

Chapter 1: The Water Beneath Alder Street

At 7:10 that morning, the rain that had been falling since midnight showed no sign of easing. Tom Delaney stood in the doorway of Delaney Hardware & Supply, third generation to run the store, and watched the gutters on the opposite roofline give up and start sheeting water onto the sidewalk instead of channeling it. He had seen the street flood before, a few inches at a time, twice in eleven years. He made a mental note to pull the sandbags forward in the stockroom, poured his coffee, and went back to unpacking a shipment of generators that had arrived the week before, timed for the start of storm season. He did not think, even for a moment, about whether his own store had a plan for a day like this one. Why would he? He sold the answer to other people's emergencies. It did not occur to him that he might need his own.

Two doors down, Rosa Ibarra was standing in the walk-in freezer at Rosa's Kitchen, checking off a delivery against a clipboard. Eleven years of running the restaurant had taught her to trust her supplier and distrust her own memory, so she checked twice: forty pounds of ground beef, three cases of chicken thighs, shellfish for Friday's special. The freezer hummed around her, reliable as it had been reliable every day since she'd bought it used from a restaurant that was closing. She had no way of knowing it would be silent within eight hours.

Above what used to be a shoe repair shop, Dr. Peter Lindgren reviewed the morning's patient list with his hygienist, Angie. A root canal at ten, two cleanings, a consultation at one. Ordinary. His receptionist, Maya, had already confirmed all four appointments by text the day before, the way the practice always did. The patient files for the morning's cases sat open on two different systems — some information had migrated to the practice's

new software the year before, some hadn't, a fact nobody had gotten around to reconciling, because reconciling old records is never as urgent as the patient sitting in the chair in front of you.

At Thread & Co., Nina Osei was steaming the wrinkles out of a rack of spring dresses that had arrived the previous afternoon — her largest single inventory order of the year, timed to land before Mother's Day weekend. Her two part-time employees, Jess and Priya, wouldn't arrive until eleven. The store's cloud-based point-of-sale system chimed softly as it synced overnight sales data, the way it did every morning, an unremarkable sound Nina had long since stopped noticing.

At the far end of the block, Grace Whitfield unlocked the door of Whitfield & Associates fifteen minutes before her staff arrived, as she did most mornings. She checked the weather radar on her phone, noted the storm cell stalling almost directly over the region, and sent a single text to her two employees: Heavy rain expected to continue. If

anything changes at the office today, follow the plan — I'll update the group thread. Marcus Yu, her senior associate, replied with a thumbs-up. Deb Alvarez, her office manager, replied, "Generator's fueled, for what it's worth." It was a small, almost automatic exchange. Neither of them thought they were doing anything unusual. That, as it turned out, was exactly the point.

By early afternoon, the storm had not moved. The ground beneath Alder Street, saturated for hours, put pressure on an eighty-year-old water main that had already been scheduled — someday, eventually, when the budget allowed — for replacement. At 2:41 p.m., it failed.

Water found the path of least resistance, the way it always does: down through fractured pavement, into utility trenches, along the buried conduit that fed electrical service to the block. Within minutes, the basement of Delaney Hardware had six inches of standing water. The crawl space beneath Rosa's Kitchen, where the walk-in freezer's compressor

lived, began to flood. Water crept toward the electrical vault that served the entire block.

At 3:04 p.m., the power company's monitoring systems detected a ground fault in that vault, consistent with water intrusion near live electrical equipment. To prevent a fire or a lethal arc flash, the utility remotely opened the circuit serving Alder Street. Every light, every register, every walk-in freezer compressor, and every dental drill on the block went dark and silent at the same moment.

For the next several seconds, five businesses that had opened that morning exactly the way they opened every morning experienced precisely the same event. What happened in the minutes after that — who reached for a phone, who reached for a flashlight, who reached for a plan, and who simply stood still, waiting for the lights to come back on — is where their stories stop being the same story at all.