THE MILLHAVEN FILES — BOOK ONE

THE WATERSHED MAN

A Nate Calloway Novel

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A FREE READING SAMPLE

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Eleven people died in Paris. The French called it a gas leak. Nate Calloway was sent to a small town in Virginia.

IN THIS SAMPLE

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PROLOGUE

Paris, France
March — Six weeks before Millhaven

Robert Marsh had been a civil engineer for thirty-one years, which meant he had spent the better part of his professional life making sure that structures stayed up, water went where it was supposed to go, and the gap between what was designed and what was built was as small as human error allowed. He was methodical by nature and patient by practice, and he had a reputation in the Columbus, Ohio office for being the man you sent when you wanted it done right and didn't care how long it took.

Helen Marsh had taught seventh-grade English for twenty-eight years, which meant she had spent the better part of her professional life convincing twelve-year-olds that words mattered and that how you said a thing was sometimes as important as the thing itself. She was generous with her students and fierce about grammar, and she had a reputation among former students for being the teacher who made you feel, at thirteen years old and furious about a semicolon, that the semicolon was worth the argument. She had a younger sister in Virginia — Ruth, who ran a diner and called every Sunday and had been telling Helen for years that she and Robert needed to start traveling before they ran out of reasons not to.

They had met at a church social in 1983, married the following spring, and raised two daughters in a house on Linden Avenue with a deep backyard and a vegetable garden that Robert maintained with the same methodical attention he gave his drainage calculations, and that Helen declared every summer was the best one yet regardless of the tomatoes. They had been, by every ordinary measure,

happy — not the dramatic, effortful happiness of people who had survived something, but the other kind: the quiet, accumulated, taken-for-granted happiness of two people who had chosen each other in the spring of 1984 and kept choosing, through the daughters and the years and the basement flood of 1997 and the health scares and the ordinary thousand irritations of a shared life, every day since.

Robert retired in September. Helen held on through the school year because she had promised her students she would, and finished in June. That summer they sat on the back porch and talked about what came next, and the answer they kept arriving at, from different directions, was the same: they wanted to go somewhere neither of them had ever been, somewhere that required a passport and a phrase book and the willingness to feel, for a little while, like they didn't know what they were doing. Helen had wanted Paris since she was twenty-two and a graduate student reading Hemingway. She had never gone. There had always been a reason, and the reason had always been sufficient, and Paris had remained the place she was going to get to eventually. Ruth had been on her about it since the girls went to college.

Their forty-first anniversary was in March. Robert booked the flights in November, which was unlike him, and told Helen at Christmas with a folded itinerary tucked inside a card he had written himself — three paragraphs, which was also unlike him, because he was not a man who wrote cards. She read them twice and decided she'd call Ruth after they returned, when she had photographs, when the thing she'd been saying she would do since she was twenty-two was a thing she had actually done.

• • •

The restaurant was called Le Ciel Ouvert — the Open Sky — and it occupied the top floor of a narrow building on Rue de Monttessuy, seven blocks from the Champ de Mars, with a terrace that extended over the street on iron brackets and gave, on clear evenings, an unobstructed view of the Eiffel Tower two hundred meters away. The tower was always lit after dark, its iron lattice strung with amber lights that made it look like something suspended between the earth and the sky by a force that was more architectural than physical, and on the hour the amber

gave way to a cascade of twenty thousand white bulbs that turned the structure, briefly, into something that shimmered against the dark.

Helen had found the restaurant in a guidebook, had verified the view online, and had printed the confirmation email when it said terrace. They were shown to their table at seven-fifteen — round, white linen, set for two. Robert held her chair, the same way he had held it for forty-one years, with the combination of ceremony and naturalness that comes from a gesture performed so many times it has become part of the person who performs it. They ordered in the careful French they had been practicing since November, Helen's better because language was her instrument, and they ordered the same Bordeaux they had drunk on their first date, a choice Robert made by pointing at the menu while maintaining the expression of a man who knew exactly what he was doing. He had not known. He had told her this sometime in the second decade. She had already known.

They ate, and talked, and watched the tower, and laughed at the birthday celebration at the next table — the cake, the slightly chaotic candles, the couple who looked approximately thirty years younger and approximately thirty times more nervous. Helen made an observation about them in the dry way she made all her observations, and Robert laughed the laugh that forty-one years produces, the one that requires no performance and no qualification. She made a note to tell Ruth that one. Ruth would appreciate it.

When the tower's lights shifted from amber to their hourly cascade, Helen said "Oh," because it was more than she had expected, and then said it again because the first time hadn't been enough. Robert reached across the table and set his hand on hers — palm down, fingers open — and she turned her hand over and laced her fingers through his, the same way she had for forty-one years, without calculation, without anything in it except the forty-one years.

• • •

The man at the far end of the terrace had been there for forty minutes.

He had ordered water and the cheese plate and had consumed approximately a third of each. He was well-dressed in the way designed not to be remarkable — good fabric, correct cut, nothing that caught the eye — and his age was difficult to fix, somewhere between forty and fifty, the years worn smoothly, the face

presenting a surface rather than a history. He sat with his back to the wall and a clear sight line to the terrace entrance, to the street below, and to the small black ventilation housing mounted to the exterior wall above the eastern railing, which had been in place for eleven days and which the restaurant staff had noticed and assumed belonged to someone else's jurisdiction. He did not look at the housing, and he did not look at the couple at the round table with the white linen and the held hands. At seven forty-seven he touched his phone once, sending a single-character message to a number that would not exist by morning, and at seven forty-nine he left two hundred euros folded under his water glass and walked out through the terrace doors without looking back at anything.

