

# **DEADLY TRUTH**

An Eric Voss Mystery Thriller

Mike Wessels

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The Elric Voss Mystery Series

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# Prologue: Genesis

*Daniel Price*

At 2:17 a.m., Price Industries rose out of the rain like a church built for evil gods.

Black glass. Silver steel. Thin white floors stacked above the river, glowing through the storm. At the crown of the tower, the company emblem burned against the night: a silver tree inside a perfect circle, its branches climbing toward heaven while its roots curled down into the dark.

Growth. Legacy. Vision.

That was Cassandra's version. I always preferred the roots. They did the actual work.

I stood in a maintenance corridor three levels below the street, wet from the rain and breathing air that tasted like ozone, dust, and coolant. Above me, the tower hummed with money. Below, behind concrete and biometric locks, sat the room Cassandra once swore had been decommissioned.

The control room. The existing heart of the company. I slid my old access card through the reader. The panel flashed red.

I smiled. "Of course."

Cassandra never removed me in one clean cut. She did it slowly, with style. First, my committee seat. Then my labs. Then my credentials, my office, my key access, and my name from the architecture logs. By the end, there was barely enough Daniel Price left in the building to haunt it.

I pried open the panel beside the lock, exposing the service port. The bypass cable fits like a needle under the skin. A tiny terminal lit up in my hand, green code pouring down the screen.

They were still using fragments of my framework. That almost made me laugh. Cassandra could erase my name from the org chart, but she was still standing on my bones.

I pushed the exploit into the system. Old code. Elegant code. A redundancy shell I had written years ago and buried three layers deep beneath predictive maintenance. Back then, I called it prudence. Tonight, it looked more like revenge.

The lock clicked. I opened the door and stepped inside. Cold hit first. Then the sound.

The room breathed in whispers: fan noise, processor whine, the bass hummed with power moving through hidden walls. Rows of servers stood behind glass like black tombstones lit by blue and amber pulses. Curved displays wrapped around the central console. I could still make out city grids, shipping routes, security feeds, and market dashboards, although most displays were dim.

Rainwater dripped from my coat onto the polished floor. I stood still and listened. Silent voices. No guards or footsteps. No witnesses.

I crossed to the main console and touched the glass.

PRICE INDUSTRIES // CORE OPERATIONS

The silver tree opened on the screen, its roots branching into a lattice of metallic lines beneath the trunk. Beautiful. False. The public always looked at the branches. Only fools ignore what feeds them.

The login prompt appeared. I didn't use my name. I used one of Cassandra's auditors instead. A breath. A turn of the loading glyph. Then the system opened.

I moved fast through the directories, pulling architecture maps, surveillance indexes, legal holds, black-budget partitions, and ghost folders masked as calibration backups. I wasn't there for cash. I wasn't there to break anything. I was there because six months of being cut out had taught me one useful lesson:

Cassandra buried only what could hurt her.

The black-budget folders gave me nothing. Legal gave me nothing. Compliance gave me a wall of polished lies.

Then I found it. A directory that should not have existed.

/ROOT/GENESIS/

I stared at the word.

*Genesis.*

A beginning. Or a cover story. I opened it.

Subfolders spilled across the screen under names bland enough to survive any audit: transport forecasting, public sentiment mapping, risk clustering, consumer deviation, conflict modeling.

On paper, it was just another predictive suite. Price built those all the time. We sold anticipation to people rich enough to think uncertainty was a defect in the world. But this was different.

Cleaner.

Deeper.

Meaner.

A map of the city filled the center display. Then another layer dropped over it. Then another. Financial flows. Police reports. Utility disruptions. Hospital intake spikes. Traffic anomalies. Campaign donations. Property transfers. Private security deployments. Each point linked itself to the next with thin gold lines that kept rearranging, converging, splitting, and learning.

For one dangerous second, the engineer in me admired it. Then I saw the panel on the right edge of the screen.

BEHAVIORAL CASCADE MODEL ACTIVE SCENARIO  
TREE DEPTH: 12 INTERVENTION WEIGHTING: ENABLED

My throat tightened. Not a prediction. No intervention. Not what might happen? What could someone nudge? Pressed. Forced.

I opened the profile index. Identities populated in a rapid column: councilman, journalist, broker, intermediary, witness, target. The function is tagged mostly by name.

Then one full file rose to the top and stayed there, pulsing red.

ELRIC VOSS

I frowned.

The name meant nothing to me. Not a donor. Not a regulator. No one belonged in a corporate system this deep.

I opened the file.

Private investigator. License active. Former police consultant. Low institutional leverage. High adaptive variance. Anomaly markers flagged.

Below that, scenario branches unfolded like veins.

Nightclub altercation. Missing person inquiry. Industrial espionage leak. Child witness recovery. Homicide cascade.

Different openings. Different streets. Same destination.

ELRIC VOSS // PROBABILITY OF CONVERGENCE: 92.4%

I leaned closer to the screen.

“Who the hell are you?”

It wasn't about him.

It was about why Price Industries had built an altar for a private detective.

I opened one branch. Then another.

Names changed. Incidents changed. Neighborhoods changed.

But the same pieces kept surfacing through the data like bones in shallow ground: a jazz club, a sealed female profile, a shell logistics company, an unidentified child, and Elric Voss.

Not watching events. Pulling them together. Or pulling him into them, again and again, until he arrived exactly where someone wanted him.

The cold in the room sank deeper into my skin. This was no forecast engine. It was choreography. A machine for arranging collisions and calling them probabilities.

I scanned the top bar and saw a second symbol beside the silver tree. Small. Deliberate. A seed split by a single vertical line.

Not Price branding. A private mark. I clicked it. A hidden admin pane opened.

For one foolish instant, I expected a designer name, a signature, some trace of ordinary human vanity. Instead, I got deployment controls.

NARRATIVE STABILIZATION ASSET REDIRECTION  
REPUTATIONAL SHIELDING TERMINATION THRESHOLD  
AUTHORIZATION

The room seemed to tilt beneath me. Those were not product labels. Those were operational commands. Someone had not built Genesis to see the future. Someone had built it to select one.

Lightning flashed through the security glass, turning every surface white. In the reflection, I saw my face hanging over the console—drawn, unshaven, eyes too wide. I looked exactly as Cassandra described me to the board.

Unstable.

Fixated.

Unsafe.

Maybe she had the wrong order.

Once I understood what I was looking at, I did not shut down the system.

I did not call the police.

I copied it.

I dropped my laptop onto the console, cracked it open, and jammed a transfer line into the port. Archive windows bloomed across the display.

COPYING... 3%

Too slow.

