

THE SHADOW DEPUTY

FREE PREVIEW • CHAPTERS 1-2

TATE CORWIN

“Two killers. One marriage. Till death decides.”

CHAPTER 1

Ridgeway No. 6

The gate should have been shut.

Caleb Rourke saw that before his headlights swept the warning signs, before the county dispatcher repeated the complaint through a burst of static, before Ridgeway No. 6 rose out of the dark as a geometry of black steel and bare concrete. The chain hung from the latch post. One gate leaf stood open a little more than the width of his cruiser.

Nothing had been cut. Nothing looked forced.

That made it worse.

He stopped on the patched approach road and let the engine idle. Rain had passed an hour earlier, leaving a dull shine on the gravel and beads of water along the reclamation company's sign. ACTIVE WORK AREA. NO PUBLIC ACCESS. The words had been peppered by birdshot long before the company replaced the lower culvert. Beyond them, the service road bent uphill through sumac and second-growth maple toward the old loading apron.

"Rook Three, copy?" the dispatcher asked.

Caleb lifted the microphone. "Rook Three copies. At the outer gate now."

"Caller said it was standing open when he came through for the drainage crew. He did not proceed past the gate."

"Understood."

The radio hissed when he released it. Ridgeway sat in a fold that stole signals and returned them when it pleased. On the ridge above, dead conveyors crossed the stars. Below, Bellwether lay mostly hidden, a few amber streetlights trapped between wooded slopes.

His phone glowed in the cup holder. A message from Elena, sent twenty minutes earlier.

If you pass Danner's, we're out of coffee. The kind that doesn't taste like roofing tar.

He had promised to be home before six. She would be awake at the kitchen table, restoring brittle county papers under a task lamp while the rest of the house slept. For one second he pictured her bare feet tucked beneath the chair and the blue mug she kept warming with both hands. Then he turned the screen down.

The open gate might mean a contractor had been careless. It might mean kids with a truck and a taste for abandoned places. Milo Grady had made a minor local industry of encouraging exactly that kind of trespass, though he called it documenting history.

Caleb put the cruiser in park and stepped out.

Cold wet air found the gap above his collar. Water ticked from the branches. He angled his flashlight across the gate, the ditch, and the road beyond. Tire impressions overlapped in the softened gravel, none clean enough to trust at a glance. The chain's free end lay against the post, its padlock closed through the last link. Whoever had opened the gate had possessed a key or found it unsecured.

He did not touch it.

"Rook Three," he said into his shoulder mic. "Gate is open. No visible damage from my position. I'm proceeding to check the immediate access road. Note poor radio coverage."

The reply broke apart, but he caught the dispatcher's acknowledgment.

He could have waited for another unit. The complaint contained no report of a person, a vehicle, or violence. The drainage foreman had seen only the gate and backed out. Caleb chose the cruiser over walking because the first bend opened onto a wider patch of road, and because anyone waiting in the trees would hear an engine whether he drove now or backup drove later.

He went through slowly.

The branch to the old loading apron appeared on his left after the culvert, pale aggregate against darker mud. No sign marked it

anymore. Caleb took it without hesitation. Deputies learned the county through repetition: lovers' pull-offs, dumping grounds, places where teenagers built fires and men stripped copper from structures that could still kill them. Ridgeway had all four.

The road narrowed between a cut bank and a rusted drainage channel. His radio gave one sharp pop. Gravel cracked under the tires. Ahead, the apron emerged in the headlights—a flat shelf of broken pavement below the mine works, scattered with concrete footings and waist-high weeds.

Something pale rested where no pale thing belonged.

Caleb braked.

At first it was only a hand beyond a clump of broom sedge. Human, palm down, fingers relaxed against the wet stems. A dark sleeve followed it into shadow. One boot showed beneath the hem of a stained canvas coat, the toe capped with a neat patch that had been stitched instead of glued. Whoever lay there had repaired things rather than discard them.

Caleb called for backup and medical response before he opened the door.

He gave the location twice. The dispatcher asked him to repeat the second time, the mine swallowing half his words. He switched on every exterior light, drew his sidearm, and stood behind the open door long enough to search the apron with the beam.

No movement. No voice. Rainwater dripped through the skeleton of the loading structure with the measured sound of someone walking far away.

He approached along the pavement, marking his own path in his mind. The figure lay thirty feet from the branch road, visible to anyone arriving from the gate. Not hidden. Not displayed, either. The weeds interrupted the outline until the headlights reached a particular angle. From there, the hand appeared first, then the patched boot, then the fact of a man.

