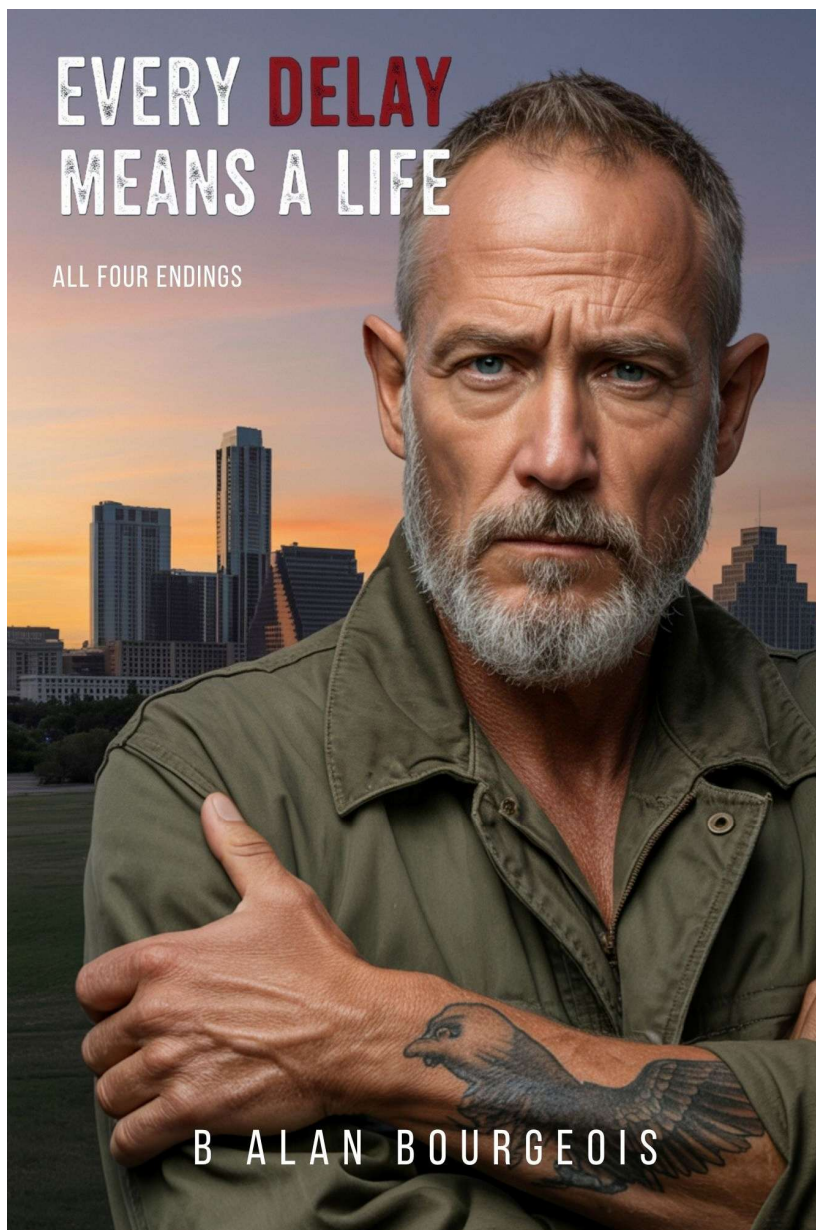


EVERY **DELAY** MEANS A LIFE

ALL FOUR ENDINGS



B ALAN BOURGEOIS

Every Delay Means a Life

All Four Endings

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Dedication

There are countless paths that lead a person into homelessness. Substance abuse is one of them, yes — but it is only one thread in a much larger tapestry of loss, bad breaks, medical crises, bureaucratic failures, impossible rents, and moments when life tilts harder than anyone can hold on.

When I wrote this book, I was homeless myself.
Not metaphorically.
Not research-driven.
Homeless.
Sleeping in my car.

Learning the rituals of survival — where to park, how to stay warm, how to stay invisible, how to stay human.

Much of what Tom endures in these pages is something I, too, have faced in one form or another.

This story is dedicated to two groups:

To those living the fight no one sees — the mothers, veterans, workers, elders, teens, and survivors doing whatever they can to stay alive one more night.

And

To the people who refuse to look away — the volunteers, case workers, street medics, outreach teams, and neighbors who understand that compassion is not a luxury but a responsibility.

Because homelessness is not a character flaw.
It is a system failure.

And every delay truly does mean a life.

This book includes one full ending, but I wrote four total — some you might expect, and some you won't. Each reflects a path a person like Tom could realistically take. The remaining endings are available at the end of this book for a small cost. Every dollar from those purchases goes directly to organizations working to help unhoused people find safety, dignity, and a way forward.