*Truth is always slow when you need it fast.*

I opened parallel channels, compressed the root directory, and tunneled the transfer through a maintenance-log path. Fans spun harder inside the console. Somewhere behind the wall, a relay snapped.

The lights dipped. Then held. Come on. The counter crawled.

11%.

18%.

26%.

A warning box flashed across the upper display.

UNAUTHORIZED DATA MOVEMENT DETECTED

“No kidding.”

I killed one process, masked another, and rerouted the packet stream.

For three seconds, the warning disappeared. Then the room bled red.

SECURITY ALERT!

SECURITY ALERT!

SECURITY ALERT!

The alarm pulsed hard through the floor.

I made myself breathe. Panic tells the truth through your hands, and honest hands shake.

The transfer jumped.

43%.

52%.

61%.

Good enough had to become good enough.

I yanked the line free and shoved the laptop into my bag. On the main screen, windows started closing themselves, neat and automatic, as if the system were wiping prints off a murder weapon.

Then the center display changed.

A live camera feed filled the glass.

The lobby above. Empty marble. Rain on the front doors. Security is already moving.

Beneath it, in a text field I had not opened, letters typed themselves one by one.

YOU SHOULD HAVE LET IT STAY BURIED.

I went still.

No sender. No cursor. Just the sentence.

The room no longer felt empty. I looked toward the server glass, half expecting a face in the reflection. There was nothing there but machines and my own warped outline. Still, the message sat on the screen with the calm certainty of a verdict.

I thought of Cassandra.

Not because I believed she was watching. She was the only person whom I knew who could make a threat sound refined.

Beyond the room, security doors started locking in sequence. I grabbed my bag and ran.

The corridor outside flashed red. Alarms ricocheted off the concrete. I tore past utility conduits and backup generators toward the service elevator, then ditched the idea and took the stairwell instead. Faster. Dirtier. Harder to trap.

My lungs started burning halfway up. Thunder rolled over the city above me.

By the time I reached the lobby access hall, voices were echoing from the mezzanine.

Guards.

More than two.

Too many.

I slipped behind a sculpted divider and flattened myself into the shadows. Through the gap, I could see the front doors, the silver tree etched into the glass, lit from below so the roots looked brighter than the branches. Rain hammered the entrance. Beyond it, the city ran black and wet, big enough to hide a man for one more night.

Inside my bag, the laptop felt heavier than iron. It felt awake.

Genesis.

*A beginning.*

Not because the machine had made something new.

Because it had revealed what had always been there beneath the polish, the branding, the quarterly reports, the public charity dinners, the smiling interviews. A hidden engine. A system that didn't just predict people. *It sorted them. Guided them. Sacrificed them.*

And in the middle of whatever came next was one name, still burning in my mind.

*Elric Voss.*

A stranger. Private investigator. A red pulse in the dark.

One guard shouted.

I broke from cover, cut through the side exit, and burst into the storm. Rain hit like gravel. I kept running.

By morning, Price Industries would tell the city I had stolen proprietary software. They would call me unstable, resentful, dangerous.

The camera would probably agree. Daniel Price is entering a secure control room. He is fleeing with a laptop under his arm.

Daniel Price.

Bitter brother.

Corporate thief.

It was a good story. Maybe, too good. But as I ran along the river with thunder over the skyline and the silver tower receding behind me, one truth settled in with the cold.

I wasn't running because I had stolen something. I was running because I had seen what the machine was for. If Genesis had marked the moment I saw it, then the future would not satisfy itself by predicting me.

It would come hunting.



# Chapter 1: Missing Persons Case

*Elric Voss*

SIX MONTHS LATER

Rain makes every city look guilty.

People keep secrets.

*I never could.*

By midnight, the city looked like it wanted forgiveness and knew better than to ask.

The rain worked the windows in slow, crooked streams, smearing the neon outside into wounds of red and blue. Across the street, the HOTEL sign had been missing its O for so long, it only ever said HTELE, which felt about right. Around here, nothing stayed whole if money had touched it.

My office sat on the third floor above a pawnshop and beside a dentist nobody trusted. The hallway smelled of damp plaster, old cigarettes, and poor decisions given time to ripen. Inside, I had peeling walls, a radiator that shrieked like a stool pigeon, two client chairs with the stuffing trying to escape, and a desk old enough to remember when lies were cheaper.

On the blotter sat a camera, a half-finished report, and a manila file on a wife who had discovered romance was more exciting once it required deception and motel receipts. The husband wanted photographs. Not justice, not clarity, not the truth in any form that might talk back. Just prove he could fold it into his pocket and unfold it later when he needed a reason to stop loving her.

Most people came to me for that.

They said they wanted the truth, but what they really wanted was something they could survive.

The rain kept time against the glass. Somewhere below, the pawnshop's front gate rattled as Kessler tested the lock for the third time. I should have been out on Mercer watching a second-

rate philanderer climb a back stair to a furnished disappointment. Instead, I sat with my feet on the desk, turning over a thought that had no business feeling larger than the case in front of me.

Sometimes the city changed before anyone admitted it had. You could feel it in the way people started locking doors earlier. In the way men in good suits lowered their voices when they said certain names. In the way, the streetlights seemed less interested in showing you the way home than in watching who came out after dark.

That kind of feeling proves nothing. It just keeps you alive long enough to notice what it does.

Then somebody knocked.

Not the flat rap of a cop or the soft apology of a debtor. Three measured taps. Clean. Patient. The sort of knock that had never once wondered whether it was welcome.

“Come in,” I said.

The door opened, and Cassandra Price stepped into my office as if she entered hostile territory she already owned on paper.

She wore a charcoal coat cut with the precision that only comes from money or vengeance. She had pinned her hair back. Her gloves were dark gray, nearly black in the thin yellow light. Rain jeweled her shoulders and collar, but not much. She had either come from a car close to the door or from a life where the weather learned manners.

I knew her face before I placed the name. Everybody did.

Price Industries touched half the city, and the half it didn't touch was probably under contract for the next quarter. Traffic systems. Municipal surveillance. Logistics networks. Security architecture. Software that predicted bottlenecks, shortages, threats, and behavior. The kind of company that made itself sound inevitable by calling itself infrastructure. The kind that got rich by convincing frightened men in government that control and safety were cousins.

The papers liked Cassandra Price. They called her brilliant, severe, visionary. Men with investments called her necessary. Men without a moral center called her the future.

Men like me called her trouble the minute she entered the room.

“Mr. Voss,” she said.

Her voice was low and even, with that polished, expensive calm some people gain instead of warmth.

“Miss Price.”

I stood because that’s how I was raised, and because I dislike people who can afford to hire the building looking down on me.