He had learned a long time ago not to look back. It changed nothing about what had happened and it changed something about the person who looked, and he could not afford the change.

He was a full block south on Rue de Monttessuy, moving at a steady pace in leather-soled shoes that made almost no sound on the pavement, when the first indication reached him. Not a sound — not yet. A vibration in the quality of the evening, the way a room changes when something shifts inside it. He had felt this before, in other cities, outside other buildings, and he knew what it meant. He kept walking.

Then the sounds began to travel down from the terrace above the street.

A chair scraping. Something falling — glass, ceramic, he couldn't tell the difference at this distance. A voice, high and sudden, cut off almost immediately. Then another voice, and another, overlapping, building into the specific acoustic signature of a crowd in distress, the sound that any enclosed space of human beings produces in the first thirty seconds when something goes wrong that everyone is realizing at the same time. From outside, from a block away, it sounded like the building itself was clearing its throat.

He did not stop walking. He adjusted his jacket with one hand and turned the corner onto the cross street, which took the terrace out of his sight line, and the sound faded behind him to something ambient, absorbed by the ordinary noise of the city — the traffic, the cafes, the river two blocks east carrying its own sounds into the evening.

The expression that crossed his face as the sounds faded was brief and did not reach his eyes. It was not satisfaction, exactly. Satisfaction implies wanting something. He had moved past wanting a long time ago and arrived somewhere more precise: confirmation. The mechanism had performed within the parameters he had established. The data was what it needed to be. Whatever came next — the classified reports, the attributed explanation, the institutional machinery that would process the event and file it away — was no longer his concern. His concern had been the proof, and the proof was now trailing behind him in the sound of a restaurant terrace going silent.

He walked south toward the river. The Eiffel Tower was visible between the buildings, still cycling through its hourly light show, twenty thousand bulbs flashing in a cascade that the city had been performing every night for years, indifferent to what happened beneath it.

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On the terrace of Le Ciel Ouvert, the first person to realize something was wrong was a woman at the birthday table who put her hand to her throat, not because it hurt yet but because something was different about the air. A second later she coughed — a single sound, like a note played on the wrong instrument. The man beside her turned to ask if she was all right and then stopped asking because his eyes had begun to water and he didn't understand why, and his chest was doing something it hadn't done a moment before, a tightening that wasn't pain exactly but was related to pain the way a shadow is related to the thing casting it.

Across the terrace, a woman knocked over her wine. Not intentionally — her hand simply stopped working correctly for a moment, the way a signal drops when the connection degrades. The glass went off the table and hit the stone floor and broke, and in any other moment someone would have laughed or apologized or called for a waiter, but nobody laughed because by then there were other sounds, the same sound from different directions — the involuntary, reflexive sound that a person makes when their body registers something wrong before their mind has the information to explain it.

Helen noticed the smell first. It was slight and strange — metallic with something underneath it, the way certain industrial facilities smell near the fence

line, a smell that the brain categorizes as wrong before it can say why. She thought, briefly, that it must be something in the kitchen. She thought: I should mention this to the waiter. She thought these things in quick succession and then stopped thinking them because her eyes had begun to sting and the stinging was moving into something else, and she looked across the table at Robert and saw that he was looking at her with an expression she had not seen from him in forty-one years, the expression of a man who does not understand what is happening and is frightened, and she reached across the table because reaching for him was the thing she did when she didn't understand what was happening either.

Robert's hand closed around hers. His grip was wrong — too hard, and then not hard enough, and his face was going through something she had no frame for, and she wanted to say his name but her lungs were doing something they hadn't been doing thirty seconds ago and the word didn't come. Around them the terrace was in motion, people pushing back from tables, someone standing and then sitting down immediately, the birthday cake on the floor, the candles still lit, the small flames tilting together in the disturbance of air created by bodies moving and then not moving.

The last thing Helen saw clearly was Robert's face across the white linen, his hand in hers, his eyes finding hers and staying there the way they had been staying there for forty-one years.

The tower was still flashing below them. The city was still warm and lit and going about its evening. For three minutes, nobody on the street below understood what they were seeing on the terrace above them, and Paris was just Paris — the river, the light, the iron tower cycling through its nightly performance, faithful and indifferent and ongoing.

• • •

The event at Le Ciel Ouvert was classified within six hours. The French government released a statement attributing the incident to a gas leak from a faulty exterior HVAC unit. Eleven people died. Twenty-three were hospitalized, of whom four sustained permanent neurological injury. The ventilation housing was removed before the scene was fully processed. The man who had sat at the far end

of the terrace was never identified from the restaurant's security footage, which experienced a fourteen-minute gap beginning at seven thirty-eight PM.

The incident was listed in Agency files under the designation PRELIM-7 and flagged for correlation with three other events across five years in as many countries, each attributed locally to gas, or contamination, or equipment failure, each closed without prosecution.

The analyst who made the correlation was twenty-nine years old. She worked sixty-hour weeks and had never heard of Millhaven, Virginia. She sent her analysis to a handler named Tom Raines on a Thursday afternoon. Tom read it on Friday morning, and by Friday afternoon he was on the phone with a field officer named Nate Calloway, telling him to pack for a long-duration assignment in a town of seven thousand people that had no reason to appear in any collection system.

The town was called Millhaven, Virginia. Population just under seven thousand. One main street. A diner.

