

SUBJECT SEVEN SERIES

ASHES + ASPHALT

PROLOGUE

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Car horns blared as the woman swerved through traffic, her driving erratic, desperate. A truck leaned into its horn behind her—long, aggressive—while tires shrieked somewhere to her left as another driver slammed the brakes to avoid her cutting across lanes.

Noise. Chaos. Reaction.

None of it mattered. Her hands tightened on the wheel until her knuckles paled. Too many cars. Too many variables. Too many witnesses. She checked the rearview mirror.

Once. Twice. A third time.

Nothing.

No repeating headlights. No steady distance. No obvious tail.

It should have reassured her.

It didn't.

The emptiness behind her felt staged.

Not absence—control.

Waiting.

Her grip tightened.

A tremor flickered through her fingers before she crushed it into stillness. On the passenger seat, a stack of manila envelopes slid with every sharp turn. One tipped, spilling photographs halfway out—grainy images, clinical shots,

shapes that blurred the line between human and something that refused to be named.

She didn't look.

She didn't need to. Beside them, a small tape recorder clicked against the console.

Tick.Tick.Tick.

Too loud.

Like a countdown.

Evidence.

Proof.

A death sentence.

She pressed harder on the accelerator. Minutes later, she was on foot. The shift from speed to exposure was immediate. She moved quickly through the crowded sidewalk, clutching her bag close, brushing past strangers without apology. Every face felt like a threat. Every movement, a pattern waiting to reveal itself.

Nothing stood out.

That was the problem. At the entrance of a bustling coffee shop, she paused just long enough to check her reflection in the glass. For a split second—something behind her shifted.

She turned.

Nothing.

Just people. Conversations. Ordinary life.

She stepped inside anyway. Heat wrapped around her first. Then the smell—coffee, sugar, something familiar enough to almost feel safe.

Almost.

The illusion lasted seconds. She spotted him immediately. Her boss sat at a table away from the windows, back to the wall, both exits in view. Coffee untouched. Eyes already on her. Reality snapped back into place.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

She didn’t answer.

“I’ve uncovered the story of a lifetime,” she said instead, her voice low and controlled. “And there are people who will do anything to make sure it never comes out.”

A spark lit in his eyes.

“You had me at ‘story of a lifetime.’”

Of course he did. Risk was part of the job. It was why they worked—reporter and editor, both willing to push too far. She slid into the seat and pulled the envelopes and recorder from her bag, pushing them across the table.

“Everything you need is here,” she said. “Evidence. Data. The full report. Publish it exactly as written.”

He frowned. “And you?”

“I need to disappear for a while.”

That landed.

“What did you get yourself into this time?”

"You'll understand when you go through it."

She hesitated—just a fraction—then added quietly:

"It's not just corruption."

His expression sharpened.

"What is it?"

She met his eyes.

"Something that shouldn't exist."

A beat.

"Something that learned how to."

Silence stretched between them. She stood before he could press further.

"Don't wait," she said. "If anything feels off—publish immediately."

Then, softer—

"Be careful."

And she was gone. He watched her leave, unease settling into his chest.

Not fear.

Not yet.

Just enough to make him hesitate before reaching for the recorder. He plugged in the earbuds and pressed play.

Static crackled.

Then a distorted male voice filled his ears.

“For safety reasons, I will not disclose my identity. The evidence provided in the envelope will have to suffice.”

Outside, she moved quickly through the crowd, eyes scanning, heart pounding. She just needed to get back to her car.

Nothing unusual.

No one following.

Almost there.

Inside, he flipped open the first envelope, eyes moving rapidly across the contents as the recording continued.

“He was created using multiple DNA samples—spliced together. Human, animal... and something else.”

Photographs. Diagrams. Notes scribbled in urgency.

Wrong proportions. Unnatural symmetry.

Things that looked human—until you looked too long. Outside, she reached the intersection and stopped at a red light, subtly checking reflections in nearby windows.

Everything looked normal.

Too normal.

For a brief second—her reflection lagged.

Out of sync.

Her breath caught.

“...some of the samples were supplied directly by the government—acquired through excavations and encounters

no one will officially acknowledge.”

A flash of light from a nearby building.

Sharp.

Deliberate.

She turned toward it, trying to focus—and everything went black. Her body collapsed onto the pavement. At first, the crowd assumed she had fainted.

Then someone screamed.

Blood spread beneath her too fast.

Too much. Wrong.

People staggered back, instinct overriding curiosity. No one touched her. Inside the café, he turned to the next envelope, pulse quickening.

“...before receiving the unknown DNA, they were unable to successfully bond human and animal genetics.”

He reached for his coffee and took a sip.

Paused.

Something bitter.

Metallic.

Wrong.

“...the unknown DNA acts as an adhesive—allowing incompatible genetic structures to coexist.”

His chest tightened.

Sharp. Immediate.

The envelope slipped from his fingers. He grabbed the cup, staring at it, realization dawning too late.

His hand trembled.

Then failed.

The cup slipped, crashing against the table and spilling across the documents. No one around him noticed. To them, he was just another man sitting still.

Too still.

Dead before the coffee finished spreading.

The recording continued.

“...forcing incompatible structures to stabilize... and evolve.”

Coffee soaked into the fallen report, ink bleeding at the edges. One line remained clear.

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