I motioned to the chair opposite my desk. She sat with the controlled reluctance of someone accepting a compromise she intended to remember later. Her gaze moved once around the office. The filing cabinet. A cracked coat tree and a stack of bills tucked beneath a dead lamp. The bottleneck peeking from the bottom drawer I hadn’t closed all the way.

She didn’t sneer. That would have been vulgar. Cassandra Price looked at the poor surroundings the way a surgeon looks at damage: clinically, without surprise.

“That’s a long climb,” I said, “for someone who could buy better stairs.”

“I prefer to meet people where they actually live,” she said.

“Work,” I corrected. “Living would be an overstatement.”

One corner of her mouth threatened movement, then thought better of it.

“I need you to find my brother,” she said.

No weather. No preamble. No soft social lie about hoping she wasn’t interrupting. Just a knife slid across the desk.

“Daniel Price,” I said.

“Yes.”

The name had passed through the papers six months earlier in a short blaze and then gone cold. Missing executive. Internal dispute. Possible theft of proprietary software. No public appeal from the family. No funeral. No ransom. The city had given it three days of appetite and then moved on to fresher meat.

“I remember the headlines,” I said.

“The headlines were chosen,” she said.

“By you?”

“By people who found them useful.”

“That narrows it down to everyone with a lawyer.”

She ignored that.

“Daniel has been missing for six months,” she said. “I want him found.”

“Alive?”

A beat.

“If possible.”

“If probable?”

Another one. She was very good.

“I want certainty,” she said.

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No. But it’s close enough for your line of work.”

There it was. Polite contempt, folded small enough to fit in a sentence.

I leaned back in my chair. “Why me?”

“Because my brother asked for you.”

That got my attention in a way the name Price hadn’t.

I had never met Daniel Price. If he knew mine, it wasn’t from good company.

“I don’t know your brother,” I said.

“He knew enough about you to be specific.”

“How specific?”

“Specific enough that I’m here instead of somewhere more respectable.”

“Flattery like that’ll raise my rates.”

“It should.”

Rain whispered against the glass. The radiator clicked behind me. She reached into her bag and laid three objects on my desk with the care of someone setting charges.

A photograph.

A wristwatch.

A folded printout.

I looked at the photo first.

Daniel Price looked to be in his late thirties, maybe forty. Lean face, intelligent eyes, a suit that had once cost money and was currently losing an argument with exhaustion. There was a strain in the mouth. Too much thinking, too little sleep, and whatever expression men wear when they’ve found something they wish they hadn’t.

“Company lobby,” Cassandra said. “Eight days before he disappeared.”

“Taken by internal security?”

“Yes.”

“Comforting,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Efficient.”

That told me more about her than the papers ever had.

I set the photograph down and picked up the watch.

Steel band. Round face. Cracked crystal from edge to edge. Moisture silvered beneath the glass. The hands had stopped at 2:17.

There are objects that arrive already carrying metaphors, as if they've been waiting all their lives to become evidence. A stopped watch is one of them. It is a machine built to tell the truth in tiny, honest increments, and it broke at the exact moment it couldn't be explained.

"His?" I asked.

"He wore it every day."

"Where was it found?"

"In his car."

I looked up. "Which was where?"

"Parking structure on Garrison. Three blocks from the river."

"Locked?"

"No. Driver's door unsecured. Wallet inside. Keys in the center console. Phone missing. The watch was under the seat."

I turned it once in my fingers. The cracked face broke the lamplight into splinters.

"Police?"

"Notified."

"And?"

"They processed the vehicle and concluded what they always conclude when a wealthy family is involved. That the matter was regrettable, complicated, and best handled quietly until it became a body."

"Did it?"

"No."

"Pity. Bodies at least commit to an answer."

Something shifted behind her eyes. Not grief. Not exactly. Grief looks different for everybody. On Cassandra Price, it seemed to have dressed itself as irritation and learned not to blink.

I set the watch between us.

“And the paper?”

“It arrived three nights ago by courier. No return address.”

“Your doorman gets a face?”

“No.”

“Of course not.”

I unfolded it.

Rows of numbers. Timestamps. Clipped notations. Internal codes. Most of it was meaningless without context or maybe designed to look that way. Then my eye found the middle of the page, and the rest stopped mattering.

My name.

ELRIC VOSS

Again.

ELRIC VOSS

And again.

ELRIC VOSS

Repeated down the center column like a stutter in the machinery.

At the top, stamped in red:

PREDICTIVE INCIDENT MODEL // PRIORITY  
ESCALATION

I read it twice. Then a third time, slower, because that’s what you do when the page in your hand looks back.

“What is this?” I asked.

“One of the internal systems Daniel became interested in before he vanished.”

“Interested in.”

“Yes.”

“That’s one way to say he broke into it.”

Her silence did the nodding for her.

I looked down again. Fragments surfaced through the code: exposure variance, terminal node, disruption threshold, subject correlation. Enough jargon to make wrongdoing sound salaried.

And my name repeatedly as if some expensive machine had gotten religion.

“Your company runs predictive models on private investigators now?”

“My company runs predictive models on risk, infrastructure, chain reactions, exposure events—”

“You build crystal balls for people with procurement budgets.”

“We build systems to expect instability.”

“Instability that knows my name.”

“Apparently.”

The word hung there between us, elegant and poisonous.

“Did Daniel send this to you?” I asked.

“I believe so.”

“Do you believe, or do you know?”

“I don’t know.”

“That must be exhausting for you.”

Her gaze sharpened. “Less exhausting than being patronized in your office, Mr. Voss.”

“It’s all-inclusive.”

She let that go, which told me she hadn’t come for dominance. She had come for a need and hated every inch of the route.

I read the page again. There are different ways a man can feel fear. The cheap way is immediate: footsteps behind you, metal in a stranger’s hand, the bad click in a dark room. The expensive kind takes longer. It arrives disguised as information.

“Why am I on this?” I asked.

“That,” she said, “is why you’re in this room.”

“No. I was already in the room. Why am I on this page?”

Her eyes held mine. “Because three days before Daniel disappeared, he asked me about you.”

I kept my face quiet.

“What exactly did he ask?”

“Who were you? “

Whether Price security had an active file on you. Whether you had ever worked with, for, or against any Price subsidiary.”

“Did security have a file on me?”

“Yes.”

“Well. It’s nice to be remembered.”

“You’ve crossed paths with people relevant to the company interests.”

“That’s corporate language for something uglier.”

“It’s corporate language,” she said, “for precision.”

“Sure.”

I set the paper down carefully. “Why wait six months?”

She removed her gloves finger by finger, buying time with a gesture.

“Because six months ago I believed Daniel had run,” she said.