Thank you for reading this story — and for caring enough to keep turning the page.

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Chapter 1

The Night Watch

The rain starts before dawn, a light knocking on the roof like somebody politely asking to come in. Tom Grady keeps his eyes closed and counts the taps the way he used to count breaths before stepping out of the truck downrange. Count to four in, hold, count to four out. The glass fogs. His own breath warms the small, stale air of the sedan until it smells like old coffee and damp canvas.

He wipes the windshield with the heel of his hand. A smear of condensation slides and then reforms, stubborn as policy. The view returns in pieces—the canted back wall of the warehouse, the rusted dumpster, a rectangle of dark sky between rooflines the color of a bruise.

The dog tags swing from the mirror when he shifts. They kiss the plastic with a little click. He keeps meaning to tuck them away so he doesn't have to hear that sound in the dark, but then he doesn't. Some things you keep out where you can see them, so you don't forget who you are, or were.

His lower back complains when he sits upright. The seat foam gave up a long time ago. He rolls his shoulders until the ache stops shouting and goes back to muttering. He slides his feet into his boots. The laces have been replaced with paracord. It does the job.

He checks the time on his phone. Three percent battery. Enough to last until the gas station opens. He thumb-checks for messages he already knows aren't there. Nothing from the city, nothing from the council, nothing from Lena. The last text from his daughter is months old now, pinned at the top where it can make him honest:

I can't watch you fade, Dad.

He closes the thread. The rain deepens, steady now. He turns the key and lets the engine cough itself awake for the heat. The whole car shivers. He watches the fuel needle ease off empty and settle just above it. A quarter tank is the line between independence and a call he doesn't want to make.

The warehouse lot is a decent spot: quiet overnight, cameras that don't point toward the cars, delivery trucks not due until seven. He learned it from a kid who sleeps in a minivan with two dogs and a carton of ramen. They traded spots the way men used to trade rations—no questions, quick gratitude, a map made of favors.

When the heater starts pushing something warmer than breath, he takes the cracked plastic comb from the glove box and drags it through his hair, quick passes meant to suggest intent more than deliver results. He wipes his face with a T-shirt he keeps rolled behind the seat, then uses a bottled water cap to rinse his mouth. It's a routine he can do half-asleep now. Routines keep the seams from splitting.

At 5:05 the Chevron on the corner admits the first customers, a trickle of men in paint-stained pants and steel-toe boots heading toward day jobs that will maybe last until noon, maybe not. Tom pulls the car out and eases into the street. The wipers squeal. He knows exactly how far the blades will travel before they miss a crescent of water in the lower left, smearing a blur that turns headlights into comets.

Inside the store, the coffee is bitter and old, which means it's perfect. He uses the last of his coins. The clerk watches him over a magazine without looking at him at all.

"Y'all still got the bathroom key?" Tom asks.

The kid hooks a key ring with a length of fluorescent nylon and slides it over without a word. Tom takes it, thanks him anyway, and heads to the back. He washes with the efficiency of a man who has shaved out of a canteen cup more times than he can count. He watches

himself in the spotted mirror: the gray at his temples, the lines at the eyes that used to arrive after a long patrol and then leave after a long sleep. These days they don't leave. He looks like a man who is almost done pretending he's not. He shakes his head and scrubs harder.

When he returns the key the clerk nods like maybe they had a conversation. Outside, the rain has eased into mist. The eastern sky has started hinting pink along the horizon where the highway lifts. The city feels like a chest taking a shallow breath. He sits in the car and opens the spiral notebook he keeps beneath the seat.

He turns to a page titled in block letters: **ONE OF THE UNCOUNTED.**

Below it, the letter he wrote at two in the morning the week before:

Council Members—

I'm writing from a car I sleep in on the east side. That means I won't show up on most of your counts. That means when your consultants give you numbers, I'm not inside those numbers. I'm a ghost you drive past. I'm a veteran. I'm also your neighbor. I'm asking for a safe place to park where I won't get ticketed or towed when I close my eyes. I'm asking you to count me so I can stop counting hours in the dark. — Tom Grady, U.S. Army (Ret.)

He'd sent versions of that same letter to each council office, changing a sentence here or a fact there to prove a human wrote it. The majority response was silence. One reply had arrived two days later with the city seal at the top and the warmth of a freezer aisle:

Thank you for reaching out. Your concerns are important to us. Please contact our partner agency for assistance with shelter placement. Due to high demand, wait times may be extended. We appreciate your patience.

Partner agency. High demand. Patience. He'd printed it out because sometimes the only way to make a thing real is to feel the paper cut your thumb.

