

AN ELLA DARR MYSTERY—BOOK #15

GIRL,

DECEIVED

BLAKE PIERCE

G I R L,
D E C E I V E D

(An Ella Dark FBI Suspense Thriller —
Book Fifteen)

B L A K E P I E R C E

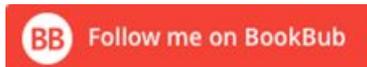
Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising twenty-one books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books; of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books; of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books; of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books, of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising ten books; of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books; of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series,

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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PROLOGUE

Jessica Owen left the party with little to show for it. She hadn't met anyone worth meeting, nor did she consume enough alcohol to make the trip worthwhile. Overall, it had been a waste of a Sunday night, so now she was braving the morning hours en route back to her apartment.

The party, held during these balmy summer months, had sported an unusual twist – it was a fancy dress affair. Jessica couldn't help but question the inclusion of such a gimmick in the sweltering heat, as elaborate costumes clashed with the season's casual and carefree vibes. Nevertheless, she decided not to dwell too long on the curious choices of the party's hosts, choosing instead to direct her thoughts towards the wide-open expanse of college-free weeks ahead.

Jessica turned and took the scenic route down Willow Street, edging along the river bank to admire one of the few natural beauties Maywood still had to offer. She'd lived in this fair city for three years, and in that time, she'd come to learn that Maywood was a poor man's Hollywood. This was the place where the creatives settled once the big leagues had spat them out, or where dreamers came hoping to catch a break without facing the ruthless competition of Tinseltown. Despite its reputation, Jessica held a deep affection for Maywood, for its underdog spirit and its stubborn resilience.

As she strolled, Jessica eyeballed the remnants of an old abandoned film set, its wooden skeleton something of a local haunt and magnet for wannabe explorers. Now draped in ivy and moss, the row of shacks and artificial cornfield had become part of the riverscape. It had been years since Jessica last ventured there, on a dare with her friends when they were still teenagers. The tales surrounding the set were a staple in local lore. From being haunted by an actor who'd met an untimely death to being a secret rendezvous spot for forbidden lovers, the stories were aplenty. Some masked guy at the party had told her that someone was killed their last night, but

Jessica had her doubts. She guessed he was trying to scare her into his bed, a technique that only worked within the suspended realities of horror movies. In the real world, it took a little more effort than that.

The shadows of the early morning, combined with thoughts of the old film set, suddenly put Jessica on edge. As she continued her path along the river, a group of figures emerged across the street. Their movements were sluggish and drunken, silhouettes weaving in and out of the weak morning light. Jessica inspected closer and saw two of the same costumes she'd seen an hour ago. Other party-goers who'd also ended the night early, she guessed, but she kept her head down, hoping to go unnoticed. She wasn't drunk enough to match their energy, and the prospect of diving into bed was more appealing than making idle chit-chat with strangers. Soon, they disappeared, and Jessica continued on.

She passed the river, down through the old lot that was fast becoming an unofficial trailer park. As she navigated through each makeshift home, she became aware of the unnatural silence of the night. Maywood, with its history and charm, had its quiet moments, but this was different. The usual distant hum of late-night city life, the occasional chirping of crickets or the distant hooting of an owl, was absent. Instead, Jessica felt as if the world around her had been muted, each of her footsteps sounding eerily loud against the gravel. The trailers themselves looked like they were holding their breath, windows shut tight, not even the whisper of wind through the gaps. As Jessica passed an old Airstream, its aluminum siding reflecting the ghostly pale light from a nearby street lamp, she thought she noticed movement within. A curtain shifted ever so slightly, but no faces peered out.

It was odd; this lot was usually alive with activity, even in the wee hours. There were always a few night owls around: the elderly man who would sit outside with his radio, playing old country songs to any insomniac willing to listen, or the young couple who'd often be found sharing whispered stories by a campfire. But tonight, there was no music, no murmured tales – just the unsettling stillness.

Jessica picked up the pace, then squeezed herself through a gap in a mesh fence at the perimeter. Her apartment suddenly came into view at the end of the long street, but even though her residence was close, the quiet of the night seemed to stretch the distance.

And suddenly, something stood out along her pathway. Something that sent a tingle of dread through her veins.

Nestled between two lampposts, just a few yards from the entrance to her building, stood a figure, still and silent. The person, or thing, was draped in a long, flowing cloak, the fabric nearly translucent in the dim light. The hood of the cloak concealed most of its face, but the faint glow from a nearby lamppost caught a glint of something metallic, perhaps a mask or some sort of ornament.

He stood there motionless, his stillness so profound that for a moment, Jessica wondered if she was looking at a statue or some elaborate art installation.

But then the figure moved, swayed, spurred to life by the night breeze. He took two slow, methodical steps towards her then stopped.

Another party-leaver, although he was wearing a costume she didn't recognize.

For a split second, Jessica considered retracing her steps, perhaps finding an alternate route. But the proximity of her home, tantalizingly close, compelled her to move forward. Even though it was just another student wandering the night, something about his outfit was a little too on-the-nose for comfort. It was neither campy nor sexy, the two things party-goers aimed for with their costume choices. Instead, it was eerily authentic. A little too real.

Then, as quickly as the blank white face appeared, it vanished into the night. Jessica blinked herself back to full awareness, chiding herself for letting her imagination run wild. Her breathing was shallow, her heart raced, but she forced herself to exhale deeply, trying to expel the unease settling in her chest. The tales Jessica had heard from her college mates weren't just limited to eerie figures and urban myths; they were more grounded, more real. Others had spoken of being

stalked after late-night library sessions, followed home, and in the worst cases, assaulted in the dim alleyways around the city. These days, you couldn't be too careful,

It's just someone from the party trying to get a rise out of me, she murmured to herself. She'd always been prone to a vivid imagination, and it was quite possible that she'd allowed stories from the past and the uncanny environment of Maywood to affect her more than she'd realized.

Continuing on her way, Jessica strode down the pathway, eager to be surrounded by the familiar comforts of her apartment. The night sounds began to return, filling the silence she had noticed earlier. A dog barked in the distance, a car passed by, its headlights briefly illuminating the street before moving on. When she reached the spot where the masked figure had emerged from, she subtly glanced in every direction, hoping perhaps to see a familiar face or any indication that it was just a harmless prank. But the street was empty, save for a few trash cans and the usual urban debris.

As she approached her building, she could see the faint glow from her living room window. But a sharp, unsettling noise abruptly broke the ambient sounds of the night – a rapid scraping, like footsteps on the pavement, moving with urgency. Jessica's instincts took over, and she quickened her pace. But then she made the classic mistake often seen in horror films: she glanced over her shoulder.

Behind her, alarmingly close, the masked figure had re-emerged, and was advancing with determined strides, the billowing cloak now trailing behind like dark smoke. The intricate metallic mask caught the sparse light of the street, casting eerie reflections onto the cracked pavement. Its eyes, concealed behind the mask, seemed to be focused intently on Jessica, never straying, never blinking.

The surrealness of the moment struck Jessica hard. Was this still remnants of the party, some late-night straggler determined to keep the night's antics going? Or was this something more sinister?

Every gut instinct screamed the latter.

Half a second later, she had no doubt.

Because the figure began to speed down the path, rapidly closing the gap between them.

Jessica's heart raced even faster as adrenaline surged through her body. Panic and survival instincts took over as she sprinted towards her apartment building. The sound of her own footsteps was drowned out by the echoing strides of the pursuing masked figure. As she hurried down her path, a few survival tips she'd once read online raced through her mind: never run in a straight line, change directions, try to lose the chaser in a crowd or complex environment. But at this early hour, the streets were desolate, and the choices limited.

She quickly weighed her options. Should she run to her building, potentially leading the masked figure to her home? Or should she duck into a nearby alley or behind a car?

Her homing instinct was strong, pulling her towards the familiar safety of her apartment, but she knew she couldn't risk leading this potential threat to her doorstep. An alleyway to her right beckoned, and with a quick, agile movement, she veered off, hoping the sudden change in direction would throw off her pursuer.

The alley was dark, the tall buildings on either side blocking out the little light the dawn had to offer. As she ran, she spotted a stack of empty crates and barrels beside a locked service door.

Without thinking, Jessica made a snap decision, quickly ducking behind the makeshift barrier and pressing herself flat against the cold wall. Her breathing was ragged and loud in her ears, and she desperately tried to calm herself, covering her mouth with her hand to muffle the sound. She strained her ears, listening for any hint of the masked figure.

A few moments later, the eerie silence of the alley was shattered by the deliberate footsteps of her pursuer. The sound grew louder, then paused, indicating he was now standing at the mouth of the alley, scanning the shadows for a hint of movement. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly, every second feeling like an hour. Jessica closed her eyes, praying he would move on, that he'd believe she'd managed to exit the other end of the alley.

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the footsteps began to recede, growing fainter and fainter until they were swallowed by the night.

Exhaling a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, Jessica waited a few more minutes, ensuring he was truly gone before she dared to move. As the initial shock began to fade, a flood of relief washed over her.

Jessica waited a few minutes, snuck out of the alleyway and rushed towards her apartment door without slowing down. She found the sanctuary of her front door, barely able to remember the past few minutes, then scoured her pockets for the keys. With a trembling hand, she penetrated the lock with the key and turned, but the bolt inside wouldn't budge.

After what felt like an eternity of fidgeting, it clicked open.

Relief came in an overwhelming wave, and the new sense of safety prompted Jessica to laugh. It must have just been some guy from the party playing a trick on her. Maybe it was the same guy she'd been talking to – the boring one who couldn't stop talking about the film ideas he had.

But as Jessica wedged her door free from its lock, she felt the suffocating presence of another soul behind her.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. A cold chill raced down her spine. She had never been more aware of the fragility of the moment, the thin line that separated safety from danger.

She should have turned around. She should have confronted whoever was behind her. But fear paralyzed her, leaving her standing in the doorway, clutching her keys so tight that they dug into her palm.

Before Jessica could make another move, every breath evaporated as the masked figure struck.

CHAPTER ONE

Ella Dark's career in law enforcement had sent her to every corner of the country, and she'd seen police precincts, jails and death rows in various states up and down the United States.

But one place she'd never been in was a courtroom.

Today, she checked that experience off the list, but it came at a deep emotional cost.

Along with her partner Mia Ripley, she was at the arraignment of the man who'd haunted her dreams her entire adult life.

Three days ago, Ella Dark's story had come to an end. For twenty-six years, she'd been plagued by an unknown figure, the man who killed her father when she was just five years old. What official records said was a natural death, Ella Dark believed differently, and so had taken investigation into her own hands. Outside of the FBI system, no less, but Ella had prevailed regardless.

Now she was in the courtroom, fixated on a large man in an orange jumpsuit with *VIRGINIA COUNTY JAIL* stenciled on the back. The man was Logan Nash – a contract killer for an underground group known as the Red Diamonds. Untouchable, if legend was to be believed, but Ella dealt in truths and evidence, not myths. Logan Nash – or Raymond Pindell as his real name went – was nothing more than flesh and blood. He might have covered his tracks for forty years, but his little assassination career had come to an abrupt end at her hands. In Logan's warehouse on the outskirts of D.C., Ella had pointed a gun to his forehead and willed herself to put this man in the ground where he belonged.

But ultimately, in a moment of unexpected clarity, she decided to let justice make the final decision.

But as the courtroom proceedings went on, she was beginning to think she'd made the wrong decision because justice was not prevailing.

‘Mr. Pindell, you’ve been arrested on suspicion of homicide, conspiracy to murder, aggravated assault and falsification of legal documents,’ read the judge. ‘If found guilty, you could face a custodial sentence of up to thirty-five years imprisonment. How do you plead?’

Logan, or Mr. Pindell as the court referred to him, glanced around the room with an unnerving calmness. His cold blue eyes briefly met Ella’s, and a smirk crept across his lips. She fought the urge to jump out of her seat and lunge at him.

‘Not guilty, your Honor,’ said Logan, his gravelly voice echoing throughout the courtroom.

A chorus of murmurs spread like wildfire amongst the spectators. Ella’s heart sank. The audacity of this man to deny all charges after everything he’d done was almost unbearable.

Ella watched as Logan’s defense attorney, a slick, well-groomed named Lionel Marx, stood up.

‘Your Honor, we request bail be set for Mr. Pindell. He is a well-respected businessman with deep roots in the community. He poses no flight risk and has every intention of defending his name against these baseless accusations.’

The prosecutor responded, ‘The charges against Mr. Pindell are of the gravest nature. The evidence we will present in the coming trial will paint a picture of a dangerous individual with ties to an underground criminal organization. Granting him bail would jeopardize the safety of the witnesses and the community at large.’

Ella held her breath as the judge contemplated. The weight of the room pressed heavily on her shoulders. She thought about all the nights she had spent digging into this case, the countless hours, the tears, and the nightmares.

‘Your Honor, this so-called criminal organization is nothing but a boogeyman. It’s much easier to blame senseless crimes on a faceless group than to address the reality that crime is ingrained into the fabric of this country. Tell me, how many members of the apparent *Red Diamonds* have you had in your courtroom?’

The judge scratched his forehead. ‘None.’

‘Exactly,’ said Marx. ‘If this group were so prevalent, wouldn’t you have at least seen some *evidence* of them?’

‘Just because the Red Diamonds have successfully eluded capture does not mean they are nonexistent.’

Marx scoffed. ‘Pure speculation. The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.’

Ella’s hands clenched into fists. She knew the Red Diamonds existed. She had seen firsthand the devastation they caused, even captured three of them with her own hands. She wanted to scream, to show Marx all the evidence she had amassed over the years, but she couldn’t. This was the courtroom’s game, and she had to let it play out.

A representative from the Virginia County Police raised his palm. ‘Your Honor, if I may. We have testimonies. Witnesses who have seen the operations of the Red Diamonds, individuals who have barely escaped with their lives. This isn’t just about Mr. Pindell; it’s about exposing a dangerous organization that’s been operating with impunity for far too long.’

Ripley, Ella’s partner, gripped her wrist. She, too, must have been feeling the tension.

Marx continued, ‘Your Honor, we are going off-topic. The matter at hand is whether Mr. Pindell should be granted bail. My client is innocent until proven guilty, and he has rights. Denying him bail based on speculation and hearsay is unconstitutional. Mr. Pindell is nothing more than a businessman. He’s operated D.C. Freezer Hire for thirty-eight years.’ Marx waved a handful of papers. ‘Tax records, employment records, sales records. If he was operating some kind of assassination business, these records wouldn’t be so detailed.’

Ella could feel a cold anger building inside her. The manipulation, the carefully crafted façade – it was all a ruse. And worst of all, she could see how it might work in a court of law. Ella couldn’t admit ninety percent of the evidence she had on Logan because she’d acquired it outside of the law. All she had was a voice recording of Logan claiming to have killed three-hundred people, but voice sample or not, it wasn’t

enough to land Logan a lifetime behind bars. The recording had no context and wasn't hard evidence of anything.

Ripley leaned over, whispering in Ella's ear. 'He's playing the game. But we have our cards too.'

'If he gets bail, I don't know what I'll do,' Ella said.

The police representative said. 'Your Honor, while Mr. Marx has presented records of Mr. Pindell's legitimate business, this does not negate the other evidence we have that ties him to the Red Diamonds and the charges he is currently facing. The legitimate front of a business can often be used to mask the illicit activities underneath. We have testimonies, recordings, and physical evidence connecting Mr. Pindell to these crimes.'

Marx countered, 'Again, these are mere speculations, Your Honor. Accusations without concrete evidence.'

'That warehouse is under D.C. Freezer Hire,' Marx began, 'And you conducted a thorough search of the place, did you not? Where were the dead bodies that my client was apparently stockpiling?'

'We didn't...'

'Enough,' the judge's voice boomed. 'This isn't the place for argument. Save it for the trial.'

Marx returned to his seat.

The judge continued, 'I've heard both sides. The charges against Mr. Pindell are indeed severe. However, considering his ties to the community and his willingness to defend against these accusations in court, I will set bail. Given the gravity of the charges, the bail will be set at one million dollars.'

Ella felt as if she'd been punched in the gut. A million dollars was a drop in the bucket for someone with Logan's connections. She watched in horror as Lionel Marx whispered into Logan's ear, a smile crossing his face.

She turned to Ripley. 'He's going to walk, Mia. He's going to walk, and we both know he won't stick around for the trial. He'll disappear, and we'll never find him again.'

Ripley squeezed Ella's wrist, her usually composed face showing signs of worry. 'We won't let that happen. We've come too far. We'll watch his every move. If he tries anything, we'll be there.'

'Before we adjourn, I'd like to make it known that bail has already been posted for Mr. Pindell.'

Ella's heart stopped. The courtroom erupted into whispers.

Logan's head spun, a triumphant glint in his eyes. The weight of his gaze crushed her, and it was clear he was sending her a message - he had won this round.

Mia Ripley whispered fiercely, 'This is not over. It can't be.'

But Ella felt paralyzed, the weight of years of relentless pursuit, and the looming possibility of failure bearing down on her. She could hear her father's voice in the back of her mind, urging her to keep fighting, to not let Logan win.

The judge continued, 'Given the sensitive nature of this case and the potential threats Mr. Pindell might face from either the public or from associated individuals, I am ordering that Mr. Pindell be placed in a police-designated housing for his safety until the trial proceedings commence. The location will remain confidential.'

Marx stood up, an objection forming on his lips, but the judge raised a hand to silence him. 'This decision is non-negotiable. It's as much for Mr. Pindell's safety as it is for ensuring he remains present for his trial.'

'Minimal security,' Marx declared. 'This man has a business to run.'

Logan turned around and grinned again. Ella had to fight the crippling urge to launch herself across the chairs and smash her knuckles into his skull.

'Minimal security,' the judge confirmed. 'Ankle tag. Five-mile radius. Any attempts to remove the tag or go beyond the designated lines will result in arrest, am I clear?'

Logan nodded, his smirk never fading. 'Crystal clear, Your Honor.'

Ella felt a fury she'd never known. Every fiber of her being was screaming for justice, for her father, and for all the other victims Logan had claimed over the years. The system was bending, bowing to the whims of a monster.

Ella leaned into her partner. 'He can't get away with this, Mia. Not after everything.'

Ripley nodded, placing a reassuring hand on Ella's shoulder. 'Look, he's under surveillance, and he's got a tag. This gives us a window. We need more evidence, something irrefutable.'

'Come on. Do you really think Logan is going to hang around? He'll disappear before nightfall.'

'All right,' the judge's voice was stern but tired. 'Given the discussions and decisions made today, I declare this court adjourned until further notice. We will reconvene once the trial date is set. Mr. Pindell, you will follow the officers to your designated housing. I expect all parties to be prepared when we next meet.'

With that, the judge gaveled, signaling the end of the session.

The spectators began to rise, the sound of murmurs and shuffled footsteps filling the air. The legal team began gathering their papers, and a gaggle of officers began escorting Logan out of the room.

Ella's breath felt short, her vision slightly blurred as if she were underwater. Every part of her ached to take action, to take justice into her own hands, but she knew she needed to stay composed, especially now.

As the courtroom emptied, Mia approached, her face lined with determination. 'This isn't the end, Ella. Logan may have won this battle, but the war isn't over.' Ella blinked back tears of frustration. 'I thought putting him behind bars would bring closure. But now, it feels like it's all unraveling.' 'We've faced impossible odds before,' Mia reminded her. 'He's tagged, and we'll keep an eye on him. But we need something more, something solid that can't be dismissed or twisted.'

Ella looked down, rubbing the bridge of her nose. ‘I can’t believe he got bail. And that someone posted it immediately.’

Mia’s eyes darkened. ‘That’s the Diamonds’ for you. But we have allies too. We need to regroup, strategize.’

‘They know about the recording, Mia. That was our trump card.’

‘Then we find a new one,’ Mia stated firmly. ‘We’ve always been two steps ahead. We just need to think.’

As the courtroom began to empty, Logan Nash, clad in his orange jumpsuit, was slowly ushered towards the exit. But instead of moving with urgency, Logan moved deliberately, letting each step linger as if he were savoring a moment of triumph.

Just as he reached the doors, he paused and turned to look directly at Ella. His icy blue eyes met hers, filled with malevolence and amusement. His lips slowly curled into a smug, sinister smile, relishing the evident anguish on her face. It was a silent taunt, a wordless mockery meant solely for her.

The weight of regret pressed heavily on her chest, limiting the use of her lungs for a few painful breaths. She remembered the moment in Logan’s warehouse, with her finger tensed on the trigger. It would have been so easy to pull it, to end the man who had caused her and so many others immeasurable pain.

Now, seeing his arrogance and apparent invincibility in the face of justice, she wished she’d have killed him when she had the chance.

CHAPTER TWO

‘We can’t stay here, Ben.’

Ella’s apartment was dimly lit, the soft hue from the streetlights streaming in through the gaps in the blinds. The living room was a reflection of her – organized chaos. Walls covered with sticky notes, photos, and scribbles of Logan Nash and the connections she’d made. A corkboard with strings connecting various pieces of what might be evidence of the Red Diamonds’ operations dominated one corner.

Ben stood silently, observing the board as though it was an alien relic. He ran a hand through his messy brown hair, a furrow of concern appearing on his forehead. He turned to Ella, who sat on the sofa, her eyes lost in the blandness of the walls – newly painted by her landlord.

‘Ella...I can’t pretend to know how deep this goes for you,’ he began, ‘But you have to trust the system. If he’s guilty, they’ll get him.’

‘It’s not that simple, Ben. The system? It’s flawed. It’s manipulated by people like Logan.’

Ben moved closer, sitting down beside her. ‘But you’ve got evidence, right? All of this,’ he gestured to the board, ‘It’ll put him away.’

Ella shook her head, her voice barely above a whisper. ‘Most of it won’t hold up in court. I don’t have solid proof that he killed my father unless he admits it. And even if I did, I can’t present it without revealing how I got it.’

Ben blinked, confusion evident in his eyes. ‘What do you mean?’

She hesitated, weighing whether to let him in on her secrets. Ella had met around eight months ago, and after a few ups and downs – one of which involved them facing down Ella’s nemesis together – they’d emerged stronger on the other side. Ella trusted the man with her life.

‘Some of the ways I found out about Logan, about who he really is... they weren’t exactly legal.’

His eyebrows raised. ‘You mean, you...’

Ella nodded, her face a mix of determination and regret. ‘I had to, Ben. I couldn’t wait for the *system* to give me answers.’

Ben exhaled. ‘What exactly did you do?’

Ella hesitated for a moment, contemplating how much she should reveal. The weight of everything pressed down on her, and she decided honesty was the best course.

‘I looked into records on the FBI database that I didn’t have clearance to access.’

‘That’s it?’

‘It sounds minor, but it’s not. Looking up confidential info can get me fired at best, jail time at worst. Plus I had to get some of the details from another FBI worker – off the record – so revealing anything will incriminate her too.’

Ben ran his fingers through his hair again, his anxiety now evident. ‘Damn, Ella. That’s... risky. How long before they find out?’

‘I don’t know. They might not. But if they call me to present evidence against Logan, they’ll want to know where it came from. Once they start digging... it won’t take them long.’

Ben rubbed his temples. ‘Okay, let’s think this through. If they subpoena you, can you deny the evidence? Say it’s not admissible?’

Ella sighed. ‘I could, but then I’d be withholding evidence in a major case. And if they suspect I’ve accessed unauthorized information, they’ll have grounds to investigate me.’

Ben began pacing and said, ‘We should reach out to that FBI worker, the one who helped you. She might know what’s going on, or if there’s any chatter about your unauthorized access.’

Ella shook her head, ‘That could expose her even more. She risked a lot for me already.’

The weight of the day’s revelations sat heavily on Ella’s heart. The quiet hum of the refrigerator in the background was the only audible noise, a stark contrast to the storm of emotions swirling inside her.

She glanced around the apartment – the one she had built her life in. Memories of movie nights, shared dinners, and intimate moments with Ben flashed before her eyes. Ella longed for a simpler life, days of her biggest concern being where to have dinner or what Netflix show to binge. Days and nights of laughter, undisturbed by the specter of legal troubles and old vendettas.

‘Why now?’ Ella whispered to herself, clasping her hands together. It seemed that just as she and Ben had found their rhythm, this whole mess with Logan and her illicit activities threatened to upend everything.

The bitterness of the irony was not lost on her. The very actions she took to seek justice for her father might now jeopardize the life she wanted to build with the man beside her. The looming shadow of potential legal consequences, not just for her but for Robert Reed’s widow – the woman who’d risked her own life in this long process – made her stomach churn with anxiety.

‘You want to stay at my place for a while?’ Ben asked. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not asking you to live with me... again.’

Ella managed a weak smile, appreciating Ben’s attempt at lightening the mood. He’d already asked her to move in with her a few weeks ago, and Ella had decided it was too soon.

‘I guess I’m accepting your offer after all,’ she said.

‘And all it took was an assassin,’ Ben laughed.

‘Would that be okay? I won’t be a bother.’

Ben chuckled softly, ‘You? A bother? Yeah, you can be a pain in the ass, but if you don’t go to sleep hating your partner at least once a week then you’re doing something wrong.’

‘You think?’

‘Relationships should be an experience of every emotion on the spectrum.’

Ella wasn’t sure that was true, but she entertained the idea. ‘Every emotion? Even anxiety, grief?’

‘Well, no, but those things will undoubtedly crop up at some point. It doesn’t help that you chase psychos for a living.’

A brief, almost comfortable silence settled between them before Ella said, ‘Maybe I should call it a day. You should see the spring in Ripley’s step now she’s on countdown to retirement.’

Ben looked in deep thought. ‘Maybe. I mean, you could do anything. But I know you won’t. You don’t want to do that, do you?’

Ella leaned back, considering his words. ‘I know. It’s just... chasing the truth, seeking justice, it’s been such a huge part of who I am. To walk away from that feels... I don’t know... like I’m giving up.’

‘So don’t do it. Life is a blank canvas, and you can do whatever you want. Providing you pay the bills.’

Ella laughed again. ‘Is that a hint?’

‘A little bit.’

Ben’s lips quirked into a mischievous grin. ‘Well, if you decide to retire early, you could always consider becoming a consultant. With your track record and skills, I bet people would pay top dollar for your expertise.’

Ella raised an eyebrow, a smile playing on her lips. ‘A consultant? Can you imagine me in an office setting, giving seminars?’

He laughed, ‘I can actually. Plus, women in suits are hot.’

She nudged him as she contemplated the idea. The thought of a new beginning, a fresh start without the constant danger and chaos was tempting. But could she really walk away from everything she knew? From the adrenaline, the chase, the satisfaction of closing a case?

Ella got up and looked over at the board, the maze of information she had compiled on Logan Nash. It was a reminder of the risks she took, the lines she crossed. But also, the lengths she was willing to go for justice.

She turned back to Ben, tears forming in her eyes. ‘Ben... I’m so sorry for dragging you into all this. This isn’t your fight, yet here you are, in the thick of it because of me.’

He stood up and took a step closer, reaching out to grab her wrist. ‘Hey, I chose to be here. With you. I wish we didn’t have this hanging over our heads, but I wouldn’t trade our time together for anything. Besides, we’ve been through worse.’

Ella recalled the incident from a few months ago, one that took place in the very apartment they now stood. The man that Ella considered her nemesis had taken Ben hostage, tied him to a chair and used him as bait. Together, she and Ben had fought off him and his disciples, tossed the man over the balcony with a noose around his neck. It wasn’t a standard date night, but it was a bittersweet memory she’d come to remember fondly for some strange reason.

She nodded, wiping away a tear. ‘You have a point. We’ve faced monsters and come out stronger. This is just another hurdle. I just wish it wasn’t so complicated.’

Ben smiled softly, lifting her chin with his finger, forcing her to meet his gaze. ‘Life is complicated, El, and pretending it isn’t is naïve. But we face it together, remember? We’ll get through this, just like everything else.’

She looked into his warm hazel eyes, finding comfort in their depths. ‘I just can’t shake off the feeling that every move I make could be the one that costs me everything. My job, my freedom, you...’

‘You’ve got guns and wits, and you know where this Logan guy is going to be housed for the next three months?’

‘No, his location is confidential, and he’s free to walk around providing he stays within five miles. But what’s stopping him just driving to Canada, catching a boat to France, disappearing and assuming a new identity?’

‘He’s tagged, you said?’

‘Tags are made of plastic, not titanium. He could cut that thing off no problem.’

‘Are you more worried about him escaping – or one of his cronies coming for us?’

Ella looked down, contemplating the question. She then met Ben’s gaze with raw honesty. ‘Both. Logan is vindictive and cunning. If he escapes, he’ll regroup and come back stronger. But he also has enough loyal followers who’d love to see me dead.’

Ben’s face hardened at the comment. ‘So what’s our plan? We can stay at my place, but for how long?’

Ella had no answer. She couldn’t track Logan down and kill him because the suspicion would be too great. But on the flip side, she couldn’t continue living her life with Logan’s looming shadow dogging her every step. It was three months until his trial, and anything could happen between now and then.

‘I’ll figure it out. I just need time.’

Ben wrapped an arm around her, drawing her close. ‘I think we should set up some security measures at my place, maybe some surveillance cameras. And perhaps talk to a few contacts, see if we can gather any intel on Logan’s whereabouts and plans.’

‘Good idea, detective.’

He smirked, ‘Well, I learn from the best.’

‘Charmer,’ Ella said. ‘Come on, we’ve got some packing to do. You’re about to suffer every bachelor’s worst nightmare.’

‘I am?’ asked Ben.

‘Yup, you’re going to live with a girl.’