“Four months ago, I believed he’d been taken. Two months ago, I believed someone would eventually ask for money. Three nights ago, this arrived. Now I believe he intended to leave a trail, and that for some reason it ended with you.”

That was the first fully honest sentence she’d given me.

Not complete.

Honest.

There’s a difference.

“Why not the police now?”

“They’ve had six months.”

“Private firms?”

“I hired one.”

“And?”

“They billed beautifully.”

I almost smiled.

“What kind of system is this?” I asked, tapping the printout.

Her jaw tightened a fraction. “An internal predictive architecture.”

“That sounds illegal in a country with standards.”

“It’s proprietary.”

“Same difference, depending on the judge.”

This time, the almost-smile was mine.

“Daniel believed certain internal models had exceeded their stated scope,” she said. “Not just forecasting outcomes. Influencing decisions. Flagging people, relationships, vulnerabilities. Steering responses before events occurred.”

“You’re telling me your brother thought Price Industries built a machine that didn’t just predict the future. It leaned on it.”

“That was his argument.”

“And yours?”

“My brother was brilliant enough to be dangerous when he was right and impossible when he wasn’t.”

That sounded like practiced. But it’s not false. Family usually tells the truth only when it comes wrapped in resentment.

“What happened between you?” I asked.

A tiny pause. There it was.

“Professional disagreement,” she said.

“That usually means one person had power and the other had a conscience.”

“It means,” she said, “that Daniel violated internal boundaries.”

“Because he thought you were hiding something.”

“Because he became obsessive.”

“Those two conditions aren’t mutually exclusive.”

A muscle in her jaw moved once, then went still.

“Daniel was head of systems architecture,” she said. “He began pursuing access to a restricted analytics division outside his authority. He accused senior personnel of concealing developments from him. He copied material. He refused direct orders. He resigned.”

“The papers said terminated.”

“The papers said what they were meant to say.”

“Did he steal something?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know what division it came from.”

She didn’t answer.

“Right,” I said. “You know.”

Her voice lowered another degree. “What I know is that one encrypted packet left an internal server the night he disappeared, and that within twelve hours his access history had been partially scrubbed by someone with authority above his.”

“Above his or above yours?”

That one found skin.

She didn’t flinch. She just looked at me with new arithmetic. I’d moved from inconvenience to variable.

“Be careful, Mr. Voss.”

“There it is,” I said softly. “The real accent.”

She leaned back a little, regaining distance by inches.

“You asked why your name appears on that page,” she said. “I came here despite every institutional reason not to. I brought you evidence that could damage my company, my family, and my position. I am offering access, money, and a path directly into the last week of my brother’s life. If your method is to keep prodding until the conversation collapses, I can leave now, and we can both preserve our worst assumptions.”

Good line. Better control. She’d said all that without raising her voice. Money never shouts if it can afford not to.

I let a few seconds pass. “All right,” I said. “Then let’s do it clean. Tell me the last verified week of Daniel Price’s life.”

She did.

Not everything. No one ever does. But enough.

He’d been sleeping at the office some nights, avoiding normal exits, arguing with security, compliance, and two senior analytics people whose names she gave me without expression. He’d started using burner phones. His keycard showed midnight access to a restricted lab, then vanished from a second log no one outside certain departments was meant to know existed. An encrypted data packet left the internal system on the same night. Daniel’s apartment was found half-packed. His accounts had not been touched since. His car surfaced near the river. His phone never did.

“And three days before he disappeared,” Cassandra said, “he came to my office after midnight.”

That room again. Same weather, maybe. Same city. Daniel is still on this side of vanishing.

“What did he want?”

“He asked about you.”

The words sat there, simple as a threat.

“What exactly were his words?”

She looked at the watch, not at me.

“He said, ‘If anything happens to me, don’t trust the police, don’t trust the board, and don’t trust anyone who says this is about money. Find Elric Voss.’”

A silence opened between us.

“Why?”

“He said you talk when other men hide.”

“That’s a charming way to describe a defect.”

“He said that was why you were dangerous.”

I laughed once, quietly. Not because it was funny. Because sometimes a sentence lands so close to the bone, all the body can do is make a noise.

There are men built for secrecy. They can carry the deterioration of a room home in their coats and sleep fine. I was never one of them. Secrets sat under my skin. They itched. They festered. They made me reckless in conversation and unpopular at the wrong parties. It had cost me jobs, clients, a marriage that had barely qualified as one, and at least two opportunities to die politely. It had served me quite useful.

*People keep secrets.*

*I never could.*

“Why didn’t you come to me that night?” I asked.

Her face altered then, just a little. Enough to let the exhaustion show through the architecture.

“Because he was my brother,” she said. “Because he had been wrong before. Because he had been brilliant before. Because I had spent years trying to distinguish between revelation and unraveling, and I failed more often than I care to admit.”

That was the truest thing in the room.

“And now?”

She looked down at the page with my name on it, then back to me.

“Now I think either he found something real, or someone wants me to believe he did. Either possibility is intolerable.”

“Now you sound like family.”

“I am family.”

“No,” I said. “You sound like somebody who knows the difference between grief and liability and doesn’t enjoy either.”

For the first time, she didn’t answer.

Rain creaked in the window frame. Somewhere in the building, pipes groaned like a man trying not to.

I reached for a cigarette, remembered I’d run out two days earlier, and settled for my own bad temper.

“Suppose I take the case,” I said. “What do I get?”

“Money.”

“Not enough.”

“Access.”

“Not enough.”

“What is enough for you?”

“The part where you stop deciding what I can survive knowing.”

That landed. She let it.

Then she reached into her bag and slid an envelope across the desk. Thick. Cream stock. Expensive enough to make cash look ceremonial.

“Half now,” she said. “Half when you bring me my brother.”

“Alive?”

“If possible.”

“And if not?”

“Then the truth.”

I put one finger on the envelope but didn't open it.

"That's the first dangerous thing you've said."

"No," she replied. "It's just the first one you heard."

I liked that line so much I nearly distrusted it on principle.

"I'll need access to his apartment, his office, his assistant, his enemies, and every internal file related to his dispute."

"You'll have the apartment and the office. A list of relevant personnel. Selected files."

"Selected by who?"

"By me."

"Then we'll argue often."

"Yes," she said. "I assume that's one of the services."

I looked at the printout again. My name is in black repetition. Some machine inside Price had circled me before I even knew the game was in play. Either Daniel had stumbled into something monstrous, or Cassandra's company had institutionalized paranoia and given it servers.

Maybe both.

"What was his last confirmed movement?" I asked.

"He left headquarters at 1:34 a.m. Security saw him enter the garage alone."

"Carrying anything?"

"Nothing visible."

"But."