He sips coffee, turns the page. Today's list is short and looks like orders:

- **Plasma** — 9:00 a.m.
- **Labor Hall** — after
- **Call VA** — ask again about group slot
- **Email follow-up** — Ruiz
- **Park before 10** — warehouse or bakery?

He nods at the list like a squad leader nodding at a briefing. Repeat it back in your head so nothing gets missed. He starts the engine again and pulls onto the feeder. The radio hisses awake on a talk station. Somebody's angry about something that has no relation to rain or coffee or paracord laces. He twists the knob to static, which is somehow better.

The plasma center opens at nine but the line forms early. It lives between a payday lender and a nail salon, the sign a promise and a dare: **EARN TODAY**. He parks on a side street and takes a number inside, sits beneath a mounted television that shows a cooking show without sound. The host lifts a lid and everyone in the audience claps like heat itself deserved applause.

Ray is there—a Marine who no longer calls himself one but whose posture can't forget. He slides into the chair beside Tom with the weary intimacy of a man whose life has the same orbit.

"You get the rain last night?" Ray asks.

"Sounded like a platoon of squirrels with boots on," Tom says.

Ray grins at that. "They ever write you back?"

"Automated niceness," Tom says. "We appreciate your patience."

"Patience is free," Ray says. "That's why they hand it out."

They sit with that for a while. The phlebotomist calls numbers. When Tom's arm is wrapped and the needle

slides in, he watches his blood travel the clear tubing with the detached interest of a man watching weather on a radar. He hates the feeling that he is literally draining himself to buy gas. He hates it less than being stuck when the needle hits E.

After, they give him a juice box and a small envelope of cash. He thanks them and means it. Outside, the sky has cleared to a hard blue that will bring heat by noon. He eats half a breakfast taco at the picnic table out front, wipes his hands on a napkin, and watches the street. A city bus exhales and kneels for a woman with a stroller. Somewhere far down the block a leaf blower drones like nostalgia.

By the time he reaches the labor hall, the first shift is already gone. The foreman squints at him, glances at his boots, and shakes his head. “Got six tomorrow,” he says, like that’s kindness. It is, in a way. A thin thread to wrap around your wrist so you don’t float away.

“Copy,” Tom says. He walks two blocks to the library to charge his phone and sit in a chair that isn’t molded to him. The library smells like old paper and a promise school used to make before the world corrected it. He chooses a table near an outlet and plugs in. The relief of the little lightning-bolt icon arriving is disproportionate. It feels like getting picked up on the last mile.

He opens the city website. The home page features a photo of a child in a park and a slogan about belonging. He clicks through to the contact page for District Four. There she is: *Elena Ruiz, Constituent Services Director*. He types; he deletes. He types again:

Ms. Ruiz—

Following up on my previous message regarding safe parking for residents sleeping in their vehicles. I am not seeking charity. I’m asking for a place where I and others won’t be criminalized for closing our eyes. I’m a veteran. I can send my discharge papers if it helps convince you I exist. Respectfully—

He pauses. The word “respectfully” looks like a prop you set on a table because people expect props. He leaves it anyway and hits send.

He follows with a message to the general council inbox because sometimes doubling a thing changes its weight. Then he closes the laptop the library loans out by the hour and walks to the stacks. He runs his fingers along spines without reading the titles, a habit that calms him. Paper doesn’t lie; it just waits. He checks out nothing. Waiting is a kind of debt too.

At noon he walks the shade side of the street to a diner that hasn’t changed its menu since nineteen-fifty-something. He orders the daily special because it’s called Special and that’s the kind of joke that still works on him. He eats slow, folds the receipt, and leaves two dollars because his mother would have been ashamed of anything less and shame is still a useful tool when you need one.

By mid-afternoon the heat has climbed into the high nineties and the car is an oven when he returns. He cracks all four windows in that delicate configuration you learn by trial and error—no more than two fingers or someone will reach in; no less or you’ll cook. He drinks water until his stomach sloshes, then closes his eyes just to see if sleep will show its face in daylight. It doesn’t. He watches light move across the headliner in slow rectangles and thinks about Lena at nine years old holding a sparkler, her mouth open in awe, the light throwing little stars on her cheeks. He thinks about the last time he saw her, the way she stood with her arms crossed like she was holding herself together because someone had to.

He tells himself he’ll call her tonight. He tells himself that so the day will accept him.

The notification buzzes at 3:26. His heart trips. He fumbles the phone, almost drops it between the seat and the console where objects go to die. He recovers it and opens the email.

Thank you for your message. Your concerns are important to us. Please contact our partner agency for assistance with shelter placement. Due to high demand, wait times may be extended. We appreciate your patience. — Office of Council Member...

It's the same language as before, the same plastic courtesy that slides off in your hands. He scrolls, searching for any fresh word to hold onto. There isn't one.

