CHAPTER 1

Forty-Eight Hours

At 11:41 on Monday night, Detective Michael Reeves was losing an argument with a form.

The form wanted to know why a supplementary report on a closed stabbing was nine days late. He had typed *The suspect’s brother hid him in a chest freezer* and deleted it. He had typed *Paperwork is where good detectives go to die* and deleted that too. The cursor blinked in the empty box, patient and unimpressed.

His kitchen smelled of burnt coffee. The half of the Pell Street duplex he rented had come with a table that wobbled and a window that looked at a brick wall, and in two years he had fixed neither. The mug beside his laptop had gone cold an hour ago. He drank from it anyway. Tom Calloway used to call Michael’s coffee bog water, and Tom had been right, but it had never stopped Tom from stealing it.

The laptop chimed.

A new email sat at the top of his personal inbox. The sender was a string of random letters at a domain he didn’t know. The subject line was empty. One attachment, two hundred and twelve megabytes, named C-01.enc. The message body was a single line.

Open when you’re ready, Mikey.

Michael read it twice. Then he sat very still, the way he did at crime scenes when something was wrong with the room and he hadn't yet worked out what.

Nobody had called him Mikey in seven years. Only one person ever had, and only at moments when he wanted Michael to stop talking and listen.

He took his hand off the mouse. Phishing, he told himself. Somebody had scraped an old obituary, a funeral guest list, a retirement toast, and learned that a dead detective once had a nickname for his partner. It was cheap, and it was cruel, and it worked, which was the only reason anyone did it. The right move was to forward the file to the cyber unit and go to bed.

He did not forward the file. He opened it.

The laptop asked for a passphrase. Underneath the box, in plain gray letters, it offered a hint: *What I called your coffee.*

Michael's mouth went dry. He typed it with two fingers, slowly, as if the keys might be hot. *bogwater*.

The screen went black. Then a room came up, and he knew it before the picture had finished sharpening. The green banker's lamp. The shelf of paperback westerns with their spines cracked white. The corner of a leather chair that had been the dog's chair. It was Tom Calloway's den, in the house on Birch Lane, where Michael had spent a hundred Sunday afternoons losing at cribbage.

And there was Tom.

He sat forward in a flannel shirt, elbows on the desk, thinner than the man Michael had known for twelve years and grayer than the man in the photograph on the funeral program. His

cheeks had hollowed out. It was how he had looked the last winter, when he still said it was a stomach thing and Michael still pretended to believe him. A pencil was in his hand. He turned it over once, the way he always did before he said something he didn't like.

"Hello, Mikey," said Tom.

Michael stopped breathing.

"If you're watching this, I've been dead a long time, and you're probably angry at me, which is fair. I'd be angry too. Listen carefully, because I'm only going to say this once, and I'm going to ask you not to interrupt, which I know is hard for you."

It was Tom's voice. It had the gravel in it, the slight lift on the end of a sentence like a man leaving room for a joke. It had the pause he took before a hard word.

"On Wednesday night, at eleven forty-seven, a man named Lyle Strand is going to be killed. Sparks Strand, if you ever worked with him. Retired fire investigator. Room Nine of the Redfield Motor Lodge, out on Route 9. He'll be struck once, at the base of the skull. The chain will be on the door from the inside. The bathroom window will be open about an inch. He'll be wearing one brown shoe." Tom stopped, as if he were checking something off a list. "The television will be on a fishing program. There'll be a paper cup of coffee on the nightstand. He won't have touched it."

The pencil turned again.

"You're going to tell yourself this is a fake. Good. Check it. Check everything. It's what I'd do." For a second his eyes left the lens and looked at something just beside the camera, and Michael felt his skin tighten. "I can't tell you why yet. You

wouldn't believe me, and I'd rather you didn't believe me until you've seen it for yourself. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for a lot of things."

He looked back into the lens.

"Forty-eight hours, Mikey. That's what you've got. Believe the clock."

The picture froze on Tom's face, mouth slightly open. Then it went black.

A white number appeared in the center of the screen, and the number began to move.

47:59:58
47:59:57

Michael closed the laptop. He did it slowly, like a man putting down something that might go off. The kitchen was suddenly very loud. The refrigerator hummed. The faucet, which dripped, dripped. Down the street a car passed with its radio on, and the bass line came through the wall like a pulse.

He stood up. His left knee complained, the way it did after eleven at night, and he put his weight on the other leg and held on to the back of the chair.

It's a fake.

He said it out loud, to the brick wall in the window. It had to be. He had worked fraud task force details early in his career. He had sat through the training sessions with their smiling slides: a voice cloned from thirty seconds of a phone call, a grandmother wired two thousand dollars by a grandson who was sitting in a dorm room three states away. The technology had been good ten

years ago and was frightening now. You could make anyone say anything. You could make a dead man say hello.

What it couldn't do, as far as Michael knew, was make a dead man say hello and know what the dead man did with a pencil before he said something he didn't like.

He opened the laptop again. The clock had not stopped. It read *47:52:10*, and it was running just as steadily as a real one.

He pulled the video back to the start and went through it a second time, with the sound turned down, watching Tom's face the way he had watched suspects' faces in a thousand interview rooms. He was looking for the seam. In the fakes he had seen, the seam was always at the mouth: a half-beat where the lips lagged the words, a blur at the corner where one face stopped and another began. He watched the lips. He watched the eyes. He watched Tom's left hand, which kept the pencil, and which had a tremor in it that Michael remembered from the last months, when the pain medication had started to take the edges off him.

He couldn't find the seam. That didn't mean anything. Michael was a detective, not a lab. It meant only that whoever had made this was either very good or very well funded.

Or telling the truth.

He shut that thought in a drawer and sat down hard. The chair rocked on its short leg.