"But one internal team believed he had already moved material out of the building earlier that evening."

"The packet."

"Yes."

"What was it?"

“We don’t know.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It remains true.”

“Does it?”

Her gaze held. Very steady. Very cold.

“No,” she said. “Not completely.”

There it was.

“What do you know?”

“I know the system he accessed was part of a predictive initiative so compartmentalized that even senior leadership received only functional summaries. Daniel believed the model was no longer merely identifying likely events. He believed it was being used to classify catalytic individuals.”

I looked at the page.

“Meaning me.”

“Meaning people like you.”

“That sounds worse.”

“It probably is.”

“And who authorized it?”

“That,” she said, “is one of the questions I expect you to help answer.”

Beautifully done. She’d just admitted knowledge and converted it into my assignment in the same breath.

I stood and moved to the window.

The street below shone like black lacquer. A taxi whistled past. A couple fought under an umbrella that had already given up. Steam rose from a street grate in pale ribbons and vanished into the rain.

Six months missing.

A broken watch stopped at 2:17.

A dead trail suddenly alive with my name.

A sister who knew more than she could afford to say and less than she wanted to control.

It should have sounded ridiculous. Instead, it sounded like the city speaking in its normal voice.

“Why me, really?” I asked, still facing the glass. “Not the answer for the boardroom. The answer you’d hate having printed.”

When she spoke, her voice had changed and not softened, and just stripped of some of its polish, like weather finally touching metal.

“Because Daniel was afraid,” she said.

I turned.

“He was angry, obsessive, arrogant, difficult. Afraid was not a condition I associated with him. That night, he was afraid. If he reached for your name in that state, I am forced to assume it mattered.”

Need. Not trust. Need usually tells the truth faster.

I crossed back to the desk and sat down.

“If I find out your brother ran because he was guilty,” I said, “I won’t turn him into a tragic genius for family comfort.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“If I find out Price Industries buried him—”

“Then do whatever your conscience can endure.”

That one had iron in it.

I nodded once. “Fine.”

She stood. I also stood.

From her bag, she took a business card, turned it over, and wrote a number on the back in dark blue ink. The cardstock was heavy enough to tile a church with.

“Call only that number,” she said. “Not my office. Not my assistant.”

“You assume I call before showing up at places.”

“I assume you survive because you do many things before they become wise.”

At the door, she paused.

“One more thing,” she said.

“Good. I was worried we’d run out.”

“Since the printout arrived, two people connected to Daniel’s internal dispute have resigned.”

“Names.”

“Harland Crewe. Deputy Director of Analytics. Mara Quill. Internal Compliance.”

“Resigned how?”

“Suddenly.”

“Alive?”

“Yes.”

“Always useful.”

“They both left the city within forty-eight hours.”

I filed the names away.

“Anyone know you’re here?” I asked.

“I doubt it.”

That answer came too fast.

“No one with your money is ever unobserved, Miss Price.”

Something hard and nearly personal crossed her face.

“Then be worth observing, Mr. Voss.”

Then she was gone.

The door closed softly behind her, and the office got cheaper all at once.

I stood there listening to the rain and the tired little murmur of the radiator.

I should have walked away.

Any half-competent investigator with a functioning instinct for self-preservation would have recognized the architecture of the trap. Missing executive. Internal theft. Sealed departments. Scrubbed logs. Predictive models. A rich sister with omissions tailored into her posture. My name on a page I was never meant to see.

But curiosity has killed better men than greed, and the defect Daniel had apparently admired in me was already awake and stretching.

I opened the envelope.

Cash.

Enough to make rent feel briefly theoretical.

Under the money sat a photocopy of Daniel's apartment key, a passcard for Price Tower, an address in Blackwater Heights, and a typed list of names—security chief. Legal liaison. Daniel's assistant. Two department heads and a driver.

No Harland Crewe. No Mara Quill.

I smiled without humor. Of course.

I slipped the list and passcard into my inside pocket and was reaching for the photo again when the phone rang.

Not the office line.

The private one.

The sound cut through the room with all the delicacy of a knife laid on porcelain.

Very few people had that number. Fewer used it. I let it ring twice.

“Voss.”

At first there was only static. Not clean line noise. Damp, granular, like the call had crawled through bad wiring and rain to get here.

Then a man's voice came on, low and flattened, as though pressed through cloth.

"You took the Price job."

Not a question.

I kept my tone even. "Who's asking?"

A pause. In the background, I heard something clanging. Maybe a gate. Maybe an elevated train. Maybe nerves.

"Daniel Price found a door he wasn't meant to open," the voice said.

There it was. The handoff, clean as a switchblade.

"You calling to close it for him?" I asked.

"For you."

I reached for the pencil by the phone. "You've got the advantage of surprise. Spend it better."

"You don't understand what this is."

"No," I said. "But I understand when a stranger starts a conversation like he's rehearsed the obituary."

A breath at the other end. Controlled. Educated. The kind of voice that had gone to good schools and maybe bad rooms.

"Listen carefully, Mr. Voss. Some names are written down because they matter."

I wrote as he spoke. Male. Controlled. No easy regional markers. Someone is trying very hard to sound like no one I'd ever place at lunch.

Then he said, "Yours was written down because it ends things."

My hand stopped.

Some lines sound melodramatic on paper and fatal in the ear. This was one of them.

“Who are you?”

Static thickened.

“At 2:17,” the voice said, “Daniel understood what the system was for.”

My eyes went to the watch on the desk.

“What system?”

No answer. Just that damp electrical whisper.

“Walk away from the Price family,” he said. “Walk away from Blackwater Heights. Forget your name was ever on that page.”

“You seem tense for a man making threats.”

“I’m not threatening you.”

“What do you call it?”

“A final courtesy.”

There was something worse than menace in his voice.

Sincerity...

“You can’t protect him,” he said.

“Him who?”

Silence.

“Daniel?”

Nothing.

Then. “You tell the truth because you think truth cleans things. It doesn’t. It strips them. Leaves the frame exposed. Some structures shouldn’t be seen without the paint.”

That line belonged to somebody who had watched institutions rot from the inside and decided description was a form of treason.

“That supposed to scare me?”

“It’s supposed to save you.”

“Who sent you?”

A long pause.

“No one sends me anymore.”

The line died.

I kept the receiver to my ear long enough to hear the dial tone turn stupid and ordinary again. Then I hung up carefully, as if rough movement might bring the voice back.

The office had gone cold.

I laid Daniel’s watch flat under the desk lamp. The cracked crystal caught the light in a dozen thin faults. 2:17. A precise minute made eternal by damage.

*At 2:17, Daniel understood what the system was for.*

Maybe the caller was bluffing. Maybe he was a freelancer with a dramatic streak and borrowed information. Maybe the city had finally learned to terrorize men with abstraction.

