

ACE OF SPADES

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 PROLOGUE
The First Card

Rain slicked the crosswalk like a mirror, and the city held its breath, waiting to see what it would reflect---another night that would follow him home whether he invited it or not.

Detective David Cross stood in it---soaked through the trench coat he'd bought with his first detective's paycheck, collar up, hat tight as if the brim could shield him from what waited in the white stripe ahead. Sirens pulsed somewhere and thinned. The rain kept time, already counting against him.

The body lay centered, knees and shoulders coaxed until geometry agreed. The man's mouth was parted just enough to hold a card---an ace of clubs, damp, the edges dark where the rain had crept. Clubs: low, blunt. Common. The suit read like a whisper that would not stop repeating.

Someone crouched and talked about tire treads. A rookie rehearsed a theory he'd practiced on the way over. A sergeant said we've seen worse twice, which meant he hadn't.

David knelt and took in the angles, the small decisions that couldn't be argued away---the hands opened and left symmetrical, the card's corner nested against an incisor as if this exact resting place had been measured and tested.

Not dumped, he thought. Arranged---and arrangement meant obligation.

"Name?"

"Owen Hamilton. Warehouse guard."

"Low-life muscle," another voice added, as if the card needed translation.

David didn't answer. He watched the club soften in the rain and thought of its cousins, of how a deck might speak if someone bothered to listen, and how listening had a way of narrowing everything else.

He rose. In the crosswalk's reflection, his face split and doubled. It was easier to look there than at the man on the asphalt. He went home and did not sleep.

The board on his wall was still just cork then, browned by the sun, a few old pushpins left from cases that had ended. He pinned Owen Hamilton in the top left corner, turning memory into placement. Beneath the photograph, on a scrap of index card, he wrote three words and pressed until the pen bit through:

Ace of Clubs

He stood back and said, "Say it plain," to the room, the board taking the words without reply. The rain beat at the windows in response.

The years did not hurry. They accumulated, and so did what the board asked of him. It thickened. It took weight. It learned his hands.

He shifted a photograph a thumb's width and felt relief he could not justify. He removed a pin and replaced it in the same hole, testing resistance. He covered sections and uncovered them again, each choice carrying its own cost. He learned the language of cork: where it yielded, where it tore, where it remembered.

Maria Vasquez. Ace of Clubs.

He placed her lower, closer to the edge, as if distance might reduce the pull. He turned her photo slightly askew and left it that way, conceding imbalance. He wrote the word Time once in

the margin, then crossed it out.

Later came Victor Grant. Ace of Diamonds.

David pinned him nearer the center and immediately disliked the suggestion of order. He slid the pin out and in again until the cork tore. The tear remained, a mark of force he could not take back.

The board crowded without clarifying. Headlines yellowed. Notes overwrote notes. There were suspects. There are always suspects.

Brandon Cooper stayed too long, then vanished, leaving a clean square behind that felt like erasure. Martin Hale surfaced and sank, his badge number written until the ink thinned and bled. David told himself the names were noise, even as he moved them with care.

The board became the continuity of his days. He covered it with a sheet when his daughter visited. Glitter from a birthday card dusted the desk and crept toward the wall no matter how often he wiped. He uncovered the board the moment the door closed.

The sheet stayed folded longer between uses. The glitter dulled, settling deeper into the grain.

A second drawing joined the first on the fridge door, held by a magnet shaped like a smiling sun. Later, the paper curled at the edges. Later still, only the magnet remained.

He did not remember taking the drawings down. He only noticed, once, that the sheet had not been moved in some time. He left it where it lay.

Time pressed without sequence. He pinned. He unpinned. He adjusted and readjusted until the actions themselves became the purpose. He dreamed of cards without faces and woke knowing sleep itself was becoming collateral.

Years later---years, not a number---he sat in a dim office with his jacket off, sleeves rolled, the board glowing where its covering had slipped.

Anthony Prescott leaned in the doorway. "It's over."

