

Prologue

Shift Change

Officer Mooney fought the wheel as the pickup lurched through the storm, her gloved hands clamped in a white-knuckled grip. Snow battered the windshield, turning the dirt road into a swirling white slurry.

She steered with her whole body, her shoulders straining under her jacket, the effort pulling at the slight softness in her frame, the kind that comes from years of work that leaves no time for anything else. Her knee throbbed from an old injury; the uneven gait she'd carry into the snow was already ghosting through her mind. In her late forties, she'd long since traded desk work for nights like this, her graying hair tucked into a bun.

The truck lurched over ruts, tires spinning for traction. On the dashboard, the tracking device pulsed weakly, a single line linking her to James Kessler's watch. The anonymous Chronos ping had come through encrypted channels—vague enough to

raise doubt, but urgent enough to drag her out here at eleven o'clock on a winter night.

She killed the truck's engine fifty yards from the cabin and let its momentum carry it in. The structure hunched at the quarry's lip, boards warped and gray beneath the storm's assault. Pines crowded close, their needles rustling like distant voices, while low fog coiled over the ground and mingled with her breath as she stepped out. Her boots sank into fresh powder; the cold bit through her gloves. She drew her sidearm, made sure there was a round in the chamber, and swept her flashlight over rusted tools and chains half swallowed by the ground.

The door creaked open under her weight, with no lock to slow it. Inside, stale air hung heavy, laced with damp wood and something sharper—the residue of bleach.

She flicked on the blue forensic light clipped to her vest. Patterns emerged: droplets arced across the splintered floor, smears along the kitchen sink's edge. Not fresh—maybe days old. Blood.

Kessler wouldn't bleed without cause. The message said his watch was still transmitting a tracking beacon, but the whole thing reeked of a setup. Still, she owed him—more than loyalty, a debt etched into her cells.

The memory sliced through her: rain hammering a narrow alley, James slumped against her as she dragged him behind a dumpster, her blood mixing with his as bullets chewed the brick above them. Days later, in a windowless room at Helix—anti-septic, fluorescent light, a single chair—his voice had been steady as the needle went in. He'd stood at the counter with his back to her the whole time, as if whatever was happening wasn't worth watching.

"This ends it," he said, winding his watch. "But you'll owe me. Not a favor—something more permanent."

She knelt, pressing her fingertips against the floor until the pressure steadied her hands.

In the smeared glass of a nearby window, her own face stared back at her—unfamiliar, as any face becomes when you’ve been alone too long. She looked away. The pattern and direction of the blood drops pointed to a gunshot—at least to her trained eye—with no other signs of violence.

From an inner pocket on her jacket, she withdrew a small evidence bag containing a single dark hair she had discreetly collected from Emily during her ten days of tailing—a strand lifted from the seat of her car. With tweezers, she worked the strand into the edge of the spatter, pressing it down until it held and looked as if it had been left behind in a fight. Any forensic sweep would now link Emily to the scene.

She stayed crouched afterward, tweezers loose in her fingers, knees pressing into the cold boards. The strand was barely visible in the spatter now. She lingered longer than the task required—the blue light steady, her breath settling into the room’s silence. Then she stood, not looking at the window.

Her hands didn’t shake. Some time ago, they stopped doing that.

The beam swept the room again, catching on scuff marks near the door. Nobody, no weapon. The room’s silence pressed in, a hollow echo broken only by the wind pressing through cracks in the walls, low and uneven. The GPS unit beeped erratically, pulling west, deeper into the forest. Risks calculated—potential witnesses, cleanup needed. If this were a trap, she had just turned it back on them.

Mooney stepped out of the cabin and pushed into the trees. Branches clawed at her sleeves. The shovel balanced on one shoulder, pistol hand free. She’d taken it from the toolshed without a second thought, its blade still crusted with old dirt.

Snow clung to her lashes and turned the flashlight beam into a blurred, wavering cone. Pines bowed under fresh snow, closing walls of silence around her. Her jeans and jacket offered no defense against the increasing cold. Boots crunched over

frozen ground and quarry debris—bent rebar, splintered crates, rusted scrap half buried in the drifts. Midnight pressed close. Each breath grew tighter, the air thick against her lungs.

The tracking beacon drew her into a dense thicket, yet she kept to a faint, erratic trail while the transmission dipped and surged.

She paused at the edge of a clearing, her beam illuminating a white mound, slightly higher than the surrounding drifted snow. Recent work—the outline was too sharp for this weather. Kneeling, gloved fingers brushed the surface. The snow was loose, as if it had been filled in a hurry. Sloppy work for a professional.

Was Kessler's watch buried here, or was it something worse?