CHAPTER THREE

Mia Ripley's laughter echoed through the restaurant, punctuating the soft jazz playing in the background. Candlelight danced in her eyes, revealing a happiness she hadn't felt for as long as she could remember.

Martin, with his piercing blue eyes and salt-and-pepper hair, was lost in her stories. Each course seemed to arrive just when they finished the previous one, as if the staff were expertly attuned to the ebb and flow of their conversation. As Mia recounted another suspenseful tale from her time chasing serial killers and mass murderers and terrorists, Martin leaned in, eager for every detail. He had been an agent once, but injuries on the job had forced him into an early retirement.

'I don't know how you do it,' Martin mused, sipping on his wine. 'Facing that kind of darkness day in and day out.'

Mia shrugged, her smile a bit more reserved. 'It's just something you get used to. We all have our own ways of coping. You did it too. You must have forgotten what it was like.'

'I chased thieves, gang members, arsonists. I never dealt with the Charles Manson.'

Mia chuckled softly, her eyes taking on a far-off look. 'Ah, Manson. I had to visit him in San Quentin once. Total douchebag.'

Martin laughed. 'He seems it.'

'I've seen my fair share of monsters. Each one as terrifying and as incomprehensible as the next.' She noticed Martin's hand unconsciously drift to an old scar on his forearm. 'But every scar tells a story, doesn't it?' she said gently, reaching over to touch his hand.

Martin looked down, his thoughts clearly drifting back to a time he'd rather forget. 'It was a knife wound,' he began. 'Got it during a bust on a drug den. Things went south, and before I

knew it, one of the guys lunged at me. I managed to disarm him, but not before he left me with this souvenir.’

Mia’s fingers gently traced the scar. ‘Every one of us in this line of work carries our battle scars. Some are just more visible than others.’

Martin nodded, taking another sip of wine. ‘I always believed in the system, Mia. Believed that if you put in the effort, the bad guys would get what they deserved.’

Mia sighed. ‘The system is flawed. I’ve seen it fail too many times. Like with Logan Nash.’ She took a moment before continuing, her voice tinged with anger. ‘The evidence was all there. But with his connections, his money...’

‘Logan Nash?’ Martin asked.

Ripley realized she was vocalizing her thoughts. The rest of the world weren’t yet familiar with Logan’s name. But now that she had started, there was a part of her that wanted to share, to unload some of the weight she felt about it.

With a hesitant breath, Mia began, ‘Logan Nash is the man responsible for killing my partner’s dad like two decades ago. We were at his arraignment this morning.’

Martin’s eyebrows knitted in concern. ‘And this guy’s walking free?’

‘For now,’ Mia said bitterly. ‘Out on bail. There’s a possibility he might not even be convicted. His lawyers are good, and his pockets are deep.’

Martin’s face darkened, and Mia could see the gears turning in his head. ‘How do you mean? How did this happen?’

Mia looked deep into Martin’s eyes, noticing the genuine interest that sparkled in them. The world around her seemed to blur slightly, the restaurant’s ambient noise fading away, leaving only the two of them in a private cocoon. It was a sensation she wasn’t familiar with, especially not with the few romantic partners that came her way. In her line of work, conversations often became one-sided, her experiences too heavy, her stories too grim for most to digest.

‘My partner sought him out, outside of FBI boundaries.’

‘She went rogue?’

‘Yup. She had to, and I lent her a hand. There was no active case, no evidence that could even build a case. But Ella risked her life to find this guy, got him to confess, but all her hard work was cast to the wind today.’

Martin placed his wine down, then waved his hands, ‘Hold on a second. You helped your partner with her rogue investigation?’

Ripley panicked, worried she’d said the wrong thing. ‘Yes, I did. You were an agent. Don’t tell me you didn’t break the rules a few times.’

‘Of course, but what I mean is... if you and her both have intel on this Nash character, surely your combined testimonies have some weight? It’s not like you’re a pair of nobodies. You’re the federal elite.’

Mia leaned back, twirling the stem of her wine glass between her fingers. The candlelight cast long shadows on the table. ‘It’s not as simple as that,’ she said, her voice soft, edged with weariness. ‘Logan Nash has been operating in the shadows for decades. He’s meticulous, almost unnaturally so. The evidence Ella gathered was mostly circumstantial. And without hard evidence, without a solid case, our testimonies alone won’t be enough, especially against his army of lawyers.’

Martin leaned forward, his brows furrowing. ‘But you said Ella got him to confess? Surely that counts for something?’

Mia shook her head, the weight of the situation pressing down on her. ‘It was off the record, without proper protocols. And given Nash’s influence, he could easily claim it was coerced or even fabricated.’

There was a pause as Martin digested the information. ‘So what’s the plan? You can’t just let this guy slip through the cracks.’

‘We’re not. We’re building our case from the ground up, gathering every shred of evidence, every lead, every connection. We won’t let him escape justice this time.’

Martin nodded slowly, his blue eyes intense and thoughtful. 'I understand the need for discretion, but if there's any way I can help... I still have contacts at Virginia PD, you know. Maybe some of them could be useful.'

Mia looked at Martin, her heart swelling with gratitude. She had known him for a short time, but his unwavering support was overwhelming. 'Thank you, Martin. That means a lot. We may take you up on that.'

'I mean, it's been a while, but you the law enforcement bond. It's for life. And trust me, guys are willing to let a few details slip if it means getting a killer off the streets.'

Ripley knew it all too well. Corruption worked both ways.

Martin took a moment, his expression softening. 'You know, when I was forced into retirement, I thought I'd lost my purpose. I went from being on the frontlines, making a difference, to just... watching from the sidelines. It's why I threw myself into other things.'

'Frontlines to sidelines,' Ripley repeated. 'Honestly, I can't wait for that. Bring it on.'

'How long left?' Martin asked.

Conversation halted as a waiter removed their plates and placed down dessert. Mia's eyes drifted to the delectable treat in front of her, a rich molten lava cake accompanied by a scoop of vanilla ice cream. She took a deep breath, savoring the scent before looking back at Martin.

'Four months, then I'm out.'

'As mysteriously as you arrived.'

Ripley laughed, despite the mouthful of cake. 'Oh yes. And I want to go out without any loose ends.'

'What loose ends do you have?'

'This Logan Nash business is the main thing. I refuse to leave Ella stranded. Oh, and mountains of paperwork. Then I'm good to go.'

Martin nodded, picking up his spoon and digging into his own dessert. 'It's funny how our priorities change over time.'

Back in the day, I couldn't imagine doing anything else. But now...' He trailed off, looking contemplative.

'Now you'd kill for a day without any drama or adrenaline,' Mia finished for him.

'Exactly,' Martin replied, looking amused. 'Though I must admit, I do miss the camaraderie, the teamwork. That sense of purpose and belonging.'

Mia nodded, understanding completely. 'There's something about being in the thick of it all, knowing that you're making a difference, that's irreplaceable.'

'Do you think you'll miss it?' Martin asked.

'No. I've paid my adrenaline toll. Now I just want something simple, maybe with someone who remembers to put the trash out on Wednesdays.'

'Trash day is Thursdays.'

'See?' Ripley said. 'I don't even know what day the garbage men come.'

Martin chuckled, the deep sound echoing in the restaurant's ambiance. 'Well, if you ever need a domestic god in your life, I might be your guy.'

Mia raised an eyebrow, an amused smirk playing on her lips. 'Is that an offer?'

He feigned an innocent look, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. 'Maybe. I can cook too.'

Mia laughed, her worries momentarily forgotten. 'Deal. Just keep carbs low. I've got my post-retirement figure to think about.'

Martin prodded his gut, two rungs below athletic but still not dad bod levels despite his age. 'Oh, that all goes. Trust me.'

Mia stretched, feeling a contentment she hadn't felt in a long time. 'You know, it's not often I can talk shop without someone turning pale or asking me if I've seen too many crime dramas.'

Martin settled back into his chair. ‘Guess I’ve seen enough to desensitize me. Plus, it’s always good to have a reminder that there’s someone else out there, someone who knows the cost of the job.’

Mia nodded. ‘It’s a life, you know? One that few can truly understand. The highs and lows, the adrenaline rushes and the heartbreaks. It takes a toll.’

Martin reached across the table, taking Mia’s hand in his. ‘But it’s worth it. For every moment of pain, there’s a moment of triumph. Of knowing you made a difference.’

Mia looked deep into his eyes, seeing the weight of his experiences mirrored there. ‘Thank you, Martin. For understanding.’

He smiled, radiating a genuine warmth. Mia couldn’t help but feel that this was the start of something new. With the impending closure of her career, she felt grateful for a new connection in her life. And who knew? Maybe Martin really was her ticket to a calmer, more domestic future.

She just had to rid herself of Logan Nash’s overbearing shadow and provide Ella a smooth transition into solo field work.

Just as Ripley was drifting off into a world of imagined possibilities, a shrill ringtone pierced the air, jolting her out of their reverie. Mia’s hand instinctively shot to her bag, fishing out her buzzing phone. The name *William Edis* flashed on the screen.

She sighed, her heart sinking. If Edis was calling at this hour, it meant only one thing: a new case. She shot Martin an apologetic look, ‘I’m sorry, I have to take this.’

Martin nodded understandingly, ‘Of course, duty calls.’

Mia answered, trying to keep her voice even, ‘Edis, what’s up?’

‘HQ. How fast can you be here?’

She glanced at Martin and the half-eaten dessert on her plate. ‘I’m at dinner right now. What’s going on?’

Edis's voice was clipped, a sure sign of urgency. 'Double homicide just came in, and it's a strange one. Your expertise is needed.'

Mia hesitated for a brief moment. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to stay, to savor this rare moment of happiness. But duty, as always, had the stronger pull.

Ripley sighed, running a hand through her hair. 'Give me twenty minutes.'

'Make it fifteen, and make sure Miss Dark gets here too. I need my top guys for this,' Edis said before the line went dead.

Ripley slowly rose to her feet, the weight of responsibility bearing down on her. She looked at Martin, her eyes apologetic.

'I'm so sorry, Martin. I have to go.'

Martin waved a dismissive hand, 'Don't worry about it. I understand.' He gave her a reassuring smile. 'We can always reschedule.'

She nodded, grateful for his understanding. 'Thank you for tonight. It meant more than you know.'

Martin stood up as well, reaching out to grasp her hand. 'Come back in one piece, please.'

Ripley chuckled, the sound tinged with a hint of sadness. 'I always do.'

With that, she grabbed her coat, giving Martin one last fleeting glance before heading out the restaurant. As she made her way to her car, she couldn't help but feel a tug at her heart. As much as the FBI had afforded her, moments like these reminded her of the sacrifices she had made, the personal connections she had missed out on.

But duty came first, and she had a responsibility to the victims, to her team, and to herself.

Ripley already had the phone to her ear.

Her partner picked up on the third ring.

‘Ella, cancel your plans and meet me at HQ in fifteen minutes.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Before Ella could reach the door, a familiar voice broke the silence. ‘What happened to fifteen minutes?’

William Edis’s office was located on the highest floor, a strategic placement that showcased the chain of command in the bureau. Even at this late hour, the light behind the frosted glass burned brightly – more evidence that the hushed whispers about Edis sleeping in his office these days may indeed be true.

Ella spun around and found Agent Mia Ripley waiting by a large potted plant that had seen better days. Mia looked impeccably poised as usual; black dress, brown boots, red hair pulled back into a tight knot with two curly strands framing her face.

‘Fashionably so.’ Ella scrutinized her partner from head to toe, acknowledging her uncharacteristic eye shadow and contouring effort. Ripley usually kept the makeup to a minimum. ‘Edis interrupted your date. How dare he.’

Ripley raised an eyebrow. ‘People my age don’t date.’

‘No?’

Ripley knocked on the door to Edis’s office. His silhouette stirred from within. ‘No. We find someone with as little baggage as possible and hope for the best.’

Ella smirked, trying to read her partner’s face. ‘Is Martin making the cut?’

Ripley shot her a wry smile, ‘A lady never tells. But let’s focus, shall we?’

Before Ella could respond, the door opened wider, and they were greeted by the bulky frame of Director Edis. He looked more exhausted than usual, with dark circles marring his otherwise stoic face. The hair continued to recede, and his typical clean-shaven chin had been replaced with four-day

stubble. There was a new scar just above his right eyebrow, a story Ella hadn't yet heard.

'Agents,' he acknowledged with a nod.

'Director,' Ella replied, her tone formal. Ripley gave a curt nod in agreement. He gestured towards the leather chairs along the wall. Ripley and Ella took their seats as Edis returned to his position behind his massive oak desk- a testament to his years of service; every scratch and ding a mark of another case, another long night. Right now, Edis was partially hidden behind a mountain of brown folders and cups of half-drunk coffee.

Ella could feel the tension brimming. 'Director,' she began, 'what's so urgent that it couldn't wait until tomorrow?'

Edis grabbed two of the folders and threw them over to the agents. *ACTIVE CASE #H17231* according to the stamp in the top right corner.

'This morning, I received a call from the sheriff of Maywood PD in Los Angeles. Last night, they found a body and.... I don't really know how to describe it.'

Ella dove into the folder, heading straight for the crime scene photos. Photos always told a better picture than words ever could.

And when she saw the first close-up photograph, her breath caught in her throat.

A blonde woman, mid-twenties at most, had been brutalized in a way Ella wouldn't believe was physically possible unless she had the evidence right in front of her.

'He stabbed her. With a... shotgun?'

Ella blinked twice, as if trying to clear an illusion, but the gruesome sight remained the same. Every sight Ella had consumed over her thirty years of life had been committed to memory; a photograph that occasionally faded but always remained accessible. Her mind was a vast database of criminals, victims, motives, and methods. Yet, as she skimmed through her mental files, she couldn't locate a single incident – or anything even similar – of a killer stabbing someone with a shotgun.

Edis held up his palms. ‘Don’t ask me the logistics of it. I don’t understand it either.’

Ella glanced over at Ripley, equally lost in the photograph. ‘Ripley. Any ideas?’

Ripley took a deep breath and leaned closer to the photograph, analyzing every detail. ‘I’ve seen many things in my time,’ she began, ‘but this... this is a first.’ She gently tapped the photograph, her face betraying her internal processing. ‘There are signs of ritualistic intent here, or at least someone trying to send a very specific message.’

In the photo, the young woman had been impaled through the chest with a black Beretta shotgun. She was still standing, resting against the corner of what looked like an apartment door.

‘She was attacked outside her own home?’ Ella asked.

‘Yes,’ said Edis. ‘But that’s not all. Look at photograph number six.’

Ella followed the instruction. She leafed through the pictures and landed on number six. The image hit her like a knife to the gut.

Resting on the ground near the woman’s feet was a plain white mask. It was simple, featureless, and utterly eerie in its lack of definition. It looked as if it had been carefully placed there, positioned to be seen but not overshadow the central horror of the scene.

And Ella recognized it a mile off.

In fact, most people would, she thought.

‘This is a Michael Myers mask,’ Ella said.

Edis nodded gravely. ‘It is. From the Halloween films.’

Ella felt an unexpected thrill. From a young age, she had been an ardent fan of the world’s cheapest genre. Late nights huddled under blankets with a flashlight, diving into Stephen King novels, and weekends spent at the cinema, consume the horror classics.

The Michael Myers mask had instantly transported her back to those simpler days. The sense of excitement, the heart-

pounding fear, and the relief that came from knowing it was all fiction. Now, here she was, faced with a real-life horror scenario. And although the danger and the stakes were very real, a part of her was animated by the challenge; a melding of passion and profession. It was as if all those years spent analyzing horror plots, understanding the psyche of on-screen killers, and predicting their next moves had been training for this very moment. She caught herself feeling this odd exhilaration and quickly reigned it in.

‘Never seen it,’ Ripley said. ‘Give me a crash course later, Dark.’

‘Will do.’

‘Edis, you said you got the call about this murder this morning. Why have we waited until now to investigate?’

‘Because until an hour ago, this was an isolated incident. However, Maywood PD got an anonymous call to check out an abandoned shack, barely two miles from this crime scene.’

Ella turned to the second section of the case file. Victim number two.

‘And I’ll warn you in advance,’ Edis continued, ‘This one is tough to stomach.’

Ella steeled herself. She was no stranger to gruesome scenes, but if Edis was warning her, then it must be pretty bad. She found the first picture, then had to take a deep breath before continuing.

‘Jesus,’ Ripley said.

Ella took it all in. A young brunette woman, similar age to the first victim, lay disemboweled on a dusty wooden floor. Ella clenched her teeth.

‘Maywood PD found this scene waiting for them. They believe this victim was killed first, but was found second.’

‘He doesn’t want his handiwork to go unnoticed,’ Ripley said.

Ella nodded as the questions rushed to the forefront, the most pressing one being; what connected these two crimes?

But when she turned the page, she had her answer.

‘Another mask,’ she said.

‘Another mask,’ confirmed Edis.

Only this time, it was a different horror icon. ‘Pinhead from Hellraiser.’

In the dull glow of the crime scene photo, the Pinhead mask took on a ghostly pale shade, with eerily realistic features and deep-set eyes that appeared to be in a state of perpetual contemplation of some forbidden pleasure or torment. But what made Pinhead, or rather the mask of him, so unmistakable and grotesque, were the silver needles embedded within. The grid-like pattern of lines that adorned the face was punctuated by thick, shiny pins, which from Ella’s angle looked like the genuine article. The mask was placed with precision, much like the Michael Myers one. It was not carelessly discarded but rather set down as if the killer wanted it to be part of the overall scene.

Ella dove back into the recesses of her brain, recalling serial killers that used masks as part of their modus operandi. Several names reared their heads; The Texarkana Phantom, Dennis Rader, the Golden State Killer – but all of those killers took their masks with them. As far as Ella could recall, no one ever left such a vital component of their M.O. behind.

Beside her, Ripley squinted. ‘I’ve heard of these films but never seen them. Who’s Pinhead?’

Edis cleared his throat. ‘It doesn’t matter who or what this Pinhead is. What matters is that we have a serial killer using horror film masks as some sort of signature. I don’t need to tell you that if the press gets a sniff of this, it’ll be a disaster. Not to mention this is over in Los Angeles, and me and the governor go way back. The FBI has a great relationship with California state and I won’t let some masked lunatic affect that.’

Ella collected her belongings. Ripley remained glued to her seat, and Ella had a good idea why.

‘Will,’ said Ripley, ‘I’m saying this not as your employee for thirty years, but as your friend.’

Edis pulled a new file towards him as his eyes met Ripley's. 'What?'

Ripley grabbed her bag and met Ella at the door. 'After this is over, if you ever send me to California again, I'm going to quit on the spot.'

There it was. Ripley once told Ella she'd rather be dead in D.C. than alive in California. She had a festering hatred for the place, although Ella was yet to get the full story.

'You have my word,' Edis said.

Ella smirked as they exited the office, waiting for the elevator. 'Ready to hit your favorite place in the world?'

Ripley glared back, her eyes full of mock contempt. 'Ecstatic. Let's just catch this psycho so I can be back in a place that doesn't consider kale a main dish.'

Ella chuckled as the doors slid open. They stepped inside, and Ella pressed the button for the ground floor.

As the elevator descended, Ella's excitement bubbled up inside. A serial killer using horror movie masks was unusual and unnerving, but there was also an enticing quality to it. An undeniable challenge. She leaned back against the elevator wall, allowing herself a moment to consider what twisted game might await on the other side, a game where horror tropes and reality intermingled.

But the thrill was short-lived, replaced by a chilling realization.

This wasn't a movie. This wasn't popcorn and jump scares. Real people had died, families had been torn apart. Every time she'd see one of these masks in the future, she'd think of real blood being spilled.

The elevator dinged, snapping Ella out of her reverie. The doors opened to a barren precinct.

Ripley sighed. 'I hope our guy is a fan of just two movies.'

Ella smirked, already in detective mode. 'Well, if he isn't, we'll be in for one long horror marathon.'

'And I'll have to catch up on a lot of movies,' Ripley muttered.

Ella gestured toward the exit. ‘After you.’

Ripley shot her one last world-weary sigh. ‘To California, then. Meet you at the airport. I need to grab my things from home first.’

‘Done.’

The two agents went their separate ways, and now Ella was alone, her thoughts quickly returned to this morning, Logan’s arraignment, the possibility that a career assassin was hot on her trail. The new case details had been a welcome distraction, but now the weight of her personal struggles pressed on her once again.

She reached her car, keeping a watchful eye over her shoulder every step of the way. She called Ben to give him the details and make sure he was safe, then headed towards Reagan International Airport.

She’d be safe on the other side of the country, and it would give her ample opportunity to figure out her next move in the Logan case.

Before that, she needed to dive into a world where fiction met reality.

Ella couldn’t lie to herself. She’d always wanted to face off against a living horror villain.

CHAPTER FIVE

The hum of the airplane engines provided a monotonous backdrop to Ella's whirring thoughts. She leaned back in her seat, her face illuminated by the small overhead reading light. Across the aisle, Ripley sat with her laptop, subjecting her keyboard to death by fingertips. The plane was barely half full, and most passengers were asleep or engrossed in their screens. The night sky outside was a blanket of impenetrable darkness.

'You're doing that thing again,' Ripley commented without looking up from her laptop.

'What thing?'

'Overthinking. Stop it. We'll figure things out.'

Ella sighed, leaning her head back. 'I just... I want to get ahead of this guy. It's not every day you have a case that merges your childhood passion with your job.'

Ripley shifted in her seat, focusing her attention entirely on Ella. 'It's not the case I'm talking about, Dark. I mean Logan Nash. That guy's trial is messing with your head, and I know what happens to you when you're distracted.'

Ella closed her eyes for a moment, attempting to shut out the images that the mere mention of Logan's name brought forth. 'Now's not the time, Mia.'

'It's always 'not the time' with you. When is the right time? When another assassin is on your doorstep? I know you probably don't want to talk about it, but we need to.'

A twinge of annoyance. 'Mia, this isn't your fight. You've helped me enough. This one is a solo mission.'

Ripley leaned forward, placing a comforting hand on Ella's arm. 'Dark, I get it. This is your story to tell. But if you're in danger, I'm in danger, and I'm not going to retire while this black cloud is over your head.'

Ella's grip on her armrest tightened. 'If you've got any ideas, I'm all ears.'

Ripley's expression softened, her fiery exterior melting into genuine concern. 'While we're out here, we can try and get Logan's location.'

'Then what? Keep tabs on him twenty-four-seven?'

'Maybe,' Ripley said, pausing for a moment. 'Look, we have resources, Dark. If Logan is as connected as you say he is, we should be using every asset we have. Surveillance, informants, everything.'

Ella ran a hand through her hair, exasperated. 'It's not that easy, Mia. He's always been a step ahead. And with the trial coming up, he'll be even more cautious. But anyway, we have a case to solve, and people are depending on us. Let's focus on that.'

Ripley set her laptop aside. 'Alright. Lay it on me. What do you think?'

Scouring through the case file, Ella pulled up the details for victim one. The first girl was killed, but the second body was found. 'Victim is Kathleen Carter. Twenty-one years old, found dead in an abandoned shack thanks to an anonymous call. She's been disemboweled, but how and with what implement, we don't know.'

Ripley pulled out her files then drummed her finger on the crime scene photos. 'This is vicious. The result of years of resentment. He didn't do this on a whim. The staging, the killing method, it's all part of a process.'

'Someone this deranged doesn't slip through the system,' Ella said. 'You don't just wake up one day and decide to disembowel someone. There aren't many historical cases of it, but the killers that did do it – Larry Eyler, Joseph Vacher, Gerald Stano – it took them four or five victims until they reached that point.'

'Right. Chances are our unsub has a history of prior offenses, so we need to look into that when we get to the precinct. And then there's this mask. What does it mean?'

Now that Ella could fully commit her energy to this one case, she made a sudden connection. 'Pinhead's from a film franchise called Hellraiser. Demons in BDSM gear that push

people to the limits of pleasure, which in their warped vision is eternal torment in hell. And now that I think about it, there are cases of disembowelment in some films.'

Ripley arched her eyebrows. 'You watch that stuff?'

'My first love,' Ella said. 'I was obsessed with the villains since I was about eight. Once wrote a letter to Anthony Hopkins.'

'Hannibal Lecter?' Ripley asked.

'Yup. Still waiting for a reply.'

'Maybe one day. So this mask, why'd he leave it behind?' asked Ripley.

Ella thought for a moment, her gaze drifting towards the window, lost in the inky expanse outside.

'Symbols,' she finally said. 'Horror villains are symbolic. They represent our fears, our anxieties, our nightmares. By leaving the mask behind, he's marking his territory, making a statement.'

Ripley leaned back. 'So, it's a signature? A calling card?'

Ella nodded. 'Exactly. He's taking credit for the kill, but it's more than that. It's about leaving a message, sending chills down our spines, making us think of the monster lurking in the shadows. He's trying to elicit a specific reaction, not just from the victim but from everyone who comes into contact with the case.'

Ripley tapped a photo showing the mask lying next to the body. 'A terrorist in a serial killer's body.'

Ella pursed her lips. 'There's something else. The precision of the kill, the selection of the mask, the staging – it's all too deliberate. He's studied his victims and the lore around these characters. He's not making it up as he goes. He's following a script.'

'Agreed. And if he can lure an unsuspecting victim to an isolated cabin, he's got interpersonal skills. Judging by the blood, he definitely killed her here, which means he found a way to get her there alive.'

‘Yup. This isn’t some deluded sociopath. He’s fully aware of what he’s doing. He can subdue, kill, and stage – in two very different environments.’ The comment brought Ella to victim number two.

‘Jessica Owen, twenty-four years old. Student at East Los Angeles College. Killed literally on her doorstep with a...’

‘Shotgun through the stomach.’ Ella’s tongue tied itself in a knot. The comment didn’t align with her rationale.

‘Yeah, what the hell is that about?’

Ella felt a sudden jolt of recognition, her eyes widening. Something triggered in the back of her mind. A grainy old image that she’d kept in storage since she was a kid.

‘Wait,’ she whispered, more to herself than Ripley. ‘I know that... It’s a scene. Halloween four. Michael Myers... he kills someone with a shotgun. Not by shooting them, but by stabbing.’

Ripley stared at Ella, contemplation written on her face. ‘Halloween four? How many of these movies is there?’

‘Too many, but I remember it clear as day.’ Ella went back to the photograph of the impaled blonde girl. ‘But in the film, Michael literally rams it through his victim, but that’s not possible in real life.’ Ella caught her partner’s gaze. ‘Is it?’

‘Not unless he’s got superhuman strength.’

‘Right.’

Ripley said, ‘So our unsub is recreating murder scenes from horror movies. First Hellraiser and now Halloween.’

Ella nodded, her pulse quickening. ‘The evidence says so. We need to take a closer look at the scene when we land. A killer this theatric? If he left his masks behind, he might have left some other hidden messages too.’

‘So, he’s staging them like they are in the movies. Each victim becomes a sort of homage to these horror icons. But why?’

Ella frowned. ‘Could be a range of things. Instinct tells me he’s a horror fanatic and wants to recreate these kills in reality. Fans can get pretty obsessive about this stuff.’

‘Nerds,’ Ripley said.

Ella ignored the comment. ‘Or could be a form of escalation – starting from being a passive viewer to an active participant. It might even be a challenge to us. By staging the kills, he wants us to recognize them, to understand his motivation.’

‘Or they’re just taunts,’ Ripley mused. ‘Like I said, don’t overthink.’

A stewardess came by, offering drinks. Ella declined, her mind racing. Once the stewardess left, Ripley resumed. ‘We need to start creating a profile. If he’s reenacting scenes from horror movies, it might give us an insight into his next move. We can predict where and how he might strike next.’

Ella agreed, ‘We need to find out where he’s meeting these women, find any connections. We need to get into his head.’

Ripley took a whiskey from the waitress and set it down in front of her. ‘Two famous horror movies,’ she said.

Ella picked up on her train of thought. ‘Yup. Two of literally thousands.’

Ripley sighed, looking deep into her glass. ‘We could be in for a bumpy ride.’

Ella’s heart rate shot up again, not from fear but exhilaration. Diving into the dark psyche of a killer who merged fiction with reality was a chilling prospect, but it was also a challenge she relished. Closing her eyes for a moment, she envisioned the pieces of the puzzle falling into place, revealing the enigma behind the mask. She was ready for the chase. And deep down, a part of her hoped the killer was ready for her too.

CHAPTER SIX

Ella's flight landed at four AM, and she was at the crime scene by six. Sleep had come in short bursts and nothing more. Since crossing the border into the Golden State, Mia's expression had turned sour, as though her body was acutely aware it had entered the Californian atmosphere.

The streets were still drenched in the indigo of the pre-dawn hours as Ella made her way to the Whitman Apartments, the site of Jessica Owen's death. Streetlights punctuated the darkness, casting long shadows that seemed to waver and merge with the mist that clung to the city's skin. Despite the early hour, there was a palpable energy in the air, as if the city itself was holding its breath, waiting.

At the end of the pathway, Whitman Apartments came into view. It was a modern but unassuming building, and this morning, it was the epicenter of police activity. Flares lit the road. Yellow tape danced in the morning breeze as officers and forensic weaved in and out. Ella's mind raced with the few details she knew, the scene she was about to encounter, and the daunting task ahead.

'We're not in Kansas anymore,' Mia quipped. An attempt at lightening the mood, but her eyes told a different story.

Ella rubbed her temples, feeling the weight of fatigue. The apartment block only boasted three doors, three apartments, all on the ground floor. Jessica's apartment was on the far right. 'Feels more like Elm Street to me.'