David pressed a pin deeper where it had begun to loosen. "He's not done."

Prescott didn't move. "Maybe you are."

The door closed. David stayed.

When the last killing went cold, the board did not. Files went into drawers. The city exhaled. David did not.

He took the board home. It learned the rooms. It learned the walls. It learned him.

Habit replaced schedule. Pills by day. Kettle at nine. Cane leaned where his hand could find it in the dark.

He covered the board sometimes. He uncovered it again. Each choice made the next heavier.

One night he drew the shade down, and the red threads disappeared into a single shape that refused to hold still. He switched off the lamp.

The house settled around him, remembering his weight.

In the dark, he tasted metal. He lowered himself into the chair and listened.

The board breathed behind the shade.

The taste of metal deepened---the price of it, all of it.

♠ CHAPTER 1 ♠

A House Gone Still

Darkness pressed against the windows, and the house waited in the same tired silence that greeted him every morning, every night, never asking anything new of him.

The first sound was the soft click of plastic: a pill lid snapping open. Then another. Then another. The tiny clatter of capsules dropping into a dish cut through the silence like beads falling on stone.

David hunched over the counter, shoulders slumped, breath shallow. His hands trembled as he lined each pill into the day-marked slots of his organizer, squinting to be sure the Tuesday chamber really held two blue tablets and one white. He checked, then checked again---just to be sure.

The kettle hissed behind him, a thin ribbon of steam curling into the dim kitchen air. He stayed perfectly still, one palm braced on his cane, the other pressed to the counter's cool edge. The smell of scorched metal seeped from the kettle as it clicked off. He poured without looking and set the mug before himself, letting it fog his glasses.

The clock on the wall ticked with methodical cruelty.

He stared at its pendulum as he drank. The tea had no flavor. He barely felt the warmth sliding down his throat. It was simply part of the machinery now, another gear turning in the unbroken routine that wound him from one day to the next.

When the mug was empty, he exhaled a long, hollow breath and pushed himself upright.

"Damn knee," he muttered, as though the joint were an unruly subordinate.

Cane in hand, he shuffled from the kitchen toward the dark stretch of hallway, his steps slow and deliberate, the tip of the cane clicking softly on the wood. The living room light faded behind him, no longer reaching his feet. Cooler air waited in the hall. His cane struck the floor with a harder sound here, the echo lingering faintly before it disappeared.

The soft tap of his cane echoed over the hardwood as he crossed the living room, his silhouette cutting briefly across the faint lamplight that seeped from the kitchen. The glow didn't follow. It stayed behind, as if afraid to enter this part of the house.

The air here felt colder. Older.

He passed the side table by the couch. His eyes moved over the scattered picture frames. Most lay facedown like fallen cards after a lost hand. One frame stood upright but bore a crack down its glass, the fracture slicing through the smile of a much younger man who barely resembled him anymore. Another frame stood empty altogether, dust lining its edges like the outline of something exhumed.

A sudden rattle broke the stillness---the window shuddering in its frame as a breeze passed. He flinched, then shuffled closer and tugged at the latch. Still locked. Still sealed.

"Loose wood," he muttered, voice low and fragile.

The wind died. Silence returned, deeper than before.

The clock on the far wall resumed its rule of the room, each tick carving a hollow notch in the air. It sounded less like time passing and more like a finger tapping on the inside of a coffin lid.

He lingered there, staring at the darkened furniture. When had he last had company? A face.

A voice. There should have been something. There wasn't. Only the hum of the refrigerator.
Only the clock.

"Didn't matter anyway," he whispered, the words dry as paper.

Turning away, he moved toward the far end of the room. His cane tapped once, twice, three times---then stopped as he reached the threshold of his office.

He stood still, staring into the black doorway as if it were forbidden ground. His fingers hovered at the wall. Then, slowly, they closed around the lamp switch.