Or maybe not.

I wrote down every word I could remember, then underlined the only one that seemed to have any blood in it.

**2:17**

I stared at it until it looked less like a time and more like a door left ajar.

Then I opened the bottom drawer, looked at the bottle, and closed the drawer again.

That was how I knew the case had me.

I took my coat, the envelope, the watch, and Daniel’s photograph. Killed the lamp. Left the adultery file where it was. A wife cheating on her husband would have to betray him without photographic support for one more night.

The hallway outside was dim and jaundiced. The bulb over the landing flickered twice, as if it were debating whether electricity was worth the trouble. By the time I reached the street, the rain

had hardened into the kind that found its way through wool and into principle.

I stood under the awning and looked both ways. The city looked back. Wet asphalt. Shuttered storefronts. A bus coughing at the curb. Steam lifting from a street grate in ghostly ribbons. A man sleeping beneath newspaper. A woman in a red coat hurrying toward something she was already late for. Normal enough to be suspicious.

Then I saw the sedan. Black. Half a block down under a dead traffic light. Engine idling low. No headlights. No hurry.

Could've been anybody. In this town, anybody was usually enough.

I started walking the other way. The sedan pulled out. That answered one question.

I kept my pace steady, collar up, shoulders loose. South instead of east. Away from my car and toward Mercer, where the streets narrowed and the buildings leaned close enough to hear your thoughts. The tires behind me whispered over wet pavement.

Not close enough for panic. Close enough for intention. Good.

I cut through Halden Alley without looking back. Past the overflowing bins. Past a drunk arguing theology with a brick wall. Past the basement club where a saxophone was making a case against hope. The sedan couldn't follow through the alley, but it could circle, and men in cars always think the street belongs to them more than men on foot do.

At the far end I crossed Dyer against the light and ducked into a diner that stayed open because insomnia is a market with excellent hours.

The bell over the door gave a tiring complaint. Heat hit me first. Then grease. Then coffee burnt down to its criminal essence.

Mara, the waitress, looked up from the counter.

"You look wet," she said.

"I'm diversifying."

“Booth or trouble?”

“Both.”

She poured coffee into a thick white cup without asking and nodded me toward the back. I took the booth with a view of the street.

Thirty seconds later the black sedan rolled past the window.

It didn't slow.

It didn't need to.

I got only the driver's shape. Hat brim. Shoulders. A man who understood that sometimes being seen was the message. The car reached the corner, paused under the light, then kept going.

Maybe that was all they wanted. To let me know the city had started paying attention in a voice I could hear.

Mara set the cup down.

“You want pie?” she asked.

“No.”

“That bad?”

“Worse. Corporate.”

She made a face. “Then you definitely want pie.”

I looked down at the watch in my palm. Cracked face. Stopped hands. An honest machine broken at the only second that mattered.

Daniel had found something. Cassandra knew less than she claimed, or more than she dared. Some machine inside Price Industries had written my name down like a forecast or a diagnosis.

And somewhere out in the rain, a man with a deadened voice had decided a warning was kinder than silence.

I drank my coffee. It tasted like iron, ash, and the morning after an argument you should have lost.

Then I made the only decision available to a man with my talents and defects.

I wasn't going home.

I was going to Daniel Price's apartment.

Because if a missing man had reached across six months of silence to leave me his broken watch, my own name, and a question that nobody rich enough to matter wanted asked, then I owed him at least the courtesy of finding out whether he'd left behind a map—

or a grave.

## Chapter 2: Before the System

*Elric Voss*

After searching Daniel's apartment all day, the night had crept up on me like a ruthless predator. The rain started again and had a way of making the city look unfinished, as if somebody had sketched it in charcoal and then dragged a wet thumb through the lines.

By the time I let myself into my office, the night had already settled into my bones. My coat was soaked through the shoulders. My hat brim dripped on the warped floorboards. Neon outside the window buzzed and bled red across the glass, turning the room into the inside of a healing wound.

I closed the door and stood still for a minute, listening.

The radiator rustling. Water tapping the sill. The small electrical hum from the lamp on my desk.

No footsteps in the hall. No soft knock from a woman with smoke in her voice and secrets in her mouth. No shadow moving where it shouldn't.

Just me and the room. Just the ache behind my eyes.

I tossed my coat over the filing cabinet and sat down hard enough to make the chair complain. Daniel Price's notes were where I had left them: spread across the desk, half in folders, half in loose stacks, like a man who had been trying to outrun his own thoughts and shed them as he ran. Receipts. Printouts. Names. Dates. Internal memos. Scraps torn from legal pads. Copies of shipping manifests. A photograph of a white corridor with no identifying marks and a timestamp that meant nothing to me.

The whole mess smelled like damp paper, stale coffee, and the sour dust of old offices. It had the odor of buried things.

For two days, I'd been looking at it the wrong way.

That's what shame feels like to a detective. Not the punch you didn't duck. Not the woman you shouldn't have trusted. Not even

the body you arrived too late to save. Shame is realizing the truth has been sitting under your nose while you've been breathing on it, fogging the glass.

I leaned forward and put both palms flat on the desk.

“Talk,” I said to the papers.

They didn't, but after a while patterns do what guilty men never can. They repeat themselves.

At first, I'd treated Daniel's material like a missing-person case with teeth. I thought he'd found one dangerous thing—one bad deal, one corrupt executive, one blackmail lever—and then vanished because of it. That was clean. Human. Understandable. The kind of story this city preferred. One sin. One sinner. One body in the river.

But Daniel's notes didn't stay in one room. They moved. Not sideways. Backward.

I started sorting them by year instead of subject. The moment I did, the room changed.

Files I'd dismissed as old corporate junk stopped looking accidental. References that had seemed vague started lining up with other vague references. Different departments. Different stationery. Different signatures. The same poison in the language.

*Behavioral modeling.*

*Population stability.*

*Response architecture.*

*Predictive intervention.*

I found the phrases in old annual-review appendices, buried consultant summaries, footnotes in budget sheets, redacted correspondence between divisions, grant applications routed through shell foundations with names charitable enough to survive a headline. There was no single project title tying them together. No banner headline. No brass plaque.

That was the point. Whatever GENESIS was now, it hadn't started as GENESIS. It had started as an appetite.

I rubbed my temple. The pressure there had been building for the last hour, a familiar iron band tightening around my skull. The lamp made a pale halo over the papers. Outside, a siren passed in the distance, thin and lonely.

One memo caught my eye again. I'd looked at it before and missed the shape of it because I'd been staring at the words instead of the absences between them.