CHAPTER ONE

Sterile Environment

The coffee ring was three inches in diameter, roughly elliptical, and had been on the debriefing table long enough to transition from wet adhesion to dried residue. Someone had set a mug down without a coaster—or a napkin, or a file folder, or literally any barrier between ceramic and surface—and the tannins had wicked outward in a pattern that, if I were feeling generous, I might describe as organic. I was not feeling generous. I moved my file folder six inches to the left and tried to focus on what Tom was saying.

"—asset in Vilnius confirmed the shipment route, which gives us the last piece of the Eastern European corridor. Good work, Calloway. Clean operation."

"Copy." I looked at the coffee ring again. It was the kind of stain that suggested habitual negligence. Someone used this table regularly and didn't care. In a facility where information was classified at levels that required three separate access protocols to enter the room, someone could not be bothered to wipe down a table. It was evidence of a world that operated at a lower standard than it should.

Tom Raines watched me from the monitor on the far wall, his face rendered in the blue-gray palette of encrypted video. He looked the same as always—tired in a way that had calcified into a permanent feature, wire-rimmed glasses slightly crooked, the collar of his Oxford shirt wilting like it had given up hope. Behind him, I could see the edge of his office at Langley: a bookshelf, a government-issue desk lamp, the corner of a framed something that was either a commendation or a photo of his kids. In three years of working together, I'd never asked which.

"You're looking at the table," Tom said.

"There's a stain."

"There's always a stain. It's a black site, not a surgical theater."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive concepts."

Tom exhaled the way he did when he was choosing not to engage with something I'd said. It was a specific exhalation—two-thirds sigh, one-third professional restraint—and I'd learned to read its variations the way some people read facial expressions. This particular version meant: I'm going to change the subject, and you're going to let me.

"We need to talk about your next assignment."

I reached into my jacket pocket and retrieved the Purell. Unscented, travel size, 70% ethyl alcohol. I'd restocked at a CVS in Arlington two days ago—always Arlington, never the one near headquarters, because patterns are vulnerabilities and I wasn't going to let anyone build a profile on me through hand sanitizer purchases. I pumped twice, rubbed thoroughly, and returned the bottle to my pocket. The whole sequence took four seconds. I'd timed it once, out of curiosity, and then out of something less comfortable than curiosity.

"I'm listening."

"Long-duration cover. Small town, rural. You'd be embedded for a minimum of eight weeks, possibly longer. We've got signals intelligence suggesting a logistics operation is running through a location that doesn't match any known infrastructure. Somebody's moving material through a town that, on paper, shouldn't have any reason to show up in our collection systems."

"How small?"

"The kind of small where people notice a new face."

I let that settle. In operational terms, a small town is a controlled environment with a passive surveillance network built into its social architecture. Every resident is a sensor. Every interaction is logged—not in any database, but in the collective memory of people who have nothing better to do than observe who's new, what they're driving, and whether they attend church. A city gives you anonymity. A small town gives you an audience.

"Cover?" I asked.

"Environmental consultant. Independent contractor, watershed survey. It gives you a reason to be on private property, access to county records, and a

built-in explanation for why you're asking questions. The work is real enough to hold up if someone Googles you—we've built out the digital footprint. Website, LinkedIn, two published papers on riparian buffer zones that are actually decent. Don't ask who wrote them."

"Equipment?"

"Standard NOC kit. Encrypted mobile, satellite phone for emergency extraction, cover documentation. Speaking of which—" Tom paused and looked at something off-screen. "Your identity package is in the room. Top drawer, left filing cabinet."

I stood and crossed to the cabinet. The safe house was in a nondescript office park off Route 7 in northern Virginia—the kind of building that housed dental practices and insurance adjusters and, apparently, rooms where CIA operations officers received their next cover identities. The fluorescent lighting was the particular shade of institutional white that made everyone look slightly deceased. The carpet was gray. The walls were gray. The air tasted recycled, which it was. I'd already noted the three exits (front door, rear fire exit, window in the bathroom that opened onto a six-foot drop to a service alley), the two security cameras (hallway and entrance, blind spot near the vending machines), and the fact that the cleaning crew had last visited sometime in the previous forty-eight hours based on the vacuum tracks in the carpet and the bleach scent in the restroom. The restroom, at least, had been acceptable.

I opened the drawer with my knuckle—a habit that drew occasional commentary from colleagues but had never, in fifteen years of intelligence work, given me a contact-transmitted illness, so the commentary could go directly to hell—and removed the identity package.

The wallet was good. Virginia driver's license, two credit cards in the cover name (Nathan Cole, which was close enough to my real name to respond naturally but different enough to matter), insurance cards, a REI membership (nice touch—environmental consultants shop at REI). The business cards were in a separate envelope. I opened it, slid one out, and stopped.

They were embossed.

"Tom."

"What."

"The business cards are embossed."

"Is that a problem?"

I turned the card over in my hand. Nathan Cole, Environmental Consulting, with a phone number that routed through a Langley switchboard and a website that would show a perfectly adequate portfolio of watershed assessments and soil surveys. The text was raised. Someone in Technical Services had decided that an independent environmental consultant operating in rural America would carry cards with tactile lettering pressed into premium cardstock.

"Embossed cardstock has a textured surface," I said. "Textured surfaces trap particulate matter, skin oils, and microbial residue at a rate roughly three times higher than smooth laminate."

"Calloway."

"Every time I hand someone a card, I am handing them a bacterial transfer medium that I then have to touch again when I put the stack back in my pocket."

"You could just—"

"Who approved embossing? Was there a meeting? Did someone sit in a room at Langley and say, 'You know what this cover identity needs? Cardstock that functions as a petri dish?'"