He reads it again anyway. He reads it like a man checks a map even when he knows the road is closed—because ritual is a way to not break something.

He dials the partner agency number for the third time this week. The recording explains the menu options. He chooses the only one that sounds like it belongs to humans. The hold music is a piano trying to be cheerful and failing. After twenty-two minutes the line clicks and dies. He stares at the dark screen until the battery icon flashes red and then fades.

When he breathes, it shudders.

At dusk, he moves the car back to the warehouse lot. Cloud scraps purple the western sky. A semi backs into a bay with the patient beep-beep of a machine that can't worry. He parks two spaces from last night's spot. You don't make patterns; patterns are a gift to anyone hunting something.

He eats the rest of the taco. It's cold and fine. He writes in the notebook because if he doesn't the thoughts will ferment.

Day: plasma, denied at hall, email sent, reply received (boilerplate). Called partner agency. Dropped.

He waits for the other sentences. The ones with heat in them. He doesn't put them down because paper is evidence and he learned a long time ago to be careful what you hand the world.

A car rolls through the lot and idles near the dumpster. A woman in a neon vest climbs out and empties a small office trash can into it. She hums. The

tune is familiar and takes a moment to name itself. "This Land Is Your Land." He almost laughs at the precision of that.

The night cools. He cracks the windows to the two-finger mark and lays the seat back as far as it will go. The dog tags knock together when he shifts. He slides a hand up and stills them. The ceiling is a shade lighter than the dark outside, a false sky he can accept.

He closes his eyes to practice sleep. The first image that arrives is a convoy ribboning across a road so bright it looks like the sun fell down and flattened. The second is a council chamber with empty chairs and microphones asleep on their stems. He tries to replace both with Lena at nine, but she blinks out, and the room returns, and then the road, and then the room.

He opens his eyes again. The windshield has fogged in a loose oval where his breath has been. He drags his hand across it and leaves a streak that catches the light from a far-off security lamp. For a second it looks like sunrise caught at night, a bright smear on a surface built to see through and not be seen.

In the silence the question arrives, uninvited and sharp: *What does it take to get counted?* The words don't sound like his voice yet. They sound like the radio when you turn the dial between stations and somebody far away is talking through weather.

He turns the ignition to auxiliary and watches the dash glow come alive. The fuel needle shivers. The check engine light does its tired orange blink. He looks at the dog tags catching a half-moon of light and thinks about how metal remembers every hand that held it.

"Count to four," he murmurs, because that's what you do when there's nothing left to do.

Four in.

Hold.

Four out.

The rain doesn't return. The city holds its breath with him.

Sleep takes the first shift. He lets it.

Chapter 2

Ghosts of Service

By seven the warehouse lot has started its daily transformation from quiet to useful. Men in gloves swing dock doors up like eyelids. Forklifts wake with complaining beeps. Tom Grady sits up and watches the choreography, the dance he used to know by muscle memory—be where the work is, don't get crushed by anything that doesn't know your name.

He folds the blanket, slides it into the space behind the passenger seat where the foam has given up, and checks the glove box for the small things that make a day survivable: a half roll of antacids, a stub of pencil, two quarters, one aspirin in foil that looks like jewelry for a very small person. He pockets the quarters and the aspirin. The dog tags slip cold against his collarbone when he leans forward, a temperature that wakes the skin and the past.

On the far side of the lot, someone laughs—short and surprised, the sound of good news arriving where it has no right to. He can't see who. He thinks of Lena at nine, laughing when the sparkler spit and went out then burned her thumb anyway. She didn't cry. She stared at the red bloom with the detached wonder of a scientist and said, "Well, that's information." He'd laughed then too, the rare kind that comes from down in the ribs and rearranges the furniture on its way up.

He turns the key, wipers pass once to chase a night's film of dust, and points the car toward the service road. The day stretches ahead like a training course: stations,

obstacles, places where you'll be timed and judged by men who won't remember you at supper.

The VA clinic is out on a bus line, a low building with shaded walks and a flag that claps against its pole with disciplined cheer. He parks two blocks away and walks to save gas for the evening. The heat is already editing the morning, taking out anything that looked like mercy. He adjusts his cap. The velcro patch on the back used to say his unit. He pulled the patch off last year when a stranger at a stoplight rolled down his window and yelled thank you at him like the words were a brick he was supposed to catch.

Inside, the waiting room smells faintly of disinfectant and coffee that should have been thrown away last administration. A television on the wall captions the news without sound. A man in a wheelchair taps his finger on the armrest in a pattern Tom recognizes as three quick, then two, then one—a cadence you use to keep your leg from going into business for itself. A woman with a clipboard calls names. Tom checks in with a receptionist who has a jar of candy on her desk and a smile that looks like a bookmark—useful, impersonal, something you place and retrieve.