"Sheriff's office," Caleb called. "Can you hear me?"

No answer.

The man's jacket had ridden up at one shoulder. Gray hair curled damply against his collar. A red thread showed where somebody had mended the right elbow by hand. The exposed fingers were broad and dark around the nails, the ingrained residue of salvage work.

Caleb scanned beyond him, then holstered and moved close enough to assess what could still be assessed without shifting the body. No breathing. No response. Fixed discoloration marked the exposed skin, a condition no resuscitation could reverse. He advised dispatch that the man appeared deceased and requested the scene be secured for investigation.

Only then did Caleb follow the beam from the outstretched hand to the face.

The head had been turned toward the mine, away from the branch road. The near cheek pressed into the wet weeds. The right arm—Milo's signing hand on two old complaints—had been drawn across the body and angled beyond the finder's first sightline. The left hand was what the headlights offered. The face was what they withheld.

A controlled discovery.

The phrase did not come from training. It came from eight years earlier, from a service road west of Bellwether and a man named Owen Mercer lying where morning survey crews could not miss him. Caleb had chosen that ground after walking it twice. He had measured nothing, written nothing down. He had known where the first truck would round the bend, where its headlights would strike, what the driver would understand in the first second and what would remain mercifully—or usefully—unclear until the second.

He had turned Mercer's face away.

He had tucked the dominant hand beyond the natural approach because recognition changed when the face and working hand stayed absent. A person became a shape before becoming a life. The finder crossed the last few yards under his own power. Later, shock damaged the order of memory.

Caleb had made that choice alone.

Now another man lay inside Caleb's decision.

The apron constricted around him. He kept his breathing even and forced his attention outward: tree line, upper structure, drainage cut, road. A killer could still be nearby. A second victim could be nearby. Terror did not excuse bad work.

He moved no closer. Through a gap in the weeds he could see enough of the man's profile now—the coarse gray beard, the flattened bridge of the nose, the deep notch in the left eyebrow.

Milo Grady.

Caleb had spoken with him three times. Once over stolen copper, once when Milo found high-school kids inside a sealed tippie and called before their parents did, and once in the courthouse parking lot after Milo spent an afternoon scanning old mining photographs. Milo had carried a cardboard tube under one arm and argued that counties lost history by accident long before anyone destroyed it on purpose.

"You ought to see Black Veil," Milo had told him. "Half those dead folks are only mysteries because one office never talked to the next."

Caleb had pretended not to recognize the name. Black Veil Archive was an invitation-only online forum where amateur historians and true-crime obsessives traded clippings, maps, rumors, and photographs from unofficial walks. Milo moderated discussions about unresolved Appalachian deaths. Including, sometimes, deaths Caleb had caused.

The dead man wore the same battered watch Caleb remembered from the courthouse lot. Its cracked face had been covered with a careful square of clear tape. Milo had a former wife in Morrow County. He had a habit of bringing peppermint candies to the clerk who opened the deed books for him. He was not an arrangement, no matter how precisely someone had arranged him.

Caleb made himself look at the whole scene again.

Near Milo's near heel, bright against the soaked pavement, lay a short loop of orange braided cord. Its end had been flattened by heat. Ridgeway maintenance crews used similar cord for keys and small tools because the color showed in mud. Elias Ward, the former foreman who still handled odd maintenance at the site, wore a ring of gate keys on orange cord through a clip at his belt.

The loop was almost too easy to see.

Caleb did not bend over it. He backed away on the route he had taken in and reported the item's position in plain language. Orange cord near the left heel. No conclusion. No name.

His mind had already ordered the scene differently: access, hand, face, discovery window, then everything else.

He stopped himself before he spoke in that order.

"Adult male, believed to be Milo Grady," he told dispatch. "No apparent signs of life. Scene access is the eastern branch off the main service road. I've observed a possible item near the decedent's left heel. I have not moved or handled it."

He returned to the cruiser and used its position to guard the approach without blocking it. In the mirror, the mine's broken framework stood against the paling sky. His pulse struck hard but evenly in his throat.

There were explanations. Milo might have found records of Mercer and copied the positioning himself before someone killed him. A stranger might have seen old scene photographs. Details Caleb believed private might have circulated through Black Veil, stripped of provenance and passed hand to hand. Coincidence remained possible in the way a falling round could happen to land on a name.

But Mercer's public photographs had not shown the first approach. The reports described position clinically, from the body outward. They did not preserve the sequence of comprehension.