Tom removed his glasses and cleaned them with his tie. This was his equivalent of a deep breath. "The cards stay. They look professional. You'll survive."

"Professionally, yes. Microbiologically, the jury is out."

Tom replaced his glasses. The left temple was still slightly askew. I knew better than to mention it. "Can we talk about the actual operation?"

I set the business cards on the table—not near the coffee ring, because I wasn't an animal—and sat back down. "Go ahead."

"The town is called Millhaven. Population just under seven thousand. County seat, barely. One main street, surrounding agricultural land, nearest city of any size is about forty-five minutes by highway. It's unremarkable in every measurable way, which is exactly why it flagged—unremarkable places don't generate the kind of signals intelligence we've been picking up."

"What kind of signals?"

"Encrypted communications consistent with an operational logistics network. Financial transactions that don't match the local economic profile. Shipping

patterns through a property on the outskirts of town that suggest professional staging, not commercial activity. Someone is using this town as a waypoint in a supply chain that we haven't fully mapped yet."

"There's a related file you should read on the plane," Tom said. "Designation PRELIM-7. An incident in Paris six weeks ago—a restaurant terrace, eleven dead, classified as a gas leak. The French closed it fast. Our analysts flagged it as a field test of an assembled binary agent. Somebody wanted to know if the delivery mechanism worked in an open-air environment with civilian density." He paused. "It worked."

He let that sit for a moment. I let it sit.

"The logistics signature from that incident," Tom continued, "matches the operational pattern coming out of Millhaven. Same corporate infrastructure. Same shipping channels. We believe the material being staged in your town is not a prototype. It's production inventory."

"Any identification on the principal?"

"Not yet. That's part of your job. We've got a property of interest—place called the Hendricks farm. Deeded to a family that hasn't lived there in three years, currently under management by a local property company. The shipping activity is centered there. We need eyes on the ground, Nate. Not a drone pass. Not a signals intercept. A human being in that town, building the picture."

I processed this the way I processed all operational briefings: structurally. Environment: small, insular, high social visibility, limited physical infrastructure for cover activities. Duration: extended, which meant the cover had to sustain casual scrutiny over weeks or months. Target: unknown principal running a logistics operation, with a known property of interest and a local property management company as a potential access point. Risk factors: proximity. In a town of seven thousand people, there is no background. You are foreground from the moment you arrive.

And proximity meant exposure. Exposure meant contact. Contact meant people leaning in to shake your hand and handing you plates of food and sitting too close on benches and asking questions that required you to stand within conversational distance, which any epidemiologist will tell you is well within the droplet transmission zone for most respiratory pathogens. A small town was an

environment purpose-built for the kind of human contact I had spent my adult life engineering my way out of.

"Timeline for insertion?" I asked, because that was the operational question, and operational questions were where I lived.

"End of the week. Drive in, don't fly—an environmental consultant working a rural contract would drive. We've got a rental house set up. You'll meet your initial local contact points through the cover work. The watershed survey is your skeleton key—it gets you onto properties, into records offices, and into conversations."

"Rules of engagement?"

"Observe and report. Build the intelligence picture. Identify the principal. Do not engage the target until we have a full operational understanding. This is a collection mission, not an action mission." He paused. "Yet."

Tom was careful with language—not literary, but precise in the way that people are when imprecision can get someone killed. "Yet" meant the Agency anticipated escalation. It meant there were contingencies being planned at levels above Tom's desk that would activate depending on what I found. It meant that Millhaven, for all its unremarkability, had attracted attention from people who moved resources in response to threat assessments, not curiosity.

"Anything else I should know?"

"One thing." Tom leaned forward slightly. On the monitor, this had the effect of making his face larger and more pixelated, which did not increase his gravitas. "This isn't a hostile urban environment. You're not running surveillance in Moscow or servicing dead drops in Beirut. This is a small American town where people are going to want to talk to you, feed you, invite you to things, and generally treat you like a human being. Your cover depends on letting them."

"I can manage social interaction."

"You can execute social interaction. That's not the same thing."

This was closer to personal commentary than Tom usually ventured, and I filed it accordingly: acknowledged, noted, disregarded. I didn't need a handler to tell me that my interpersonal approach had a clinical quality. I was aware. The clinical quality was the point. Every interaction was a data exchange. You offered information calibrated to your objectives, you collected information relevant to

your assessment, and you terminated the exchange before either party exceeded their informational budget. This was not coldness. It was efficiency. The fact that efficiency and coldness were visually indistinguishable was a problem for other people to manage.

"I'll be fine," I said.

"I know you'll be fine. I need you to be convincing."

I looked at the coffee ring one more time. Three inches in diameter. Dried tannins. Evidence of someone who moved through this space without thinking about what they left behind. Most people were like that—careless with their traces, unconscious of their residue. They touched surfaces without considering what they deposited. They stood too close without calculating the exposure. They offered trust like it was free, as if the cost of being wrong was someone else's problem.

I had never been like that. My earliest operational instinct—before the Agency, before the training, before any of it—was containment. Control your inputs. Manage your outputs. Don't touch what you don't have to. Don't let anyone close enough to leave a mark.

It had made me an exceptional intelligence officer. Tom had said so himself, once, in the closest thing to praise the CIA's bureaucratic culture permitted: "You're the best I've got, Calloway. You're also the loneliest, but that's not my department."

He wasn't wrong about either count.

"End of the week," I confirmed. "I'll review the full operational package tonight."

"There's one more thing in the drawer. Physical item."