'Feds?' a voice called from behind.

Ella turned her attention to the source, and there she found a tall man in prime middle age, silver hair peeking from beneath a well-worn sheriff's hat. His badge gleamed even in the muted morning light. The image of a small-town sheriff, but one transposed to the bright lights of Los Angeles.

'Yes we are. You're in charge?' Ripley said.

The man extended his hand to the agents, a firm grip waiting on the other side. Ella nodded her greeting.

‘I’m Chief Daniels. Thanks for being so prompt.’

‘Don’t mention it. I’m Agent Ripley and this is Agent Dark.’

‘Ah, the experts,’ Daniels remarked with a hint of skepticism. ‘Glad you could make it. We could use a fresh pair of eyes.’

Ella sensed a touch of defensiveness in his tone, as if he was somewhat protective of his jurisdiction. ‘We’re here to help, Sheriff.’

He grunted in acknowledgment. ‘Good. Jessica’s apartment is right here. We’ve kept it as untouched as possible. Medics have removed the body, but forensics are still sweeping things up.’

‘Can you talk us through what happened?’ Ella asked.

Chief Daniels took a moment, glancing at the apartment door before letting out a long sigh.

‘Local 911 got a call around one AM. Jessica’s roommate, Clara, came home to find Jessica nailed – or shotgunned – right through the chest.’ His expression darkened. ‘Gruesome scene. It wasn’t until we got here that we found that horror mask.’

Ripley raised an eyebrow. ‘Got it. Anything else?’

Daniels continued, ‘There’s no sign of forced entry on the door, so we’re guessing our killer never went inside. Clara – Jessica’s roommate – wasn’t home when it happened. She found the body, and she’s been a wreck since.’

‘Where’s the roommate now?’ Ella asked.

Daniels gestured to the edge of the pathway. ‘In that cruiser. She came to pick a few things up but couldn’t face going inside.’

‘Any surveillance footage?’ Mia inquired

‘We have a few around the premises. We’re currently reviewing them, but it’s too soon to say. Whoever did this

knew what they were doing. The fact that we haven't found a single shred of evidence says just that.'

Ella's gaze followed the yellow tape's perimeter, 'Any witnesses? Neighbors? Anything out of the ordinary?'

Chief Daniels shrugged, 'Not much yet. Only two other neighbors, and neither of them heard a thing. But we're questioning everyone.'

'Forensics have come up short, I assume?' asked Ripley.

'Afraid so.' Daniels waved another officer over and took a plastic bag from him. He passed it to Ella. Inside was a pale, emotionless face. Black eyes, the devil's eyes. The Halloween mask. Ella's stomach tightened into a knot at the sight of it. Until now, she'd always associated this image with fictional terror, not the cold, grim reality of an actual murder.

'Michael Myers,' Ella said, her voice faltering a bit. The irony was not lost on her that here in Los Angeles - in the heart of the entertainment world - a killer was drawing inspiration from a silver screen slasher.

Daniels nodded, his expression grave. 'Yes, but it's what we found inside that's got us baffled. Forensics discovered traces of hair conditioner and a segment of mesh netting.'

Ripley reached out and took the bag from Ella, inspecting it for herself. 'Conditioner, you say?'

Ella connected the dots, a new surge of dread fast approaching. 'Christ. That means our unsub didn't just leave the mask at the scene.'

'No?' Daniels asked.

'No. He was wearing the mask when he killed her.'

Ripley passed the mask back to Daniels. 'Agreed. The conditioner kept his hair from going brittle, so strands didn't snap off. The mesh is from a hair net.'

'He's taking precautions. He's ensuring there's no trace of him left behind.' Ella finished.

Daniels removed his hat and pushed back a clump of sweaty hair. 'Sick freak.'

Ella said, ‘This isn’t just some horror fan killing for the thrill of it. This guy is an organized monster. He’s communicating something. Blurring the lines between fiction and reality, but why?’

Daniels rubbed his temples, clearly frustrated and overwhelmed. ‘We’re hoping Clara might provide some clarity. Maybe she knows something she’s not yet realized.’

Ella nodded. ‘Right. Could we speak to her?’

‘She’s back there in the cruiser. Give me a moment.’

Daniels disappeared, unlocked his car door, and then summoned the agents over. Ella and Mia made their way to the police cruiser, where Clara was reluctantly stepping out, arms folded, a makeshift barrier from the horrors up ahead. Ella saw her distress a mile off; a pale, limp figure, around the same age as the victim. Her dark hair was disheveled and dry, eyes puffy from crying

Ella approached cautiously. ‘Clara? Hi, I’m Agent Dark, and this is Agent Ripley. We’d like to ask you a few questions if you’re willing?’

Clara glanced up, her gaze settling on Ella, then darting to Mia. She swallowed hard, nodding slowly. ‘Okay.’

Mia, taking on a softer tone that Ella rarely heard, began, ‘We know this is extremely difficult for you. But anything you can tell us might help us catch whoever did this to Jessica.’

Tears welled in Clara’s eyes, but she blinked them away. She wrapped her arms around herself tighter. ‘We... moved here together three years ago. Fresh start, you know? I... I just can’t believe she’s gone.’

Ella gently pressed, ‘Did Jessica have any enemies? Anyone who might hold a grudge or was acting strange towards her recently?’

Clara shook her head. ‘No, Jess was friendly with everyone. I mean, she had some fights with people, but who doesn’t? Nothing that could lead to... this.’

‘Did she have any relationships that ended badly or any recent friendships that turned sour?’

A pensive look crossed Clara's face. She pursed her lips together and gazed off into the night.

'Clara?' Ella said. She could tell was fighting a battle between confession and repercussion. 'If you know someone who might have done this...'

'There was this guy, Mark,' spat Clara. 'Jessica dated him a couple of months ago.'

There it was.

'Mark who?' asked Ella.

'No idea. I don't know much about him. Just saw him a few times.'

Ella pressed on. 'Saw him where?'

'Outside our place.' Clara motioned to the pathway that led to our front door. 'Here. Hanging around. Jessica said he was, I dunno, too intense. He didn't take it well, sent her some angry texts, but she blocked him.'

Ella committed the information to memory. 'That's good to know, Clara. Anything else out of the ordinary?'

Clara hesitated, biting her lower lip.

Ella gave Clara what she termed the encouragement stare. Eyebrows raised, eyes a little wider than usual.

'There was a package about a week ago,' Clara said. 'Jess thought it was a prank.'

Ripley asked, 'A package?'

'Yeah. It was a DVD. We laughed it off, thinking it was delivered to the wrong address or something. We don't even have a DVD player. But now...'

Ella waited a second, then asked. 'The DVD was Halloween, wasn't it?'

Clara nodded.

Ella took a deep breath. The link was clear. The killer had sent a message before committing the crime.

'The DVD, one of Jessica's favorites?' Ella questioned.

‘God no.’ Clara said. ‘Jessica hated those kinds of films. We could barely manage rom-coms.’ Her look grew distant, lost in happier memories.

Mia scribbled down some notes. ‘This Mark, can you describe him? Anything you remember will be useful.’

‘Mark? I don’t know. He had a sort of...restless energy about him. Always fidgeting, never really making eye contact. Around 5’10’, dark hair, usually had stubble. That’s all I remember.’

‘Did he ever mention where he worked or what he did for a living?’

‘Not to me, no. He was just... there. Until he wasn’t.’

Ella placed a gentle hand on Clara’s arm, ensuring she had the young woman’s attention. ‘Clara, I promise we’re going to do everything we can to find who did this. Every bit of information you provide helps.’

Clara managed a weak smile. ‘Thank you.’

‘If you remember anything else, anything at all, please let us know.’

‘I will.’

Ella mused, her mind piecing together the psychological outline of her unsub. This wasn’t about the victim’s relationship to the movie. It was about the killer’s.

Mia took a deep breath, ‘Thank you, Clara. This information is crucial. We’ll follow up on all leads.’

As the agents moved away from the cruiser, Ella muttered to Mia, ‘We need to find out if these victims have any connections. Are they random targets, or purposely-targeted surrogates for something or someone?’

‘Let’s take a closer look at the bodies,’ Ripley said.

Daybreak was on the horizon. The sun peered out from behind Maywood’s high-rise buildings in the distance. ‘I love the smell of autopsies in the morning,’ Ella said.

‘We need to know when our other victim was killed. If we can establish a killing pattern, we might be able to predict

when he'll strike again.'

Ella climbed into their car, but she didn't need any further information to know that this killer's horror-inspired mission had only just begun.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ella walked down the sleek corridor of the County of Los Angeles Medical Examiner's Office, flanked by steel doors and fluorescent lights overhead. The Medical Examiner's Office, with its pristine surfaces and the unmistakable aroma of antiseptics, was a stark contrast to the visceral horrors she and Mia had witnessed earlier. It was here that the true nature of death was laid bare, stripped of any cinematic drama and presented in unvarnished truth.

Ella's mind sifted through the psychological implications of this killer's game, asking herself questions that she couldn't rightly answer. And when presented with unanswerable questions, the next option was to turn to the hard evidence.

'We need to pull all footage from the Whitman Apartments, ask the other residents about Mark, and cross-reference Jessica's call and message logs.'

'Agreed. I'll get Daniels and his team on that. Getting clearance to scour through Jessica's phone could take a while, but I'll try and fast-track it through.'

Usually, law enforcement were at the whim of external agencies when it came to privacy and security. But Ripley's clout stretched far and wide. With any luck, she could get access within a few hours.

They found autopsy room 3C. Ella knocked on the door.

A voice, though muffled, came from the other side. 'Come in.'

Pushing open the heavy door, Ella was immediately struck by the coldness of the room. The sharp tang of antiseptic and death greeted Ella, overpowering the scent of even Ripley's sweet perfume. Large stainless steel tables were arranged in a precise manner, each accompanied by an array of sharp surgical instruments. Most tables were empty, save for two covered by a stark white sheet.

‘Detectives,’ said a man from behind a computer, his eyes hidden behind a pair of glasses that were specked with droplets. He stood up to greet them. ‘Thank you for coming so promptly. I’m Doctor Weller. I just got finished with the second body an hour ago.’

‘Thanks for meeting us. Could you talk us through everything?’ Ella asked.

‘Certainly.’ The doctor moved between the two tables. ‘Where do you want to start?’

‘Jessica Owen, please.’

‘Very well.’

The coroner uncurled a sheet, revealing Jessica Owen’s pallid, rigid body down to the waist. The wound in her abdomen was the centerpiece, a gaping hole that betrayed the violence that had ended her life. Ella felt her throat tighten as she examined it, seeing not only the wound itself but the dark intent behind its creation.

‘This wound,’ Weller began, pointing to the mangled flesh, ‘was inflicted with considerable force. The edges are jagged, which suggests a serrated blade of some sort. From the depth and angle of the cut, the assailant likely had a high degree of physical strength. However, what’s interesting is that the incision wasn’t made in a single swipe.’

‘You’re saying the killer took their time?’

Doctor Weller nodded. ‘Exactly. The cuts are deliberate, almost as if the killer was trying to communicate or recreate something specific. Besides this primary wound, there are also multiple superficial cuts and abrasions across her body, suggesting a prolonged struggle.’

Mia, her face pale, looked at the doctor, ‘What about the cause of death?’

‘Blood loss from this abdominal wound,’ he replied. ‘There’s also significant internal damage. It’s likely she didn’t last long after this wound was inflicted.’

Ella turned to her partner. ‘He cut her first, then inserted the shotgun. He didn’t have the brute strength to force it inside her

without a serration.'

Doctor Weller shook his head. 'The police report mentioned she'd been lanced by a rifle, and no, no one on earth has that kind of strength. The physics doesn't add up.'

Ripley leaned against one of the counters, her face unreadable, but her knuckles white. 'This is more than just a murder. It's a statement. A fantasy he's been harboring for years.'

Ella looked closely at Jessica's hands, her fingernails broken and torn. 'She must have fought hard.'

'Yes. Jessica scratched and clawed, but given the depth of the stab wound, it would have only taken a few seconds for her nervous system to shut down.'

Ella ran her fingers through her hair, her mind racing. 'What about the other victim, Doctor?'

Weller covered Jessica's body with the sheet again. More a sign of respect than anything else. 'You ladies might want masks for this one. And possibly a blindfold.'

He reached for another table, the sheet on this one noticeably stained with a dark hue. Taking a deep breath, Ella prepared herself for another shock. Doctor Weller unveiled the body of Kathleen Karter.

Ella took one glance, looked away, then steeled herself for the oncoming inspection. This poor woman had clearly been put through hell, so Ella took a moment to pay her respects. Indifference to death turned a person's heart to stone, and Ella took every measure to ensure that never happened.

'Kathleen Carter, twenty-one years old. Killed two nights ago judging by decomposition levels. A teacher in training, according to her records. Put simply, your perpetrator eviscerated her.'

Ella leaned closer to Kathleen's midsection, a chaotic mess of ripped tissue and displaced organs. The cuts on her body were neither precise nor methodical like Jessica's. Instead, they seemed chaotic, frenzied, as if the killer was under a different kind of urgency or mindset.

‘Different. Two distinct killing methods,’ Mia muttered, her gaze fixed on the mutilated body.

‘Very different,’ Doctor Weller agreed. ‘While Jessica’s injuries suggest a more methodical approach, Kathleen’s mutilation is... passionate. Impulsive. The marks are everywhere, but none seem to have a specific intention like Jessica’s did.’

Ella studied the numerous slashes on Kathleen’s body as she recalled the Pinhead mask left behind at the scene. ‘Multiple cuts to her chest, shoulders, hips. More than just evisceration.’

Doctor Weller sighed, looking somewhat perplexed. ‘That’s the thing. While it was undoubtedly a knife that performed the amateur surgery, the other wounds don’t match any standard knife, blade, or any surgical equipment. The depth and width of the cuts vary considerably, suggesting an improvised or unique weapon. Additionally, some of the marks seem... torn, almost as if the weapon had barbs or was serrated irregularly.’

Ripley, who had remained silent until now, stepped closer. ‘Could it be a custom-made weapon?’

Ella mingled fiction with reality, recalling horror scenes she hadn’t seen in years but could never forget. There was only one conclusion to be here.

‘Possibly. Cause of death was excessive blood loss from a ruptured celiac artery, but these additional wounds were created whilst Miss. Carter was still alive. But what implement he used...’

‘Hooks,’ Ella interrupted. ‘He used hooks.’

Ripley and Mia both turned to Ella. ‘Hooks? What makes you say that?’ Ripley asked.

Ella took a deep breath, grounding herself against the nightmare image in front of them. ‘Think about it. The torn and ragged appearance of the wounds. The randomness. The differences in depth. And not to mention, Hellraiser.’ She motioned towards Kathleen’s torn body. ‘All of it is suggestive of the use of hooked implements that could be dragged across the skin.’

‘Hellraiser?’ asked Doctor Weller.

‘Don’t ask,’ said Ripley.

‘As in, the movie?’

Ella nodded, not wanting to give too much away, even to someone affiliated with the case.

Doctor Weller tilted his head then ran a gloved finger over one of Kathleen’s shoulder wounds. ‘I have to say, the idea hadn’t occurred to me, but it makes sense, especially given where she was found.’

Ella wasn’t sure she heard the doctor right. ‘Huh? Where she was found?’

Weller reached for his notes. ‘It says here Miss Carter was discovered in the old cabins along Huntington River.’

Ella’s brow furrowed. ‘What’s significant about those cabins?’

Doctor Weller looked up, adjusting his glasses. ‘I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the history of those cabins, but back in the day, they were part of a film set. I might be showing my age here, but a film was shot there in the eighties. The production wrapped up, and the cabins were never destroyed. Instead, they’ve just been left there, decaying over time. A relic of a past era.’

The revelation hit Ella like a tidal wave, an unexpected jolt that momentarily took her breath away. For a brief moment, the noise in the room faded, and she was adrift in a sea of connections, piecing together fragments that she hadn’t even realized were related. Every bone in her body told her that this was a significant breakthrough. The cabins, the specific, deliberate killing methods, and the connection to a world of cinematic terror. It wasn’t just about making a statement – it was a perverse form of artistry.

Ella spun to her partner. ‘We need to see those cabins.’

Ripley nodded fast. ‘Could be something there. Killers who are dead set on murdering in a specific location will go to great lengths to make it happen – and that sometimes involves mistakes along the way.’

Doctor Weller added, 'It's not exactly common knowledge, just a nice bit of trivia from us old timers. It was just a B-movie horror film if memory serves me correctly.'

Ella was fired up, ready to go, one step closer to understanding this killer's game. She nodded, grateful. 'Right now, Doctor, all we have are pieces of a puzzle. But, thanks to you, we might just have found a corner piece.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ella hesitated for a moment at the entrance. The afternoon sun hung low, casting long shadows over the nameless cabin, one of three dotted along the Huntington River bank.

Time had weathered its wooden planks, and the overgrowth had swallowed most of the pathway leading up to it. The image of Kathleen's mutilated body was still fresh in Ella's mind, and the thought of stepping into a place of such fresh death filled Ella with a range of emotions, from the empathetic to the angry.

Mia nodded encouragingly at her. Ella gripped the rusted handle and pulled. The door almost dropped off its hinges.

Inside, the dimly lit cabin smelled of age, dampness, and a metallic hint of dried blood. Ella's flashlight beam moved across the room, revealing the blood stains that had soaked into the wooden floor.

But what caught her attention immediately was the giant red letters painted on the wall.

I AM IN HELL HELP ME.

'Jesus,' said Ripley. 'That wasn't on the crime scene photos.'

A familiar line, written in a style to resemble blood, just like the original.

'It's from the Hellraiser sequel,' Ella said, struggling to fathom the brazenness of this unsub. And Mia was right. That chilling message had not been there in the initial crime scene photos. Someone had tampered with the scene, almost certainly the killer – at some point in the past twenty-four hours, no less. Ella snapped a picture of it with her phone.

Mia stepped closer, shining her flashlight along the baseboard. 'There's some paint smudging down here. It's still a little wet,' she observed, touching it and showing her red

fingertip to Ella. ‘This might’ve been done recently, maybe even a few hours ago.’

Ella’s gut tightened. ‘He’s playing with us. He wanted us to see this.’ She gazed at the message, each word screaming at her, both a taunt and a confession.

The agents began their meticulous examination of the cabin, checking every corner, every surface in the hopes of finding something, anything, that would lead them closer to the perpetrator. The solitary window, though filthy from years of neglect, still held a few clear spots. Ella scrutinized them for signs of fingerprints but came up short.

‘We’re wasting time,’ Ripley said. ‘Forensics have already swept this place dry.’

Ella tested every floorboard for creaks, and every wall for possible hollows. She checked for hidden compartments, loose panel. In horror movies, secrets were often hidden in plain view from the beginning.

‘I am in hell, help me,’ Ella said. She repeated the line in her head. In the context of the movie, the victim’s physical self was literally trapped in the underworld. Was this killer comparing his mental struggles to that of someone stuck in hell? Was it a cry for help, a plea to be caught? She thought of past serial killers who’d done the same but found no comparison. Historic serial killers who’d begged police to catch them had all been lust murderers, unable to control their urges. This killer was far from that.

No footprints, no secret notes.

In the dim light, the floor of the cabin seemed uniformly dusty – a testament to years of neglect. But as Ella’s flashlight beam drifted over to one corner, she noticed a peculiar detail: the corner area was covered in a thick layer of dust, except for four small, impeccably clean, circular spots.

They were arranged almost in a perfect square, equidistant from each other. She crouched down, motioning Mia over. ‘Look at this,’ she whispered, her voice betraying her intrigue.

Mia squinted, her own flashlight joining Ella’s. ‘What am I looking at?’

‘Four clean spots in a sea of dust,’ Ella replied, tracing the perimeter of the voids with her finger. They were almost the size of bottle caps, and each one was devoid of even a single dust particle. It was clear that something had been placed there, but what?

‘Props?’ Ripley asked. ‘We know this freak has a flair for the theatrical.’

‘These spots, I don’t understand them. They’re not random. He doesn’t do random.’

Ella stood up, her head throbbing with the weight of her thoughts. She started pacing the cabin, her flashlight beam flitting here and there, as if searching for an inspiration hidden in the gloom. ‘We’ve seen horror movie references, crime scenes that mimic iconic film sequences, but this...’ She gestured towards the dust-free circles, ‘This doesn’t fit. Or if it does, I can’t place it.’

Ripley sighed, running her fingers through her hair. ‘Maybe it’s a message we aren’t seeing yet, something that needs context. Or maybe it’s a clue to the next scene he’s planning to set up.’

‘Exactly. These circles might be a hint to where we need to look next. Maybe we need to look outside this cabin. In the movies, the trail doesn’t end at one location. The protagonists move from one scene to another, uncovering the story piece by piece.’

Mia nodded slowly, ‘The breadcrumbs in the fairy tale.’

Ella’s gaze wandered back to the wall with the scrawled message. The words *I AM IN HELL HELP ME* felt more significant now. This wasn’t just about recreating movie scenes; it was about leading them on a journey, forcing them to play a part in his twisted narrative.

‘It’s a puzzle, a challenge,’ Ella murmured, the realization sinking in. ‘And those spots might be our first tangible clue about where to go next. We just need to figure out how to read them.’

Ripley’s phone pinged. She read a text message. ‘The chief has set up our stations at the precinct. Are we ready to head

there?’

Ella took a deep breath, trying to harness her racing thoughts. ‘Ripley, we need to go back to basics. This is about horror films, iconic sequences, legendary villains, and tortured victims. We need to decipher his storyline.’

Ripley raised an eyebrow, ‘How do you suggest we do that?’

‘We research. We go back and watch every iconic horror movie that could possibly inspire a deranged mind. Look for patterns, dialogues, settings. I remember the ones I’ve seen, but there’s gotta be thousands I haven’t,’ Ella explained.

Mia frowned, ‘It could take weeks, even months. There are countless horror movies.’

‘We need to narrow it down,’ Ella said with determination. ‘We look at the patterns from the scenes he’s already recreated. Locations, type of victims, methods. If he’s following a specific genre or timeline, it’ll give us a starting point.’

‘I was saving the classics until I’d retired,’ Ripley mused.

Ella nodded, ‘Then consider this a head start, but we’re not just watching. We’re analyzing. We need to put ourselves in his shoes, think like him. See the movies through his eyes.’

‘I’ll leave that to you. I’m going to look into this ex-boyfriend of Jessica’s.’

‘Alright. And remember, we need to play by the rules.’

‘What rules?’

‘The rules of the horror movie, because we might be characters in one.’

CHAPTER NINE

The room was dark, save for a single overhead light, casting a concentrated beam onto a worn wooden table below. Everywhere else, shadows wrapped themselves around the contents of the room like a shroud.

The air was thick with the scent of chemicals—latex, paints, but he'd already cleansed all traces of the metallic odor of blood. The walls were lined with shelves filled with masks in varying stages of completion: some still unformed and featureless, others painted with haunting detail. Each one told a story, a chapter in a macabre production. The tableau was a testament to painstaking craftsmanship, dedication, and a deeply disturbed mind.

He stood there, hunched over his station, applying the finishing touches to his next masterpiece. His fingers danced over the tools laid out before him—brushes, blades, and a myriad of tiny containers holding various pigments. Every move was purposeful, every brush stroke calculated.

On the other side of the room, rows of DVDs and Blu-rays stood in perfect order next to a vintage film projector. These were his treasures – films that had shaped his world, his perspective, his very being. Each title resonated with memories, moments when he had felt a deep connection with the villains who lurked within their frames.

Michael Myers. Freddy Krueger. Leatherface. Hannibal Lecter. To the world, they were monsters, but to him, they were misunderstood artists. Misfits who found solace in their own twisted worlds, shaping reality to their own narrative.

He could see himself in each of them. A kindred spirit. An outlier, never truly belonging to the world of the ordinary. Like them, he felt trapped in a society that failed to grasp real creativity when they saw it, instead content with shallow, transparent attempts at artistry. The superhero movies that

bestowed impossible heroism, the true crime documentaries that spotlighted tragedy for easy content.

This world – it felt like a sea of mediocrity to him. Everywhere he looked, he found a lack of true passion, a lack of genuine creativity. It was as if society had become complacent, willing to consume whatever was fed to them, no matter how devoid of substance or originality. To him, it seemed everyone was asleep, merely going through the motions, lulled into a false sense of security by the dull monotony of their everyday lives.

He saw himself as the antidote to this. Through his actions, he was waking the world up, forcing them to confront genuine terror, genuine art. No filters, no embellishments, just raw, visceral emotion. In his eyes, his actions were the truest form of artistry, an expression of his deepest desires and frustrations, a rebellion against the mundane.

The mask before him was nearly complete, unlike any other he had crafted before. The realism and attention to detail was like nothing the masters could create. It was grotesque yet compelling - a visage that told of anguish, fear, and madness. With a final brushstroke, he set the mask aside to dry, admiring his work momentarily.

To his right lay a mannequin head, bald and blank. He reached for a special wig cap, stretching the thin fabric over the mannequin to test its fit. This cap, made of a unique blend of latex, ensured that not a single strand of hair, no DNA of any sort, would betray him. Once on, it would be almost a second skin, making the removal of any mask seamless, leaving no trace of the monster underneath.

He prepared himself, pulling on gloves and then the wig cap. It fit snugly against his scalp, sealing any potential evidence inside. Over it, he placed the freshly crafted mask, adjusting it until it sat just right, molding it to his face.

There was a ritualistic quality to his preparation. The transformation wasn't just physical; with every layer, he donned a new persona, shedding his past, his reality, and embracing the dark fantasies that consumed him.

He glanced at a wall clock, its ticking growing louder in the silence. Time was of the essence. Tonight was important. Another scene awaited, another masterpiece to be crafted, another life to be taken. His heart raced in anticipation, not of the act itself but of the creation, the performance, the sheer artistry of it all.

Tonight, another victim would join his gallery. Another story would be told. A new chapter in his ever-evolving narrative. With one last glance in a dusty, smudged mirror, he stepped out of his lair, leaving behind the eerie congregation of masks that bore silent witness to his descent into madness.

The city outside was alive with anticipation, completely oblivious to the storm that was about to hit them. And as he donned his new mask, sealing his identity from the world, he felt an overwhelming sense of purpose. The hunt was about to begin, and he was ready. He was no longer just a fan, an observer. He was now a part of the horror pantheon, a legend in the making.

And the world would soon bear witness to his masterpiece.

CHAPTER TEN

The precinct was a cacophony of ringing phones, typing keyboards, and officers deep in conversation. Police stations were always hives of activity, but every precinct Ella had worked out of in Los Angeles was more like an unwanted party than a workplace. She guessed there was a reason that California was considered the murder capital of the world.

Ella had made a makeshift workspace for herself amidst the noise, surrounded by piles of paperwork, and a laptop open to a multitude of tabs detailing various horror film tropes and their histories. A neon-green highlighter in hand, she feverishly jotted down notes, connecting the dots between what she knew and the vast ocean of horror lore.

Mia sat opposite her, equally drowning in paperwork. Legal documents, case files, and interviews with family and friends of the two victims were spread out in front of her. The pieces of the puzzle were laid bare for both agents, now they just had to connect the dots.

‘I can’t believe I’m saying this,’ Mia began, glancing over at Ella’s notes, ‘but I think your idea of looking into horror tropes might not be as ridiculous as I thought.’

Ella looked up, her glasses slightly askew from her fervent research. ‘See? There’s a method in the madness. These killers, especially if they’re deriving inspiration from fiction, always leave some kind of breadcrumb trail. Scripts follow patterns, and we know patterns.’

Mia sighed, rubbing her temples. ‘I never thought my career would lead me here. I’ve been chasing real criminals for thirty years, and now I’m trying to catch one inspired by make-believe monsters.’

‘Welcome to the post-modern world, Ripley. Boundaries are blurring everywhere. Look,’ she pointed at her notes, ‘many of these movies follow a specific pattern. And if our

killer is following them too, it's going to help us predict his next move.'

Mia moved closer, scanning Ella's writings. 'Okay, so walk me through this. How do these tropes connect to our victims?'

Ella started to explain, 'Well, for instance, there's the Past Sin trope. Often in these movies, the killer's motivation is rooted in some past wrongdoing. The victims might've bullied him, or they share a traumatic event. Maybe something they all did in their youth?'

'Interesting. So, maybe something in the past links these women?'

Ella continued, 'Then there's the Revenge angle. Sometimes, the killer targets people close to an individual they think has wronged them. Could one of the victims have someone obsessed with crushing them?'

Ripley fell silent for a second. It took Ella a few seconds to realize why. She was inadvertently referring to her own past.

'Sounds familiar.'

Ella brushed off the intrusive memory because that story was long over. Thoughts of Logan Nash replaced them, but again she sidelined the oncoming words and images and worries. One battle at a time, she told herself.

'And then we've got the Love Angle,' Ella said. 'The name implies that the killings might be sexual in nature, but they never do. Love Angle killers act out of rage, not primal gratification. Any sexual assault would be a power move, not a lust move.'

Ripley paused. 'I've been trying to look into Kathleen Carter's life, but there's a lot to get through. The woman has lived a transient life since she was about sixteen. Worked as a nurse, hitchhiked through California, finally took up training as a teacher last year.'

Ella pressed her knuckles against her lips, another connection on the horizon. 'Ripley, that's it.'

'What's it?'

‘Jessica was a student. Kathleen was a nurse, hitchhiker, teacher. The exact kind of victims in horror films.’

Ripley looked unconvinced. ‘Students and hitchhikers sure, but nurses and teachers?’