The question—and the sight of blood in the cabin—dragged her back to that night years ago: the ambush, bullets whining past as she hauled James's limp body into cover, her hands slick with his blood, her own frame betraying her, the tumors gnawing relentlessly in her bones, sapping her will. Afterward, he'd offered her a way to outrun the cancer, to stretch the few months she had left into years.

Whatever Kessler had injected into her had burned the tumors out and left something else in their place—tireless in a way that felt engineered, wrong. But what had "stopping" it cost? Lives diverted, futures rewritten, secrets buried deeper than this patch of ground.

She drove the blade in.

The frozen earth resisted—a dull, grudging give—then opened. Scoop after scoop. Her breath came in bursts, white against the dark. Snowflakes melted down her cheeks and into her collar, cold threading under her skin as sweat built beneath. She paused twice to listen. The pines gave nothing back. She kept digging.

A branch snapped nearby—sharp. Not the wind—too rhyth-

mic. She froze, switched off the flashlight, and listened. Another crack, fainter, from the left.

Her hand found the pistol grip. The woods felt alive, watchful. She waited, counting breaths, until silence returned. Maybe an animal.

Digging resumed. The shovel moved faster now, muscles burning as the hole widened, and the signal pulsed.

Headlights cut through the trees. Two cars on the road, moving slowly. Snow fell heavier now, a soft veil muffling the world, filling in where she'd just dug. The quarry edge loomed nearby, its pit a black void—crumbling sheds, overgrown machinery frozen in decay. Fog thickened, turning the lights into eerie, probing fingers that swayed through the trees. Car doors slammed, crisp in the cold, figures emerging with flashlights turned on.

Emily stepped out, her coat pulled tight at the collar, her eyes moving before the rest of her. Ten days of watching, and she still moved the same way—careful, as if she'd recently learned the world held more traps than she'd been told.

Anita emerged from the passenger side—her profile instantly recognizable. Vic climbed out of the second car. He was broad through the shoulders, the way men who work with their hands get, his movements deliberate in the cold.

But why were they here together? What could have drawn them to this desolate place at nearly midnight? It reeked of coordination, a sure sign they knew something she didn't. She'd tailed Emily for days, logging her routines and connections for James. And now this group, on the same trail, whether they realized it or not. Maybe she'd grown complacent, letting them track her here. The Chronos message blazed in her memory now, unmistakable—a lure that had left her dangling in the open.

They fanned out, beams sweeping the ground, voices low and muted by the snow.

Mooney crept through the dense woods, moving slowly to

avoid snapping twigs. She crouched low, weaving between dark trunks until she was close enough to hear them, yet still hidden by undergrowth and snowfall, invisible to their sweeping lights.

"Mooney's either gone or hiding," Emily said, using her flashlight beam to highlight the tracks leading away from the cabin.

Anita shivered. "Creeps me out. Why not just call her? Catching her like this is... weird."

Vic grunted, his flashlight fixed on the door as he moved toward the porch with an easy confidence, as if he owned the place. "Nah. I wanted to see for myself. Maybe she got a tip that Kessler's been here."

Emily turned sharply. "James was here?"

"Don't think so," Vic said with a shrug—the kind meant to end a conversation.

Emily hesitated. "Then... how'd you know Mooney was here?"

Vic jerked his thumb toward a dark corner under the eaves. His eyes lingered there a beat too long, as if replaying a memory. "Camera. The boss's cabin—I can watch it from town. The signal's unreliable, but it's better than making the trip every time."

Their words hung in the air, laced with caution. Mooney's breath caught. They must have seen her arrive on the camera, but that didn't explain why Kessler's watch was here.

Flashlights cut through the darkness as the group converged on the cabin door. Her window of opportunity was narrowing fast. She went still.

She could step into the light, walk out of the tree line, and claim she'd come on the same tip they had. Plausible enough. She was law enforcement. But they'd ask too many questions. Her fingers still curled around the remembered pinch of the tweezers.

She drew a shallow breath and slipped back into the dark-

ness between the pines, moving quietly toward her truck, hidden behind a boarded-up utility shed near the quarry. Keeping low along the tree line, she made a wide circle around the cabin.

With the engine idling quietly, she coasted down the steep incline, her tires whispering over the powder, the sound swallowed by the wind in the trees. Once clear, she eased onto the accelerator and disappeared into the night.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel tighter. The Chronos ping. Emily at the cabin. The hair she'd just planted. The storm had erased the truck's tracks behind her, but her grip on the wheel remained iron-tight.

She needed more information before she could go back. She had to find out who had sent that ping—and whether they already knew she'd come here.