The lamp snapped on with a delicate click, and a thin line of light stretched across the room, coming to rest on the pegboard as if it knew where to look. In its glow, the wall bloomed from blackness all at once---a sprawl of photographs and yellowed clippings, edges curling like dead leaves. Red thread stitched through them in tangled arcs, pinned to scribbled notes and faded police reports with rust-specked tacks. The paper seams overlapped and collided until they formed a map only he could read. Up close, it was evidence. From a distance, it became something else---a constellation charted in grief and stubbornness.

David eased closer, cane tapping once against the leg of the desk.

His shadow stretched across the board like a smear.

He stood there in silence, eyes moving from thread to thread, face to face, drawing the same invisible lines he'd drawn a thousand times. His lips parted but no words came. Then, softly, almost reverently:

"Say it plain this time."

The board did not answer.

He lingered, gaze narrowing to the center photo---the oldest one, edges gone brown and

brittle, thumb-smudged at the corners. His chest had gone still without his noticing.

Pressure built in his ribs until pain stabbed through them.

He gasped sharply, reeling back a half step, and caught the edge of the desk to steady himself. The cane clattered softly as he pulled it upright again.

His grip tightened.

His gaze locked on the photo.

His heartbeat stuttered. The photo blurred.

The smell of dust and old paper sharpened---turning suddenly into rain on hot pavement. Sirens seeped through the seams of the present like distant ghosts. A red flash pulsed against the edge of his vision, faint at first, then blooming across everything in a wash of cold light.

Blood on wet pavement.

Rain falling.

A body facedown, limbs at impossible angles.

Younger hands---his own---lifted the tape cordon.

He stepped beneath it while voices shouted from behind: officers barking orders, boots splashing, radios crackling.

David moved like still water while chaos crashed around him.

Paper lifted in a gust, spinning through the air like startled birds.

One sheet caught his shoulder, clung, then slid away. He didn't move to stop it.

The sirens faded.

The room dimmed around him.

Now there was only the ringing phone.

Beside it, a cold dinner plate, edges crusted with untouched gravy.

The phone rattled against the table with each chime.

He stared at it until the sound clipped off mid-ring, severed cleanly, leaving a silence sharper than any blade.

The stillness pressed in again, solid and heavy.

The photo swam back into focus on the board.

His throat was dry.

His voice came out as a rasp.

"What game are you playing?"

His fingertip clicked the lamp switch.

Darkness collapsed across the room, folding around him.

He stood motionless, the sudden black pressing close, the pegboard's shape dissolving until it was only shadow---only memory.

His hand lingered on the desk a moment longer, fingertips brushing the cool wood.

He found a loose pushpin at the corner of the board and pressed it firmly into place with a soft metallic snap. The motion was careful. Precise. Like sealing something back into its tomb.

He stepped back.

Listened.

Silence stretched.

Too clean. Too hollow.

Then---above him---the ceiling gave a long, groaning sigh as the wood shifted under unseen weight.

David froze.

Every muscle went still, even his breath.

The cane trembled faintly in his grip.

A long beat passed.

Nothing followed.

"Old wood," he whispered, the words nearly lost to the dark. "Just old wood."

He turned, moving slow, cane tapping softly against the floor as he made his way toward the doorway. The sound seemed smaller now, swallowed by the house.

At the threshold, a single sharp creak cracked through the ceiling overhead.

David stopped mid-step, spine rigid.

"Old wood," he said again, firmer this time, though his voice caught on the edges. His grip tightened on the cane.

He crossed into the hall, the dark swallowing him whole.

Behind him, unseen, a faint draft swept through the room---as if someone had just passed by. The draft lifted the fine hairs at the base of his neck.

♠ CHAPTER 2 ♠

Ghosts in the Pegboard

Dim, pale light bled through the curtains, catching on the faint shimmer of old grease on the kitchen counter. The house had not warmed yet. The quiet held until the slow scrape of a chair leg broke it.

David lowered himself into the chair with both hands braced on the table, shoulders trembling with the effort.

The pill sorter sat waiting before him, neat and squared.