‘Sympathetic professions,’ Ella said. ‘Makes the monster more monstrous when they call someone you care about.’

‘Right, so what does that mean here?’

Ella rushed around to Ripley’s side of the desk and began rifling through her papers. ‘It means our killer knew the intimate details of these victims’ lives. They weren’t just in the wrong place at the wrong time. A stranger isn’t going to know that someone is a teacher in training.’

Her fingers danced across the cluttered files, finding a driving license, bank records, tax returns, dating site profiles. Nothing substantial.

‘Ripley, give me something that tells me who Kathleen was. She doesn’t have any family or friends or colleagues?’

‘Few. She was a nomad. The closest thing I’ve got is...’ Ripley joined in Ella’s search, four hands ransacking a mountain of printed files. ‘This.’

Ella took it. Kathleen’s employment record at Coalbrook Elementary School. Six pages long, covering everything from Kathleen’s previous addresses to any criminal history. The former was long, the latter was empty.

But it was a single entry that caught Ella’s attention.

‘Ripley, look.’ She held the paper to her partner’s nose.

‘Emergency contact, Mark Brewer,’ Ripley said.

‘Mark. Remember what Jessica Owen’s roommate told us? Jessica had dated a guy named Mark and he’d been hanging around outside her place.’

Ripley took the document and re-read it. Ella could feel her energy coming to life. ‘Could be a coincidence, but I don’t believe in those. We need more intel on this guy.’

Ella jumped back to her desk, her fingers moving swiftly across the keyboard. She first went to the Maywood Police

Database and searched for the name.

‘Three Mark Brewers with criminal records in Los Angeles,’ she said.

‘Any of them nearby?’

Ella scanned the details. ‘One. About ten miles from here.’

‘Age?’

‘Forty-nine.’

Ripley scrunched her face. ‘Too old. Boundaries might be blurring, but I can’t imagine a student dating someone pushing fifty.’

Ella couldn’t disagree. The other Mark Brewers on the system were too far out to be viable, so she recalibrated. There was another option available, one that was often even more useful than official databases.

‘I’ll try social media,’ Ella said. ‘Everyone has a digital footprint.’

Ripley asked, ‘But how will we know if it’s the right Mark Brewer? We don’t know what he looks like.’

‘An obsessive personality like this? We don’t need to know what he looks like. His horror fascination will be on full display.’

Ella opened up a window and lined up a few choice social media sites. She clicked into the first one and searched Mark’s name, then narrowed her results down to the Los Angeles area.

Forty-two names.

Ella scrolled through, willing her man to make himself known.

The first ten profiles yielded no notable connections. Most were generic - typical profile photos of vacations, family outings, the occasional political slogan. The eleventh, though, made her pause.

She couldn’t fully see the man’s face because it was obscured with dark face paint.

The white contoured lines of the paint clearly defined a twisted clown smile and sharp, angular eyes. The bright red

bulbous nose stood out, contrasting starkly with the long, brittle dreadlocks, like snakes slithering out of his skull. It was a haunting visage, unsettling even through a computer screen.

‘Ripley,’ Ella called, beckoning her partner over. ‘Look at this.’

‘What is it?’ Ripley hurried round to the other side.

‘This guy. Mark Brewer.’

Ripley’s eyes narrowed, her lips pressed into a thin line as she studied the profile photo. ‘He’s a clown.’

Ella dug into Mark’s profile and began devouring his posts and photos. Right away, the theme was obvious. Mark Brewer had a penchant for the sinister.

Pictures of him at horror conventions, posing with actors and directors. Professional studio shots of him in his clown regalia; sharp makeup, tattered clothes, an array of weapons in his hands.

‘I’ve never seen a clown with a baseball bat. What kind of clown is this?’

Ella moved faster through the posts, more of the same coming at her fast. She stopped at one photo – a picture of Mark Brewer holding a young woman by the throat.

But it was the caption that caught her attention.

Another night at the haunt! Love scaring the life out of people. #HauntActor, #KillingFields.

‘Killing Fields?’ Ripley said.

One more search later, Ella had the answer. A website popped up, showing a horror-themed amusement park on the outskirts of the city.

‘Killing Fields. It’s a haunted house attraction... And Mark Brewer works there.’

Ripley tilted her head. ‘So, we’ve got a guy obsessed with horror who works in a place where scaring people is his job.’

‘Yup.’ Ella was back into Mark’s profile. There was only one more box to tick. ‘We need to check this guy out, but we need as much evidence before we meet him.’

She arranged Mark's friends list alphabetically, rushed down to the J section.

Jane Stubbs.

Jasmine Crowther.

Jason Barber.

Then the name she wanted leaped out at her, scratching at her eyeballs.

Jessica Owen.

'Got him,' Ripley said.

'Got him,' Ella confirmed.

Her pulse quickened, threatening to explode from her wrist. The connection was undeniable. Every intuition, every professional instinct she had honed over her years as an investigator, screamed that they were on the right track. She checked the time. Too early for a haunted house to be open, but that didn't mean Mark wouldn't be there.

'Ready to visit a haunted house?' Ella asked.

Ripley grabbed her brown jacket and checked her pistol. 'First time for everything.'

Ella was ready, new adrenaline driving her. 'Come on. Let's end this story before act two even starts.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ella steered her car into the empty parking lot, gravel crunching beneath the tires. The large sign up ahead, with its letters covered in fake blood, was impossible to miss: Killing Fields.

The entrance was a facade of a decrepit mansion; crumbling walls, tattered curtains, ghouls and hanged mannequins decorating the windows. Ella felt a pang of unease, a world away from adrenaline-driven determination she had felt back at the precinct. There was something about monsters hiding in plain sight that spoke to her core.

‘Pretty deserted out here,’ Ripley said from the passenger seat.

They’d left the heart of the city behind and were now in the grisly underbelly of Maywood. Traffic had thinned on the journey here, replaced by a vast stretch of empty road. Abandoned warehouses, graffiti-covered buildings, and forgotten structures had composed the scenery. At the end of the stretch was this haunted house – the perfect location for such a place.

‘It’s off hours,’ Ella said. Perfect time for an ambush.’

‘You think this Brewer guy might be inside?’ Ripley asked.

‘It’s possible,’ Ella replied, her hand instinctively moving to the holster at her side, ‘if he’s working on setting things up for tonight or practicing his routines.’

‘One way to find out,’ Ripley said.

They exited the car and approached the mock mansion, with its spires reaching into the overcast sky like skeletal fingers. In every direction, there were chilling details meant to unsettle visitors: from the wrought-iron gate groaning softly on rusted hinges, to the mock graveyard set a bit off to the side, complete with tilting tombstones and statues of winged angels with their faces worn away.

They walked up the cracked path, flanked by dead, twisted trees and overrun with crawling ivy. Every so often, Ella could hear soft mechanical whirring as some hidden device detected their approach, setting off a random spook—a banshee’s wail, a shadowy figure darting between windows, or a ghostly whisper brushing past her ear.

The main entrance was a set of grand double doors, slightly ajar. A sign beside them declared: Enter At Your Own Risk.

Ella pushed one of the doors open, revealing a dimly lit foyer filled with dust and cobwebs. She stepped inside with Ripley, hand pressed to her pistol. She noted the ticket booth to her left, concealed in a blend of cobwebs and frosted glass. Chandeliers overhead were adorned with severed heads and specks of fake blood. An antique grandfather clock stood against one wall, its pendulum swinging lazily, the soft ticking the only sound in the otherwise empty foyer.

Then Ella heard the rustling of footsteps nearby. The movement came from behind the ticket booth.

‘We don’t open until eight,’ a voice said. A face emerged behind the glass; a youngish man with slick black hair, bloodshot eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. A modern-day vampire.

‘Then maybe you should lock your doors,’ Ripley said.

The man kept a distance. ‘Open doors aren’t always an invitation, but something tells me you’re not here for a scare.’

‘What makes you think that?’ asked Ella.

‘Badges and guns, for a start. Who are you?’

Ella flashed her badge. ‘We’re with the FBI. We’re looking for an employee of yours named Mark Brewer. Is he here?’

The man scratched his cheek. ‘Mark?’

‘The clown with a baseball bat.’

‘Oh, you mean Trixter. He might be here. Why?’

‘Confidential,’ Ella said, ‘but if you could point us to his wing of this mansion, we’d be grateful.’

‘Trix works in Extreme Blackout, but maybe I should tell the owner before I let you in. What’s this about?’

‘You don’t need to know,’ Ripley said. ‘Where is this...’

‘Is about the allegations?’ the vampire asked. ‘Because they’re not true.’

Ella’s ears perked up. ‘Allegations?’

The man’s expression quickly adjusted. ‘Nothing. Rumors, that’s all. Blackout is through that door, across the cemetery. It’s the big tunnel.’

Ella noted the sudden change of subject. She didn’t trust this man one bit.

‘Thanks. And Mark’s – sorry, Trixter’s definitely here?’

‘I don’t know. He sometimes comes in early to set up. I should alert the boss, give me five...’

Ella didn’t give him a chance to finish. She was out through the rusty iron door, leaving the sketchy vampire behind. Mia followed suit, and the two agents briskly made their way through the tunnel. At the end, a faint light appeared, and on the other side, Ella found herself staring at a vast, lifelike cemetery.

The ground was uneven, with small hills and dips that added to the realism. The tombstones were weathered, some cracked and others covered in moss. Ella imagined that during operational hours, this place would be crawling with actors dressed as the undead, lurking in the fog and popping out from behind gravestones to scare visitors. They maneuvered between the graves, passing by mausoleums with gargoyles perched on top, their stone eyes seeming to watch every move. Eerie statues of mourners were frozen in grief, their cloaks billowing in an imaginary wind. Ella felt an odd admiration for the detailed design.

Ahead, the silhouette of the tunnel entrance came into view, its gaping mouth appearing as an abyss from this distance. But before they could approach, Ella’s sharp gaze caught a figure moving near the tunnel.

A long-haired man, dreadlocks tied back into a bun. He was wheeling barrels that seemed to be filled with liquid.

As they got closer, Ella recognized him. Even without the bright, exaggerated clown makeup, the features were unmistakable. It was Mark Brewer.

‘Ripley, that’s him.’

She motioned for Ripley to hold back, her eyes never leaving Brewer. He seemed engrossed in his task, oblivious to their approach. She noted his attire: a dirty jumpsuit with stains of what looked like paint.

Drawing closer, Ella could hear the soft sloshing sound from the barrels. Ella’s heart raced, a million thoughts running through her head. With a quick hand signal, Ella indicated for Ripley to circle around and cut off any potential escape route. Ripley nodded, hanging back, out of sight. Guilty people tended to flee.

As Ella crept closer, her every sense heightened. She could smell the dampness of the earth, feel the subtle vibrations of the ground with every footstep, and taste the metallic tinge of adrenaline on her lips. Brewer stopped wheeling the barrels for a moment, pausing to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Ella used this moment to her advantage, closing the gap between them further.

‘Mark Brewer?’ she asked.

Brewer’s body went rigid, every muscle in his back tensing. He turned to face his accuser.

‘Yes?’ he asked. His voice was deep and rough, a Californian accent hidden in there somewhere.

‘I’m with the FBI. Is there somewhere we could talk?’

‘Talk?’ Mark asked. ‘About what?’

‘You tell me.’ Ella kept it vague. It was best to reveal as little as possible and let persons of interest incriminate themselves when possible.

‘Everything here is above board. We tell the cops this every week, but you never listen. If you’ve got problems, take it up with the boss.’ Mark wiped his nose with his forearm, a face

trying to mask its nervousness with a semblance of composure. His eyes darted, assessing the situation, likely looking for a way out.

‘I don’t know or care about what goes on here. I’m more concerned about the two women that fell into my lap this morning.’

‘Women?’ Brewer’s voice trembled ever so slightly, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘No? Where have you been the past two nights?’

‘None of your business,’ Mark said before going back to his barrels. ‘Now if you don’t mind, I’ve got work to do.’

‘So have I. Do you want to do this the easy way or the hard way?’

Brewer went rigid again, glancing around the site. Ella didn’t take her eyes off him, but she could tell the rest of the park was mostly devoid of life.

Suddenly, Ella had her answer, because Mark Brewer became a blur.

He kicked one of the barrels in Ella’s direction, its contents sloshing out as it rolled violently towards her. Ella jumped to the side, narrowly avoiding it. The liquid inside smelled foul, but she couldn’t be sure of its contents.

She barely had a moment to process the attack when she saw Brewer take off, sprinting towards the tunnel entrance. Ella immediately gave chase, the adrenaline fast taking hold. Ella’s pulse thundered in her ears as she pursued Brewer into the Extreme Blackout tunnel, first arriving a maze of corridors filled with mirrors and brutalized mannequins; artificial horrors. The mirrors disoriented her for a moment, staring back at her reflection in twisted forms. However, Brewer’s movements were difficult to miss.

Not slowing down, Ella reminded herself that only guilty people ran. She could picture Brewer in the throes of killing, eviscerating bodies, lunging firearms through human flesh. She had a good feeling that the blur ahead of her was the man responsible for the two recent dead women.

But Brewer was quick and wily. He turned a corner, and by the time Ella reached it, he'd vanished. In front of her was a large room, styled like a Victorian-era ballroom. A chandelier overhead swung ominously, and in the dim light, she could make out the forms of what looked like dancers in aged dresses and suits. The figures began to spin and twirl, their ghostly laughter filling the room. It was a mechanical setup, probably activated by motion sensors.

In the momentary confusion, Brewer appeared from behind one of the spinning figures, baseball bat in hand, charging right at her. Ella ducked before the moment of impact, the bat narrowly missing her head. She rolled away, reaching for her pistol, but Brewer was already on her.

The stench of sweat and desperation emanated from Brewer as he tried to tackle her to the ground, but Ella kept her balance. The clown was lean and capable, with a surprising amount of strength beneath his brown jumpsuit.

Ella felt the cool touch of the baseball bat against her side as Brewer tried to wrestle her gun from her holster. Ella thrust her elbow into the clown's spine, momentarily disorienting him, but Brewer responded in rage. With a shoulder tackle, Brewer hauled Ella off her feet, sending her past the Victorian dancers, through a curtain, into a pit filled with thousands of loose objects.

The impact drove all the air out of her lungs, and now Brewer had mounted her, one fist held high. In her peripheral vision, Ella recognized the pieces beside her; prop body parts. Ella reached out and grabbed anything she could, rustling through severed hands and feet.

But amongst the cheap plastic, Ella found something metal, something sturdy. She dug her fingertips in, pulled it from amongst the limbs and forced it against Brewer's cheek. Ella heard bones shatter, teeth crack, and as she inspected her unexpected weapon she found it was a handheld dry ice machine.

Ella scrambled for the button on the top, pushed it and blasted Brewer with plumes of frost. His touch suddenly dissipated, punctuated by a series of guttural screams.

All vision disappeared for a minute as the ice filled the room. The fog cleared within a few seconds, revealing another figure standing above the pit of severed limbs. Like a cheap illusionist, Ripley stood overhead, gun trained on Mark Brewer.

‘Hey Brewer,’ Ripley shouted. ‘Freeze.’

Brewer fell down next to Ella, one hand raised in surrender, one attending to the probable frost burns on his face.

Ella caught her breath, and only then did Ripley’s joke register.

She turned to the fallen man beside her and said, ‘I guess it’s not true, after all.’

Brewer gave nothing way. He lay there, waiting for Ripley’s next command.

‘Clowns don’t always have the last laugh,’ Ella said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ella sat on the opposite side of the one-way mirror, staring intently at Mark Brewer as he lounged in his chair. The clown without makeup seemed unfazed, the picture of nonchalance despite the injuries. Sandblasted skin and an expanding bruise on his cheek.

Ripley entered, holding two steaming cups of coffee. ‘Dry ice machine, huh?’

‘Desperate times, desperate measures. I hope I didn’t scar him.’

‘He’ll live,’ Ripley said. ‘Anything yet?’

Ella sighed, accepting one of the cups. ‘Not a word. He refuses to say a word until his lawyer gets here.’

Ripley leaned against the wall, watching Brewer through the one-way mirror. ‘Well, he’s definitely been around the block a few times to know his rights. What do we know about him?’

Ella blew on her coffee, the steam swirling around before taking a sip. ‘No charges. Nothing that screams serial killer, but remember those *allegations* his colleague mentioned?’

‘Yeah. We know what they are?’

‘Two customers at Killing Fields accused Brewer of being a little handsy. Two women, around the same age as our victims. Apparently our friend Trixter uses his job to his advantage.’

Ripley raised an eyebrow. ‘Sexual assault. That’s how it starts.’

‘Nothing official, that’s why he wasn’t in the police database. He hasn’t been charged, just suspected.’

‘Hiding in plain sight,’ Ripley said. ‘Perfect cover.’

The comment brought back thoughts of Logan Nash. The man who felt a million miles away yet right next to her at the same time. Ella’s fingers tightened around the coffee cup.

‘We need something concrete, something more than just allegations. And unfortunately, he knows it. That’s why he’s so smug in there.’

Ripley nodded. ‘His lawyer will probably use those allegations to his advantage. Claim that they were false, that they were disgruntled customers, and that Brewer was just doing his job.’

‘We can present him with the fact he knew both victims, but it’s not concrete enough, might not even be enough to hold him here.’

‘He ran, Dark. He tried to hit you with a baseball bat. I can hold him here for weeks based on that alone.’

Ella’s mind wrestled with the facts, but the major question that cropped up was – did Mark Brewer seem like a killer? Sure, he’d attacked her and had unverified allegations against him, but did that translate to him being capable of murder? She stared intently at the dreadlocked clown through the glass. His casual demeanor, the way he kept himself – all of it seemed a stark contrast to the twisted clown persona he projected at Killing Fields. Could someone that cool and collected really be a ruthless killer? Or was it just an act?

‘Don’t do that thing, Dark,’ Ripley said.

She turned to her partner. ‘It’s just... Look at him. Can you genuinely see him as a killer, Ripley? Or are we barking up the wrong tree?’

‘He’s a clown obsessed with horror films. He knows the victims. He literally tried to kill you an hour ago. Most of the time, the simplest answer is the correct one.’

Ella felt the doubts beginning to seep in. ‘He’s an actor, Mia.’

‘So is everyone else in this stupid place. I ran into two failed actors just getting these coffees.’

Ella couldn’t deny the truth in Ripley’s words. This was LA, a city of dreams, a city where almost everyone wore a mask, playing a role, hoping to be discovered or to hide their real selves. The line between acting and reality could get dangerously thin at times.

Ripley took another sip from her cup, her gaze never leaving Brewer. ‘Actors are the best liars. They get paid to be someone they’re not. Maybe Brewer’s the best actor of them all, and Killing Fields is just his stage.’

Ella pondered the idea. ‘But if he’s such a good actor, why let his guard down and attack me? Why risk it all?’

‘Maybe you cornered him, made him panic. Even the best actors can flub their lines when put under enough pressure.’

A silence settled between the two detectives as Brewer began to hum a tune, his voice barely audible through the intercom. The song was hauntingly familiar, F minor to A flat and back again. It took Ella a few seconds to recognize the notes.

‘He’s humming the Halloween theme,’ she said.

Ripley stepped closer to the mirror and rested her knuckles on the glass. Ella could see her rage building. ‘Then he’s either brave or stupid.’

Ella’s mind whirred with the disparity between the psychological profile and the man sitting beyond the mirror. Her initial analysis of the killer had been of someone methodical, organized, mission-oriented. The kind of psychopath who would unravel if their carefully laid plans were disrupted.

And she was struggling to fit Mark Brewer into that box.

‘Mia, you know how goal-oriented offenders get when their designs are interrupted. They try and wriggle free, make up wild excuses, anything to finish their missions.’

Ripley placed her coffee cup on a nearby table. ‘Sometimes there are psychological anomalies, Dark. Not every serial killer fits into a perfect box. Kemper, Manson, Fish, Gein. Unique psychopathologies.’

‘Absolutely, but look at Brewer. He’s a showman. He thrives on reactions. All I’m seeing is a shock artist with no substance. Alice Cooper without the charisma.’

Chief Daniels appeared, hanging up a call, brown folder in hand. He gazed at the suspect for a minute before turning his

attention to the agents.

‘Here’s everything we know about this guy. Not much to go on, but it’s something.’

Ella took the folder. ‘Thank you, chief.’

‘He can’t afford a lawyer so his public defendant will be here. He can’t make it for a few hours, so you ladies are gonna need to sit tight.’

‘God’s sake,’ Ripley said.

Ella began to pace. She wasn’t going to idly sit by until this defendant showed up, because if they had this all wrong, then every second wasted was a second closer to finding another body.

And not only did Mark Brewer’s personality oppose the psychological profile, but there was something else on Ella’s mind too.

In horror movies, the killer was rarely the ex-boyfriend.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ginny pulled the soft throw blanket tighter around her shoulders as she switched the channel to KTLA News. A drone shot of a small apartment building filled the screen, glinting in the flashing blue lights of the nearby police vans surrounding the place. The lower third of the screen read:

HORROR MURDERS GRIP MAYWOOD, UPDATES AS THEY COME.

She had a sudden urge to run upstairs and check on the kids. Chester and Amelia were old enough now that they rarely woke up in the middle of the night, and every other time Ginny had babysat the little angels, she'd never had any problems.

But she'd been hearing about these apparent horror movie kills all day, and the news had put her on edge. The information was impossible to escape, because every news outlet had shamelessly thrown the details in her face, almost mocking her with the grisly specifics.

Ginny looked around the living room, trying to shake off the unease that had settled in her chest. The murmur of the TV newscaster droned on, 'Police have confirmed two victims of the horror slayer, both Maywood residents. The crimes have taken place over the span of two nights, and police are urging locals to stay vigilant.'

She ditched the blanket, double checked the front door, patio door, kitchen windows. All locked. The Martins were a security-conscious family, and there was no way they'd have taken any risks when it came to their children's safety. With a deep breath, she decided to check on the kids. Maybe it would soothe her nerves to see them safe and sound.

She tiptoed upstairs, trying to minimize any noise. As she approached Chester's room, she noticed his door slightly ajar. She peeked inside, caught the six-year-old sleeping peacefully, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Amelia's room

was next, and just as she had hoped, the little girl was wrapped in her blanket, lost in dreams, nothing but a gentle breeze lapping at her curtains and green wavelight casting stars against the ceiling.

Ginny went back to the living room and muted the television. The fear-mongering was doing her no good. She reached for a book on the table, determined to spend the rest of the evening lost in a fictional world where monsters could be defeated by closing the cover. The book was trashy romance; a clichéd story of a young woman falling for an emotionally-unavailable bad boy, only to discover she'd accidentally friend-zoned her true love along the way. Easy and brainless, and that was enough for Ginny tonight.

Just as she started to get engrossed in the book's pages, her soft ringtone broke the silence.

Ginny froze for a moment, glancing at the name flashing on her screen.

UNKNOWN.

Her heartbeat ramped up, but Ginny settled herself. She received anonymous calls all the time. Ever since she'd streamed Paranormal Activity through that sketchy website, her email and phone number had fallen prey to scammers worldwide.

Every fiber of her being told her it was probably just someone trying to swindle her into buying insurance, but what if it was the Martins checking in? Cliff was a digital dinosaur by his own admission, so he might have set his phone to anonymous calling by accident.

Ginny decided to answer.

'Hello?'

A few seconds of silence, then a raspy voice whispered, 'Have you checked on the children?'

Ginny's fingertips clenched the phone. She felt a sudden pain in her chest, keeping deep breaths at bay. 'Excuse me?'

'I said, have you checked on the children?'

Ginny suddenly felt eyes on her, exposed, as though answering the call had unlocked the doors and opened all the drapes by magic.

That voice. She knew it well, but she couldn't place it. Her rationale was clouded by a sudden dread.

'Mr. Martin? Is that you?'

It wasn't his voice, nor the voice of any telemarketer or scammer she'd heard before.

'No. Are you watching the news?'

'Who is this?' Clarissa snapped, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

'You thought you got away from me, didn't you?'

Ginny jumped out of her chair and rushed to the window. She peeked through the drapes and saw an empty driveway and nothing more.

'I'm hanging up,' she said firmly.

'Do that, and I won't give you the good stuff tomorrow night.'

Ginny pulled the phone from her ear and checked the screen again, as though the anonymous title might have morphed into the real caller's name.

It didn't, but in a moment of clarity, it all connected.

'Jake, you asshole,' Ginny cried. 'You think that's funny?'

Ginny's boyfriend, and possibly soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. Never one to shy away from an uncomfortable joke.

A burst of laughter down the phone line. 'Gotcha.'

'Got me? Two people are dead, you idiot. What if I'd have called the police on you?'

'That's why I hid my number,' Jake laughed.

'I'm not laughing. I'm looking after two kids here. You think I need your dumb pranks at a time like this?'

Jake stuttered. 'Look, I'm really sorry, Gin. It was a stupid move. I thought I could lighten the mood, make you laugh or something.'

Ginny marched around the room, too amped up to sit still. 'It's immature shit like this why I have my doubts about you. You're twenty-four. Give the frat boy shtick a rest.'

'God, I'm really sorry, Ginny. I swear I won't pull anything like this ever again.'

There were notes of remorse in his tone, but the boy had shown his true colors. The immaturity was too much to handle. Where were the courteous men these days, Ginny wondered.

'Whatever. Tomorrow night's canceled. We're done.'

'Gin, come on, don't...' Jake began, but Ginny ended the call and threw her phone down on the couch. Another one bites the dust. She returned herself, grabbed the book and lost herself. After what felt like an eternity of trying to concentrate on her book, Ginny decided to make herself a cup of tea to calm her nerves. As she took her first sip, her phone rang again.

Ginny breathed a deep sigh, returned to the living room and saw the same ominous sight again.

UNKNOWN.

If that little slug was going to grovel, she wasn't interested.

But she had to admit, it would be nice to hear him uncomfortable for a minute or two.

She answered the call.

'Jake, go away. I don't want to...'

'This isn't Jake,' the voice cut her off.

A chill pricked at Ginny's fingertips. The voice on the other end was rough, low, distorted. It had a depth to it that Jake's didn't.

'You should've hung up when you had the chance,' the voice continued.

Ginny's heart raced. She searched for words, her mind racing, trying to make sense of the situation. 'Who is this?' she finally managed.

‘You don’t know me, but I know you,’ the voice replied with an eerie calm. ‘I’ve been watching.’

Ginny’s eyes darted around the living room. Had news of the recent murders turned everyone into a prankster?

‘Whatever. You’re not the first jerk to prank me tonight. I’m calling the police.’

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you.’

Ginny pulled the phone from her ear, smashed the red button that ended the call. Her heart continued to race as she dialed nine-one-one and connected instantly.

‘What’s your emergency?’ the operator asked.

‘Someone’s calling me and threatening me,’ Ginny said. She shot out of her chair and double-checked the locks on the doors again. All shut, no possibility of breach.

‘Okay, ma’am, stay calm. Do you have their name or phone number?’

‘No. He withheld the number.’

‘Where are you located, ma’am? We’ll dispatch an officer immediately.’

Before Ginny could answer, her phone vibrated with a new text message.

Ginny clocked the number. One she didn’t have saved in her phone.

The operator’s voice echoed through, ‘Ma’am? Your address?’

But Ginny had fallen silent. Her finger trembled as she opened the message, and she saw nothing but a blank screen.

Only a video attachment.

Eight seconds long.

‘Ma’am, are you still there?’ the operator asked. ‘Can you get to somewhere safe? A locked room?’

Ginny’s tongue was frozen, her lips sewn together by fear. Her thumb hovered over the video as she battled between

curiosity and safety, but curiosity easily took the gold. Against better judgment, Ginny tapped the attachment.

Her phone screen dissolved to black. The footage was shaky, the room dimly lit. For a second, it was hard to make out the scene. But as the camera steadied, the realization hit her like a freight train.

Green shapes cast against the walls. The image of young Amelia nestled comfortably between her sheets.

She realized there was someone else in the house.

Ginny dropped the phone, her hands shaking uncontrollably. As it hit the ground, it induced another sound, a mirror effect from up above. The upstairs floorboards began to creak; slow footsteps across the landing, ending at the top of the stairs.

‘Stay on the line, ma’am,’ the operator called, audible from the floor. Then something about officers en route, something about staying safe.

Ginny’s mind raced. Thoughts of the children, her own safety, and the strange voice on the phone swirled into a cacophony of panic. Ginny scanned the room in a frenzy, searching for a weapon.

She saw a metal poker next to the fireplace, but her eyes were drawn to something else.

In the gap between the hallway door and the doorframe, Ginny saw a demonic face straight out of a nightmare.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Alright, Mr. Brewer,’ Ella began, her tone steely. ‘You know why you’re here. Two people dead in Maywood, two nights, and we’ve got some evidence linking you to both. So, let’s talk.’

At last, the man had agreed to talk, insistent that his public defender remain present at all times. Ella had been waiting all day and evening for the man’s statement, and by now she was itching for the answer – was Mark Brewer involved in these murders or not?

‘Dead, huh?’ Mark asked. ‘I thought you dragged me here on sexual assault allegations.’

Ripley jumped in, ‘No. This is a lot more serious.’

Mark’s gaze flitted around, never settling on one place for too long. His fingers drummed on the table, not nervousness but confidence. Ella had sat across from plenty of suspects in her time: some defiant, some broken, some trying to play it cool. But Mark was a new level of nonchalance, complete indifference in the face of murder accusations.

Ella observed his reactions closely. She had her doubts about his guilt, but evidence was evidence, and he had connections to both of the victims. Not to mention, his horror obsession gelled well with the killer’s M.O.