“Group meeting’s at nine,” she says. “If you’re here for intake, you’re early.”

“Early’s a habit,” he says.

“It’s a good one.” She slides him a form and a pen anchored to the counter by a length of chain. He hates the chain more than the form. He fills in the blanks with the measured block letters a drill instructor admired once for being legible even under duress. Address: none. Phone: the number that can be on or off depending on the kindness of outlets. Emergency contact: he puts Lena’s name and then crosses it out and writes “none” because he doesn’t know what right she has to a call like that anymore.

He sits. Two seats down, a kid with a jawline so sharp it looks drawn on stares at his boots like they’ve betrayed

him. Across from them, an older man sleeps and snores and wakes himself up with it and apologizes to the ceiling. The room hums with that soft static particular to places where people come to be repaired: hope and skepticism rubbing against each other until sparks are either made or aren't.

At nine the counselor calls them back. Group is a circle of chairs and a coffee pot that has already seen too much. The counselor's name is Mr. Beck. He wears a tie the color of a bruise trying to heal and eyes that have perfected the art of looking at people without touching them.

"Standard check-in," Beck says. "Name, branch, years, and then whatever's present. You don't owe each other a performance. You owe each other the courtesy of being real."

They go around. Navy, Army, Army, Air Force, Marine. Tom waits his turn the way he used to wait for a door to be blown—counting breaths, letting other men's stories walk across his back like a bridge he's built without tools.

When it's him, he keeps it simple. "Tom. Army. Two tours. Present is... I need a place to park where I'm not illegal for closing my eyes. That's the kind of 'present' that's got the other stuff sitting up."

A couple of heads nod. The kid with the drawn-on jawline—*Evan*—looks at him sharp, interest breaking through whatever hurt has been doing the talking. Beck nods as if Tom placed a piece in a puzzle they're all pretending isn't a picture of something on fire.

"What happens in your body when you're looking for that place?" Beck asks. The question is so specific it skips past defenses. Tom appreciates the honesty of a man who goes right to the mechanics. He can meet mechanics with mechanics.

"I run routes in my head," Tom says. "Clock the exits. Move two or three spots over so no one can make a pattern out of me. Windows two fingers. Everything gets

evaluated for what it can do to me and what I can do with it. After that, the body does what the body does—keeps count.”

“Of what?” Beck asks.

“Threats. Breaths. Days since the last time something made sense.”

He doesn’t say *bodies*. The word sits at the edge of his tongue and looks down. He doesn’t say it because this is the part of the story where he is still a man trying to be helped instead of a man trying to invent a way to be seen. He pinches the skin between his thumb and forefinger where the acupuncturist once told him a pressure point lives. He doesn’t believe in magic but he believes in distraction.

They talk: nights that go sideways without permission, the shame of asking for blankets at churches that look at you like you’re the weather that ruined their picnic, the way commerce is built to make you visible and need is built to make you invisible. Beck writes words on a whiteboard—*hypervigilance, moral injury, sleep hygiene*. Tom hates *hygiene* attached to sleep. Where he comes from, hygiene is cleaning a weapon that will get you home. Sleep is a field you cross without a map.

Evan speaks up for the first time near the end. “I keep thinking if I can get back to who I was, I’ll be okay,” he says. “But I don’t remember who I was without remembering what I did and then I don’t want to be that guy either.”

Beck nods. “So you’re chasing a version of you that never existed and using that failure to justify punishing the one who does.”

Evan flinches like he’s been touched without consent. Tom recognizes the look. It’s the look you get when someone names your ghost louder than you have courage for.

After group, Beck corners Tom at the coffee. “You still on the list for transitional housing?” he asks.

"I'm on every list," Tom says. "I'm like Santa's bad dream."

Beck's smile is small and human. "If you can stay after, I can call a contact at ECHO. They're piloting a safe-parking schedule in another city. We can at least steal their playbook."

Tom knows what *pilot* means. It means somebody threw a dart at a calendar. Still, a playbook is more than a mood. He nods. "Appreciated."

Beck makes calls. Tom listens to a conversation you could script: greetings, acknowledgments, the careful dance of jargon. *Capacity, bandwidth, stakeholders, liability, phased rollout*. Tom watches Beck listen and thinks of radio operators he knew who could look like they were doing nothing while landing helicopters with their thumbs.

"Okay," Beck says finally, covering the receiver with his hand. "They're going to send me their draft. It's not Austin. But policy is a Lego set if you're not precious."

"Copy," Tom says. He wants to feel relieved. He feels like a man who found a dollar on a road where rent is due.

