Where's your girlfriend?" I pretended not to hear him.

I'd programmed Dana's number into the site phone, but she never answered when I called her. It wasn't until the end of the month that I saw her at Town Centre again.

I was on foot patrol outside Moxley's Jewelry, where a young couple stood at one of the jewelry cases near the door. Nabil, the salesman at Moxley's, was with them. He set a ring on a black velvet pad in front of the couple and gave them a

broad smile. The woman tried on the ring, and when she held it up toward the ceiling light, I saw it was Dana. The man looked down at a cell phone in his hand, then whispered something in her ear and left the store. I tried to memorize his face—the father of Dana's child, no doubt—but my vision kept slipping. I felt sucker-punched, and did knee bends until I could see straight.

The man glanced toward the mall exit, pressed a button on the cell phone, and lifted it to his ear. Inside Moxley's, Nabil excused himself and picked up the store phone. Dana, who still had the ring on her finger, looked around casually, then quickly strode out the door. Swift and silent, she and the man hustled for the Town Centre exit. I stepped in front of them, and they stopped.

Dana stuck her chin out.

"Hi, security."

Inside the store, Nabil cried out.

The man pulled Dana. "Tell the rent-a-cop goodbye."

I didn't bother chasing them when they ran. Instead, I went inside Moxley's and did an Incident Report with Nabil, who said he'd call my supervisor.

"You security?" he wailed. "I am robbed."

At the end of my shift that night, I used a pay phone in the food court to call Dana, figuring she'd been screening my calls. I punched the numbers in a rush and held the receiver upside down, so nervous that I was panting. She answered.

"Hello?"

Her voice was soft and cautious.

"Dana—" I started. But the rest of what I wanted

to say was jumbled and choked. I was so frantic that there was only room in my throat to breathe. Her voice suddenly became guarded.

"Dwight?"

I pulled at my jaw. My voice sounded loud in my own ears.

"Marry me," I croaked.

My ears burned, and inside them I heard a dull hum. But once I'd gotten the words out, I felt reckless, nearly invulnerable.

"Marry me, Dana," I said.

Silence.

"Oh, Dwight," she said, "hang up the phone. Hang it up."

1800: Shift ends. Guarding Mary.

I trudged back around Mercy Prep, the ground soft as fudge and my shoes sinking in the muddy ruts. The statue of the Virgin Mary had been washed clean by the fury of the storm, and with its imperfections exposed—pitted surface, dull features—Wellbeck's statue seemed then just an

ordinary garden piece, one of a million cheap, mass-produced lawn ornaments that anybody could walk into a Meijer, buy, and carry off under their arm.

Nearby, the robins stood under the pine tree, where one of their chicks had fallen out of the nest and into a shallow puddle. They stood at the edge of the water, chirping softly as if quizzing the chick, then flew off when I approached. The chick—bunched up on itself like a fetus—had drowned, and I felt a stab of rage as I lifted it out of the puddle. How long had it lived—one day, two? And for what?

I carried the dead chick to the garden and held it over the Virgin Mary; easy as breaking the stem of a flower, I pinched its head off. Blood landed on her tilted head, ran down her cheek, passed her mysterious smile, and spotted the clean bone-white of her shoulder. I waited for punishment; but the school windows were dark and empty, the clouds over Mercy Prep low as a ceiling, and I didn't need Sandvik to tell me that with no one watching, it was possible to get away with anything. 