‘Kathleen Carter,’ Ella said. ‘You knew her?’

Mark shrugged. ‘We had a brief love affair about a year ago. Nothing more.’

‘A brief love affair? You were her emergency contact for her employer.’

‘I guess she was more into me than I was her.’

‘You don’t seem too shaken up about her death.’

‘I barely knew her. Life goes on.’

Ella clenched her jaw, holding back the urge to snap. The man's cold indifference made her skin crawl, but she knew she had to remain composed. 'Seen Kathleen recently?'

'No. Not in months.'

'What about Jessica Owen?'

'Who?'

'You oughta know,' Ella said, 'you're pals on social media.'

A flicker of recognition on Mark's face. Ella couldn't tell if it was fake or genuine. 'Oh, Jessica. I went to school with her like ten years ago. Haven't spoken to her... ever, I think.'

Ripley leaned forward, her voice icy. 'It's interesting, Mr. Brewer. For someone with such strong connections to both victims, you seem to be remarkably coy. And both of them murdered, just days apart?'

Mark's public defender chimed in, 'Detective, I hope you're not suggesting guilt by association. It's weak, especially for feds.'

Ella raised her hand, signaling Ripley to hold back. 'We're not jumping to conclusions, but we do need to understand the links. Given the unusual circumstances, wouldn't you agree?'

Mark leaned back, a hint of amusement in his eyes. 'What unusual circumstances? Old flames and forgotten schoolmates die every day. It's a sad world.'

'Not by people fixated on horror movies – as you are.'

Mark threw his hands up and collapsed back in his seat. 'So what? I like them. Lots of people do. But I'm not about to go around cutting people up just because it happens in some film. I know the difference between fiction and the real world, thanks.'

Ripley said, 'Says the man who plays a clown for a living.'

'And? It's a job. Not easy to make a living in LA, you know?'

Ella tried a different route. 'Maybe these murders will bring some attention to your little show. Finance is a big motivator.' It was a lie, however, because serial killers rarely killed for

monetary gain. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, financially-motivated offenders were women.

‘You think I want this attention?’ Mark cried. ‘I have a reputation, gigs, connections. I’m going to risk life in jail for that.’

Mark’s public defender leaned in and patted his arm reassuringly. ‘Alright, I’ve heard enough. Go on, Mr. Brewer, tell them where you were the past two evenings.’

Taking a deep breath, Mark started recounting his alibi. ‘Two nights ago, I was at my sister’s. She lives in Westwood. She’d called me over because her son, my nephew, had a fever. I stayed overnight.’

‘And last night?’ Ripley pressed.

‘I was at work until three AM. Everyone saw me. Staff, owners, customers.’

‘We’ll need their names,’ Ripley said.

Mark’s defendant jumped in. ‘I’ve already put a list together, contacted all the necessary people. It’s done. Until you verify his alibi, I insist he remains a free man.’

Ella and Mia exchanged glances. The weight of the decision is pressing on them.

‘Innocent people don’t usually attack FBI agents with bats,’ offered Ella.

‘I thought you were going to take me in for the *allegations* against me. They’re not true either.’

‘Alright,’ Ella sighed at Mark’s lawyer. ‘But he stays in town. And if we find even a tiny inconsistency, he’s right back here.’

Mark nodded vigorously, his relief evident. ‘I promise you won’t find anything.’

Ripley stood up to leave, but Ella stayed put. She had more questions for this man, and had a curiosity about his horror fascination.

‘Mr. Brewer, I assume you know what murders we’re referring to, right?’

Mark nodded. 'Everyone knows.'

'As a horror fanatic, what do you make of them?'

Mark tilted his head, then looked back at his defendant for approval. The man nodded.

'Horrific, of course,' Mark said. 'I celebrate cinema, not tragedy. It's a real shame what happened to Kathleen and Jessica.'

Ella leaned forward, 'Do you think the person responsible could be someone in the...' Ella searched for the right term. 'Horror community.'

'Must be. But I don't know the finer details. All I heard is that your guy left a Michael Myers and a Pinhead mask behind. Those movies aren't exactly cult classics. They're mainstream horrors, iconic characters.'

Ella decided to give a little. Sometimes, gestures of goodwill were returned.

'Our perp stabbed someone... with a shotgun. And disemboweled another. He was reenacting scenes from Halloween four and Hellraiser two.'

Mark shifted uncomfortably, glancing at his public defender again. 'Look, there are thousands of horror fans out there, and not all of them can differentiate between reel and real. But to assume that anyone in the *horror community*, as you put it, would commit such acts is a broad stroke.'

Ripley, cut in, 'So, in your circle of acquaintances, anyone comes to mind? Anyone who might take things a little too far?'

Mark shook his head, 'I meet tons of horror enthusiasts every day, at conventions, events, even at my shows. No one comes to mind, but...' Mark trailed off as he bit his lip.

Ella willed him to continue with a stare.

'But you should check out the Dread Pages,' Mark carried on.

'The what?'

‘The Dread Pages. It’s an online community, solely for Los Angeles horror buffs. It’s not just for horror talk, either. It’s a place for actors directors, and writers to advertise their services.’

Ella noted down the name. ‘What makes this place stand out?’ she asked.

Mark leaned back, looking visibly drained. ‘Maywood is for the rejects. The devil’s rejects, if you will.’

Another film reference. ‘Point being?’

‘All I’m saying is you need a brass ring piece to survive in Hollywood, and those that don’t survive end up in this city. I’ve seen what failure can do to a man, and if you check out some of the posts on Dread, you’ll see what I mean.’

Ella read between the lines. Mark was suggesting that their killer could be a failed actor.

‘Thank you for the lead, Mr. Brewer,’ Ella said softly.

‘Just doing my part.’

As Mia gathered her files, Ella paused, taking a moment to meet Mark’s gaze. ‘If you’re telling the truth,’ she began, her voice gentle but firm, ‘and you have nothing to do with these murders, I hope for your sake that your alibi holds up. But know this, we will find out if you’re lying.’

Mark maintained his composure. He’d given very little away during their whole exchange, and all of Ella’s instincts concluded that he was an innocent man. Of the recent murders, at least.

‘I understand.’

With a final nod, Ella turned and followed Mia out of the interrogation room. The door closed with a soft thud, leaving Mark and his public defender behind. Once outside, Mia and Ella walked in tandem down the corridor.

Ella lost herself in thought, replaying the interrogation in her head. Echoes of her footsteps reverberated off the sterile walls, punctuated by the occasional murmur from other rooms.

‘Dark?’ Mia prompted.

Ella blinked and looked over at Mia. ‘What are you thinking?’ she asked.

‘That thing about failed actors and the pressure of Hollywood. It might be a stretch, but it’s worth looking into.’

‘This could be less about horror, more about the desperation of a broken dream,’ Ella said.

‘The city of failure,’ Mia said.

Ella sat back down at her desk. She had a lot of work to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ella's desk was bathed in the dim light of a lone desk lamp. The walls behind her were lined with corkboards, each one plastered with photos of crime scenes, victims, and snippets of horror film scenes. Red strings crisscrossed between different points of interest, forming a web of theories and connections.

Ella stared at the board intently, her finger tracing the line from the Halloween four reenactment to the Hellraiser two scene. She clocked the time. Ten PM. If their killer was keeping up his pattern from the past two nights, another body could land in their laps before the night was out.

'Did you check out the Dread Pages?' Ripley asked from across the desk.

'Access denied. It's invite-only, but I've got my girl at HQ sneaking me in the back door. She'll email me when it's done.'

'Perfect,' Ripley said. 'Why don't we go over the profile? This guy's motivations are messing with my head.'

Ella moved to the whiteboard behind her and began unloading her thoughts. 'Two victims. Same race and gender, similar ages. Under other circumstances, we'd assume a sexual component, but we can pretty much rule that out.'

'No signs of sexual assault according to the autopsy reports,' Ripley said.

A general rule in psychological profiling was that a knife was considered a substitute for genitalia. Stabbing was symbolic of penetration, but this case was a rare anomaly.

'The victims don't seem to run in the same circles. Two disparate lifestyles. The only connection is that they lived three miles apart.'

Ripley tapped her pen against her teeth as she rummaged through her papers. She landed on photos of Jessica Owen and Kathleen Carter. 'Something stands out to me here, Dark. Something about these victims.'

Ella stopped scrawling for a second. ‘What?’

‘Jessica is stick thin, strawberry blonde, hair cut at the shoulder. Kathleen’s got long brown curls, slightly wider. And these are our killer’s first two victims. Something about that seems off to you?’

Ella looked over the pictures on Ripley’s desk and applied basic serial killer profiling. If she was this killer, what kinds of victims would he initially target?

‘They’re visually different, agreed, but if there’s no sexual component, looks wouldn’t be a factor. He’d opt for convenience.’

Ripley threw her pen down and said, ‘You’re right, but even mission-oriented killers prefer a certain *type* of victim, and that type usually involves appearances.’

Ella couldn’t make it fit. ‘I don’t think our unsub cares about that. He just wants young women who fit the mold of horror victims. Remember, he might have chosen them because of their character, not looks. Teacher, student.’

‘True. Just something that was on my mind.’

Ella went back to the board and noted Ripley’s comments. ‘Keep them coming,’ she said.

‘Jessica Owen was blitz-attacked outside her own home, meanwhile he lured Kathleen to a secluded area. He could have simply stalked Jessica, but Kathleen’s scene required some serious legwork. Not to mention, he killed Kathleen first, so on his very first kill, he took some incredible risks.’

Ella considered it, but she had an opposing theory. ‘I don’t think luring Kathleen here would be as difficult as you think.’

‘No?’

Ella reached back onto her desk and found printouts of Kathleen Carter’s dating site profiles. ‘The woman seemed to be on every dating site known to man. Either Kathleen was desperate to find her true love, or...’

Ripley took one of the pages. ‘Or she liked to get wild.’

‘Rule number one of horror movies. Horniness equals death.’

‘But we’ve checked Kathleen’s conversations. She hadn’t talked to anyone on there recently.’

‘She could have met our unsub somewhere else. He could have mentioned that he knew a quiet spot. Easy as that.’

‘Is it?’

‘That’s how I’d have done it,’ Ella said.

Ripley shot her partner a look of concern. ‘Of course it is.’

‘I’m in the unsub in this scenario. But even so, it means he comes prepared, because he must have had the weapons in place for when Kathleen arrived at that cabin.’

‘A murder kit.’

‘A disembowelment kit. That’s a new level of sinister.’

‘This is as premeditated as it gets. He’s been planning these kills for a long time.’

Ella studied her notes on the whiteboard, now realizing that they had a lot of theories but very little that could help them catch this perpetrator. Uncovering a solid motive or predicting his next move was difficult.

‘Mark’s comments about the failure of actors... Could it be that our killer is recreating these scenes as some kind of audition?’

‘That’s an angle,’ Mia responded, joining Ella at the whiteboard. ‘Each murder as a scene, each scene a portrayal of his desperation to be seen and recognized. The one thing we *do* know is that he wants to be recognized, otherwise he wouldn’t have notified the police of Kathleen’s whereabouts.’

‘If this is an audition, then there has to be a climax, an ultimate scene he’s building towards. But what could it be?’

Ripley rubbed her temples, ‘We need to think like him. He’s a cinephile, someone who deeply loves and understands movies. Maybe he’s building up to a specific scene from a movie he values above the rest. A grand finale.’

Ella interjected, ‘If that’s true, we need to figure out what that movie might be, and more importantly, the specific scene.’

And once we do that, we might be able to anticipate his next move, intercept him before he can act again.'

There was a brief silence before Ripley spoke, 'Dark, you said that horniness equals death in horror films. A common trope, right? What if we look at the most iconic scenes in horror history where this trope plays out? Maybe that's where he's headed.'

Ella shook her head, 'That's dozens, if not hundreds of movies. How do we narrow it down?'

'What if we start by looking at the forums or online groups that he might frequent? We've got access to the Dread Pages soon. There might be some sort of clue or pattern there. We could also take another look at the physical locations. The places he's chosen so far are all reminiscent of classic horror settings. What if it's a different clichéd location every time?'

Ella pieced an idea together. 'He started in an isolated cabin, then outside a suburban home.'

'Where next?' Ripley asked. 'What's the logical progression?'

Ella pulled up a series of images in her head, everything from asylums to cornfields. The parameters were broad, but there was one setting that stood out above the rest. One that wasn't too dissimilar from the locations he'd killed in so far.

A figure sped through the precinct, a beeline towards the agents. Chief Daniels manifested on the opposite side of the table, red-faced and short of breath.

Ella recognized the signs immediately. Bad news was forthcoming, and if she was a betting girl, she'd put a hundred dollars on one piece of bad news in particular.

'Agents,' Daniels interrupted. 'Mark Brewer's alibi checks out. He's not our man.'

Ella clenched her fist and tapped it against the whiteboard. 'As expected.'

'But that's not all,' Daniels continued.

There it was. Ella braced herself for the worst.

Ripley chimed in, 'He's struck again, hasn't he?'

‘Yes, and this one is... a little different.’

Ella suddenly choked on her breath, her voice trapped in her throat. ‘He’s killed inside someone’s home, hasn’t he?’

Chief Daniels said nothing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As she approached the home, Ella's attention was drawn to the child's swing hanging limply in the front yard—a poignant reminder of the life that flourished here, now overshadowed by an act of inexplicable violence. Ella's heart raced; the horror film similarities were getting too real, too close for comfort.

The details had been scarce. All Daniels knew was that a dead woman lay somewhere inside.

Ella grabbed Ripley's arm and froze on the pathway leading to the house. 'Mia, if there's kids in there, I can't...'

A uniformed officer guarding the door overheard and jumped in. 'The children are fine.' He pointed across the way towards a horde of bodies. Amongst them were two youngsters, still clad in pajamas.

Ella breathed a bittersweet sigh of relief, but equal horrors were still to come.

The front door was ajar, revealing brief glimpses of commotion within. As she made her way to the entrance, the subdued conversations of officers and forensic techs echoed in her ears, punctuated by the distant snap of a camera.

The living room had been turned into a makeshift forensic scene. Blue-gloved hands moved methodically, cataloging and bagging evidence, their precision contrasting the violence that had occurred here. Warm beige walls, lavish furniture, family photos – all of it punctuated by the body of a young blonde girl lying on the living room floor.

The victim, no older than twenty-one, lay sprawled amidst a pile of broken porcelain. Perhaps she had been holding a tea cup or a plate before everything went awry. The fabric of her nightgown was marred with a dark stain that had spread across her midsection, a sharp contrast to the pristine white of her attire.

Ripley, possibly sensing Ella's distress, whispered, 'Focus on the evidence, not the victim. Remember, we're here to catch this monster.'

Ella nodded, forcing herself to examine the room with a detached eye. There was a shattered vase on the coffee table and a trail of blood that started from the doorway and led straight to the girl. The struggle had been brief but intense.

'It's strange,' Ripley observed, 'The other murders were staged with almost theatrical precision. This one feels... hurried, chaotic.'

A forensic officer signaled to the agents that their work was done. Ella moved in, bent down, gently moving a strand of blonde hair from the girl's face. 'Maybe he was interrupted, or she fought back harder than he anticipated.'

'Stab wound to the stomach. That's different. Simple.'

'A far cry from evisceration or impalement, but why has he changed so suddenly?' Ella asked.

Ripley put her hands on her hips and gazed from corner to corner. 'The scene must have called for it, but what horror movie is he reenacting here?'

Ella tried to place it, but there were a million horror scenes that took place in domestic settings. 'No idea, but something stands out. The subtlety, the lack of theatrics, the almost... personal nature of the attack.'

Ripley cocked her head, her gaze fixating on the shattered porcelain. 'Most of his previous scenes were grand, they were all about showmanship. But this... this feels intimate, almost spontaneous. Maybe he knew her personally?'

The living room filled with the silent cacophony of its own tragic story: spilled liquids hinting at a disrupted evening, a book propped open about fifty pages in. The TV was on but muted.

Chief Daniels entered, face pale, eyes red. He'd even foregone his sheriff's hat. 'Awful,' he said.

'Who called it in, chief?' asked Ripley.

‘The homeowner, Cliff Martin. Victim was their babysitter. He’d been out with his wife, and when they got back...’ Daniels’ voice cracked, unable to finish the sentence.

Babysitter, Ella thought. She felt the weight of the statement and couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like for the parents to walk in on such a scene. A night out, a little break from the kids, and then coming home to find your safe haven had been invaded.

‘Where are Mr. and Mrs. Martin now?’ she asked.

‘Outside with some of my guys. Kids are there, too. Luckily, they slept through the whole thing. Didn’t see or hear anything.’

‘Thank God for that,’ Ella said. ‘Has he left a mask behind?’

Daniels shrugged and looked around at his feet as though the comment might summon forth the required item. ‘No mask, so there’s a chance this *isn’t* our guy, but a third murder in three nights, barely two miles from Jessica Owen’s house? Not a coincidence.’

Ella agreed.

‘How’d he get inside?’ asked Ripley.

Daniels said, ‘Haven’t got that far yet, but Mr. Martin assured me he locked this place up tight before he left. The babysitter was no rookie, either. She never took any risks, apparently.’

‘He might have known her,’ Ripley said. ‘We need to check the victim’s phone to see if she invited anyone over.’

Daniels scratched his chin. ‘Problem there. No phone on the victim.’

Ella asked, ‘No phone?’

‘Nope. We’ve found her handbag, purse, keys – but no phone.’

Ella tried to make sense of it but struggled. ‘Young woman, trusted babysitter, but she doesn’t have a phone?’

Ripley shot her a troubled look. ‘Only one conclusion.’

Ella got there too. ‘The killer took it, but why?’

‘They must have been in contact, in one way or another.’

Ella stepped away from the victim and stared at the flickering TV. It was on a news channel, something about a helicopter crash in San Diego, but the scrolling text at the bottom of the page mentioned the very case she was lost in.

MAYWOOD HORROR MURDERS – UPDATES AS THEY COME.

There was about to be an update, alright. She refocused on the task at hand, playing out the scene in linear order. Only she stumbled at the first hurdle because she couldn’t figure out how her unsub had gained access to the home.

‘I’m going to check the upstairs,’ Ella said.

‘Right behind you,’ said Ripley. Ella led the way, passing by bloodstains and scuffs on the hardwood floor. Ella first checked the bathroom; no sign of a struggle or forced entry. Next was the Martins’ bedroom, and again found no possible entry points. Just soft furnishings, a king size bed, velvet sheets.

Ripley then moved through to the next bedroom with Ella in tow. A door decorated with superhero stickers greeted them, and inside, Ella found the distinct decor of a young boy’s room. Posters, toy cars, airplane bedsheets.

But no entry points.

Their last port of call was the final bedroom. The door was painted a soft lavender, adorned with hand-painted flowers and butterflies that appeared slightly smudged – probably the work of young, eager hands. A sparkly sticker reading ‘Amelia’s Room’ revealed its occupant.

Pushing the door open gently, Ella was immediately enveloped by a room that exuded childhood whimsy. The walls were a shade of pale pink, sprinkled with wall decals of unicorns, rainbows, and fairy princesses. Dashes of green light bounced off the walls, hypnotically rotating moon and star shapes.

Ella switched the main light on and scrutinized every corner, but it was the window opposite the door that drew Ella's attention. It was slightly open, allowing a gentle breeze to flutter the curtains. Ella moved closer, and found that on the window sill, several dolls had been scattered, their positions suggesting they might have been disturbed or hastily moved.

Ella had to fight back a sudden wave of nausea.

'Ripley, you don't think...?'

Her partner gently opened the curtains to give them full view of the window. Down below, the Martins' square garden revealed itself.

'Open window, but...,' Ripley peered out of it. 'That's a long drop down below.'

Ella inspected it too. There wasn't much to grab on to. 'Looks like a tough journey, but how else would he get in? He can't walk through walls.'

'Get forensics to follow the trail outside. He might have left footprints behind.'

The serene environment of Amelia's bedroom, filled with innocence and dreams, juxtaposed against the grisly scene downstairs, left a pit in her stomach. She refocused on the bed, its soft pastel shades and the plush unicorn that seemed to be guarding it. The thought that the killer had been so near, potentially mere moments away from the young girl, was chilling. How close had he come to her? And why hadn't he disturbed her?

As her eyes roamed the room, they settled on something she hadn't noticed initially – a small vent near the baseboard, just a few feet from the bed. It was oddly out of place, a metal rectangle in the midst of the room's playful decor. The vent cover looked slightly askew.

Ella tapped her partner on the shoulder.

Ripley followed Ella's line of vision. She caught it, too.

'A vent,' Ripley said. 'What about it?'

Ella glanced out of the window again and couldn't see how this killer could ascend or descend without serious injury. Plus, there were houses at the rear. Someone could easily have spotted an intruder climbing through their neighbors' window.

'Our killer wouldn't risk going this route,' Ella said. 'I think this is a smokescreen. A red herring.'

Ella hesitated for just a moment, an instinctual reluctance tugging at her as she edged closer to the vent. She reached down to fully remove the cover.

With a deep breath, she pried it away from the wall, revealing a darkness that stretched on beyond her vision. As she shone her flashlight inside, she caught a reflection of something that turned her blood to ice.

Her initial thought was a rat corpse. Her second, a doll stuffed down there by a curious child.

But as she reached in and took hold, her fingertips found something leathery, rough but durable.

Gently, Ella pulled the strange item from its resting place.

Ripley knelt next to her. 'Jesus, Dark. What the hell is that?'

Ella held it up to the light.

'It's a mask,' she said.

But it was a mask she didn't recognize.

Hand-stitched. The eye holes were jaggedly cut out, one larger than the other. Its mouth was similarly uneven, contorted into a permanent twisted grin. The chin was sharp and pointed.

'Get that to forensics right now,' Ripley said. 'But what film is that mask from? It doesn't look like anything I've seen before.'

Ella didn't have an answer. Even to her horror-infected brain, the mask was an outlier. She needed to do some more research.

'I don't know.'

Ripley was already at the exit. ‘Come on. Let’s get that swept for prints, then we’ll take a look into Ginny’s life. See if there’s any connection to the other...’

Ella hadn’t taken her eyes off the strange mask, but Ripley’s comment broke her out of her haze. Her toes curled into the soft carpet beneath. ‘Hold on, what did you say her name was?’

‘Who? The victim?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Ginny Mathers. Why?’

In all of the commotion, Ella hadn’t even processed the victim’s name.

But now she did, something slid into place – something that suggested there was much more to this case than cinematic murders.

Ella’s stomach tied itself in a knot. She stared at the monstrous face hanging from her fingertips, then back to her partner.

‘Ripley, I have it,’ she said. ‘It makes sense.’

‘What are you talking about? What does the victim’s name have anything to do with this?’

Ella was lost in her head, spinning thoughts like a cyclone.

‘We need to back to the coroner, quickly,’ Ella said. ‘Because we might have this all wrong.’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ella dragged Ripley into the coroner's building, into the place where death became a science. Despite the midnight hour, nothing in Los Angeles slept – even the dead.

'Dark, you're going to have to start explaining. I'm too tired to read your mind.' Ripley followed closely behind, reluctant but clearly willing to hear Ella's possibly-outrageous theory.

The morgue was a scene of surreal serenity. Steel gurneys, polished instruments, and the hum of machinery keeping the room at the precise temperature necessary for its function. Fluorescent lights cast their cold glow upon everything, illuminating the lifeless forms that called this place home before being committed to the ground.

Doctor Weller was already at the door, holding it open for the agents' arrival. He yawned as they arrived, and the bags under his eyes suggested he'd just stepped off one of these gurneys himself.

'What was it that couldn't wait?' he asked.

Ella slid past him. 'I'm really sorry to drag you here like this, but I needed to check something. Pictures just wouldn't do. I needed to be certain.'

'Very well,' Doctor Weller said as he shut the airtight door behind him. 'What do you need?'

'I need to see Jessica Owen's body. More importantly, her face.'

The doctor applied his gloves and moved over to one of the metal drawers embedded in the wall. Pulling it open with a slight creak, he carefully slid out the tray holding Jessica Owen's remains. 'Make it quick, because her features will begin to degrade soon.'

Ripley stared at the lifeless form, then turned her attention to Ella. 'What are we looking for, Dark?'

Ella approached the body cautiously, closely examining at Jessica's face. She gently brushed away a stray strand of hair from Jessica's forehead.

'Look closely,' Ella said. 'Blue eyes, blonde hair cut at the shoulder, sharp jaw. Student. Doesn't she remind you of someone?'

Ripley squinted, trying to make a connection. 'I mean, she looks like any other young woman you'd find on a college campus. What are you getting at?'

'Looks a little bit like Jamie Lee Curtis from the seventies, don't you think?'

Ripley breathed a heavy sigh, loud enough to get her point across. 'Rookie, you've gone insane.'

Ella waved her hands about, prepping her long explanation. 'No. Remember how Jessica Owen was killed? A shotgun through the chest, just like one of the victims in the fourth Halloween film.'

'And?'

'Jamie Lee Curtis is the one Michael Myers was after all along. She was his sister.'

Doctor Weller took his glasses off and peered a little closer. 'You know, I can see it, actually.'

'But that's not all,' Ella said. She turned to the doctor, 'Could we see Kathleen Carter's body?'

Doctor Weller complied, wheeling out the next victim's remains. He uncurled the white sheet down to Kathleen's shoulder. The body was a little more decomposed than the first, but the facial features were still intact.

'And Kathleen. Long brown curls, thick jaw, deep brown eyes. See where I'm going with this?'

Doctor Weller adjusted his gloves and said, 'The girl from Hellraiser.'

Ella slapped her palm against the steel cabinets with a resounding clang. 'See. I'm glad you watch films, doc.'

Ripley adjusted her jaw and exhaled like she was smoking an invisible cigarette. ‘No, I still don’t get it. These women resemble the heroines from the films he’s reenacting?’

Before Ella could carry on with her explanation, there was a knock at the door. Doctor Weller sauntered over and let the new arrivals inside.

Two medical workers, lugging a new victim on a gurney. Doctor Weller accepted the body and, with the help of the medical staff, placed Ginny Mathers on a steel table.

‘And here’s Ginny. She doesn’t look like any famous horror girl, but she’s got the same name as one. Ginny Field from Friday the Thirteenth.’

Ripley wrapped her palm around her temples, like she’d just downloaded an encyclopedia into her brain. ‘Put this in simple terms, Dark, because your crazy is rubbing off on me.’

‘Laurie Strode, Kirsty Cotton, Ginny Field. Our unsub is killing off final girls.’

Ripley blinked rapidly, a brief flicker of realization emerging. ‘He’s what now?’

Ella leaned against a table, her fingers drumming rapidly against the steel. ‘Final girls. It’s a horror trope. The last woman standing at the end of the film. The one who faces the killer and, usually, survives. Our guy isn’t just choosing random women; he’s choosing women who look or have some connection to the *final girls* of iconic horror films.’

Ripley looked idle, like she was about to fall asleep standing up. ‘But why? What’s the point?’

Ella shrugged. ‘Maybe he wants to rewrite the narrative. Maybe he feels these films give people a false sense of hope. By killing these women, he’s saying there’s no such thing as a final girl in real life.’

‘And the masks? What about them?’

‘Exclamation points. Our killer isn’t one for subtext, it seems, but there’s something else too. He’s started blurring his horror lines.’

‘How so?’

‘The reason we couldn’t find Ginny’s phone? Because he called her on it before he killed her. He toyed with her, probably why he was already in the house.’

Doctor Weller appeared over her shoulder. ‘The call is coming from inside the house,’ he said. ‘When A Stranger Calls.’

Ella gestured to him. The man clearly knew his horror history, and Ella appreciated his validation.

‘Old film from the seventies,’ she said. ‘Guy stalks a babysitter, toys with her, tries to stab her.’

Ripley held up both palms and said, ‘Okay, Dark, let’s say I believe you. Why is he blurring the lines now? Why not just find someone that looked like this Ginny character? Or kill the final girl from this seventies movie you mentioned?’

‘The artist’s journey,’ Ella said. ‘First you imitate, then you blend, then you create.’

Ella guessed her information overload had given Ripley a headache because her hands continually found their way to her temples.

‘So, he mimicked Halloween and Hellraiser, then he blended Friday the Thirteenth and...’

‘When A Stranger Calls,’ Ella finished. ‘Or he might be frustrated that he can’t find a final girl that fits, so he’s blending his references, but all that leads us to the final step. Creation.’

‘And that involves?’

‘He’s already started it. That mask he left behind? That ain’t no mask I’ve ever seen in a horror movie before.’

Ripley crossed her arms and glared at the ceiling as though demanding answers from a higher power. ‘So he’s branching out into his own project.’

‘Maybe. It’s hard to say right now. He might still be mixing his references for maximum impact, but pretty soon, he’s going to go off script.’

‘Or to a script that only he knows.’

‘We could compile a list of iconic final girls, but if he’s already passed that stage then it’ll be a waste of time. Plus, young girls in their twenties with a resemblance to their cinematic counterparts? It wouldn’t be an easy task, Ripley. We’d be looking for needles in a pile of needles.’

Ripley motioned towards the exit. ‘But these final girls all have something in common, right? I assume they’re young, fit, attractive.’

‘That’s most people in LA.’

Ripley sighed. ‘Then we need to think like him. If his motive is to break the trope, to demonstrate that in real life, final girls don’t get their cinematic endings, then what would his grand finale look like?’

‘Something big, something *personal*,’ Ella said, but that was all she had.

‘Then we’ve got work to do,’ Ripley said. ‘Hotel or precinct?’