I opened the drawer again. Beneath where the identity package had been, there was a smaller envelope. Inside it: a key to the rental house, a vehicle registration for a Honda CR-V (silver, three years old, unremarkable to the point of invisibility, exactly what an environmental consultant would drive), and a laminated card with emergency extraction protocols.

I also found a map. Not a digital file, not a satellite image—an actual folded paper map of Millhaven and the surrounding county, the kind you'd buy at a gas station if gas stations still sold maps. Someone had circled the rental house in blue

pen and drawn a dotted line to the main street. There were small handwritten labels: Diner. Hardware. Library. Post Office (closed).

It looked like something a parent would draw for a child on the first day of school. Here's where you eat. Here's where you'll go. Here's where the nice people are.

"Who made this?" I asked.

"Analyst in the support division. She said the satellite imagery didn't give a good sense of the town's layout at street level, so she made a reference map." Tom paused. "She also said—and I'm quoting here—'Tell him the diner has good pie.'"

"I'm not going to eat pie at a diner."

"I'm just relaying the message."

"Do you know how many hands touch a communal pie server in the course of a single lunch service?"

"I do not, and I'd like to keep it that way. Safe travels, Calloway. First check-in is seventy-two hours after insertion. Secure channel, standard protocol."

"Copy."

Tom's image blinked off. The monitor went dark. I sat in the fluorescent silence of the safe house with my cover identity spread across a table I didn't want to touch, a map to a town I'd never heard of, and a set of embossed business cards that were, at this very moment, collecting ambient particulate matter on their textured surfaces.

I gathered everything into the envelope, sanitized my hands, and stood. The chair left a slight impression in the carpet—evidence I'd been here. In twenty minutes, the fibers would recover and the impression would disappear. No mark. No residue. No proof that anyone had occupied this space at all.

That was how I preferred to move through the world. Clean insertion, clean extraction. Touch nothing. Leave nothing. Be no one's memory.

I pocketed the Purell, tucked the envelope under my arm, and walked out of the room, past the blind spot near the vending machines, through the hallway with the single camera, and into a parking lot where a silver Honda CR-V was already waiting, freshly washed, keys in the envelope, not a fingerprint on it.

In four days, I would be in Millhaven. A town of seven thousand people who, according to every operational profile I'd ever studied, would want to know my

name, my business, my opinion on the weather, and whether I'd tried the pie at the diner.

I started the engine and pulled out of the lot. The hand sanitizer was in my right pocket. The embossed business cards were in the envelope on the passenger seat. The map was folded on top, the dotted line pointing toward a town that, at this moment, was nothing more than a collection of coordinates, census data, and signals intercepts.

I did not yet know about Ruthie and her booth near the back hallway. I did not know about Earl and his postal routes and his raccoon stories and the one sentence buried in twenty minutes of monologue that would crack a logistics operation. I did not know about Dale and his truck or Faye and her research project or Diane and her locked doors that sometimes weren't.

I did not know about Meg.

What I knew was this: the world is a contaminated surface, and the safest way through it is to touch as little as possible. I had built a career on this principle. I had built a life on it. It had cost me things I tried not to inventory, because inventorying losses is an operational indulgence, and I do not indulge.

The highway stretched out ahead of me, clean and gray and empty. I drove toward Millhaven with both hands on the wheel—ten and two, because some protocols aren't about safety, they're about control—and the absolute certainty that I would move through that town the way I moved through everything: without leaving a mark.

I was wrong about that. But I didn't know it yet. And even if someone had told me, I wouldn't have believed them, because believing people is not something I do.

It's something I was going to have to learn.

CHAPTER TWO

Arrival

Millhaven announced itself with a speed limit sign.

Fifty-five dropped to forty-five, then to thirty-five in the space of a quarter mile, which told me the town had a civic sense of order but not enough infrastructure to justify a traffic light at the transition. I noted the sign's condition—faded but legible, the reflective coating still intact, which meant the county maintained it on a schedule. Good. Maintained infrastructure suggests funded local government. Funded local government suggests civic engagement. Civic engagement suggests people who pay attention. People who pay attention are the enemy of operational anonymity.

I was making threat assessments about a speed limit sign. This was either rigorous professional habit or a personality disorder. The Agency had never asked me to clarify which, and I had never volunteered.

The highway became a road, and the road became Main Street with the organic inevitability of a small town that had grown along its only artery. I counted intersections: seven, if you included the two that were little more than gravel turnoffs into agricultural land. Building heights were uniformly two stories, with the exception of what appeared to be a church steeple—white, clapboard, Protestant in that non-denominational way that small towns default to—and a grain elevator on the eastern edge that I could use as a landmark from any position in the town center. Lines of sight were generous. The terrain was flat enough that a man standing on the roof of any Main Street building could see a vehicle approaching from three directions. The fourth direction, to the north, was blocked

by a gentle rise and a stand of hardwoods that screened the residential area beyond.

I logged all of this in the time it took to drive four blocks. It was reflex, not effort. The same way some people see a landscape and think beautiful, I see a landscape and think: two viable overwatch positions, limited concealment on the southern approach, and if I needed to leave this town in a hurry, Route 9 heading west was the only option that didn't funnel through a single-lane bridge.

Main Street presented itself with the modesty of a place that had nothing to prove. A diner with a hand-lettered sign I couldn't read yet from this distance. A hardware store with an American flag and a Pennzoil banner flanking the entrance. A library—small, brick, with the kind of dignified proportions that suggested a Carnegie grant sometime around 1912. A post office that looked closed. A community center with a bulletin board visible through the front window, flyers layered over flyers in an archaeological record of bake sales, blood drives, and county fair announcements. A gas station. A feed store that appeared to be out of business. A real estate office with sun-bleached listings in the window that hadn't been updated since the photos were taken with a camera that still had a flash.