On his way out, he stops by the bulletin board. Flyers layer over flyers like leaves that forgot to fall. *Veterans Writing Group—Tell the Story That Won't Leave You Alone. Housing Resources—Call 2-1-1. AA—No one gets sober alone*. Tacked in the corner is something new: **Voices of the Unhoused — Testimony Night at City Hall**. Beneath, a handwritten note: *Put bodies in seats so they can't pretend we're theory*. He writes the time on his palm. The ink bleeds a little and makes it look like it's already history.

It's past eleven now. The heat has set up a residency. He walks two blocks back to the car and sits with the door open, letting air find the low places. His phone woke to half a charge. He opens email. At the top of the inbox is a reply from *Elena Ruiz*.

Mr. Grady—

We've received your follow-up. I'm sorry the partner agency call dropped; we've had reports of technical issues and are working with them to resolve. I understand your concern regarding safe parking. The Council Member is considering options in consultation with APD and our service partners. Liability and neighborhood impact are significant considerations. I can't promise a timeline, but I can promise your message is being read. — E. Ruiz

He reads the one sentence meant to show a human is in the room: *I can't promise a timeline*. He appreciates the permission not to pretend. He hates that it's the one honest thing in a bowl of words designed to be soft enough not to bruise.

He types back.

Ms. Ruiz—

Thank you for the response. "Liability" is a word that sounds like it belongs to lawyers. It's also what I become when I close my eyes in a legal parking space. I'm asking you to transfer some of that liability from my body to your policy. If you need a person to stand at a microphone and say that plain, I will. Respectfully, Grady.

He doesn't send it. The cursor blinks until it becomes a metronome for a song he doesn't know the words to. He deletes *respectfully* and then deletes the rest because anger written when the sun is high is a kind of thirst. He saves nothing. He leans his head back on the seat and stares at the ceiling fabric pillowed into small constellations by years of nothing. He closes his eyes. Opening them again takes effort he would rather spend elsewhere.

By one he's at the thrift store on Cesar Chavez, scanning the electronics shelf for a charger that hasn't been gnawed by time or teeth. He finds one that looks almost new and tests it in an outlet meant for a floor lamp in the furniture section. The phone takes charge like a man taking a second plate because manners would be an insult to hunger. He thanks the cashier who tells him

it's half-off day and calls him *sir* in a way that makes the word feel like a clean shirt.

Back in the car he plugs the phone in and lets it gorge. The window cracked to two fingers lets in a ribbon of street music. A guy with a guitar is butchering a classic into something original by accident. Tom watches a couple argue across the street, hands moving in choreography that keeps stopping just short of dangerous. The day is an inventory he keeps and keeps and cannot sell.

At three he drives to the library again for the cool and the plug. The weatherman on the captioned TV is drawing lines of red across a cartoon Texas shaped like a promise no one read before signing. Tom sits at the same table. Out the high window, the sky is the color of exhaust. He opens a new document and types *Statement—Voices of the Unhoused*. He lets his fingers wait above the keys the way a man lets a dog smell his hand before contact.

He writes:

My name is Tom Grady. I slept in a parking lot last night because that's the option a city gives me when the math doesn't. I am not a theory. I am a person with a body that still needs rest even when ordinances make that a crime. I am a veteran. That used to make people listen. It doesn't now, so I'm trying other things like going where microphones live. I'm asking for a place designated by this city where those of us in cars can sleep without being read as trash or threat.

He stops. He didn't plan to write *trash or threat*. The phrase sits there like a mirror he didn't consent to. He leaves it. Paper should be allowed to tell the truth when mouths can't.

He adds:

If the word is liability, I ask you to measure the liability of what happens when a human being is exhausted inside a moving object. If the word is neighborhood impact, I ask you to measure the impact of the

neighborhood that is a parking lot full of closed eyes and keys in ignitions because the heat will make you into a ghost if you let it. If the word is timeline, I ask for tonight.

He prints two copies while he still has time on the library card. The printer gives him a low-toner version of himself. He folds one copy small and slides it into his wallet. The other he tucks into the notebook beneath **ONE OF THE UNCOUNTED** like a spare lung.

On his way out, a librarian with hair the color of new pennies stops him with a finger held politely in the air. "You left this," she says, holding up the charger he almost forgot in the wall.

"You just saved my life," he says, too honest. She smiles and doesn't make a joke about it, which is another way to save a life.

By five he's at the bus stop outside City Hall with a handful of others carrying signs that range from angry to handmade to both. A woman in a yellow shirt passes out water bottles. A man with a neat beard and a clipboard practices his three minutes into a phone camera, getting the timing wrong and smiling about it anyway. Tom doesn't have a sign. He has the paper. He rubs his thumb along the fold until the friction warms it enough to feel like a decision.