## **PRICE INDUSTRIES**

### **Strategic Risk Assessment Working Group**

Below that, three paragraphs of corporate anesthesia. Economic instability. Labor forecasting. Civil response variables. Nothing you could convict a company for. Nothing you could even despise properly.

Men in boardrooms had learned a long time ago that the ugliest ideas in the world sounded harmless if you dressed them in enough neutral nouns.

At the bottom, though, there was a list of departments consulted in preliminary design.

Finance.

Security.

Civic Analytics.

Legal.

And one that made me stop breathing for a second.

*Biochemistry.*

I read it again.

*Biochemistry.*

Not software. Not logistics. Not public-policy modeling.

*Biochemistry.*

A cold little thread drew itself down the center of my back. I went through the stack faster after that, hands moving on instinct, separating paper from paper, year from year, lie from lie.

There it was again, not often, but enough. Budget bleed into biochemical research. Procurement authorizations for neural-response assays. A vague equipment order routed through medical subsidiaries Price mostly used for tax polish and public goodwill. Half-deleted meeting minutes mentioning retention variance and memory stress thresholds. My mouth went dry.

The rain kept tapping at the window like a patient finger. I found one note in Daniel's handwriting jammed into the spine of a folder, as if he'd hidden it there in a hurry.

*Not just software.*

*Earlier human trials?*

*Why is biochem attached? Ask why records sealed before G.*

*E.V. file missing preregistration docs.*

I stared at the initials.

E.V.

For a moment I told myself it meant something else. An executive. A division. Some internal shorthand Daniel liked. Anything but what it looked like.

Then the ringing started in my ears. Not loud. Worse. Thin and high and intimate, like a wire being tightened inside my head.

I stood too fast and the room tilted with me. I had to catch myself on the edge of the desk. The lamp flared white. My stomach turned over once, slowly and ugly.

I'd had migraines before. Since childhood, if you wanted the truth. Pressure behind the eyes. Sudden sweats. Nausea. Little faults in the machinery. Doctors had called them stress responses, hereditary sensitivities, nervous conditions, lifestyle issues. Men with clean nails and expensive ties always had a name ready for a thing they didn't understand.

But standing in that office with Daniel's note in my hand, I had the strange, dislocated feeling that the pain wasn't arriving.

It was remembering me.

I lit a cigarette with unsteady fingers, drew deep smoke, and let the bitterness anchor me. The first pull tasted like burnt paper and pennies. I didn't even like cigarettes much. I liked what they did to silence the anxiety.

Daniel had seen something in the old records. Something old enough that he had written *before G*. Before GENESIS. Before the name. I needed someone who had been there at the start.

Retired men are easier to find than guilty ones. All you need is patience, a phone book, and the knowledge that the world eventually discards everybody.

Even useful people. Sometimes especially useful people.

Three hours later I had a name.

*Edgar Pell.*

Former contract economist. Later "external systems consultant" for Price Strategic Planning. Left the company twenty-one years ago. Brief mention in two archived reports. A tax address in the northern part of the city where the streetlights were dimmer and the houses leaned into weather like old boxers leaning into punches.

By then it was close to midnight, and the rain had thickened into something meaner. I drove through streets shining black and gold, windshield wipers slashing time into pieces. The city after dark looked less like civilization than evidence.

Pell lived in a narrow brick house wedged between two others like a book misplaced on a shelf. Paint peeling. Porch light weak. A dead fern hanging by the door. When I knocked, I heard bolts slide back one after another before the door opened three cautious inches.

One pale eye looked out at me.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Pell?"

"Who's asking?"

"Elric Voss."

The eye narrowed. “No solicitors.”

“I’m not selling salvation. I’m looking into Daniel Price.”

At that moment, the door opened a little wider. Pell was in his seventies, maybe older, the kind of age that had given up pretending not to hurt or be hurt. Wisps of white hair combed with stubbornness rather than success. A cardigan hanging from shoulders as narrow as coat hooks. He smelled faintly of menthol, old books, and the medicinal sweetness of liniment.

“Daniel Price,” he said carefully. “That family is trouble in a better suit.”

“I’m starting to notice.”

He looked at the rain behind me, then at my face. I must have looked worse than I felt.

“Five minutes,” he said. “If you drip on the rug, I’ll bury you under it.”

Inside, the house was overheated and lined with paper. Bookshelves against every wall. Stacks of journals on end tables. Boxes under chairs. A lamp with a yellow shade cast everything in the color of old teeth. Somewhere deeper in the house, a clock ticked with judicial disapproval.

Pell waved me toward an armchair that had surrendered years ago. He took the one opposite and lowered himself into it with care.

“So,” he said. “What is it the younger Price idiot found that made all of you start circling old bones?”

“All of us?”

His mouth twitched. “You think you’re the first man in a wet coat to ask me about the company?”

My hand tightened on the armrest. “Who else?”

He ignored that. Or pretended to.

“What do you know already?”

“Enough to ask better questions than I did yesterday.” I said.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s what I’ve got.”

He studied me for a long time. His eyes were watery but not weak. Academic eyes. The kind that had spent a life reducing people to trends and then gone sour when the people started bleeding again.

“What did Daniel find?” Pell asked at last. “It wasn’t a secret project. Not at first. That’s the mistake outsiders make. They imagine a room full of villains agreeing to be villains. Real evil starts as an efficiency proposal.”

He leaned over, picked up a mug from the table, sniffed it, grimaced, and drank anyway.

“In the early days, Price wasn’t pitching prophecy. They were pitching stability. Economic forecasting, labor-action prediction, supply fluctuation modeling. Cities are expensive beasts. Strikes, riots, panics, market runs—all of it costs somebody money. Usually the wrong somebody, in the minds of men who already have enough.”

“Predict instability,” I said, “and you can prepare for it.”

His smile was humorless. “That’s how it was sold. Predictive civic management. Social resilience architecture. The language shifted every quarter, depending on who was paying. Banks liked one vocabulary. Government liked another. Private security firms liked a third.”

“And underneath?”

“Underneath was the same fantasy men have always had. To know what people will do before they do it. Then to shape the conditions so they never do anything inconvenient.”

The room felt warmer all at once. Sweat gathered at the base of my neck.

“Prediction,” I said.

“Preemption,” Pell corrected.

The clock in the other room ticked. I could hear the rain moving along his gutters.

Pell set the mug down with a small click. “At first the inputs were ordinary enough. Employment numbers. Consumption patterns. Arrest data. Migration. Public sentiment proxies. They were building models to anticipate collective behavior. Markets. Neighborhoods. Voting blocs. Workers. You understand?”

“Crowds,” I said.

“Crowds are only individuals measured cheaply.”