He cracked open Monday's slot---then Tuesday's, then Wednesday's---out of habit. He shook pills into his palm, the soft rattle barely breaking the quiet. Only then were the trays open before him, already full, lids yawning.

A long pause. The pills tipped back into their bottles one by one. Each lid closed with a soft snap.

The kettle began its low, dull hum from the counter. He didn't get up this time.

His cane leaned against the table; one hand rested on it out of habit. The other traced slow circles in the wood grain, over and over, thumb following a dark seam in the varnish. The air smelled faintly of old paper and metal.

When the kettle clicked off, he poured without looking and drew the mug closer.

Both hands wrapped around it like a man cupping a coal.

Steam thinned and vanished---only then did the first true taste slam into him.

The clock ticked behind him, louder than it had any right to be.

He set the empty mug down, pushed back from the table, and his joints crackled like dry wood bending in winter.

"Onward," he muttered to no one.

The cane tapped once as he rose, and he began his slow shuffle toward the office. He stopped just inside the doorway, cane braced lightly against the jamb.

The pegboard stood waiting in the lamplight. It wore the weight of another night---the photographs yellowed deeper, threads slack and brittle, paper edges curling like forgotten receipts left too long under a lamp.

He stepped forward, the cane's tip tapping once on the floor, and lifted it, pointing the brass tip toward a photo near the top.

"Aaron Miller," he murmured. "Ninety-seven. Thought he was the one. Had the ring of it--- slipped into a cab while I chased ghosts down at the docks."

The cane drifted to another.

"Jeffery Franks. Two thousand three. Right build, wrong hands."

Another.

"Harley Wilkinson... left us a trail of nothing. Clever bastard. I'm still proud of that work."

The words slipped out quietly, worn smooth with use, like paper passed through too many hands.

"Twenty years," he said at last, voice thin as thread. "Twenty years chasing a shadow."

The phrase settled into the room as if it had always belonged there.

His gaze moved across the board, following threads that no longer led anywhere certain.

Names and years blurred together. Arrests. Releases. Deaths. Each once burned brightly, then faded, leaving only the outline of faces.

A slow breath slipped out of him, soft as steam leaving a cooling kettle.

The cane tapped softly as he crossed to the desk. He lowered himself into the chair; the leather sighed beneath him.

A paperclip came up from the tray. It rolled slowly between his thumb and forefinger.

The board stood, silent.

A thin blade of sunlight slipped through the curtain slats, striping the pegboard in pale gold.

David rolled the chair closer.

The cane leaned, forgotten, against the desk.

He reached for a cluster of notes pinned near the center---edges curled, ink faded to the gray of old newspaper---and eased them free. The tacks came loose with reluctant little pops.

The papers shuffled slowly between his fingers.

"Owen Hamilton," he murmured. "Warehouse guard. Kept his head down---until the night he helped move the shipment."

The photo moved slightly higher.

"Ace of Clubs."

Another followed.

"Douglas Smith. Broker. Burned five families out of their savings before the market caught him."

The tack pressed home with the pad of his thumb.

"Ace of Diamonds."

A third.

"Alec Sellers. Neighborhood enforcer. Left three men in wheelchairs before anyone would testify."

The paper angled off to the side.

"Ace of Hearts."

The faces meant little now.

Only the shapes.

Only the pattern.

He reached for another photograph buried beneath the others---an evidence print from the first year of the case. A coroner's photograph. Black and white, edges softened from years of handling.

The image showed the side of a man's neck.

A ligature mark cut a pale line beneath the jaw.

David leaned closer.

His breath stopped.

It happened without a thought. It always had.

Stillness crept through his chest, narrowing the world to a single point.

The mark wasn't quite right.

That had been the problem from the beginning.

Too clean.

Too deliberate.

A faint crossing indentation near the base---barely visible unless the light struck it just so.

A detail that never appeared in the reports.

Never in testimony.

Never anywhere but here.