Beyond the edges: farmland, tree lines, fences, sky. The kind of sky that has too much of itself—wide open, pale blue, the clouds arranged in a way that made the town look small and the horizon look permanent. I didn't have a word for what that felt like. I didn't need one. I needed the address of the rental house.

The GPS took me two blocks off Main Street and onto a road called Sycamore Lane, which had sycamores, so at least someone in this town's history had demonstrated a commitment to nominal accuracy. The house was the third on the left: a single-story, white clapboard, with a covered front porch, a detached single-car garage, and a yard that someone was maintaining at the bare minimum standard of social acceptability. The grass was cut. The hedges were not. This was fine. An environmental consultant renting a temporary residence would not be expected to landscape.

I parked the CR-V in the driveway, retrieved my bag from the trunk, and approached the front door. The key from the envelope fit the deadbolt. The lock turned with the resistance of hardware that had been recently re-keyed—the Agency's work, or the landlord's, or both. The door opened onto a living room that

was furnished in the dialect of rural American rental: a couch with cushions that had given up on structural integrity, a coffee table with a ring stain (another one; I was developing a theory that the world was approximately forty percent ring stains), a television that predated streaming, and a kitchen visible through an open doorway. The air smelled of carpet cleaner, which meant someone had prepared the space recently. Carpet cleaner is not the same as clean, but it was an effort, and I noted the effort.

Then I went to work, starting with the bathroom, because the bathroom is where contamination lives. The toilet was the standard residential model—I checked the flush mechanism, the seal, the exterior surfaces. I sprayed the entire unit with the hospital-grade disinfectant I'd packed in my bag—Clorox Healthcare Bleach Germicidal, not available at consumer retail, acquired through a supply chain I will not describe—and let it sit for the manufacturer-recommended contact time of one minute. While it sat, I addressed the sink. Faucet handles are the second-most-contaminated surface in any residential bathroom, after the toilet flush lever, and I cleaned them with separate wipes to avoid cross-contamination. The mirror was irrelevant from a hygiene standpoint, but it was streaked, and streaks on a mirror suggest a cleaning approach that prioritizes appearance over thoroughness, which told me everything I needed to know about the previous tenant's methodology.

The shower required a full disinfection cycle. I won't detail the process because it took eleven minutes and involved a level of attention to grout lines that most people would find clinically excessive. They would be wrong. Grout is porous. Porous surfaces harbor biofilms. Biofilms are colonies. I don't cohabitate with colonies.

The kitchen took longer. Countertops, cabinet handles, the refrigerator interior (empty, which was a relief—I once opened a rental refrigerator and found a jar of mayonnaise with an expiration date that predated my current cover identity), the stove knobs, the sink, the faucet, the drain. I ran the tap for two full minutes before I'd consider using it, because standing water in pipes develops bacterial cultures that the first thirty seconds of flow doesn't clear. I checked the under-sink area for evidence of pest activity—droppings, gnaw marks, nesting material. Clear. The Agency's advance team had presumably ensured a baseline of

habitability, but I trusted my own assessment more than I trusted anyone's, which was both an operational principle and, if I was being honest, the kind of thing a therapist would find revealing. I did not have a therapist. The Agency offered them. I had declined, citing scheduling conflicts that we both knew were fictional.

The living room I could manage. The couch received a disinfectant treatment that I knew, intellectually, was disproportionate to the actual pathogenic risk of upholstered furniture. I did it anyway. The coffee table was wiped down twice. The television remote—statistically one of the most contaminated objects in any shared living space—I sealed in a plastic bag. I would operate it through the bag. This was not a compromise I enjoyed, but it was functional.

By the time I finished, ninety-four minutes had elapsed. The house smelled like a hospital. This was the correct smell for a living space. I stood in the center of the living room and conducted a final assessment: clean surfaces, known sight lines from every window (I'd checked each one, cataloguing the view, the lock mechanism, and whether it opened far enough to serve as an emergency exit—the bedroom window did, barely), stocked supplies, operational workspace established on the kitchen table where I'd set up my laptop and the watershed survey materials that constituted my cover work.

The house was mine now. Not in any legal or emotional sense. In the only sense that mattered: I had made it safe.

I should have eaten something from my travel provisions—protein bars, sealed, individually wrapped, a brand I'd vetted for manufacturing hygiene standards. Instead, I picked up the hand-drawn map from the identity package and looked at the word Diner.

This was an operational decision. The diner was, according to Tom's briefing materials, the social center of Millhaven. Any intelligence officer establishing a long-term cover in a small town would make the local diner an early point of contact—it's where you're seen, where you establish the pattern of your presence, where you begin the slow process of becoming a recognized face instead of a suspicious one. Going to the diner on the first evening was not social. It was professional instinct.

I told myself this twice, which was one more time than a genuine operational decision requires.

The diner was called Ruthie's, which either meant the owner's name was Ruthie or the town had a tradition of naming establishments after people who weren't there anymore. The hand-lettered sign I'd seen from the road was now legible: Ruthie's, in a serif font that had been repainted enough times to develop a slight topography, with Breakfast All Day in smaller letters beneath it. The building was single-story, brick on the bottom and wood siding on top, with a row of windows along the front that glowed with the warm yellow of incandescent lighting. Someone had put a chalkboard easel on the sidewalk that read: Today's Special: Chicken Fried Steak. I moved past the chalkboard into the restaurant.