Ella smiled. Sleep could wait. ‘You know my answer.’

‘Precinct it is. Let’s go.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The morning sun painted the Los Angeles skyline with hues of gold and pink. Birds chirped, and the city stirred to life as people hustled about, oblivious to the horror that had unfolded during the night. Mia Ripley leaned against the windowpane of her office, an empty coffee cup in hand, gazing at the city with a distant look.

The exhaustion was evident in every line on her face. Her usually sharp eyes were now clouded with fatigue. She hadn't slept, and neither had Ella. The weight of the case, the lives lost, the mounting pressure to find the killer - it was all taking its toll. They'd been in LA two days, but to Ripley, two days was a lifetime in this city.

Ella walked in, her movements sluggish. She carried a tray with two coffees and a couple of doughnuts. 'Breakfast,' she said, forcing a weak smile.

Ripley turned to face her, accepting her next caffeine injection with gusto. 'You know, I've been in this game for over three decades. Seen some of the most twisted minds at work. But this... this feels different.'

Ella sighed, taking a seat opposite Ripley. The precinct began to fill with the morning crew.

'It's like he's playing a game, but the rules are from a world we're not familiar with.'

Ripley looked at her with weary eyes. 'Ella, I have to admit... I'm out of my depth on this one.'

Ella put down her coffee, her expression softening. 'It's okay. It's hard to connect the dots when you don't know the picture they're supposed to form.'

'But you do,' Ripley said with a resigned tone. Ella nodded slowly. 'Yes. I know the movies, the tropes, the patterns. But it's more than that. It's understanding the psyche of someone

who would take those stories and twist them in such a macabre way.'

'Then you're going to need to take the reins here. I trust you to do it right.'

Ella blinked, clearly taken aback. 'You want me to lead?'

Ripley studied her for a moment, then nodded. 'Yes. You've got an insight into this that I don't. And the truth is, in a few months, you're going to be on your own anyway. I'm only supposed to be the consultant out here.'

She thought of Martin and the life that awaited on the other side of employment, a life that wasn't categorized by serial murder. A big part of the job was knowing when to step away from the limelight, and Ripley was more than ready to take that step now. She'd toyed with the idea for years, but Martin's influence had accelerated the decision. She'd stepped on the gas, but every time she looked in the rearview mirror, she'd see the rookie – better than Ripley had ever been.

'I appreciate the confidence, Mia,' said Ella. 'These jaunts won't be the same without you.'

'You won't be alone. You'll have some rookie to boss around.'

'I'm not sure how to feel about that,' Ella laughed.

Ripley drummed her fingers on the table. 'That's another conversation for another day. Right now, we need to find out if Ginny has any connections to Jessica or Kathleen. Friends, colleagues, lovers, anything.'

'That's what I've spent three hours doing,' Ella said. 'Absolutely nothing so far. Ginny worked a basic admin job and did babysitting gigs on occasion. She didn't run in the same circles as Jessica and Kathleen. No friends in common, didn't frequent the same places. These women are from three different walks of life, I'm sure of it.'

'So the killer's finding them through an unconnected thread.'

'Yes, and there's one thing that sticks out.'

Ripley was ready for it. The anomalies always held the best clues. ‘Go.’

‘All three girls were on social media in some way or another, but Ginny’s account doesn’t show her name. It just says *GMathers01*.’

Ripley took it in. ‘So how’d he find her name? And how’d he find out about her babysitting job?’

‘He must have gotten close to her.’

‘Or close to someone who knows her. Have we talked to the Martin family?’

‘Daniels has. Their alibi checks out, but I’ll ask Daniels to question them a little further.’

Ripley eyed Ella’s whiteboard scrawling and turned her thoughts to the unsub’s physical appearance. ‘So we think this guy crawled in through a vent in the Martins’ house?’

The rookie held her coffee to her chest. Steam drifted up to her chin. ‘That’s how I’d have done it. The vent leads right outside. It’s a tight tunnel, but that just means it’s easier to climb.’

‘That means he’s pretty nimble, probably has good upper body strength too.’

‘I’d say so. All we can really say for certain is that he’s in decent shape. Anything else would be a guess.’

Ripley said, ‘Masked attacker hiding in the vents. This guy is a creepy bastard, isn’t he.’

‘You got that right. Reminds me of Pennywise in the sewers. Maybe he was referencing that, too.’

It was happening again. More terms Ripley wasn’t familiar with. ‘Who?’ she asked. ‘Actually, don’t bother. You’re heading up this case now. Keep your horror movie references to yourself.’

Ella bit the end of her marker pen and asked, ‘You’ve honestly never seen any of these films?’

‘Not to my knowledge. I’ve seen a few classics. My ex-husband took me to see *Misery* on our first date. I’ve seen

Aliens as well. What's the one where Jack Nicholson goes mad?'

'The Shining.'

'Yeah, that one. I've seen those. Didn't care for them much, except Aliens.'

Just as the conversation was veering into movie territory, there was a sharp knock at the door. Chief Daniels stepped in, a world-weary look spread across his face, the sort of weariness that came from working long hours on a case that seemed to go in circles. Ripley knew the feeling well.

'Good morning, chief,' Ella said.

'It might just be,' Daniels said. He placed a USB stick down on the table. 'I've got something for you.'

Ella returned to the table and picked it up. 'What's on here?'

The tech department finally cracked Ginny's cloud. We might not have her phone, but we have the contents of it. Everything is on that stick. Messages, calls, photos, you name it.'

Ella sped towards her laptop and thrust the USB stick in. 'Found anything yet?'

'Tech don't have clearance to view the contents. Privacy violation. Only we can.'

'On it,' Ella said, her fingers hammering the keyboard like she was trying to murder it. Ripley ran around to Ella's side of the desk, both her and Daniels peering closer.

'Check her recent messages, Dark,' Ripley said.

The rookie clicked around, not blinking, familiarizing herself with the layout of the contents. She took to it at an enviable speed, a hundred times quicker than Ripley would. Just another reason it was time for her to hand the reins over to someone younger and better looking.

'Finding them,' Ella said. She clicked between folders, none of them appropriately-named. 'Got them. It's messy, but I think I can figure it out.'

The jumbles of text on the screen were enough to turn Ripley's eyes square. Nothing but names, blocks of text, dates and times. It took Ripley a minute to get her bearings.

Ella said, 'Recent text messages to... three people. Cassie, Layla, Melanie.'

Ripley dug her fingers into the table. 'All women. Not our unsub. Go back a few days.'

Ella dug through the files, so fast Ripley would barely keep up. Within a few seconds, she'd pulled up another load of messy data.

'Nothing. The last male she spoke to was... four days ago. Cliff Martin. But they're just arranging a night for Ginny to come and babysit.'

'Calls?' asked Ripley. 'Photos, videos?'

Ella smashed away at the keys, then her palms hovered over the keyboard as she turned statuesque. 'Oh crap... two anonymous calls, both last night.'

This time, Ripley saw it too. Every log was labeled with the date, time and call length. 'Coroner said Ginny was killed around ten PM.'

'And these calls came in nine fifty-five.'

'Right before she was murdered.'

Daniels asked, 'Can we listen to the calls? Are they recorded?'

'No. No recordings, just information.'

'Dammit,' Ripley said. 'Is there any way to dig deeper, maybe trace the caller's location?'

'I doubt it. He's covered his tracks again, but we might be able to...' Ella stopped abruptly, one finger poised over her mouse. 'Wait a minute. Something doesn't add up here.'

Ripley felt an invisible dagger lodge in her stomach. After thirty years in the FBI, she knew when a breakthrough was on the horizon. It was cop's instinct.

Ella was in a new page, a folder of thumbnails, each one beginning with the prefix *VID* followed by a long number.

‘Media files?’ Ripley asked.

Ella tapped the screen. ‘Ginny died around ten o’clock, and she received a video from someone literally three minutes before. Not only that, but she received *another* video... this morning.’

‘Could be friends sending her stuff?’ Ripley said. ‘People send unsolicited videos all the time.’

Ella shook her head slowly. ‘But look, it’s from the same number that contacted her minutes before her death.’

‘Let’s see them,’ Ripley said. ‘Most recent one first.’

Ella clicked. The video opened.

Ripley’s heart sank to the pit of her stomach.

Because it quickly became clear she was watching the killer’s amateur horror movie.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ella felt like she was seeing beyond the veil, like she'd stumbled upon something she wasn't supposed to see.

But every fiber of her being told her that the killer intended them to see this.

'It's... Jessica Owen's death,' said Chief Daniels.

The video showed a terrified woman running down a street, only for the cameraman to duck behind a house. There was a cunning in his maneuvers, a predator stalking his prey. Ella watched, her breath held, as he chose a new, unexpected path, circling around and positioning himself for the perfect ambush.

As Jessica neared her sanctuary, her front door just steps away, Ella could almost hear the deafening scream trapped within her own throat, urging the woman to move faster, to shut out the danger on her heels. The unmistakable rasp of the cameraman's excited breathing became louder, and then suddenly emerged from his hiding spot and attacked the woman that was clearly Jessica Owen outside her front door.

The camera shook with the violence of the assault. It tilted at an odd angle, offering a skewed perspective of the ground, before it jerkily refocused on the wounded torso of Jessica Owen. The camera then steadied, as though the killer had positioned it against a surface, then showed the final moments of Jessica's life. A shotgun soon followed, solidifying the horrifying tableau that was now forever seared into Ella's memory.

'He filmed it,' Ripley said.

As Jessica Owen stood against her door, impaled by a rifle, a voice in the background began to speak.

I'm going to finish what we started.

The screen went black.

Ella, Ripley and Daniels exchanged glances, all of them wide-eyed, none of them willing to break the silence. Ella finally did it.

‘Finish what he started,’ she said. Ella tried to isolate the voice in her head, see if she could place it. Low-pitched, no regional dialect, classic middle American. It wasn’t distinct enough to latch onto, but she committed it to memory.

‘What’s he talking about?’ Daniels asked.

‘I don’t know, but we’re not done.’ Ella navigated to the second file, the one sent mere minutes before Ginny Mathers had passed away. ‘Brace yourselves, because this could be more of the same.’

Ella clicked, and a video opened up. It was brief. Only eight seconds long.

First, darkness, then splashes of green came into focus. The camera panned to the right, and there lay Amelia Martin – one of the children Ginny had been entrusted to watch – sleeping soundly in her bed.

‘Oh my God,’ Ripley said. ‘He videoed himself in the house.’

The video quickly cut out. Ella stopped and took a deep breath, feeling like she’d just gone ten rounds in a boxing ring.

‘He terrorized Ginny moments before he killed her. He sent her a video while he was upstairs.’

‘Sick freak,’ Daniels said. ‘Why would he do that?’

Ella had a few guesses, but they all came down to the same thing in the end. ‘Because he’s making his own horror movie.’

Ripley and Daniels both fell quiet. Ella felt like she’d spoken something that daren’t be said, like she was speaking what was on everyone’s mind but were too afraid to say it. And now that the idea had escaped her lips, the pieces fell into place.

‘He filmed Jessica and Ginny’s murders. And remember at the old cabin, when we saw those marks in the dust?’

Ripley pinched the bridge of her nose and smirked like she’d been given the answer to a riddle that now seemed

obvious. ‘Tripod,’ she said. ‘He filmed that, too.’

‘Yeah, and he wants us to know it. Our unsub knows we’d find Ginny’s cloud account. These videos are for us.’

Ripley chimed in, ‘When he sent the first video to Ginny, it was a power play. To show he’s omnipotent. By sending her that video, he was signaling to Ginny that she was already his prey, and there was nothing she could do about it. That’s a whole other level of psychological torment.’

‘It’s also a significant risk,’ Ella added. ‘Sending a video while he’s in the house? If she had seen it and screamed or alerted someone... He’s playing a dangerous game.’

Ripley nodded. ‘Which means he’s confident. Overly so. This isn’t just about the murders. It’s about the thrill, the chase. He’s not just playing the role of a serial killer anymore. He’s become one, with all the psychological components to boot.’

‘And he wants us to know it,’ Daniels said, gritting his teeth. ‘He wants us to feel helpless.’

Ella looked at the computer screen, determination prickling every nerve in her body. ‘Yup. But we’re not helpless. He might be confident, but might be his downfall.’ She dug into the file details and pointed to a phone number. ‘Can’t send videos anonymously, not by text, anyway.’

Daniels wiped sweat off his forehead as he leaned closer. Ella caught a noseful of his cologne. ‘Guess he’s not so tech savvy after all.’

‘Ripley, can you trace a number? See who it belongs to?’

‘Yeah, give me a second. What if it’s just a burner phone though?’ Ripley hurried to her desk and fired up her laptop. She navigated to the police database.

‘We might still be able to trace where the message comes from. Daniels, you have software for that?’

‘The tech department will.’

‘Good.’ Ella read out the cell phone number, and Ripley keyed it in. In the modern age, smartphones require some form of verification or registration to use. Plus, with so many

features requiring linked accounts and location data, it was difficult for any smartphone user to remain completely invisible.

A minute passed that felt like an eternity. Ripley's fingers flew across the keyboard, working at a frenzied pace, trying to pry open whatever digital door might hold the key to finding the merciless killer. Ella's eyes remained fixated on the screen, observing every movement, while Chief Daniels paced behind them, his eyes flitting between the computer and the doorway, as though he expected the murderer to walk right through it.

Finally, Ripley's eyes snapped up, looking towards Ella. 'I've got something,' she said, her voice edging on both triumph and disbelief. 'The number... it's registered.'

Ella swallowed a lump in her throat. She hadn't expected it to work. She predicted a swerve, a dead end, another labyrinth of complexities, but instead, Ripley had something. A clear lead. A beacon in the murk. 'Who?' she asked.

'Not a name. A business. It's the contact number for Morton's Video Rental.'

Ella's mind raced, her thoughts a vast, bottomless ocean. 'Video rental? Places like that still exist?'

'That's what it says. Morton's Video Rental. But there are no details about the business itself.'

Ella pushed on, searching the name online. Daniels interrupted.

'Morton, Morton, Morton,' he repeated. 'Why do I know that name?'

Ella turned back. 'It rings a bell?'

Daniels moved over to the window and surveyed the parking lot. 'Something about it, both the name and the store.'

Ella pulled up a few bits of information, but it was as vague as Ripley described. 'Barely anything online about it. No business info, no listed owner. But we need to pay this place a visit.'

Daniels suddenly snapped his fingers. 'Got it,' he said. 'Alex Morton. That's how I know it.'

Ella swallowed hard. ‘Alex Morton? Who’s that?’

The chief hurried round to Ripley’s side of the table. ‘Old case. Six or seven years ago. We busted this guy for stalking a woman. He snuck into her back garden and filmed her through the window. Ripley, pull the details up.’

Ella felt short of breath. Excitement filled her veins. The connection was too poignant to ignore. She pieced the rest of the story together herself.

‘And this Alex fellow was the owner of Morton’s Video Store?’

‘You got it,’ said Daniels. ‘Old VHS store, no idea how it was in operation back then, let alone now.’

‘Here,’ said Ripley. ‘I’ve got Alex Morton’s arrest file. Stalking, harassment, trespassing. He got one-hundred hours of community service.’

Ella dashed around to get a glimpse of the man. His mugshot showed a man in his fifties, a hollow stare despite his gleaming blue eyes. Receding hairline, scruffy white beard, black t-shirt with a motif disappearing as the mugshot cut off.

As Ella peered closer, she recognized the peak of the logo.

‘He’s wearing a Candyman t-shirt.’

Ripley was up, jacket in hand. ‘I don’t know what that is, but I’m guessing it’s a horror movie.’

‘A cult classic,’ Ella said. She checked the time. Not even nine AM. She never thought she’d step foot in a VHS store again, but here she was, gearing up for one last rodeo – a nostalgia trip without the nostalgia.

Daniels said, ‘You ladies need backup? I need to do the paperwork to let Mark Brewer out, but I can send a couple of guys your way if you need.’

Ella wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to take this man down by her own hand. ‘Just have your phone ready,’ Ella said. ‘If we corner him, he can’t run, and that’s enough for us.’

‘Roger that,’ Daniels said.

Ella patted herself down, ensuring the big three were in place; gun, phone, handcuffs.

‘Come on, Mia, let’s go check out the latest releases.’

A horror-obsessed serial killer dead set on making a real-life slasher film. Whoever Alex Morton was, Ella had to meet him.

And she’d take great pleasure in canceling his production.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As Ella stepped out of the car, the scent of aged paper and musty air met her nostrils. The atmosphere around the store seemed still, almost stifling. Despite its decrepit appearance, she could feel the weight of history — both the store's and Alex Morton's — pressing down on her.

The dilapidated storefront of Morton's Video Rental seemed to sag beneath the weight of decades. The paint was chipped and faded, the sign overhead flickered with a neon light that seemed to stubbornly cling to life. The windows were obscured with age-old grime and layers of faded movie posters from a time long past, boasting titles from the eighties and nineties.

Adjacent businesses had been renovated and modernized over the years, but Morton's stood defiant, like an old relic from a forgotten era, a testament to its owner's stubbornness or perhaps a nostalgic attachment to the past. Ella could see clusters of old VHS tapes stacked haphazardly behind the glass, their spines faded by time and sunlight.

Ripley joined her side, casting a wary glance at the storefront. 'Feels like we've stepped back in time,' she murmured, adjusting her sunglasses atop her head.

'I half expect to see a Betamax section,' Ella said.

The pair approached the entrance, the door adorned with a faded sticker proclaiming *Whatever you do, don't fall asleep*.

Ella tapped it, feeling a static charge run down her fingertips. 'Famous line. It's from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.'

Ripley huffed. 'Pretty lame quote. Come on, I'm sick of this horror movie crap. Let's bag this son of a bitch.'

Ella grasped the rusty handle, and with a slight push, the bell overhead chimed, announcing their entrance. Inside, the dim fluorescent lighting revealed rows upon rows of VHS

tapes. The shelves were covered in a fine layer of dust, and the linoleum floor creaked beneath their feet. The walls were painted a dull, sun-bleached yellow, and the entire place had a quiet air of decay. A small counter stood at the back, with an ancient cash register and a display case of candy so old Ella wouldn't dare touch it.

From a shadowed corner, the silhouette of a man emerged. His build matched the mugshot Ella had seen thirty minutes ago, but age had etched deeper lines into his face. His gaze, however, remained unchanged – cold calculating, and unsettlingly familiar.

‘Well,’ the man began, voice dripping with mock sweetness, ‘I wasn't expecting customers this early. Especially not from the Maywood PD.’ He was wearing stained brown trousers and an old grey shirt, both harmonizing with the store's dull aesthetic.

Ella squared her shoulders, refusing to be intimidated. She took note of the man's voice, comparing it to the voice she'd heard on the killer's audio clip. Similarities were there - a low-pitched resonance, void of any distinctive accent. It was nondescript yet unmistakably familiar. She wondered if Ripley had caught on as well.

‘Just browsing. Any new releases?’

The store owner smirked. ‘Not here. For some, the past is far more interesting than the present.’

Ripley shifted slightly. ‘I guess the past has a way of catching up to you. And what makes you think we're from the Maywood PD?’

He lowered his eyes. ‘Badges, guns. You're not the first cops to show up here.’

‘Why's that?’ Ella asked. She scrutinized the man on the other side of the counter, weighing up the probability that he was responsible for three murders in three days. He didn't have the nimble figure she'd profiled the killer to have, but there was enough upper body strength there to climb a narrow vent with a little contortion.

‘Cops don't like me... and I don't like cops.’

Ella spied her partner, reaching for her pistol, but Ella subtly grabbed her wrist. 'It's a line from Robocop,' she said.

The owner leaned forward on the counter, an unexpected sign of cooperation. 'You know your movies.'

'As do you. So tell me, Alex Morton, what's your favorite scary movie?'

Alex furrowed his brow at the mention of his name. 'Is that a trick question?'

'No.'

'Well, the classics are classic for a reason. Psycho, Tenebrae, Halloween.'

Halloween, Ella thought. If Alex was her unsub, would he mention the very film that inspired one of his murders? Or was it a double-bluff? She checked his microsignals, but the intricacies of the mouth – one of the key visuals in gauging body language – was obscured by a cloud of white hair.

'What about Hellraiser, Friday the Thirteenth?' she asked.

Alex shook his head firmly. 'Too supernatural. I like the real. The gritty. Anyway, enough of the pleasantries, why are you here?'

Ella felt a twinge of unease as Alex's demeanor shifted. A new composure, combined with a possible veiled hint, left a cold feeling in her stomach. 'We're FBI. I'm Agent Dark and this is Agent Ripley.'

Alex eyed her partner. 'Ripley, huh?'

'Yup, now Mr. Morton, we'd like to know where you were the past three nights.'

Alex took a step back. 'Why?'

'Curiosity.'

'Fine. I was here. All night, every night.'

Ella tried to peer into the back room behind her suspect. 'All night?'

Alex chuckled, 'Of course. This old place isn't just a store, it's my home.' He gestured to a curtained doorway towards the

back, likely leading to his living quarters. ‘No need to go out when you have the world of cinema right here.’

Ripley shot a sidelong glance at Ella. ‘Must get lonely,’ she remarked.

His gaze softened for a moment, hinting at a touch of sadness. ‘It can be. But movies...they’re a great escape.’

Ella asked, ‘Anyone to verify those claims?’

‘No. I live alone.’

Ella tilted her head, analyzing him. The solitude he mentioned was evident in his world weariness ‘No neighbors? No staff?’

He smirked. ‘Neighbors? This isn’t a residential area, Agent Dark. And staff? Haven’t needed any since the digital age took over. VHS tapes aren’t exactly flying off the shelves.’

There was a cold silence as Ella weighed up her options. She caught Ripley’s eye, and her expression said exactly what Ella was thinking. With no alibi and a solid connection to Ginny Mathers’ murder, they had to arrest him.

‘Mr. Mathers, I’m sorry, but we need to talk to you at the precinct. Could you step this way, please?’ Ella reached into her pocket for her handcuffs. Meanwhile, Alex had frozen on the spot, eyes widening just a fraction. He looked at Ella, then at Ripley, and his gaze darted towards the back room.

The tension was palpable, the atmosphere charged. Ella knew that the next few moments were critical. Ripley, seeing Alex’s gaze move to the back room, began moving towards his potential escape route.

‘Easy now, Alex. We just want to ask a few questions.’

He swallowed hard, eyes darting between the two agents. ‘I didn’t do anything,’ he muttered, his voice shaky. ‘I’ve just been here, minding my own business.’

Ella tried to keep her voice level and calm. ‘If that’s the case, then you have nothing to worry about. We just need you to come with us, answer a few questions, and we’ll sort everything out.’

But Alex's panic was evident. 'You don't understand. It's not that simple.' His voice became frantic, fear dogging every word.

Suddenly, with the agility of a man half his size, Alex bolted towards the back room, shoving past a stand filled with DVDs, scattering them in his wake.

The adrenaline came thick and fast, supercharging Ella's nervous system as she leaped into action. Ripley was hot on his heels, the sound of tapes toppling and aged racks creaking filling the air as the agents quickly closed the distance. As they neared the back room, a mess of wires and old movie equipment met them.

Ella yelled, 'Stop! Alex!' But he didn't listen, disappearing through the curtained doorway. The curtain billowed as they pushed through, revealing Alex's living quarters – a small room cluttered with old movie paraphernalia, film posters, stacks of DVDs and a bed covered with faded linens. The room had a heavy, musty smell, mixed with the scent of old popcorn and stale cigarettes. A small kitchenette was set to one side, with a half-eaten sandwich resting on a plate.

She could hear Alex's rapid breathing and footsteps ahead, and suddenly, a rear door flew open, filtering sunlight in narrow beams. The daylight blinded Ella, causing her to squint as she adjusted to the sudden brightness. She was out in a long alleyway that ran behind a number of old stores, and not only did Alex have a good head start, but he'd surely know the layout much better than the agents.

Ripley was still hot on Alex's heels, her agility impressive as she pursued the blur disappearing down the alleyway. Alex made a mad dash towards a tall chain-link fence, desperation in his pace, driven by a rush Ella had seldom expected.

Ripley quickly caught up, and they were only a few steps behind Alex as he reached the fence. For a moment, it seemed he'd hesitate, but he began scaling the fence with surprising dexterity.

'Dark, flank right! He'll try to head towards the main street!' Ripley called out, not breaking her stride.

Alex was nearly over, his shoe catching on a loose wire as he tried to swing his leg over. Ripley was almost at the base, reaching up to try to grab Alex's foot, but he managed to kick free, losing a shoe in the process. With a final push, he dropped onto the other side of the fence, stumbling slightly before regaining his footing.

Ella changed her course, aiming to cut Alex off at the pass. Her shoes pounded on the cracked asphalt as she passed down a slot between two of the old buildings, out onto the main stretch of road. As Ella rounded the next corner, she spotted the entrance of the old grocery store. With its broken glass panes and faded signage, it stood as another relic of the past. And, to her surprise, she saw Alex making a beeline for it, pushing through the half-hinged door and disappearing inside.

She followed on his trail, gesturing to her fence-scaling partner to join her. Ella stopped at the entrance to allow Ripley to catch up.

'Be ready,' Ella yelled. 'He's cornered now. He might be more desperate.'

Ripley nodded, tightening her grip on her pistol. 'You take lead. I got your six.'

Ella reminded herself of the old adage that only guilty people ran. Guilty of what? Ella didn't know, but she was going to find out before morning was out.

The two agents entered the store with caution, a piercing bell announcing their arrival. It was as derelict inside as it looked from the outside, with old wooden shelves stocked with products that looked long past their expiration.

'Alex Morton, show yourself,' Ella called.

Behind the dusty counter, a clerk appeared from a back room, then held up her hands in surrender as she spotted Ella's pistol. Ella gestured for her to disappear to safety.

Ella edged inside, checking every direction. An aisle on her left seemed promising. Faded cans of soup and boxes of cereal lined the shelves, and it led to what looked like an old butcher's section at the back. To her right, an old pharmacy

counter was lined with dusty bottles and tinctures, its adjacent aisle leading to what looked like an old office or storage room.

‘You go left, I’ll go right,’ Ripley said.

Ella grabbed her partner’s arm. ‘No. This guy’s a runner. Block the exit.’

Ripley nodded. ‘Alright. Don’t take any chances,’ she said as she concealed herself next to the entranceway. Ella continued sidestepping through the store, advancing slowly, her breath shallow.

As Ella approached the fridge section, her eyes darted around to take in every detail. From the corner, a movement caught her attention. Without warning, the suspect lunged from behind a display, eyes wild and frenzied, his fingers outstretched and aiming for her throat.

Instinctively, Ella raised her forearm, blocking his advance, while her free hand reached for her sidearm. They locked into a knot, and Alex’s momentum forced them backward, crashing into a glass fridge door and rattling the contents inside. Ella quickly pivoted on one foot and managed to turn their positions, using Alex’s own force against him. She thrust him against the glass, but Alex bounced off and used the force to his advantage. He struck her cheek with an elbow, dazing her for a moment, then lunged back in preparation for a relentless assault.

Ella shook off the sudden pain. She wasn’t here to play this man’s games, and she certainly wasn’t about to become a victim in his twisted plot.

She ducked to avoid another swing, and with a swift and precise kick to Alex’s knee, she brought him down to a single leg. He staggered, his face contorting, and then Ella drove her knee into his midsection, forcing the air from Alex’s lungs and momentarily stunning him.

Seizing the momentary advantage, Ella lunged at Alex, using her body weight to propel both of them forward.

Ella had him. The man the news were calling the Maywood Horror Murderer. He was within arresting distance, and she was going to make sure she extracted every piece of

information from his twisted brain by whatever means necessary.

Alex Morton crashed spine-first into the refrigerator door, raining down glass from the heavens and coating both he and Ella in crystalline shards. Ella felt no pain, only determination. Alex sprawled out within – just another expired product lining the shelves.

With a spit of blood, Alex cried, ‘It’s.... not my fault.’

Footsteps crossed the aisle, stopping at the scene of the slaughter. Ella glanced back and saw one terrified shopkeeper and one Agent Ripley. She threw Ella her handcuffs.

Alex Morton grabbed onto the doorframe to pick himself up but fell under his own weight.

‘You... could have killed me,’ Alex spat.

Ella snapped one cuff on his wrist. Time to put the exclamation point on this case.

‘Dead or alive, you’re coming with me.’

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

He kept his distance as he followed her, assuming the role of a simple stranger that happened to be traveling the same path through the city backstreets. Every now and then, she would pause to peer into a shop window or to greet a familiar face. To anyone observing, she seemed carefree, but he saw more. He saw the way her eyes darted around occasionally, the slight quiver in her hand when she thought no one was watching, the way she held her bag a little too tight. There was an underlying current of fear of past traumas that still haunted her.

He found himself entranced by her, but not in the way he had been with the others. This wasn't the predatory thrill he felt when stalking a victim. This was something different, something more complex. Was it admiration? Fascination? He couldn't quite put a finger on it.

Her name was Aurora. An ethereal name for an ethereal beauty. But what drew him to her wasn't just her physical allure – it was the enigma that surrounded her.

He had met her once before, even conversed with her, although their interaction only lasted a few fleeting moments. They had exchanged a few pleasantries, words Aurora had no doubt forgotten but had etched in his mind forever. He had been someone else then, wearing a different face, a different persona. He was certain she wouldn't remember him, but he remembered her. Every detail, every nuance.

She took a turn into a quieter alley, and his heart rate quickened. The thrill of the chase, the dance between the predator and the prey – it was intoxicating. He maintained his distance, careful not to alert her. But every so often, he would take a step too quickly, his shoe echoing on the sidewalk, and she would glance over her shoulder, as if sensing something amiss.