His thumb rested on the edge of the photograph.

Twenty years.

No one else had seen it---or no one had cared.

Air finally slipped back into his lungs.

The photograph returned to the board.

The lamp above him sputtered, filament flaring orange.

He stilled until it steadied again.

"Wiring's going," he muttered.

The switch clicked.

The bulb winked out with a faint pop, leaving only the sunbeam cutting across the board like a card laid face-up on green felt.

He leaned toward the oldest photo, close enough to fog the glass with his breath.

The cane's rubber tip brushed softly along the wall as he drifted toward the window.

It was the first time all morning he had stepped outside the orbit of the board.

The curtains were half-drawn, pale light pooling at their edges.

Two fingers caught the fabric and pulled it aside.

Outside, the street was alive.

Children wheeled past on bicycles, their laughter sharp and bright in the cold. A brown dog bounded after them, tongue lolling, nails clicking across the pavement.

At the far end of the block, the mail carrier stood at a gate, speaking with a neighbor. They laughed at something David couldn't hear, heads tipped back, shoulders loose.

The sound bled faintly through the glass.

Muffled.

Distant.

Like voices carried through water.

He stood unmoving; the cane planted before him like a stake in soft ground.

For a moment his hand rose toward the pane.

It stopped just short of the cold glass.

Fingers hovered.

Then lowered.

The world on the other side went on turning.

His did not.

The laughter faded down the street until even the dog was gone.

He let the curtain fall and turned back into the room.

The house reclaimed the sound as it always did, and the tick of the wall clock gathered everything back into itself.

He stood in the middle of the room, unsure why he had risen.

The board behind him.

The clock.

The quiet air.

Nothing had changed.

Yet something sat wrong, like a paper pinned slightly out of alignment.

A sound rose faintly through the silence.

A doorbell.

Far away.

Long ago.

The memory struck behind his ribs like a tack driven into cork.

He jolted.

The cane slipped from his grasp and clattered across the floorboards.

The sound vanished.

Silence closed in.

He stooped, wincing, and lifted the cane.

The worn brass handle rested in his palm, thumb tracing the shallow dent near the crown---
polished dull by years of use.

"The marked card in my hand," he murmured.

His voice sounded far away.

The cane leaned against the armchair while he crossed to the table where the pill bottles
waited.

The labels had faded. The caps were scuffed.

Night's doses rattled into a shallow dish, each pill landing softly.

From the corner he took the small alarm clock and wound it forward to midnight.

The dial clicked gently into place.

He sank into the armchair.

The cushions breathed out around him.

In the stillness, the faint hum of the house rose---low and steady---air whispering through vents and the thin seams of old wood.

As if the walls themselves were waiting.

♠ CHAPTER 3 ♠

The House That Listens

Darkness pressed flat against the windows, heavy as stone. The only light came from a dull orange lamp pooling across the rocker, its glow too weak to reach the corners of the living room.

David Cross sat motionless beneath it, shoulders drawn tight, a wool blanket draped over him like burial cloth.

His cane lay across his lap, his hands resting lightly on its length as though it were the only thing tethering him to the present.

The house held its breath.

He stared down the hallway toward his office. The lamplight behind him barely grazed the threshold, leaving the far end in absolute black. His eyes caught the faint gleam of the doorknob in that darkness, a single cold pinprick of reflected light.

The wall clock ticked behind him.

Then didn't.

He turned his head slightly, listening.

Stillness.

He craned around to check the clock face---both hands pointed at two o'clock.

He waited, eyes fixed on them until they blurred.

A full minute passed before he blinked and checked again.

Two o'clock. Exactly the same.

He faced the hallway once more, jaw tight.

The darkness sank in, its reach stretching beyond what any sane night could allow.

The rocker creaked as he shifted forward, as if something at the far end of the hall had tugged an invisible string tied to his chest.

The desk lamp snapped on with a brittle click, slicing through the dark behind him.