Inside, the chamber is colder than it needs to be. Rows of chairs face a dais where men and women sit behind their names like titles used to be armor. The "testimony night" is run by a nonprofit that believes in things Tom has to stand near to believe in them too. A woman with a microphone lays out the rules: "Three minutes. No profanity. Speak from your life. Don't read policy. Don't threaten. Be ready to be interrupted by a tone that sounds like an elevator arriving."

The first speaker is a grocery clerk who sleeps in a sedan with two kids while saving for first and last month's rent that keeps moving like the horizon. The second is a man whose hands won't stop shaking. He doesn't apologize for it. He says he's tired of being told gratitude

is the correct response to neglect. The third is a woman who used to be a teacher and now teaches nothing to anyone because the district cut a program that let her pay for a one-bedroom. Tom listens and listens until his hands start to sweat and he has to press them flat on his thighs to keep from making fists just to feel like a person with edges.

They call his name on the sign-up sheet. *Thomas Grady*. The sound of his own name in a place with microphones turns his legs into stilts. He walks to the podium anyway. The city seal looks like a coin minted to buy forgiveness. He places the paper on the wood and rests his fingers on the top edge so they don't shake in the way Evan's did.

"My name is Tom Grady," he says. The microphone gives his voice a size he doesn't recognize. "I slept in a parking lot last night."

He reads. He doesn't look up. He knows the rule about eye contact and persuasion. He breaks it. He reads like the paper is a weapon he doesn't trust his hands with. The tone pings at two minutes fifty. He rushes the last line—"*If the word is timeline, I ask for tonight.*" Then he nods and steps back and the applause is polite and the faces at the dais are paid to look like they are arranging care even when there is none to arrange.

A council staffer meets him at the side aisle with a card. She has hair in a sharp bob and a binder with tabs like a field guide to rain. The card says *Elena Ruiz, Constituent Services Director*. He wants to laugh at the efficiency of the universe, but her eyes are not a joke.

"Thank you for speaking," she says. "I'm sorry about the call. And the email. We are working on options."

"Options are pretty until you need one," he says. He didn't mean to be unkind. It slips out like a reflex you spend years training and fail to unlearn.

She doesn't flinch. "I know," she says. The *I know* lands like something you'd say if you had once

slept in a car and won't say it because men like him might turn it into a reason to ask more of you than your job allows. "APD's concerned about liability in surface lots. I'm trying to get them to read the San Diego memo."

"San Diego figured out how to count their ghosts?" he asks.

"They figured out how to make a place for them to sleep," she says. "Which is a start. Will you email me? Directly."

"I did. Today."

She looks tired in the way people look when their tiredness costs them something you can't repay. She gestures toward the seats. "Stay for the rest," she says. "It matters that you're in the room."

He sits again. He stays. The room keeps filling with lives. A woman with a face like a map cries without apology while describing the math of insulin in a cooler and the price of ice at the gas station when you're buying it with coins. An elder in a veteran's cap says he hasn't gone back to the shelter since he woke to find a man standing over him deciding if his shoes were takeable. A pastor apologizes for closing the church lot at night and vows to bring the issue to the board in a tone that tells Tom the board has been saving its *liability* for just such a moment.

When it ends, they spill out into a dark that has cooled enough to be mistaken for kind. Tom lingers on the steps and watches the group break into smaller groups: plans, rides, cigarettes traded like intelligence. Elena passes him without seeing him and then does see him and lifts her hand in something like a wave and something like a promise. He lifts his in return. It looks like surrender and isn't.

Back in the car, he unfolds the statement and lays it on the passenger seat like a sleeping animal that earned its rest. He stares at it until the words go blurry and then disappear into plain white. He turns the ignition to auxiliary. The dash glows. He watches the needle like a

man watching a horizon for the shape of a thing he prayed for and didn't ask out loud because he has learned what asking does to hope.

The radio picks up a station he didn't choose. A voice is saying something about a car found on the south side, a man dead inside. Tom's whole body goes still, then colder than the night allows. He turns the dial to static and then lower until the static is a rumor. He breathes. Four in. Hold. Four out. It doesn't fix anything. It does what it always does—it gives his hands a job while his head looks for one.

He thinks of the group again, the whiteboard words he wanted to erase with his sleeve, the kid Evan, the way Beck's questions landed like small grenades with kindness written on the pin. *Moral injury* stayed on the board a long time. Beck had underlined it. "We do things— or things happen around us—that violate what we believe the world owes a person. That rift doesn't close with slogans," he'd said. "Sometimes it doesn't close at all. Sometimes you build a bridge over it every day. Sometimes you fall in and learn to climb out faster."

Tom lets the words walk around the car. They check the windows, the doors, the space where a man makes decisions his mother wouldn't recognize. Moral injury. He rolls the phrase in his mouth without speaking. He hates it and loves it. He hates the smell of academic permission. He loves the idea that a scientist somewhere believes in naming the hole so a man can stop pretending he's standing on something.

