

CHAPTER ONE

Nora Calder had not slept through a full night in two years, four months, and — if she let herself count, which she tried very hard not to — eleven days.

She had gotten used to it the way people get used to a limp. She no longer expected the old rhythm, the eight unbroken hours her body used to fall into as easily as breathing. Instead she had built a second life out of the hours between midnight and dawn: a life of lukewarm tea, transcription work with the volume turned low, and the particular gray light that came through her apartment windows in Alder Falls before the sun bothered to commit to rising.

Her apartment was the top floor of a converted textile mill on the east bank of the river, exposed brick and iron pipe and windows too large for the amount of heat she could afford to keep in them. She had moved there fourteen months ago, after the divorce, telling herself it was temporary, a place to land while she figured out what her life looked like without Daniel in it. Fourteen months

later she still had boxes she hadn't opened, and she had stopped pretending it was temporary.

At 3:40 a.m. on the night everything changed, she was sitting cross-legged on her couch with a laptop balanced on a cushion, running the graveyard shift of her freelance work: transcribing the borough's police-scanner podcast, a low-rent local production that paid her eleven cents a word to turn overnight radio chatter into a clean, searchable feed for true-crime hobbyists and insomniac shut-ins who found the sound of dispatch codes soothing. It was not the career she had trained for. It was not the career she had once had. But it kept her adjacent to the thing she used to be good at, and some nights that was enough.

She had been a reporter once. A real one, with a byline that meant something, an investigative desk at the *Alder Falls Sentinel* and, for three good years, a reputation for the kind of digging that made people in this town nervous when her name came up in conversation. That life had ended the way those lives sometimes end — not in one dramatic collapse but in a slow attrition of budget cuts, buyouts, and a story she had written nine years ago that she still, on her worst nights, dreamed about.

She was not thinking about any of that at 4:05 a.m. She was thinking about a garbled 911 call involving a dog that had gotten into somebody's garage, and whether "K-9 unit responding, code four" was worth the extra half-hour of research to confirm, when her cell phone rang.

The screen said *Unknown Caller*.

She almost didn't answer. It was the kind of hour when the only calls that came through were robocalls selling car warranties to a country that was, by 4 a.m., mostly asleep and unable to be sold anything. But something about the timing needled her — cell towers didn't usually bother spamming a number at five past four — and she picked up out of the same reflexive curiosity that had made her a decent reporter once.

"Hello?"

For a moment there was only breathing on the other end. Ragged. Close to the microphone, the way people breathe when they are trying very hard not to cry.

"Is this Nora Calder?"

The voice was a woman's, low and urgent, roughened at the edges like she had been crying

for a long time before she'd dialed. Nora sat up straighter, the laptop sliding off her knees.

"Who is this?"

"You have to listen to me. Please. I don't have long — they don't let me have long. Tomorrow night, at the parking structure on Ferris and Ninth, level three, there's a man named Kyle Boone. He works security there, ten p.m. to six a.m. Someone is going to be waiting for him by his car at two-forty in the morning. They're going to use a tire iron. He's going to die before the next shift finds him at six."

Nora's mouth had gone dry. "Who is this? How do you know my name?"

"Please, you have to believe me. I know how this sounds. I know exactly how this sounds, I've heard myself say it, I sound insane, I know. But it's true. It's going to happen and I can't stop it and you're the only —"

The line went dead.

Nora sat very still on her couch for almost a full minute, the phone warm against her ear, the dial tone humming its flat, indifferent note. Outside, the sky over the river had not yet begun to lighten. Somewhere below her, a delivery truck

downshifted on Founders Street, the sound rising up through the old mill's brick the way sound always did in this building, like the whole structure was one long throat.

They don't let me have long.

She told herself it was a wrong number. A prank. A very specific, very cruel prank, if it was one, because whoever had called her had known her full name on the second ring, in the dead of a Tuesday night, when almost no one alive still had reason to call Nora Calder about anything at all.

She did not go back to sleep. She sat with the phone in her lap until the sky went from black to bruised purple to the flat pewter gray that passed, in Alder Falls in November, for morning, and somewhere in that long gray stretch of waiting she opened her laptop again — not to finish the transcription, but to search, with hands that were not quite steady, for a parking structure on the corner of Ferris and Ninth.