Caleb did.

So, apparently, did someone else.

Headlights moved through the trees below. Backup came up the main road too fast, slowed at the branch, then eased onto the apron. Caleb stepped into view and held up one hand.

Deputy Neff stopped short of Caleb's cruiser and killed his siren before it could cycle. He was young enough that his rain shell still reflected clean white across the shoulders. His gaze tried to reach around Caleb toward the weeds.

"Stay on this line," Caleb said. "Medical can stage down at the wider turn. One approach only."

Neff nodded, swallowed, and did exactly what he was told.

Caleb briefed him without interpretation: caller, gate, route, initial observation, safety check, apparent death, likely identity, visible cord. Neff wrote on a small pad while Caleb spoke. When he glanced toward Milo, Caleb said, “Look from here. Don’t go closer unless something changes.”

“What happened to him?”

“We don’t know yet.”

The true answer sat behind Caleb’s teeth. Someone had killed Milo and brought him here—or killed him here—and then spent care on the finder’s experience. But cause, movement, and timing belonged to people who would document more than a deputy could see under headlights. Caleb would not convert fear into a finding.

A second unit closed the outer gate area without touching the chain. The ambulance waited at the turn until medical personnel were directed in along Caleb’s path. They confirmed what Caleb already knew and withdrew without widening the scene. Dawn gathered slowly, turning the wet concrete from black to iron gray.

Sheriff Grant Hale arrived in an unmarked sport utility vehicle. He stood at the apron’s edge while Caleb gave the account again. Hale was broad through the shoulders even at fifty-eight, silver-haired, his expression built for bad news delivered without theater. He listened all the way through before asking a question.

“You know him on sight?”

“I’ve dealt with him. Milo Grady. Salvage complaints and trespass calls. He did archive work.”

“Black Veil?”

“Yes.”

Hale looked toward Milo, not at Caleb. “State assistance is on the way. Until they take it, this stays narrow. Names, photographs, chatter—none of it leaves the people who need it.”

“Understood.”

“And you’re the finder. I want a formal follow-up statement after your initial report, with your patrol and dispatch times attached.”

Caleb met his eyes. “All right.”

It was the correct decision. Hale would have made it for any deputy who found a body, especially one on a site the department checked routinely. Caleb's route, his arrival, the minutes before backup—each would become part of the case.

Hale gestured toward the orange cord. An investigator had placed a small numbered marker beside it without touching it. "That common out here?"

"Maintenance crews use bright cord on keys and tools."

"Ward still have access?"

"Last I knew."

"Last you knew," Hale repeated, fixing the limit in place.

A photographer began at the road and worked inward. Frame by frame, the apron changed from a place into a record. Gate. Tire marks. Weeds. Cord. Milo. Each fact acquired a number and a documented position. Caleb watched from beyond the entry line.

The cord wanted the police to look toward Elias Ward. Maybe that was all it was: something lost by a maintenance man who had worked Ridgeway for years. Maybe Milo had picked it up. Maybe it had lain there through a week of rain.

But its brightness offended the rest of the scene. Milo's placement did not announce itself. It waited for the correct angle and unfolded by degrees. The cord simply asked to be found.

Hale moved away to take a call. Neff carried the entry log down to the gate. For a moment no one stood close enough to hear Caleb if he spoke.

He could tell them about Mercer.

Not the whole truth. Only that the position looked familiar. Yet Rowan Price or whoever came from the state would ask why. They would retrieve the old scene records. They would compare what had been public with what Caleb knew. His name sat in the Mercer file as a responding deputy whose patrol had passed within miles of the discovery window. His first report contained details he had believed ordinary because he had written them after making them true.

Helping them read Milo might teach them to read him.

Caleb looked at Milo's repaired boot and remembered the man in the courthouse lot, protecting old maps from drizzle with his own coat.

Then he said nothing.

The omission changed no photograph. It moved no evidence. It would never appear on the scene log. But it was the first decision Caleb made in the Milo Grady investigation that protected whoever had arranged the body.

By full daylight, Caleb could read two parts in the scene. The police were meant to notice the orange cord. He was meant to notice the turned face and hidden hand.

If that reading was right, whoever had left Milo at Ridgeway did not merely know the Mercer case.

They knew Caleb had killed him.

CHAPTER 2

The Second Statement

At ten seventeen that morning, Caleb watched four minutes become evidence.