The interior was exactly what I expected and nothing I was prepared for.

Twelve tables, eight booths, a counter with nine stools. The floor was checkered linoleum that had been mopped within the last four hours based on the residual sheen. The walls were paneled in a wood that might have been oak or might have been oak-adjacent, decorated with local photographs—high school sports teams, a tractor pull, a woman holding an enormous zucchini—and a clock shaped like a coffee cup that I suspected had been purchased from a catalog sometime during the Clinton administration. The air smelled like coffee, fried onions, and something baking that I would later learn was pie but at that moment registered only as a thermal event with vanilla notes. The lighting was warm enough to be flattering and dim enough to hide the age of the furnishings, which was a design choice, even if nobody here would call it that.

There were eleven people in the diner. I counted them the way I counted everything—automatically, with a secondary assessment of threat posture, exit proximity, and whether anyone was paying particular attention to the door. Nobody was. Two couples, a table of three men in work clothes, a woman reading alone at the counter, and a teenager in a corner booth doing homework with the specific despair of someone who had been told to finish it before they could leave. All unremarkable. All exactly what a Tuesday evening in a diner in a town of seven thousand people should look like.

A woman emerged from behind the counter carrying a coffee pot, and the room rearranged itself around her.

She was five-four, compact, moving with the perpetual momentum of someone who had been in motion since before sunrise and would not stop until

the last customer left. Silver-streaked dark hair pinned up with a clip. Round face, deep laugh lines carved by years of expressions she hadn't bothered to moderate. Brown eyes that appeared to be focused on the coffee pot but were, I realized after two seconds, focused on me. She wore a faded green apron over jeans and a plain top, slip-resistant clogs, and a small gold cross on a chain. Reading glasses hung from a beaded cord around her neck. Her hands were reddened in the specific way that suggested years of hot water and bleach—a dishwasher's hands. She owned the place, and she still did the dishes. I filed this under a category I didn't use often—integrity.

"Sit anywhere, hon," she said, and then didn't wait for me to choose. She was already moving toward the back of the restaurant, coffee pot in hand, weaving between tables with the fluid efficiency of someone who had mapped this room ten thousand times. She paused at a booth near the hallway that led to what I assumed was the kitchen and the rear exit. She set a menu down on the table. She didn't gesture. She didn't explain. She just left the menu there and kept moving, topping off the coffee of one of the work-clothes men, exchanging three words with the reading woman at the counter, and arriving back behind the register in the time it took me to process that I'd been seated.

I looked at the booth. It was positioned against the back wall, facing the front door, with a clear sightline to the entrance and the main dining room. The hallway to my left led to the kitchen and, beyond it, what had to be a back door. If I sat here, I could see everyone who entered, monitor the room, and exit through the rear in under four seconds.

She had given me the best tactical seat in the building.

I sat down, and I told myself it was coincidence. Diner owners seat single customers near the back to keep the front tables open for larger parties. It was space management, not situational awareness. The sightline to the door was incidental. The proximity to the rear exit was architectural happenstance. There was no reason—none—to believe that a woman who ran a diner in a town of seven thousand had looked at me for two seconds and deduced that I was the kind of person who needed to see the exit.

I pulled a disinfecting wipe from the travel pack in my jacket pocket—I always carried a flat pack, the kind that fit without creating a visible bulge—and cleaned

the table surface. The laminate was already reasonably clean, which I attributed to professional standards rather than to my benefit. I wiped the menu, both sides. I wiped the salt and pepper shakers, then moved them to the far edge of the table where I would not accidentally contact them again. I wiped the edge of the booth seat where my hands would rest.

The reading woman at the counter watched me do this with an expression I couldn't categorize from this distance. I didn't care. The table was clean.

Ruthie—I was assuming this was Ruthie—returned with the coffee pot and a white ceramic mug that she set on the table with the handle facing me. "Coffee?"

"Please."

She poured. The coffee was dark and smelled like it had been made with intention, not obligation. I watched the pour—clean stream, no drips on the rim of the mug, the pot's spout recently wiped. Acceptable.

"New in town?" she asked, and the question had the cadence of someone who already knew the answer and was asking out of social protocol rather than curiosity.

"Arrived today. I'm doing some environmental consulting work in the area. Watershed survey."

"Watershed." She said it the way you'd say a word you'd heard before but never had reason to use. "That's the water-in-the-ground business?"

"More or less."

"Well, we've got plenty of ground. And water." She topped off a phantom drip on the mug's rim with a quick tilt of the pot. "You staying awhile?"

"A few weeks, possibly longer. Depends on the scope of the survey."

"Mm-hm." This sound, delivered while she was already turning away, conveyed an entire paragraph: I've heard temporary before, we'll see how long you actually stay, and I'll have your coffee order memorized by Thursday whether you want me to or not.

She returned two minutes later with a pad. "You ready, or you need a minute?"

"What's the special?"

"Chicken fried steak. Mashed potatoes, green beans, and a biscuit."

"What's in the chicken fried steak?"

I meant this as a food-safety inquiry. I wanted to know the oil type for the frying (some establishments reuse oil well past its safe thermal cycle), whether the breading was made in-house (cross-contamination potential with shared prep surfaces), and whether the steak was hand-pounded (direct hand-to-meat contact) or machine-tenderized (marginally more hygienic, depending on the equipment's maintenance schedule). These are reasonable questions. I would argue they are essential questions. The fact that most people do not ask them is an indictment of most people, not of the questions.

Ruthie interpreted this differently.