He said it like a quote. Something somebody richer and cleaner had said in a boardroom years ago while other men nodded.

“Then the models improved,” Pell went on. “Or thought they did. Better granularity. Better confidence scoring. They stopped asking what populations would do and started asking which specific persons created instability inside populations.”

My pulse kicked once, hard.

“Instability,” I said, “according to whom?”

“According to whomever was paying to keep the city smooth.”

That landed and stayed there.

I looked around the cramped room, at the books and heat and dust. “Where does biochemistry fit in?”

For the first time, Pell’s gaze moved away from mine.

“That,” he said, “was where I stopped being useful.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning economists like me are invited to lunch. Biochemists are invited downstairs.”

I felt something in my chest go cold and exact.

“Downstairs where?”

He gave a dry laugh. “You think internal maps say *sub-basement for morally dubious science?*”

“Try me anyway.”

Pell sighed through his nose. “There were whispers. Pilot studies. Cross-disciplinary exploration. The argument was simple enough: if you can model response, perhaps you can improve response. Reduce volatility. Increase compliance. Mitigate traumatic retention. Encourage adaptive behavior. Corporate phrases. Scientific perfume over old coercions.”

“Memory,” I said quietly.

Then he looked at me properly. “Who said memory?”

“No one.”

“Then why did you say it?”

Because that word I had not wanted had already entered the room and sat between us like a third man.

“Call it a guess,” I said.

Pell’s fingers worried at the handle of his mug. “There was talk of stress encoding. Decision interruption. Chemical support for behavioral smoothing. Nothing proven. Not in anything I saw. But a company like Price never stops at what can be justified on paper. It keeps walking until somebody important tells it to stop. And in this city, important men are always late.”

My head throbbed in time with the clock.

“Did Daniel come see you?” I asked.

A pause.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“About three weeks before the stories about his disappearance started.” Pell spoke slower now, choosing what to lose. “He brought documents. Not many. Fragments.

He was frightened, though he was trying very hard to wear anger instead. Said he’d found evidence that the current system had roots much older than the public rollout. Said early iterations involved human-response testing and sealed records. Said some

subjects appeared in later predictive models as if the company had followed them for years.”

My mouth tasted rusty.

“What subjects?”

“He only named one.”

I didn’t ask, because I already knew. My body knew before my mind would let it. Pell went on anyway.

“You,” Pell said.

For a second I heard nothing at all. No rain. No clock. No old man breathing across from me. The world just folded inward, small, white and silent.

Then sound came back too fast.

The radiator rattle. Street water spraying under passing tires. Blood in my ears.

“You’re wrong,” I said.

“I hope so.”

“I would remember.”

Pell gave me a look so tired it bordered on pity. “Would you?”

The question hit harder than it should have.

Images fluttered at the edge of my mind—never forming, never staying. White light. A chemical smell sharp enough to sting the eyes. A glass partition. The pressure of adhesive on skin. Somebody said my name from too far away.

Then gone.

I stood. The room lurched, then I put a hand on the mantel until it steadied. Pell didn’t move.

“Daniel said,” he continued softly, “that he couldn’t understand why your name appeared in early material and then again in later model reviews. Same conclusion. Different years.

He thought perhaps you were connected to someone at Price. Perhaps a family link. Perhaps a clerical error. He said the strangest part was that the file behaved as if history had been damaged around it.”

I turned toward him. “What does that mean?”

“It means records were missing in patterns, not at random. Intake pages are gone, but test references remained. Consent forms are absent, but outcome summaries survived. Dates clipped. Identifiers redacted badly as if removed in haste decades after creation. Daniel told me one line repeated across versions.”

The headache tightened like a fist.

“What line?”

Pell swallowed. “He didn’t quote it exactly. *Something about variance. Disruption. Statistical resistance.*”

I was already reaching for my coat.

Pell’s voice sharpened. “Mr. Voss.”

I stopped.

“If Daniel found what I think he found, then this was never about a disappeared heir embarrassing a powerful family.” He held my eyes until I had no choice but to hear him. “This is about a system that began by studying unrest and ended by selecting people. Not criminals. Not innocents. Variables. *If your name is in that architecture, then whatever happened to you happened because someone believed you mattered to the model.*”

*Or threatened it.*

I left without saying much. Couldn’t trust my mouth. The rain hit me cold and immediate, washing the heat of Pell’s house off my face. I stood on the porch for a second too long, breathing hard, one hand braced against the wet rail.

Across the street, a car sat dark beneath a dead Sycamore.

Maybe it had been there all night. Maybe not.

I couldn't see the driver, if there was one. Just the outline of a windshield holding rain.

I got in my own car and drove away slowly, checking the mirror every third breath.

It followed for six blocks, then disappeared when I cut through a service lane behind the old post office. Maybe I shook a tail. Maybe I imagined one. In my line of work, paranoia and professionalism share a wall.

Back at the office, the air felt colder than before. I locked the door, drew the blinds, and spread Daniel's material across the desk again. My hands were steadier now, which frightened me more than the shaking had. There's a certain kind of calm that comes only after terror has selected its seat.

I found the folder with the note.

*E.V. file missing preregistration docs.*

Then another sheet I'd overlooked because it looked like nothing: a partial printout, edges blackened by copier wear, half of it cut off. Columns of names or codes had been removed. What remained was a set of annotations in machine text and one handwritten margin note in Daniel's slanted script.

At the top:

## **SUBJECT RESPONSE REVIEW — ARCHIVE EXTRACT**

Below that, most of the page was useless fragments.

*baseline response latency*

*memory retention inconsistency*

*intervention tolerance variable*

*behavioral disruption persistent*

Then, three lines lower, isolated by a copier blur as if the machine itself had wanted to hide it:

**E.V. remains statistically disruptive.**

My initials.

There it was: Not a coincidence. Not a division code. Not a ghost in paperwork.

Me.

The lamp buzzed overhead. Somewhere in the wall, the pipes knocked twice like knuckles.

I read the line again and a smell came to me out of nowhere—antiseptic, sweet and rotten underneath, the smell of a room scrubbed clean after something dirty. My pulse stumbled. For one instant I saw a ceiling so white it hurt, and shadows moving behind glass.

Then the vision broke apart, and I was back in my office with rain on the window and Daniel's evidence under my hands.

I understood two things at once: Daniel had not uncovered one crime. *He had uncovered the foundation beneath all of them.*

And somewhere before GENESIS had a name, before the city learned to fear an invisible machine, Price Industries had put its hands inside my head and left me with less than I started with. I stood very still in the weak yellow light, looking at my own initials like they belonged to a dead man.

Outside, the city kept breathing through its wet concrete lungs, pretending it had never been built for this.