He thinks of Lena again, arms crossed, eyes that don't blink when someone tries to sell nonsense as news. He imagines calling her. He imagines saying, *I stood at a microphone and didn't throw it*. He imagines her voice unfurling into the car like cool water. He presses the phone awake and stares at her name in the contacts like it's a trap set by a benevolent god. He does not press call. He puts the phone face-down on the seat, which is a way to postpone both joy and shame.

He writes in the notebook.

VA group: Beck's got a contact. Elena is not a machine. City Hall is cold but useful. Statement landed or it didn't; paper is lighter now. Words: moral injury. Experiment: try sleeping with the windows three fingers. Might not cook now that the wind's up.

He stares at the last line. A small thing you can control is a lever powerful enough to move the immediate universe. Three fingers, not two. He adjusts the windows. The night moves in and doesn't set off any alarms. He smiles without showing teeth. He closes his eyes and waits for sleep to remember the route.

He dreams of a road that climbs and climbs and never crests. On the shoulder are small white crosses with names engraved too shallow to hold ink. He knows they are the names of people who were not counted. In the dream he has a brush and a pot of paint. He kneels at each one to thicken the lines until you can read them from a moving car without squinting. He works until dawn and wakes with the ache in his knees, which is either psychosomatic or evidence that some dreams lift heavier than others.

When he wakes for real, it takes a beat to remember which world he's in. The real one wins by a nose. He sits up. The dog tags swing. Outside, a cat walks the low wall with the easy authority of a creature born to be uncounted and uncaring. He checks the phone. No calls. An email—*ECHO Draft: Safe Parking Protocol (other city)*. It's from Beck at three in the morning. Attached is a PDF with more boxes and arrows than a military field manual. He doesn't open it yet. He puts the phone in his pocket and lets the idea of a blueprint ride along with him where hope used to sit with its feet on the dash.

On the way to the gas station, he passes a memorial on the median: flowers in a jar wired to a light pole, a laminated photo of a woman with kind eyes, a cross cut from pallet wood, hand-lettered: **María**. It's new. The flowers haven't figured out they're dead yet. He slows

without meaning to. He doesn't know why he says "I see you" under his breath, but he does. He taps the steering wheel twice—once for her, once for himself—and rolls on toward coffee that will be exactly as bad as yesterday and exactly as necessary.

In the bathroom he washes his face and whispers to the mirror, "Today you call Lena." The mirror does not argue. He dries with paper that leaves lint and makes your skin into something you had to bargain for. Back in the car he opens the ECHO draft and scrolls. The language is a grammar of caution and courage: **Eligible vehicles, check-in hours, liability waivers, security presence, restrooms, trash protocol, lights-on perimeter, lights-off interior, no-questions intake, nightly count.** The phrase **no-questions** makes him want to sit down on the gas station floor and not get up for an hour. Instead he nods, a small bow to a sentence that might save someone's brain from breaking.

He snaps a photo of the section about *lights-off interior* and *restrooms* and forwards it to Elena with no body text. He adds the subject: **Tonight matters.** He hits send before he can make it more eloquent and therefore more avoidable.

He takes his coffee to the curb and sits. The heat is back at the edges but not yet on top of him. A bus yawns and kneels for a man with a cane. The city pretends to be merciful in small, scheduled ways. He sips and lets the shape of the day arrive one small mercy at a time.

The radio will mention another body tonight, he thinks, and feels his hands go stone on the cup. He loosens them with a conscious unclenching. He refuses to let a future he doesn't own rent this hour. He has a list to write, a charger that works, a statement that exists in two copies, and a draft from another city that thinks human sleep should not be a crime.

He writes the list on a new page. The pencil moves like a unit he still belongs to.

- **Follow-up Beck** — thank & ask about timeline

- **Forward draft to Maya?** — no, not yet (do not feed the machine)
- **Call Lena** — leave message if she doesn't answer
- **Labor hall** — try for one of the six
- **Return to lot early** — three-finger windows test
- **Prayer** — he stops the pencil and then writes it anyway, slow: *Say the names.*

He doesn't know whose names he means. He knows how to say them anyway.

He stands, drops the empty cup in a trash can stickered with the city's logo and a slogan about belonging, and heads for the car. The day waits at attention, at ease, at the ready. He takes his place in it like a man stepping into a formation that may or may not go where he asked to go.

He turns the key. The engine coughs twice, then cooperates. The dog tags knock their small metal hello. He touches them once with two fingers—three-finger windows, two-finger salute to the past—and pulls into traffic that folds around him like a river that hasn't yet learned his name.