The Rook County Sheriff's Office had one interview room that did not look designed for confessions. Beige walls. Scarred table. Two upright chairs on one side, one on the other. A framed county map hung behind the door, its glass reflecting the ceiling panels in washed-out bars.

Sheriff Hale set a printed dispatch chronology beside Caleb's initial report.

"You wrote that you arrived at approximately zero-four-fifty-four."

"That was the dash clock."

"Dispatch entered you on scene at zero-four-fifty-eight."

"My first transmission from the gate didn't carry cleanly. I repeated it. Then I lost coverage farther in."

Hale nodded once. Not agreement. Confirmation that he had heard the explanation.

Caleb sat with both hands visible on the table. He had showered in the locker room, changed uniforms, and drunk coffee that tasted worse than anything Elena had accused Danner's of selling. The grit of Ridgeway remained behind his eyes.

Hale tapped the top page. "The caller's time, your acknowledgment, both arrival references, the request for backup, the units coming in. We preserve all of it. Four minutes in a radio pocket isn't a missing hour, but I don't want anybody cleaning it up because you wear our badge."

"I don't either."

That much was true.

“You’re a witness and the finder. You’re not working the scene or chasing the Ward lead. State assistance will take the investigative lead while we support. If that changes, it changes after conflicts are considered, not because we’re short-handed.”

Caleb looked at the forms. “Understood.”

Hale switched on the recorder, stated the date, time, location, and names, then asked Caleb to begin at the gate.

Caleb gave him a clean copy of the morning.

The drainage foreman’s complaint had reached him during patrol. He had approached from County Six, stopped short of the open gate, reported his location, checked for visible damage, and proceeded after observing no immediate person or vehicle. He described the branch road, the first sight of a hand, his threat assessment, his calls for backup and medical response, his limited approach, and the scene transfer.

He kept his language exact and unadorned. Approximate where the clocks differed. Apparent where he lacked authority to conclude. Observed instead of knew.

The discipline did not calm him. It exposed every place where discipline itself might look rehearsed.

Hale let him finish. “When you first saw the individual, what did you see?”

“The left hand and part of one boot through the vegetation.”

“What did you observe when you approached?”

“No visible breathing or response. Skin condition inconsistent with signs of life. The head was turned away from the access road. The right hand was positioned across the body and out of sight from the initial approach.”

Hale’s pen stopped.

Caleb heard his own error. He had answered in the order he had worked so hard not to use over the radio. Head. Right hand. Not jacket, face, identity, or the absence of response. The hidden hand had risen in his report as if it mattered before anyone said it did.

“What made the right hand significant?” Hale asked.

“Officer safety first. Hands can show a threat or an object. Then medical assessment and identification.”

A credible answer. A true answer, as far as it went.

Hale wrote it down.

He asked about Milo next. Caleb recounted their contacts and Milo’s archive work. He described the orange cord only as an item visible near the heel and said he associated that kind of cord with maintenance crews generally. He did not volunteer Elias Ward’s name until Hale asked whether he had seen Ward carry similar material.

“Yes,” Caleb said. “On a key ring. I don’t know that it was the same type, and I never saw it detached.”

“Good,” Hale said, meaning the limit, not the lead.

The door opened after a brief knock.

The woman who entered carried a narrow folder and a lidless paper cup. Rain darkened her charcoal jacket. Her black hair was pulled into a loosening knot; nothing in her face invited underestimation or advertised the fact.

“Detective Rowan Price,” Hale said. “State major crimes.”

Rowan set the cup away from the paperwork. “I’d like the sequence before we get too attached to the first version.” She stated her presence for the recorder but did not ask what Caleb thought had happened.

“From the gate,” she said. “Only what you perceived at each point. If you learned something later, we’ll put it later.”

Caleb started a third time.

She interrupted rarely. When she did, the question divided one kind of knowledge from another.

“You saw the padlock closed through the final link while you remained on the public side?”

“Yes.”

“You did not test the lock.”

“No.”

“You recognized the eastern branch without a marker.”

“I patrol Ridgeway calls. The loading apron is the usual destination. The other track was soft and overgrown.”

“From this morning or prior patrols?”

“Both.”

She marked the distinction. Caleb saw her method: separate columns for what the scene offered, what experience supplied, and what later voices might contaminate. Structure frightened him more than suspicion.

“When did you identify Mr. Grady?” Rowan asked.

“After I approached close enough to assess him and could see his profile.”

“Before or after you noticed the right hand?”

Caleb pictured wet weeds, gray hair, the right arm hidden across the body. “Before I confirmed his identity.”