Yet, he was adept at this game. Every time she looked back, he was gone, blending seamlessly with the surroundings, hiding in plain sight. He relished these moments – this was his art, his mastery.

As Aurora passed by a small, dimly lit curio shop, the man's eyes wandered to the window display. Among the odd assortments of antique toys, dusty trinkets, and faded photographs, there was an object that monetarily prized his attention from the beautiful girl.

It was an old, hand-crafted, ornate mask, an artifact from a past civilization that had been hauled out of the ground. With its bronze surface and diamond eyes, it reminded him of a mask his uncle had once created. Not for a movie, but as a personal project—an intricate blend of history and horror. It had been a testament to his uncle's unparalleled skills in special effects craftsmanship.

This particular mask had always intrigued him as a child, with its haunting features that seemed to shift and change when viewed from different angles. The mask had a dual nature; part beauty, part beast. It was said to be inspired by an ancient deity that represented the dualities of life - creation and destruction, love and hate.

Seeing it now in the curio shop window, the memories surged forward. He remembered sneaking into his uncle's studio late at night just to get a closer look at that mask. He remembered how the cold metal felt against his skin, how the features seemed to come alive. It was a piece of art that had both terrified and captivated him. But more than that, it was a symbol of his uncle's genius - a genius that had been cruelly snuffed out by the unforgiving world of Hollywood.

Because his uncle, a once-renowned special effects artist, had crafted similar masks for movies. This was during a time when practical effects were an art form before CGI took over. His uncle had been passionate, always eager to push the boundaries, forever chasing the next big innovation. But ambition can be a double-edged sword, and for his uncle, it was his undoing.

There was that one film – a horror movie that was supposed to be his magnum opus. But something tragedy struck. A mask that was supposed to be just a prop became all too real. His uncle hadn't taken the necessary precautions, and under the bright lights of the film set, the latex inside had melted, gluing itself to the actor's face and resulting in unexpected suffocation.

The details were hushed up, but the scars ran deep. His uncle was blacklisted from the industry, branded a failure, and relegated to obscurity. The irrelevancy turned his uncle into a bitter man, and so the uncle vented his frustrations on one nephew in particular.

He introduced this nephew to the world of horror movies at much too young an age. Watching a slasher film was not a bonding experience; it was punishment. If he misbehaved or refused to run errands, he was made to watch the most gruesome scenes. Locked in the dim room, the only light being the flickering screen projecting nightmares, he would curl into a ball, praying for it to end.

The dinner table scene from Texas Chainsaw Massacre. The stained glass hanging from Suspiria. Marty in the Mirror from Poltergeist. The cult sacrifice from the Wicker Man. Needles down the fingernails, demon vomit from possessed children, annihilated families, young girls killed and mutilated. The scenes played out in his head as though he'd lived through these horrors himself, more real than his own memories.

But over time, terror morphed into fascination. The dread lost its edge, and the monsters that haunted his childhood dreams became something else. They became idols, mentors, even friends. Demons to some, angels to others. These monsters represented strength, control, and power – things he felt he lacked in his real life. Instead of fearing them, he began to idolize them, and the lines between fantasy and reality began to blur.

That was how he was initiated into the macabre world of horror. The films that had once been instruments of torture became his safe haven. Evil thenceforth became his good. He found solace in the predictable rhythms of the genre – the

buildup, the climax, the final confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist. He especially admired the slasher films where the killer, despite the odds, always came back for one more scare.

But horror movies always ended one way; vanquished monsters, triumphant heroes, love and resilience conquering all, beauty slaying the beast.

And that made him sick.

In the safety of the dark theater or the confines of his room, he would sneer at the predictable endings. The scream queens always survived, the heroes always prevailed, and good always trumped evil. It was a tired narrative that no longer satiated his evolved tastes. The real world, as he saw it, was much different. It was unpredictable, chaotic, and often cruel. Heroes didn't always win, monsters weren't always slain, and sometimes the damsel in distress became the victim. His own life was a testament to that. His tormented childhood, the injustices dealt to his uncle, the scorn of society. It was all evidence of the world's twisted reality.

His disillusionment grew, and he started to write his own stories in his mind, tales where the predator was always a step ahead, where the prey's struggles were in vain, where the end was always bitter and devoid of hope. It was a world where he had the power, the control, and where the rules of conventional horror didn't apply. His mind began to mesh these fantasies with reality. Every encounter, every observation, every face on the street became a part of his dark narrative. He fancied himself a director of his own horror masterpiece, and the world was his film set.

Shaking his head, he tried to banish the memories, focusing once again on Aurora. But the ghosts of the past clung to him, whispering in his ear, reminding him of the twisted path that had brought him to this very moment.

Aurora had moved ahead, disappearing from his immediate line of sight. Swiftly, he paced forward, eager to find her again. Aurora, with her air of vulnerability and strength, was the perfect final girl for his story. She had everything: the

looks, the charisma, the resilience, even the cutesy name that was equal parts sweetheart and warrior.

Aurora was the one who would bring his tale to its climactic end.

Rounding the corner, he finally caught a glimpse of her. Aurora's apartment building stood before him, an old brick structure that seemed to wear the history of the city on its very walls. He observed from the shadows as Aurora entered her building, her silhouette briefly appearing in the window as she moved up the staircase. The street was silent, save for the distant hum of city life. He waited for a beat, ensuring no one had seen him, before making his move.

As he approached the building, he remembered their brief interaction, the softness of her voice, the brief touch of her hand as they'd exchanged sweet nothings.

He paused for a moment outside her apartment door, listening for any sign of movement from within.

All was quiet. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out an item, carefully wrapped, holding it between his fingers. He glanced around once more, ensuring that the hallway remained deserted. Then, with precision, he slipped the object under Aurora's door.

The scene was set.

Time to destroy the one horror trope he'd despised since day one – the final girl.

And this time, it wasn't just a symbol – it was a *real* final girl.

If Aurora – or those detectives he'd seen at the crime scenes – thought that this story had a happy ending, they hadn't been paying attention.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

‘Alex, we’re going to make this short and sweet,’ Ella said. Beside her, Ripley pulled a sheet of paper out of a brown folder and pushed it towards the cuffed suspect on the other side of the table. The man had cuts to his neck and shoulder, but as far as Ella was concerned, he Alex Morton got off lightly.

Ripley said, ‘This is a list of numbers that contacted Ginny Mathers’ last night. Mind telling us why your number is top of the list? Twice?’

Alex shifted uncomfortably in his seat, trying to separate his hands but finding resistance from the chains. ‘Looks like a lot of numbers called Ginny last night.’

‘Wrong,’ Ella said. ‘You were the last one. You sent her two videos, and the bad news for you is... we’ve seen those videos.’

‘I don’t know anyone named Ginny Mathers, and that’s not my phone. Well, it is, but it’s not like that.’

Ella raised an eyebrow. ‘Not like what?’

Alex’s eyes darted between Ella and Ripley, a classic deer in the headlights. ‘It’s not like what you think. My phone was stolen last week.’

Ripley scoffed. ‘That’s convenient.’

Alex’s voice trembled, a mixture of desperation and fear. ‘Listen, I was at a bar with some buddies, okay? I had a bit too much to drink. When I woke up, my phone was gone. I’ve never seen these *videos*, and I have no idea who this Ginny person is.’

Ella leaned in, her face inches from his. ‘Alex, I expected better from a movie buff like you. You know the one offense that instantly breaks immersion?’

‘What?’

‘Bad continuity. This morning, you told us you never leave your store, yet you were *at the bar with your buddies.*’

Alex pressed his palms to his eyes, although it required some contortion. ‘Okay, okay. There’s more to it.’

Ella sat back and waited for him to tie himself in knots. The more a suspect talked, the more chance they had of incriminating themselves.

‘Go on,’ Ripley said.

Alex swallowed hard. ‘My store has a... private area in the back. We host adult film viewings at weekends. It’s a niche clientele, and it brings in good money. It’s the only way my store can stay afloat.’

Ella grimaced at the thought. She assumed there might be some kind of money laundering operation going on, but porn parties were something else. She wasn’t sure which was worse.

‘Sex parties?’ asked Ripley. She, too, sounded unconvinced.

‘No, we just watch films. I thought that’s why you were there. To bust me.’

Ella caught her partner’s side-eye. Ella had a lot of questions, not all of which related to the case.

‘Your amateur porn cinema doesn’t concern us,’ said Ella. ‘Hell, it’s not even illegal. We only care when dead people show up in our laps.’

Alex’s face flushed white. He tried to spread his hands apart again. He couldn’t, but he kept trying regardless. Ella saw the anxiety pick up speed.

‘Dead people? You don’t mean... the horror murders?’

Both agents sat back in unison. Ella let the silence do the talking.

‘Whoa, hold up,’ Alex cried. ‘I heard about them. Everyone has, but please tell me you don’t suspect *me?*’

‘Horror buff. Lives in the area. You even contacted our latest victim minutes before her death. If the shoe fits, Alex,’

Ella's voice was ice-cold.

Ripley leaned in. 'See, here's the problem, Alex. You've got a lot of suspicious circumstantial evidence against you. The phone, your connection to the area, and now this... side business of yours. And what kind of person doesn't cancel their service when their phone gets stolen?'

'I had *nothing* to do with those murders! I don't know anyone named Ginny. Those films, those parties, it's all just business! Entertainment! I wouldn't hurt anyone! And my phone? I thought I just... misplaced it.'

Alex's panic seemed genuine, but Ella had seen enough suspects to know that looks were merely the surface.

Ella said, 'Well, you're going to have to help us out here, Alex. You don't have any alibis for the past three nights?'

Alex shielded his face with both palms as he gently rocked to and fro in his chair. He grabbed his beard with a firm grip and said, 'Two nights ago. I had one of my parties. People will have seen me. You can ask anyone!'

Two nights ago. The night of Jessica Owen's murder. Ella had to play it coy because if Alex was lying, there was a chance she could slip him up.

'Right. And your phone. It went missing last night?' She phrased it as a statement rather than a question.

'No, no,' Alex violently shook his head. 'I lost it last Saturday night. Over a week ago.'

Ella silently cursed, holding back a sigh she desperately wanted to gush. Jessica Owen's death had most likely been filmed on Alex's phone too.

She felt her airtight case becoming undone. The finish line was dissolving into the distance, along with the possibility of any conviction. Ella still wasn't convinced Alex Morton was innocent, but she'd used nearly all of her ammunition in eliciting a confession.

All except one.

She gauged her partner's body language, still rigid and focused, but intuition told her that Ripley was struggling for

interrogation topics too.

Time to shoot the final bullet.

Without warning, she reached into her folder and pulled out a picture of the mask she'd found in the vent at the babysitter scene. The nameless mask, the personal mask. She flung it across the table and glued her stare to the man in front of her.

Alex squinted at the picture, not touching it. 'What's this?'

'You tell us,' Ella said.

She inspected for any signs of familiarity or recognition. This type of offender wouldn't be able to resist acknowledging his handiwork, especially when framed by the glossy parameters of a crime scene photograph.

Ella focused on the corners of Alex's mouth, his shoulders, his pupils, feet, fingertips, forehead wrinkles.

And she got nothing.

'I don't know what this is.'

Ripley asked, 'What's it look like to you?'

Alex sucked air through clenched teeth. 'A demon face? I don't know.'

Ella sighed inwardly. She had genuinely hoped that this would be the piece of evidence that broke him, the one thing that he couldn't deny. But his genuine confusion and lack of recognition seemed to seal the deal: either Alex was an incredibly talented actor, or he truly had no connection to the mask.

She leaned back, feeling defeated. 'Alex, it seems we're at an impasse here.'

Ripley added, 'Our job is to get to the truth, to get justice for these victims. If you're truly innocent, we need to know now.'

Alex seemed to deflate in his chair. 'I swear, I had nothing to do with these murders. Everything about my phone and the private screenings at my shop is true. But I never hurt anyone.'

Ella inspected her fingernails while she weighed up her next move. Piecing Alex's story together, she arrived at one

logical conclusion. Alex Morton was something of a hermit, and by his own admission, most of his social interaction came from his illicit parties.

And their killer – if it wasn't the man in front of her – had taken Alex Morton's phone for a reason.

It was another twist in his tale. A swerve to add depth to his story. The killer wanted Alex Morton as a suspect because it would make the finale that much grander.

'So, Alex, let's say we believe you.'

Alex sighed so heavily that Ella felt his breath on her face. Sourness and cigarettes. 'Please do. I'm not a murderer.'

'Chances are someone stole your phone during one of your little get-togethers at the back of your store?'

'Yes. I mean, I don't know,' Alex stuttered.

'Continuity, Alex,' Ella reminded him. 'You said you hosted your parties at weekends, and that you lost your phone Saturday night.'

Alex flopped back in his seat again. Ella suspected that he knew what was coming.

Ripley leaned in and said, 'That means our killer was in your store last Saturday night.'

The suspect tensed up at the comment. Ella spotted signs of genuine distress in his microsignals – increased blink rate, parted lips, unnaturally furrowed brow. As far as she could tell, Alex's response was authentic.

Ella's phone began to ring in her pocket. She ignored it for a moment.

'So, we'll expect a list of names on our desk in thirty minutes. Don't forget anyone.'

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Outside the interrogation room, Ella returned the call she'd missed. It was from a desk at Virginia PD

'Miss Dark?' a voice said. 'It's Bob Stone at Virginia.'

A lump formed in Ella's throat. Bob Stone was an old friend from her days in law enforcement and the one she'd entrusted to keep tabs on Logan Nash while she was away.

'Bob, is everything okay?' she asked.

'Bear with me a second, Dark, the line is bad. I'm going to try you on another number.'

The cop suddenly hung up. Ella moved the phone from her ear and glanced at the screen in confusion. The line had been fine.

Then another number called. A cell number she didn't have saved.

'Hello?' she asked.

'Ella, Bob again, on my personal phone. I need to talk to you – off the record.'

Ella's curiosity piqued. She didn't like the sound of this. 'Ah, now the illicit call makes sense,' she said.

'Yeah. Listen closely because I can't talk for long. Your buddy Logan Nash? He's already causing problems.'

Ella shuffled down a corridor, away from prying eyes. 'What's he done, Bob?'

'He's already gone beyond borders. We got alerted he was seven miles out of his zone, so we had to swoop in and find him.'

'But you got him?'

'Yeah, we got him,' Bob said. 'He played it stupid, pretended he lost track of his whereabouts, but I know better. He's planning something and I don't like it.'

Despite being nestled in a corner, Ella suddenly felt like she was being watched. Barely two days in, and Nash was already trying to pull some tricks. What if he was coming for her? What if he was organizing his travel arrangements to some lawless faraway land?

‘Where was he when you caught him?’ Ella asked.

‘Liquor store. Probably one of the Diamonds’ stores.’

Ella rested her forehead against the wall, tempted to slam some of the frustration away. ‘You took him back to his safe house, right?’

‘Yes I did,’ Bob said, ‘and that’s why I’m calling.’

Ella lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘Where is he, Bob?’

‘I can’t give you the exact address or number, you understand that, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘But our safe houses haven’t changed since you were here. He’s on the outskirts, zero security, probably bored... up to his neck in boredom, you could say.’

Ella read the subtext. They said the real music was the silence between the notes.

‘Thank you, Bob. This conversation never happened.’

‘Take care. Good luck in California. If you need me, call my cell, not my desk.’

‘You got it.’ Ella ended the call. One of Ella’s first tasks at Virginia PD ten years ago had been to keep an eye on a safe house. Bob Stone had been her watching partner, and the offender they were guarding had been a local strangler.

Up to his neck.

Ella knew exactly where Logan Nash was being held, but what could she do? In a day or two, once surveillance on him had died down, there was nothing stopping him fleeing. For all she knew, he could already have an escape plan in place. Worse yet, a murder plan.

She moved back up the corridor, thoughts whirring like a carousel. Before she could deal with Logan Nash, she still had

a horror movie fanatic to find.

‘Dark,’ Ripley called from the end of the corridor. ‘Get over here.’

Ella met her, discarding the Nash issue for as long as her conscious mind would allow. ‘We got something?’

‘Morton’s drawn up his list of perverts.’ She waved a piece of paper in Ella’s face. ‘He can’t remember who was at his place last Saturday night, so he’s listed all of his little voyeur friends. Fifty-six names.’

Ella took the list and scanned each line. ‘Popular guy.’

Ripley looked eager, maybe because she was one step closer to leaving California. ‘Surprisingly, and more importantly, one of the guys on this list is our unsub. That means we’ve got a lot of work to do.’

Ella took a deep breath, feeling the weight of both the current case and the looming threat of Logan Nash. She couldn’t let her personal ties to the past get in the way of her duty to protect the people of California from a deranged killer.

‘We’ll run backgrounds on each of them, see if any of them have criminal pasts or connections to any of the victims.’

‘You take half the names, I’ll take the other, and with any luck, we might get this fanatic before he begins act three.’

Ella sat back in her chair, massaging her temples. The list, which once promised a lead, now lay crumpled in a ball on her desk. The weight of disappointment pressed against her, but she wouldn’t let it pin her down. She turned her attention back to the drawing board she had been maintaining since she got here, a cacophony of notes, patterns, and scribbles about horror tropes. If there was a connection, it was buried in here somewhere.

‘Ella?’ Mia’s voice broke through her concentration.

‘You’re coming up short too, right?’

‘Yup. These guys might be perverts, but they’re squeaky clean in the eyes of the law. All I’ve got is a few parking tickets and a public urination charge.’

‘That’s more than I’ve got,’ Ella said. ‘Cleaner than a duck’s back over here.’

Ella paced around, each step heavier than the last. ‘Have forensics got anything back from Ginny’s scene yet? Or anything from the new mask?’

Ripley scrambled around her table and pulled up a printout. ‘Negative. Nothing but a few cloth fibers at the scene, but tracing them to any source will be impossible. No hair strands in the mask, and tech said that this mask is completely unique. They’ve run it through imaging software and found nothing like it anywhere online. However, they did say there were flakes of skin around the eyeholes.’

‘Skin flakes? So we can pull DNA from that?’

‘Possibly, but sourcing DNA isn’t the issue. Matching it is.’

Ella ran a hand through her hair in frustration. ‘So, all we know is our killer wore this mask at some point.’

‘Yup. And like you said yesterday, homicidal killers in horror masks don’t just appear out of thin air. This little venture is his end game. Years of criminal activity has brought him here.’

Ella couldn’t agree more. She turned back to her board of movie tropes, trying to visualize the world through the lens of a horror villain. She thought of Leatherface, Hannibal Lecter, Michael Myers, Norman Bates, Pinhead, Jason Vorhees. The icons, the legendary faces of evil. Did they have anything in common that their unsub might relate to?

Their back stories had been the gateway to Ella’s life of profiling real monsters, so if she wanted to understand this killer, she needed to take a few steps back in time.

She threw some ideas out there, using Ripley as her sounding board. ‘Mia, the killers we catch all start small. They begin with burglary and rape and then progress to homicide.’

‘Yup. The psycho’s journey. What about it?’

She thought again of Michael and Jason and Hannibal. These fictional psychopaths didn't follow the typical cycle of a fledgling murderer, and perhaps that was why the unsub related so much to them.

'Horror villains don't do that.'

'They don't?'

'No. They *snap*. It's rarely a cycle of abuse. Instead it's a single incident that defines their evil.'

'That happens in the real world, too.'

Ella considered it. Ripley was right. The Yorkshire Ripper killed thirteen women because a sex worker laughed at him. Ed Gein dug up corpses to symbolically resurrect his mother.

Thoughts of Ed Gein, the famous grave robber and murderer that inspired multiple fictional horror icons. Norman Bates, Leatherface, Buffalo Bill – all derivations of a real killer, all of whom were triggered by individual instances that characterized their wickedness.

Norman Bates was sent abused by his mother.

Leatherface was raised by a cannibalistic family.

Buffalo Bill was rejected for sex change surgery.

Ella spoke her next thoughts aloud, hoping Ripley might filter her thoughts and make sense of them. 'Hannibal Lecter saw his sister get killed and eaten during the war. Michael Myers was locked in an asylum for decades. Pinhead had been traumatized by the war. Jason Vorhees drowned as a child. Jigsaw lost his child and developed cancer.'

Ripley looked nonplussed. 'Dark, are you okay? You're talking about fictional characters. Real lives don't have the convenience of a script.'

But Ella was too deep to let go. 'Samara Morgan was drowned by her mother. Candyman was lynched. Carrie White was humiliated by schoolmates.'

'You're just talking about movies now.'

Ella's gaze flitted back to her board, tracing the links she had made between the fictional villains and their motivations.

‘Mia, what if we’re profiling this guy all wrong. What if he didn’t start life as a criminal? What if he’s not a typical psychopath?’

‘You mean...’

‘Yeah,’ Ella said. ‘What if our killer is actually a victim?’

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Ella was back at her laptop, police database at the ready. With her new angle, she was ready to dive in at the deep end. She'd now found the simple term for what she was looking for – she needed to find her unsub's origin story.

Mia leaned forward, elbows on her desk. 'That would change everything. Our unsub might have had a turning point, a defining trauma that pushed him over the edge.'

'Exactly. Maybe it's not about the evolution of a criminal, but the transformation of a victim into a killer. If we can identify that trauma, maybe we can get a clearer picture of who he is and why he's doing this.'

Ripley folded her arms, nodding along with Ella's spiel. 'It's not a common path. Most victims of trauma don't turn into killers. But if he's modeling himself after these horror icons, then he's choosing to act out in this way, driven by that initial trauma.'

'And it means our profiling approach has to change. We're not looking for the typical signs of criminal escalation. We're looking for a sudden and drastic change in behavior. Could be something that happened to a wife, parent, sibling, friend.'

Ripley held up her hands in surrender, 'Hold up a minute, Dark. Let's apply some real-world logic to this whole thing.'

Ella's fingers froze over the keyboard. She willed her partner to continue.

'Slasher villains live unrealistic lives. There aren't families of cannibals out in rural Texas. There aren't deformed lunatics in hockey masks stalking campsites. If there was, we'd know about them.'

Ripley had a point, but Ella wasn't sure how it fit. 'So how do we fix that?'

'Well, I heard all that shit you just talked and one thing stood out to me.'

‘What?’

‘Injustice. All those names you threw out all seemed pissed because no one helped them. Sound reasonable?’

Ella contemplated the idea and came to an easy conclusion. ‘Very much so.’

‘So, what’s the closest thing we have to such injustices?’

The answer was right there in front of her. ‘Unsolved cases,’ Ella said.

Ripley snapped her fingers. ‘Murders, disappearances, somewhere an unsub might feel the system failed them.’

Ella nodded in agreement, her fingers moving quickly as she started compiling a list of potential cases. ‘We find that wound, and we find our killer.’

‘Bingo. Now we just need to...’

‘Oh Christ,’ Ella interrupted as her results flashed up on the screen. ‘I forgot LA was the murder capital of the world.’

‘Don’t I know it? How many results?’

‘Nearly eleven thousand unsolved crimes in total. Everything from murder to fraud to identity theft.’

‘Jesus wept. How far back?’

‘Forty years,’ Ella said.

‘Realistically, someone wouldn’t hold onto trauma for that long. Chances are his trigger happened in the past ten years.’

Ella adjusted her parameters. ‘Two thousand cases.’

‘Still a lot. We don’t have time to scour every single one, so let’s narrow it down.’

Time to profile. Time to blend real world probabilities with fictional tropes. Ella never thought this day would come.

‘It would be a serious crime. Someone wouldn’t don a mask and start killing people because his mom fell for an online scam or something.’

‘Right, so homicide, maiming, abduction.’

Ella filtered down her results. ‘Seventeen-hundred.’

‘Better. Now, location. Always important.’

Ella applied real-world behavioral science to the proceedings. This unsub might be playing the role of a serial killer, but he would still be unconsciously bound by the same pathologies.

‘Within three miles of the first victim, which was Kathleen Carter. He’d want to kill in a zone he was familiar with, so he has an anchor point somewhere near the old cabins where Kathleen died.’

‘Right. How many results?’

Ella did the work. ‘Just over eight-hundred. We’re getting closer.’

‘Okay, now the most important component, and one that we might potentially have overlooked with all this horror business. But why is he targeting young, attractive girls?’

The simple answer was that young girls made the best scream queens, but given that there was no sexual component to the crimes, the reason for his attraction had to lie elsewhere.

‘Because they’re the ones that wronged him. He views young girls as the source of his trauma, and he’s projected their actions onto surrogates.’

Ripley clicked her fingers again. ‘Right, and our victims were between twenty-one and twenty-four. Narrow it down.’

Ella did. She took a deep breath. ‘Just under five-hundred unsolved crimes within three miles of the old cabins that involve girls in their early twenties.’

‘Still a lot,’ Ripley said as she glanced at the wall clock. ‘We’ve got what, twelve hours before he might strike again? It’ll take us longer than that to devour each case file.’

Ella embraced the pressure like it was an old friend. Hard times made hard women. ‘Okay, let’s get logical. He’s not just targeting girls in their early twenties, there has to be a specific trigger, a unique variable.’

‘Go back to your horror villains. We’ve done the tangible stuff, now we need to add the element that makes our killer unique. What is it?’

Ella regarded her horror board, the board that seemed to be growing more complex by the minute. What was this killer's secret ingredient? The element that separated him from a textbook psychopath? The one that compelled him to frame his murders with horror references?

Ella pressed her palms to her face, assuming the position of oblivion, the state that helped push her unconscious mind to the limits. There was a connection hiding just out of reach, teasing her, pining for her attention but disappearing at the last second.

'Masks,' Ella blurted out, talking to herself. Masks were the only constant in all three crimes, the signature, the element that didn't need to be present but was.

'What about the masks?' asked Ripley.

'They're his signature, so they're crucial to his fantasy.'

'Obviously.'

'But... ' Ella began before dissolving back into her fantasy world, a world where she dissected the most iconic fictional villains from the comfort of her psychotherapist's chair. Norman Bates sat opposite her, mother's wig and all. Leatherface with his chainsaw perched by his side, Freddy Krueger's gloved hand twitching, Jason Voorhees silently tilting his head, Michael Myers rigid like a mannequin.

'What if the masks aren't for his victims? What if they're for him?'

Ripley raised an eyebrow. 'Come again?'

'The masks,' Ella continued, 'they're not just to scare the victims or to hide his identity. They're a reflection of his trauma, a manifestation of what he feels. They're his safety, his armor.'

'Go on,' Ripley said.

'Each mask, in horror lore, isn't just an accessory. It's a part of the killer's identity. Think about it. Jason, without his hockey mask, is just another big guy. Leatherface without his skin mask is just a deranged man. The mask is essential for

their identity as a killer. It's their transformation. It's how they cope. It's how they turn their trauma in...'

Ella cut herself off mid-sentence.

Behind her eyelids, Norman Bates unleashed his famous smile, the sinister grin that concealed a head full of secrets.

'Turn their trauma in what?' Ripley asked.

With an eyeful of Norman Bates, Ella recalled something she'd forgotten existed. Fifteen months ago, she'd been at a bar in Virginia, hunched over her laptop as she indulged a passion project of hers. She'd been halfway through it before William Edis had called her and offered her a chance at fieldwork, and Ella had left the project unfinished. It had been a psychological profile of Norman Bates.

She resurrected it, conjuring it from the deepest recess of her memory bank.

A primary point to establish is that no analysis of a fictional character could ever reflect similar psychopathology if similar crimes to Bates's were ever to occur in real life. While the seed of which Bates was born was planted by Plainfield murderer Ed Gein in the 1950s, Bates is the fictional manifestation of Gein pushed to his utmost limits, in addition to the fact that Bates must also abide by the laws of linear storytelling. Bates, like many horror villains, is characterized by what psychologists might call inward trauma association, in that the offender adopts the very traits that initially create the trauma.

'That's it, Ripley,' said Ella. 'Our unsub was attacked by someone in a mask.'

Ripley bit her lip. 'What? Why?'

'It's how horror villains are born. They turn their trauma inward as a way to cope. Hannibal Lecter saw his sister get eaten, so he became a cannibal. Jigsaw was tested by life, so he tested others. Pinhead chased pleasures of the flesh, and ended up a Cenobite.'

Ripley's barely seemed to register Ella's comment, but she shot out of her chair to the other side of the table. 'So, we need to find an incident that involved a masked attacker,' she said.

‘Yes, but we’re looking for the victim, not the attacker.’

Ripley leaned forward, dispersing her newfound energy.
‘Can you keyword search the results?’

Ella navigated to the search section, hammered in the term *mask* and searched.

Zero matches.

‘Crap,’ Ella said. She refined the search, instead searching *masked*.

Nothing again.

Disappointment threatened to creep in, but Ella kept it at bay. She felt like she was getting closer to the man behind the horror mask, like she’d finally seen the world through his eyes. He was a victim of life, so he weaponized his victimhood as a coping method.

‘Come on, come on,’ Ella said. ‘There has to be something here. I know it.’

Ripley rested a hand on her shoulder. ‘Dark, police wouldn’t use the term mask in an official report. It’s too vague.’

‘So what would they use?’

‘Costume, concealment, cover, disguise.’

Disguise.

Ella typed it in, smashed enter and waited with baited breath.

Come on, give me something, you son of a bitch.

The results popped up.

One match.

From eleven thousand, one result stood above the rest.

*COLD CASE #B71426 – 08-09-2012 – PARKER, M.
HOMICIDE, HOME INVASION.*

‘We got it,’ she said.