Its beam pooled across the desk and climbed the pegboard beyond, catching the red threads like blood vessels stretched too tight.

David eased down into the chair, knees crackling. The blanket slipped from his shoulders and crumpled on the floor.

The board loomed over him---*twelve victims on the left, six suspects on the right*, their photos split like opposing sides of a long cold war.

The victims' side lay dense and crowded, paper edges curled and yellowed like memorial cards.

The suspects' side stood sparse, stark, eyes unblinking from their pins like a silent jury.

He dragged a worn sheet from a folder and began copying its notes onto fresh paper, the words shrinking with every line.

Owen Hamilton---victim. Caleb Price... suspect. Still missing.

Maria Vasquez---interviewed by Martin Hale days before she died. Hale's notes vanished.

Victor Grant---buried in cement. Silas Trent approved the developer who bribed him... why?

The pen tip scratched in tight, shallow strokes.

Lena Crosswell---victim. Brandon Cooper said her scene looked 'too clean.'

Alec Sellers---victim. Trent gave him a suspended sentence. Why?

He shook his head hard enough to rattle his glasses.

"No... no," he muttered. "It's not linear. Not order. Pattern. Overlaps. Always overlaps."

More pages, tighter script.

Douglas Smith... Iris Monroe called him 'a likely target.'

Rachel Bloom... Cooper's camera logs missing.

His words slurred together, the names collapsing into initials.

D.S. to I.M.---motive: exposure. S.W. not related to Ezekiel Ward. T.K... fire... purge...

He scratched until the pen tore the paper. Ink bled into the groove.

Dozens of pages lay crumpled at his feet, blackened with overwriting. The newest were barely legible---jagged glyphs even he had to squint at.

His fingers locked around the pen in a white grip. A jolt of pain flared through his knuckles.

He let the pen fall. It clattered against the blotter.

David stared down at his cramped hand, trembling, as if surfacing from deep water.

A sudden, sharp gulp caught him off guard; the lamp's light flickered as if it too felt the sting.

He pushed the last page aside and blinked slowly, like a man waking from a trance.

The pen rolled in a slow arc toward the edge of the blotter and stopped.

The house waited.

Then---soft as breath---a board creaked overhead.

Another followed behind him, faint but sharp, as if something had stepped just out of sight.

David turned slightly in the chair, listening.

The office door stood ajar to the black hall. The sound moved again, faint and deliberate, crossing from the ceiling above to the floorboards beyond the doorframe.

His posture was rigid, a stillness that held the room in place.

This had always been its way.

The house never spoke when he faced it---only when his back was turned.

The noises shifted with him, always just out of reach, like eyes sliding behind a painting as he passed.

Another creak.

Then silence.

The world seemed to pause around him; his throat was a coiled spring, every inhale caught in the hush of the house. When he finally exhaled, the floorboards eased with a low sigh, and the lamp's fringe trembled as if disturbed by breath.

David's hands found the arms of the chair. His grip whitened.

He stared at the black hall beyond the door and whispered,

"What game are you playing?"

He paused, scanning the gloom for an answer before letting his voice drift into the dark corners of the house.

The rocker creaked in a slow, even rhythm, matching the thin draw of David's breath.

Back and forth, wood on wood, soft as a metronome.

A sudden gust rattled the windows.

The panes shivered in their frames, then stilled---as if the wind had thought better of coming inside.

David didn't move.

The lamp flickered.

Dimmed.

For a full second the room seemed to collapse into darkness before the light snapped back with a brittle hum.

The silence settled over him like a heavy curtain, swallowing every stray sound.

No tick from the wall clock.

No settling groan from the beams.

Even the refrigerator's hum had stopped, like the house had drawn in a long, soundless breath and refused to let it go.

The air grew heavy around him, thick as wool.

Waiting.

David's fingers tightened on the armrests of his chair.

He slowly turned the rocker toward the kitchen's black doorway, its edges dissolving into shadow.

He stared into the dark as though something were standing there---just beyond sight---listening.