“You emphasized that hand in this statement.”

“Hands are part of a threat assessment.”

“Yes.” Rowan did not add *but*. She did not need to. “Did its position seem unnatural?”

“It seemed deliberately placed at first glance. I can’t determine that from observation alone.”

“What made it look deliberate?”

“The arm was across the body, with the hand screened by the torso and vegetation.”

“Screened from where?”

“The branch road. The expected approach.”

Hale’s chair creaked. Rowan’s expression did not change.

“So the body was visible from the expected approach,” she said, “but identification was delayed by orientation and vegetation.”

“Yes.”

“Was that familiar?”

There it was: a door open just wide enough to enter. Caleb could name Owen Mercer, but the resemblance would become a lead—and teach them to read his old report in light of what he knew now.

He held Rowan’s gaze.

“No,” he said. “Nothing about the arrangement seemed familiar.”

The lie entered the recording with his name and the time.

Rowan let one silent second pass, then turned a page.

“The gate,” she said. “In the handwritten notes you gave Sheriff Hale this morning, you called it ‘dropped again on the hinge side.’ Dispatch conveyed only that it stood open. What did *again* mean?”

“The lower edge was dragging on the aggregate. That gate has sagged before. Contractors sometimes have to lift it to close.”

“Most recent time you saw it?”

“Five or six days ago, from the county road. It was closed.”

“Documented?”

“No.”

Rowan showed them the drainage foreman’s phone photograph, taken before Caleb arrived. The hinge-side corner sat low above a fresh curved scrape.

“It supports the sag,” she said. “I’m asking because your wording supplies history dispatch did not.”

“The history came from me.”

“That may be the whole answer.”

She had not accused him. She had fixed his explanation beside a fact and preserved both.

The road and radio pocket supported either arrival time within minutes.

“No impossible gap,” Rowan said. “But Grady’s placement relied on a finder using that road in low light, with headlights at roughly that angle. The foreman stopped and called. Who normally goes inside?”

“A deputy. Sometimes a site representative.”

“Which deputy?”

“Whoever holds the east side. Last night, me.”

“Public rotation?”

“No. But people know our cruisers.”

“Grady watched local operations. Ward has site access. Either could know habits without a schedule. So could others. Predictable isn’t necessarily selected.”

The killer had not needed a schedule. Caleb covered the east side most Tuesdays; enough people had seen his route to reproduce it. Elena knew it because she shared his life, estimating his roads from the day and the weather.

Rowan asked about the orange cord.

“Potentially useful,” she said. “Not yet meaningful. We need to know exposure time, who uses it, and whether it belonged to Grady. A bright object beside a body can be evidence without being a truthful statement.”

“You think it was planted.”

“Someone left it, intentionally or otherwise. Provenance decides what we say next.”

She had reached his unease without pretending the cord spoke for itself.

She closed the folder. “One last time. Before today, had you ever seen a victim positioned to delay recognition from an expected approach?”

Mercer surfaced whole enough to smell: cold dust, wet leaves, diesel from the survey truck coming around the bend.

“No,” Caleb said.

Rowan looked at him for a fraction longer than courtesy required. Then she noted his answer and wrote the time beneath it.

The interview ended at eleven oh six.

Outside, phones rang and a printer stuttered. Neff stood at the report counter with mud drying on his boots, keeping Milo’s name to himself.

Caleb signed the acknowledgment. The pen had left a heavier downstroke beneath his surname.

“Go home,” Hale said. “Price has your number.”

Through the glass, Rowan aligned the chronology with his reports. Four minutes. Hand before face. Gate history. Each detail stayed weak. Together, they had shape.

He understood then why the second statement mattered. The first omission at Ridgeway could still have been shock, uncertainty, a failure to recognize resemblance. Repeating it here had made it intentional. He had placed the lie inside a preserved account where any future truth would have to fight its way back out.

His badge had not kept him beyond the evidence.

It had given the evidence his full name.

By evening, rain had polished the Rourkes' front walk and moved east. Caleb sat in his cruiser in the driveway for almost a minute after shutting off the engine. The house looked as it always did: warm light in the kitchen, porch bulb attracting two late moths, Elena's small hatchback tucked close to the garage because the driver's window leaked.

He checked the empty street before going in.

The kitchen smelled of onions, thyme, and toasted bread. Elena stood at the stove, her archive pencil pinning up her dark hair. A shallow tray on the table held a county tax ledger between sheets of clean paper.

She looked at him once and turned down the burner.