"Well," she said, planting one hand on her hip and lifting her chin in the way of a woman who had just been asked to perform and was going to deliver, "it's a cube steak, pounded this morning by me personally, seasoned with salt, black pepper, garlic powder, a little cayenne—not enough to burn, just enough to know it's there—dredged in flour, then egg wash, then seasoned flour again. The flour's got paprika, onion powder, and a little bit of white pepper because my mother used white pepper and I'm not about to argue with a dead woman who was right about everything. Fried in peanut oil—fresh today, I change it Tuesdays and Fridays. The gravy is pan drippings, flour, whole milk, salt, pepper, and a half teaspoon of Worcestershire that I will deny using if anyone asks. Potatoes are Yukon Gold, boiled and mashed with butter and cream. Green beans are from a can because it's March and I'm not a liar. Biscuit is buttermilk, made at four this morning, and if you don't eat it with butter, I'll know, and I'll be quietly disappointed."

She had listed seventeen ingredients—I counted—without pausing, without consulting a reference, and without breaking eye contact. This was not a recitation. It was a credential.

"I'll have the special," I said, because there was no other possible response to a woman who had just performed a seventeen-ingredient monologue with the fluency of a closing argument.

"Smart man." She collected the menu. "Butter's on the table. Don't let me down on the biscuit."

I ate alone. The chicken fried steak was, objectively, excellent. The breading was crisp without being greasy, which meant the oil temperature had been correct—somewhere between 350 and 375 degrees, based on the texture. The

peanut oil was, as advertised, fresh. The biscuit was warm and structurally sound in a way that suggested a practiced hand and a kitchen that maintained its oven's temperature calibration. I ate it with butter because Ruthie had told me to and because, in the hierarchy of contamination risks, individually wrapped butter pats ranked low enough that I could accept them without internal negotiation.

The green beans were from a can. I respected the honesty.

Ruthie circled back twice during the meal—once to refill the coffee, once to clear the biscuit plate, which she took with a nod that I interpreted as approval. The second time, she lingered. Not long. Just the span of a sentence.

"You know what I've learned running this place for twenty-two years?" she said, and the question was not directed at me specifically. It was directed at the room, at the evening, at the general vicinity of the coffee pot. I happened to be in the path of it.

"What's that?"

"You can't control who walks through that door." She tilted her head toward the entrance. "But you can make sure there's a seat for them when they do."

She said this the way people say things they've said before—not rehearsed, but settled. A conclusion she'd arrived at through twenty-two years of evidence and had no interest in defending because it didn't require defense. Then she topped off my coffee, even though it was still three-quarters full, and moved on to the next table.

I processed this as local color. Small-town wisdom, the kind of folksy observation that people in places like this offered to strangers because the social contract here apparently included philosophical commentary with dinner service. It was pleasant. It was meaningless. It had the rhetorical weight of a needlepoint pillow.

I returned to my meal.

When I finished, I calculated the tip: $8.47 on a $42.35 check, which was 19.97%, which I rounded to $8.50 to hit an even twenty percent without exceeding it. I placed the bills on the table with the check on top—weighted, so it wouldn't move if someone opened the back door and created a draft. I wiped the table with a fresh disinfecting wipe, because I had used this surface and I was going to leave it cleaner than I'd found it. This was not consideration for the next customer. It

was protocol.

I stood, buttoned my jacket, and walked toward the front door. Ruthie was behind the counter, glasses on her nose, reviewing a ticket. She didn't look up, but she said, "See you tomorrow," with the same certainty she'd used for the seventeen ingredients. Then, almost to herself, something that had nothing to do with me: “Helen would’ve liked you.” She turned a page. I didn’t ask. It had the quality of a thing said to a room rather than a person—the kind of thought that escapes when someone’s attention is elsewhere.

I didn't correct her. An environmental consultant working a multi-week contract in a small town would eat at the local diner. Regular patronage was part of the cover.

That was why I'd come back. The cover.

Outside, the sky had gone dark in the way that rural places go dark—completely, with an authority that cities never achieve. The streetlights on Main Street were widely spaced and produced circles of amber that didn't quite reach each other, leaving pools of shadow between them. I could see stars, which I hadn't in months. The air smelled like cut grass and cooling asphalt and, faintly, the diner's exhaust vent.

I walked to the CR-V. The town was quiet around me—not silent, but quiet in the way that living things are quiet when they're at rest. Somewhere, a dog barked once and stopped. A porch light came on two blocks away. A truck that needed a new muffler rumbled down a cross street and faded.

Seven thousand people, and I could feel every single one of them. Not as threats. Not as targets. As presence. The accumulated weight of seven thousand lives being lived in proximity, all of them aware—at some low, ambient level—that a new person had arrived and eaten dinner at Ruthie's and was now walking to his car under a sky with too many stars.

I got in, started the engine, and drove back to Sycamore Lane. The house was as I'd left it—clean, catalogued, secure. I locked the door, checked the windows, set my phone on the kitchen table next to the laptop, and sat down to begin reviewing the operational files on the Hendricks property.

But for a moment—just a moment, brief enough that I could dismiss it as fatigue—I thought about what Ruthie had said.

You can't control who walks through that door. But you can make sure there's a seat for them when they do.

Small-town pleasantry, the kind of folksy observation that means nothing beyond the moment it’s spoken.

I opened the laptop and got to work.

You've reached the end of the sample.

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"You can't control who walks through that door. But you can make sure there's a seat for them when they do."

— Ruthie, The Watershed Man

THE MILLHAVEN FILES — BOOK ONE

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