"Shoes," she said.

He glanced down. Ridgeway mud darkened the welt of one boot.

"Right."

It was so ordinary that he nearly laughed. He left them on the mat.

Elena crossed the room and put one hand against his chest, not embracing him until he leaned into it. Her cheek rested below his collarbone. She smelled faintly of paper dust and the citrus soap she used to clean paste from her fingers.

"I heard there was a death at the mine," she said.

"Who told you?"

"The radio said Ridgeway was closed for an investigation. Then Lydia Crane called the archive asking whether Milo Grady had signed in yesterday." She drew back enough to see his face. "I told her I don't discuss the register without permission. Was it Milo?"

The name was not yet part of an official release, but Lydia had connections through the archive and Black Veil. Elena had stated the source before Caleb could ask. As a former investigator, she knew exactly why the source mattered.

"Yes," he said. "Don't repeat it."

"I won't."

She did not ask how he died. She did not ask what he looked like. She touched the red pressure mark his vest had left at the base of his neck.

“Can you talk about any of it?”

“Not much.”

“Then don’t.” She returned to the stove. “Wash your hands. Soup in five minutes. You can tell me whether you want quiet.”

He washed longer than necessary. When he turned, a mug waited beside his place.

“You got coffee,” he said.

“I possess problem-solving abilities.”

“Danner’s?”

“I possess standards.”

The dry answer belonged exactly to the woman he had married. He felt some clenched part of him ease.

They ate potato soup at the kitchen table, the damaged ledger moved safely to the counter. Only when Caleb’s bowl was half empty did Elena ask, “Were you the one who found him?”

He looked up.

“You don’t have to answer.”

“Yes.”

Her face softened. “I’m sorry.”

He waited for the next question. She tore a piece of bread and dipped it into the soup.

“Was it chance?” she asked.

“What?”

“That you found him.”

The kitchen’s small sounds sharpened: refrigerator motor, spoon against ceramic, water settling in the pipes.

Elena saw his expression and lifted one hand. “I’m not asking for case details. Former habits. Ignore me.”

“No. Explain.”

She considered the request rather than pretending she had not understood it. “There’s a difference between leaving someone where a person will eventually find them and leaving someone for a particular kind of person to find. Ridgeway isn’t a sidewalk. If Milo was inside the gate, somebody either accepted a long delay or had reason to expect an authorized person.”

“A deputy.”

“Or a contractor. Site security. Whoever goes through instead of stopping at the sign.”

He heard Rowan’s voice: *Who normally proceeds inside?*

Elena read the change in him and set down her spoon. “That was discussed?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Then don’t. It’s not revelation. Half the town knows which nights a cruiser sits at Danner’s and which direction it leaves.”

“You notice?”

“I’m married to the cruiser.” A small smile. “Also, this morning you took the Ridgeway side of the county because the river road floods after hard rain. You’ve complained about that gate dragging for two weeks. If I can make a reasonable guess from breakfast conversation, so can anyone who watches patrol habits.”

Every fact had an innocent source. More than innocent: intimate. He had told her about the dragging gate. She knew his Tuesday route because she listened when he spoke.

In the dark window over the sink, the kitchen reflected back at him: Elena, his pale uniform shirt, the empty hall.

Elena reached across the table and covered his hand. Her palm was warm. “You think somebody knew your route.”

“I think somebody knew a deputy would respond.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No.” He could not tell her why the hidden hand terrified him, or that an old crime had opened its eyes inside his present life.

Elena squeezed his hand once. “Then we change routines. I check before I leave the archive. You stop sitting in the driveway with the dome light on. We tell Hale if anything is out of place. Practical things first.”

“You saw me sitting out there?”

“The headlights came through the curtains. You always come in right away unless you’re finishing a call.”

Of course she had seen him. This was home. Here, his movements belonged to another person’s knowledge.

She carried their bowls to the sink and checked the back-door lock without making a performance of it. She took fear apart until it became tasks; that loving competence had drawn him to her.

Yet Milo's death had erased the border Caleb kept around home. The killer knew his unconfessed choice. The investigation possessed his timed lie. And Elena, from ordinary marital knowledge, had framed the finder problem almost exactly as Rowan had.

She returned to him and brushed a crumb from his sleeve.

"Try to sleep," she said. "Whoever did this didn't need to follow your cruiser this morning."

Caleb went still.

Elena nodded toward the window, the wet street, the town beyond it. Her expression held only concern.

"They only needed to know what you would do before you did it."