Ella opened the result with trembling fingers and prayed there was something usable inside.

Overview: At approximately 01:15 on the morning of 08-09-12, the home of Sergeant Jason and Megan Parker at 23 Rosewood Avenue, Maywood was breached by an unknown perpetrator. The subject fatally wounded Megan Parker, 21, with a blade before being chased out of the home by Sergeant Parker. The subject's features were not visible due to a disguise.

‘Holy crap,’ Ella said.

‘A cop. Looks like his daughter was killed by a masked intruder,’ Ripley said. ‘But look, are you seeing what I’m seeing?’

Ella double-checked it. ‘Yes, I think I am.’

She was already out of her chair. There was no time to wait around.

Because not only did Sergeant Jason Parker fit the psychological profile, but his daughter had been killed ten years ago to the day.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The Los Angeles skyline painted streaks of orange and purple as dusk set in, the city's familiar hum replaced by an eerie silence. Ella sped through the streets, somewhat distressed by the unexpected lack of traffic. Mia sat beside her, eyes glued to the tablet as she scrolled through Sergeant Parker's background.

'Parker served on the force for over twenty years,' Mia began, her voice tense. He was awarded numerous accolades for his exemplary service, but his record isn't without blemishes. There were complaints of excessive use of force and questionable investigation methods. But all these red flags started popping up only after his daughter's death.'

Ella clenched the steering wheel. 'That explains the downward spiral. From hero to maniac cop. Another horror trope.'

Mia nodded. 'His daughter, Megan, was only twenty-one when she was killed. Home from college for the summer. And get this, she was studying to be a teacher.'

Ella's heart sank. 'Student, teacher. That's Jessica Owen and Kathleen Carter rolled into one.'

Mia shook her head. 'Yup, but this was a dead-end case. No DNA evidence, no camera footage. Parker's statement said the attacker was in a plain white mask.'

'That must've crushed him,' Ella said.

Mia continued scrolling. 'He took a leave of absence after that. He came back six months later, but he wasn't the same. They made him part-time, banished him to a desk, mental health deteriorated.'

'And now he's out?'

'Left the Maywood PD six months ago,' Mia confirmed. 'From what Daniels told me before we left, Parker became obsessed with the unsolved case of his daughter. Spent nights

at the precinct pouring over files, chasing every lead, even those that seemed unrelated.'

'So, Parker's daughter is killed by a masked attacker, and ten years later, a masked killer starts terrorizing LA.'

Mia sighed, her face a picture of concern. 'The timing is suspicious. But why now? Why after ten years?'

Ella pondered as the car's headlights illuminated the street ahead. 'Trauma doesn't have a timeline. The anniversary? Maybe because his career is over, but he's still seeking justice? The desk job might have crippled his mental health, but he stayed put for years because it would have given him access to resources. When he couldn't solve the case... boom, trigger.'

As they approached Parker's residence, a quaint single-story house with a picket fence, they noticed a faint light emanating from a window. The curtains were drawn, but shadows moved within. Ella parked the car at a discreet distance, then took a moment, gearing up for the confrontation ahead. 'This could be our guy, Mia,' Ella whispered, her voice heavy with uncertainty.

'We need to tread carefully. He might be deranged, but he's capable. He isn't deluded like a lot of other psychos. He's fully aware of what he's doing, and that means he has an empty conscience. If he thinks killing us will help him go free, he will.'

They got out of the car and headed to the front door. Her hand hovered for a moment before she knocked three times, the sound echoing slightly in the quiet street. Minutes felt like hours as Ella waited in the silence. No answer came.

Ella exchanged a glance with Mia, her look conveying the question they were both contemplating: Should they breach?

'What's the legalities?' asked Ella, one hand on the doorknob.

'Not in your favor,' Ripley said.

Ella knocked again, louder this time.

A minute passed, and still no answer.

‘But...’ Ripley continued, ‘no hero has ever retired without a misdemeanor or two.’

‘How many do you have?’

‘None.’

‘Let’s not sully your record,’ Ella said as she tugged the handle. The door clicked open. Ella gestured towards a trash can mounted on the curb. ‘We caught him as he was putting his garbage out.’

‘You’ll be the death of me,’ Ripley said.

Ella pushed the door open, hoping the noise might alert the owner. From inside, a layer of white noise traveled from an open door at the end of the kitchen. Ella stepped inside, palm clutched to her pistol at her side. The kitchen was sparkling clean, immaculate, everything in its place. Above the kitchen table, Ella saw a collage of Megan and Jason together in happier times. Vacation photos, school photos. It was enough to twinge her heart with grief for the bereaved father.

Ella’s footsteps echoed softly on the wooden floor as she and Mia moved deeper into the house. The living room was awash in the soft blue glow of a muted TV, the static screen illuminating old family photos and the edge of a leather couch. The white noise grew louder, the source becoming evident as they approached an open door leading to a rec room.

Between the cracks, Ella saw a figure. Tall and wiry, hunched over a whirring vacuum.

But it was a woman.

Not Jason Parker.

The white noise died out, and when the vacuumer spun on their heels, she spotted the two strangers who’d breached her home.

‘Agh!’ the woman cried as she toppled back against the wall. She grabbed the vacuum and used it as a makeshift barrier. ‘Who the hell are you?’

Ella peered at her partner. According to Jason Parker’s file, he lived alone. Megan’s mother had died at a young age.

‘FBI,’ Ella said, trying to reassure the woman. She was wearing a grey jumper, two sizes too big. She had a mop of grey hair that seemed to defy gravity. Ella guessed she was in her sixties.

‘Who? You just walk into houses whenever you feel like it or somethin’?’

‘Sorry for the intrusion, but we need to speak to Jason Parker. Is he around?’

‘How’d you get in? And no, he ain’t.’

‘We walked in,’ Ella said, opting for honesty. It was always better in the long run. If she got a telling-off from the director, so be it. ‘Our apologies, but we’re desperate.’

The woman threw her vacuum to the side – an assertive act to offset the adrenaline rush, no doubt. She scanned the two agents from left to right and back again.

‘Cops?’ she asked.

‘Feds,’ Ella said with a flash of her badge. ‘Is Jason here?’

‘How many times, lady? Jason don’t live here no more.’

There was always a swerve at the last minute, Ella thought. ‘Can you tell us where he is?’

‘Ain’t you got records for that?’ the woman asked.

Ripley this time, ‘Our records show he lives here.’

‘Yeah, he did, until two weeks back. Jase checked himself in. I’m his neighbor. I been cleaning this place once a week since he left.’

Ella had to backtrack. Something wasn’t adding up. ‘Checked himself in? How do you mean?’

‘To the madhouse. Jase lost his marbles. He’s gone to some fancy schmancy place in Vernon to get his head together.’

Ella’s mind raced. ‘Madhouse?’ She repeated, her voice softening.

‘Yeah. I ain’t got the name. Meadow-something or other. Look it up.’

Ripley chimed in, ‘Sorry, we didn’t know. There’s no mention of that on his records.’

‘Well, leave it that way,’ the woman said.

Ella turned to her partner as she weighed up the possibilities. If Jason Parker had been in an institution for more than three days, he couldn’t be their unsub. Not unless he was allowed to leave and come back, which not many institutes allowed.

‘Sorry to be blunt, but why are you in his house?’ she asked.

‘I been his neighbor for twenty years and I’ve watched the man go through hell and back. I come round and clean this place so it’s spick and span for when he gets home. That alright with you, Marple?’

Ella took a deep breath, processing the unexpected turn of events. They’d come looking for a potential killer, but instead, found a tormented soul searching for peace.

Ripley tapped Ella on the arm and gestured to leave. Ella followed her through into the kitchen, taking one last look at the photos of Megan Parker on the wall.

How did she get the profile so wrong?

And if Jason Parker wasn’t her killer, who the hell was?

‘Well, Dark, you were right about one thing.’

Ella said nothing. She waited for Ripley to take her shot.

‘Jason Parker was indeed a victim, he just never took the next step.’

Back out in the car, the short trip felt like a fever dream. Ella desperately wanted to believe that she’d come close to figuring this unsub out, only to have the finish line pushed back another mile.

‘You were right about something, too,’ Ella said. ‘Reality is much different from the movies.’

A dead end. Back to square one.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Back at the precinct, Ella stared at her laptop screen, still struggling to process the crushing blow of Jason Parker not being their unsub. Furthermore, how could her profile have been so wildly inaccurate?

No leads. None of the names on Alex Morton's list seemed to correlate with their profile. No DNA evidence at any of the crime scenes. And to top it all off, they were around six hours away from another victim losing their life providing the killer kept up the same pattern.

The only good news was that she finally had full access to the Dread Pages. It was a forum with thirty-thousand users, all either horror industry workers or devout fans. Ella had searched the entire forum by the *term* mask and found six-thousand results. The fact that a single term was all she had to go on felt pathetically thin. But the sad reality was that the masked killer angle was the only thread she had to pull. She scrolled through, seeing posts but not really noticing them.

Most iconic horror mask?

New Freddy mask for sale.

A timeline of Ghostface masks (yes, they're different).

'Jason's neighbor was right,' Ripley said as she walked in, phone in hand. 'He's been in an institute for two weeks. He *was* one of Morton's porn friends though, but he's been securely locked up during every murder.'

Ella massaged her temples in preparation for an oncoming headache. It was going to be a brutal one. 'God dammit.'

'You can say that again. Daniels has checked every mask store in the city. None have Michael or Pinhead masks of the same quality our killer used. No one recognizes his personal mask, either.'

'Probably got them online.'

'Yup. Untraceable.'

‘Our killer’s too smart to buy those masks from local places. He’s covered his tracks every time. This will be no different.’

Ella’s phone buzzed with a flurry of notifications. The media frenzy over the masked killer had reached fever pitch, and reporters were hungry for the next big scoop.

Ripley said, ‘You’re getting them too?’

Ella saw a bunch of messages from unknown numbers, all following the same format. Journalists introducing themselves, namedropping their publications then asking for *a statement*. She deleted all of them.

‘How do these assholes get our numbers?’

‘Beats me.’

‘Have you read the news?’ Ella asked.

‘It’s hard to miss. These scumbags are practically cheering this guy on. A horror movie killer is like a wet dream to them. They’ll be milking this for years.’

‘It’s a sick game to them,’ Ella sighed. ‘Meanwhile, we’re here killing ourselves to put a stop to it. What the hell is wrong with the world?’

‘It’s a God damn circus. Life’s a stage and scumbags like our unsub are the performers.’

Ella wished for a moment that these journalists could walk a mile in her shoes. See the despair on the face of a mother who’s lost her child, or tell a young woman that her sister is never coming back.

‘And every time they sensationalize it, they’re indirectly encouraging the killer. And every victim is just another act.’

The weight of the case, the pressure from Edis, and now the media circus – it was all taking its toll. She clicked on page seven of her search results, Dread Pages, and let out a weary sigh. All these threads, posts, discussions. It was a maze with no exit.

Man with a mask stuck on face movie, what is it called?!

*[NOW CANCELLED] Indie Film Casting Call – ‘In Hell,’
Masked Killer Rampages LA.*

Interview With ‘Behind the Mask’ Director.

‘You okay?’ Ripley asked gently.

‘Far from it,’ Ella said, scrolling without paying attention. ‘You know why.’

‘We’ll get this guy. It took twenty years to catch the Green River Killer.’

‘Because he killed forty years ago,’ Ella said. ‘And Ridgway didn’t send videos of his kills to the very people investigating him. Our guy did, and we’re still coming up short.’

‘Dark, we’ve found three suspects in two days. Take a step back, see the big picture. I know it’s not easy, especially with everything going on with Nash, but hastiness isn’t going to get us anywhere.’

The very mention of Nash’s name made Ella sick to her core. If she could just snub him out, the world would be a brighter place.

‘You want to talk about it?’ Ripley asked.

‘We’ve done nothing but talk about it. We dissected this unsub from top to bottom and...’

‘Not the unsub,’ Ripley said. ‘Logan Nash. He’s obviously on your mind, so tell me what you’re worried about.’

Ella wasn’t sure that spilling the details would come with any benefit, but sometimes, saying the words aloud somehow exorcised them.

Ella took a deep breath and looked away, the weight of the case and personal demons making her shoulders slump. ‘Nash isn’t just another criminal. You know that. He killed my dad. And every time I see his face, every time I hear his name, it brings back memories I’ve spent years trying to bury.’

Ripley moved closer, her usually stern expression softening. ‘I can’t begin to imagine what you’re feeling. But you have to remember, you’re not in this alone. We’re a team.’

And while Nash might have taken something from you, we'll make sure he doesn't do it again.'

Ella scoffed bitterly, 'You know, when I caught Nash, I thought I'd feel better. Closure, they called it. But all it did was open up old wounds. Now, even if Nash ends up in front of a judge, it's going to expose everything I did to catch him, and none of it will hold up in court.'

'Like what?' Ripley asked. 'So it wasn't FBI sanctioned, so what? You never heard of amateur detectives?'

Ella wished it was that simple. 'I looked into classified documents. I had to deal with another Fed worker inconspicuously. You know Robert Reed? The guy who was tracking Logan before me? His wife helped me out, but she had to give me Robert's docs from his personal stash at home. I found Logan through that, pointed a gun at him, attacked two of his little friends. I bloodied him up, cuffed him and took him to jail. I gotta give all that up if I want to have a *chance* at convicting him. How's that gonna go down with the director? If I don't end up dead, I'll be in jail for twenty years.'

Ripley coughed, then let the silence linger. 'Well, you've got two options here, Dark.'

'Yeah, both bad.'

'Yeah. First, you can lie under oath. Make up some bullshit about you seeing Logan when you were a kid, and that weird photographic memory of yours remembered him twenty years later. It might fly, it might not.'

Ella chuckled. 'Not a bad lie, but I couldn't do that.'

'No, you shouldn't, so that leaves option two. Tell the truth, all of it, leave no detail unmentioned. Then, take your punishment. Go down a hero.'

Ella scoffed again. 'Yeah, right. Name a hero that did jail time.'

Ripley slapped her partner on the shoulder and said, 'Nelson Mandela. Martha Stewart. Johnny Cash. Like I said, no hero has ever retired without a misdemeanor or two.'

Ella couldn't help but smile, perhaps the first one since she'd gotten to LA. Now she knew how Ripley felt, although Ripley's intense hatred of this state was one of life's unanswerable mysteries.

'Earlier today, my guy at Virginia PD called and said Nash looked like he was about to skip town. A small part of me... no, scratch that, a *huge* part of me, wished I'd just done what I had to back when I caught him.'

Ripley sniffed, then wiped her nose with her forearm. Looked like hay fever, Ella thought. Maybe it was the heat and pollen Ripley detested so much.

'Bullets in the head solve a lot of problems, but they create new ones too.'

'Do you really think that?' Ella blinked back a few unshed tears. Sometimes I wish I could be heartless, cold. It would've made things easier.'

'That's not true,' Ripley said, her voice gentle. 'If you were any of those things, you wouldn't be the agent you are. And you wouldn't be my partner.'

Ella took a moment, gazing at the stream of words on her laptop. For some reason, she thought of Kathleen Carter's death scene.

I AM IN HELL HELP ME.

'Mia, how many times have you...?'

'Have I...?'

'Pulled the trigger,' Ella finished.

Ripley went round to her side of the desk and took a seat. 'You don't want to know.'

Ella read between the lines. 'Do you regret it?'

'That's another conversation, now stop distracting yourself with this Logan Nash business. It's another problem for another time. Right now, we've got a killer in our midst, and I've got a real hankering to get out of this place. Capiche?'

Ella licked the dryness off her lips. Her throat suddenly felt like she'd swallowed a gallon of dirt. 'Yes, miss,' Ella said.

Mia grabbed a tissue and blew her nose at a deafening volume. ‘Damn, hay fever’s back again. Hold on D.C., I’m coming home soon.’

Ella went back to the Dread Pages and idly opened up a few threads. A discussion about horror masks, a casting call for an indie film that had been canceled, a post questioning the realism of the Saw franchise. For now, it was all letters and words, no substance. Ella realized she hadn’t slept in over a day, and if she wanted to make any headway, she needed caffeine in her veins.

‘Mia, I’m going to get some air. Maybe coffee, too. I think we need it.’

‘Good call,’ Ripley said as she wiped her nose again. She let out a grunt of frustration.

As Ella was about to leave, she turned and asked the question that had haunted her for well over a year. If she couldn’t solve the current mystery, an older one would have to do.

‘By the way, why do you hate this place so much?’

Ripley was engrossed in something on the screen. She reached down into her bag and pulled out her purse. ‘My husband, Alfie, father of my children.’ She flipped open her purse and showed Ella a photo. Ripley had talked about Alfie a few times, but Ella had never seen his face. ‘Fifteen years ago, we were out here on a case together, chasing a serial stabber. Alfie tracked him to a car garage. When Alfie went to make the arrest, the unsub jumped him. I got there a few minutes later, but it was too late.’

Ella’s jaw dropped, completely taken aback. She knew Alfie had passed away, but she never knew how.

‘Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up.’

Ripley folded her purse back and put it away. ‘And I never got the answers I wanted, never got to show the unsub the repercussions of his actions. Every time I come here, it’s all I can think about.’

Ella had asked and she had received. She felt like she’d crossed a boundary of some sort. ‘Did you never question

him?’

Ripley went back to her laptop. ‘No, I never got the chance. Like I said, bullets in the head create problems.’

Ella felt a twinge of guilt, regretting ever prying into Ripley’s past, but it had enlivened something in her. ‘Sorry, Mia. I had no idea.’

‘It’s fine. You deserve to know. Now get us caffeine.’

‘On it, captain. Let’s fuel up then forge our path out of here.’

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Ella had walked and walked, and try as she might, could not locate a single coffee shop around these parts. She now found herself walking parallel with the Huntington River, a serene landmark that helped settle her thoughts into something coherent. Buildings grew sparse, replaced by stretches of green and the gentle lapping sounds of water against the bank. Every now and then, a rower would glide by, their paddles breaking the water's stillness, or a couple would be walking their dog, the animal excitedly sniffing around, pulling its owners along. Yearnings for caffeine had now been replaced by a desire to see the world as the unsub saw it, warts and all.

Three victims over three nights, all young women, all resembling final girls in one way or another. At each crime scene, he'd left a mask behind. This was his signature.

He had filmed each of his murders, or at least portions of them. He was confident in revealing these videos to the police through underhanded means, which meant he was either cunning or reckless. Every death had occurred through different killing methods – something almost entirely unheard of in the realm of serial homicide. To Ella's knowledge, there hadn't been a single serial killer in history who'd altered their modus operandi with every single killing.

It was not the serial killer's design. They chose their preferred method and stuck with it, only changing things up to experiment or appease their evolving urges.

'For the first two murders, he was not a serial killer,' Ella said. 'He was merely playing the role of one.'

As she walked, the soft whisper of the river served as a backdrop to her thoughts. In her mind's eye, Ella played the haunting scenes over and over. The victims, the masks, the macabre signature. The echoing screams, the twisted pleasure in his eyes as he watched the life drain out of each victim.

Ella stopped for a moment, leaning against the railing and gazing into the water. The river reflected the evening hues, a shimmering mirror of the world above. She saw her reflection distorted by the ripples. It made her think of how everyone had multiple facets, layers beneath what was presented to the world.

Far in the distance, she saw the old cabins, the scene of Kathleen Carter's death. Ella moved closer to them, drawn to them. She knew the killer had returned to the scene the day after he killed Kathleen, but she doubted he'd come back. Besides, they now had a cop at every scene for that very reason, and none of them had reported any suspicious activity.

Ella recalled the finer details, the nuances that cinema-goers would overlook on first watch, then realize the truth had been in front of them the whole time. She thought of the unsub's video, the one where he impaled Jessica Owen with a rifle. She'd heard his voice on that clip, but it was so indistinct that it couldn't be traced.

I'm going to finish what we started, he'd said.

Was it just a throwaway comment? A one-liner before committing his first ever homicide? Perhaps it was a nod to the fact he'd been stalking Jessica Owen for a while?

No. This unsub was too careful for that. Every detail had been meticulously planned out beforehand. After all, he was following his own script.

Now that Ella thought about it, the chances that the killer had literally written all of this out in a script was very high.

Closer to the cabins, she relished the flow of the river. With its constant motion, it seemed to mirror the constant churn of thoughts in her mind. The ebb and flow of water, like the ebb and flow of memories and theories. Ella felt that she was onto something, a thread that might lead her to the very core of the unsub's psyche.

'If he *has* written a script, what would that make him? A scriptwriter? A visionary?' Ella was talking aloud but to herself. On the other side of the river, the cabins came into

view. Three old wooden shacks in an off-center line, exteriors having eroded from time and river swells.

What had the coroner said again?

I'm not sure if you're familiar with the history of those cabins, but back in the day, they were part of a film set. A film was shot there in the eighties. The production wrapped up, and the cabins were never destroyed. Instead, they've just been left there, decaying over time. It was just a B-movie horror film, if memory serves me correctly.

She'd looked into movie and found it was some forgotten exploitation piece. Supernatural horror with a religious angle – nothing to do with the current goings-on. The location might be symbolic of something, but the old movie itself was irrelevant.

Ella stood still, the world around her fading into a hazy background. The weight of the investigation burdened her, but in this moment, she felt the grip of its hands beginning to loosen.

Her brow furrowed, deep lines etching across her forehead. The corners of her mouth turned down slightly, not in frustration, but in deep concentration. Every clue, every piece of evidence, every statement swirled in her mind like individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, desperately seeking their rightful place. Her fingers tapped rhythmically on her thigh, an outward expression of the rapid cadence of thoughts within. The whispering wind and the distant hum of the city disappeared, replaced by the silent echo of her thoughts ricocheting off one another. Eyes unfocused, she delved deep into the recesses of her mind, trying to connect the dots.

It was as if the answer was right there, teasingly hovering at the edge of her consciousness. Obvious, yet elusive. Her breaths became shallower, each inhalation pulling her closer to that critical realization, each exhalation pushing away the unnecessary clutter.

Then, as if a switch had been flicked, a light went on. The pieces snapped together, forming a clear image.

In horror movies, secrets were often hidden in plain view from the beginning.

Ella's mind was alive with electricity, every neuron firing rapidly. It was like a storm inside her head; blinding flashes of understanding and resonant claps of realization. The sensation was almost dizzying, but she welcomed it, letting it wash over her.

It wasn't just the murders that were premeditated; it was the entire storyboard. She felt like she was peeling back layers of a dark, intricate tapestry. The more she delved, the more she discovered patterns and repetitions, echoes of a mind obsessed with detail, control, and cinematic flair.

She thought of the messages, the victims, the masks – or one mask in particular. The mask at Ginny Mathers' scene wasn't of a famous horror icon, because that horror icon hadn't made it to the screen.

Yet.

Then she thought of the Dread Pages. The threads she'd idly read, convinced she wasn't making any headway when, really, she'd seen it all in black and white.

I AM IN HELL HELP ME.

The heavy weight of frustration that had been pressing on her for days started to lift, replaced by an exhilarating rush of adrenaline. The world around her faded, consumed by the cascade of revelations. Gone was the weary investigator, and in her place was a detective alight with fervor. The once calming surroundings of the river and the greenery were now just a blur in her peripheral vision. Her focus was singular - the precinct. She felt like a bloodhound that had just picked up a scent, leading straight to its quarry.

The pace of her heartbeat quickened. For the first time, she felt like she was starting to grasp the magnitude of the unsub's vision. It wasn't just about the thrill of the kill; it was the theatrics, the legacy. He wanted to be immortalized, and not just as a serial killer.

Because this unsub was a film director.

And she even had the title of his movie.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Ella barreled into the precinct, boots rapping off the polished floor as she stormed past busy officers, turning heads and halting conversations. She navigated the maze of desks and officers with an agility borne out of urgency. Her eyes darted around, scanning the sea of faces for one in particular. Spotting Mia Ripley at the coffee machine, she made a beeline in her direction.

Ripley looked up, clearly startled by the commotion, her eyebrows raised in question. But before she could utter a word, Ella was there, grabbing her arm and pulling her back to her desk.

‘Mia, listen to me. I know what’s going on.’

Ripley’s coffee had spilled over her hands. ‘Thanks for the third-degree burns, Dark. I couldn’t wait for your coffee any longer. I was about to die.’

‘Coffee can wait, this can’t.’

Ripley’s initial surprise melted into intrigue. ‘Alright, Dark, you’ve got my attention. Lay it on me.’

‘Our unsub isn’t just a killer. He’s a director.’

Her partner sipped her coffee, unimpressed, it seemed. ‘We know he sees himself as some sort of artist. We knew that from the start.’

‘No,’ Ella pleaded, ‘he’s literally filming scenes for his movie. And not just any movie, but one that was canceled.’

‘Make sense here, Dark. What are you talking about? How do you know this?’

Ella hurried over to her whiteboard, erased everything and started from scratch. ‘Look, on that video of Jessica Owen’s murder, he said *I’m going to finish what I started*. Remember?’

‘Of course.’

‘That’s because he’d already begun his fictional movie, so this was his way of taking things to the next level. This is his way of bringing his fictional movie to life.’

‘What fictional movie, Dark? I’m lost here.’

‘I’m getting there,’ Ella said at too loud a volume. Her erratic ramblings had drawn the attention of a few peripheral officers. She continued regardless. ‘Every scene has been a clue. A breadcrumb trail that mimics his fictional movie. At Jessica’s scene, it was the voice message. At Kathleen’s scene – which was his first kill – he referenced it right in front of us.’

Ripley placed her coffee down and moved closer to the board. ‘You mean those little prints in the dust? The tripod marks?’

‘That was one clue, but the other was way more obvious.’

Ripley looked back at her papers for a moment. ‘The giant message on the wall? About him being dead?’

‘No, not dead. In hell.’

‘What’s the difference?’

Ella ignored the question for a moment. ‘And finally, Ginny Mathers. At this scene, he left us this unique mask. That’s because this is *him*. It’s not a representation of horror icon, this is *his* mask, *his* identity, the slasher villain *he* created himself.’

Ripley scratched her chin. ‘And by putting himself in the sequence, he was equating himself with the greats, if you can call them that.’

‘You got it. Michael, Pinhead... then whoever this guy is.’ Ella rushed over to her laptop, clicked through a few pages, and found the thread she’d been on barely an hour ago.

‘Okay, I get it, but what movie are you talking about? Not that B-movie that was filmed at the cabins years ago?’

‘No. He only killed Kathleen there because it represented horror cinema. Like I mentioned before, this guy doesn’t do subtext.’

‘You’re telling me.’

Ella spun her laptop around to show Ripley. ‘And maybe that’s why his indie movie got shut down last year.’

Ripley leaned in and read the title aloud. ‘Indie film casting call. In Hell. Masked killer rampages LA.’ She peered back at Ella. ‘In Hell?’

‘I caught this earlier, but I dismissed it because the post was a year old. But read the thread. It’s an old casting call announcement for a horror film. It’s all there, synopsis, cast requirements, everything. If you read through the posts, it’s like a timeline of this film’s history. I’ve only skimmed it, but from what I can tell, the film is about a masked killer moving through Los Angeles, targeting victims that epitomized horror movie cliches. Look, the synopsis is a few replies down.’ Ella commandeered the laptop, scrolling down.

In LA’s forgotten corners, a new kind of terror emerges. As night falls, a mysterious masked killer known as The Director begins a rampage, turning the cliches of classic horror films on their heads. At the center of the Director’s gruesome spree is a group of women, all survivors, but The Director seeks to redefine their statuses, bringing a new meaning to the term ‘final girl.’

Will they turn the tables on The Director and bring his reign of terror to an end, or will they become the final victims in his twisted film? Only the final reel will tell.

Perched over the laptop, Ella waited for her partner’s confirmation, some validation that she hadn’t going crazy or was making ridiculous leaps.

Then Ripley said, ‘I am in hell, help me.’

‘Exactly,’ Ella yelled, drawing a few eyeballs her way. ‘He wasn’t just quoting a famous horror line, he was trying to be smart. Our guy was hiding the title of his film right in front of us.’

Ripley smirked. ‘Devious son of a bitch. Like you said, sometimes the truth is right in front of you from the start.’

‘Right? And Kathleen was the first victim. He hid his end game in sight from the beginning. Another fiction trope.’

Ripley grabbed on the edge of the desk for support. 'Apparently this film shut down because of production issues, am I seeing that right?'

'Yeah. They ran out of money. Looks like they fought to bring it back but ultimately gave up.'

'Well, maybe someone hasn't completely given up, but who? Producer, actor, what?'

Ella pointed at the synopsis again. 'Remember, subtlety isn't our guy's forte.'

Ripley clocked it, slamming her hand on the desk in triumph. 'The Director.'

'Bingo.'

'But who is he? The main post has been deleted.'

Ella assumed the position in front of her laptop. Time for a little technological wizardry.

'Once something's on the Internet, it's there forever,' she said. 'We just need to get a little creative.'

'Look through the user's old posts, maybe?'

Ella had tried that as she was running back to the precinct. 'This is the only post he's made. But don't fret, because caching might be in our favor.'

'Caching?'

Ella fired up a search engine and keyword searched the URL of the Dread Pages forum post. It popped up. One result. 'Cached pages are a snapshot of a page from an older time. Now, our little director made this post last year but deleted it six months ago. But with a little luck...' Ella clicked the drop-down menu beside the search result, opened up the cached version of the page.

A white, text-only version of the page popped up.

Got it.

'In Hell' is a groundbreaking horror film set in Los Angeles. We're seeking diverse talent to portray a range of characters who will confront, subvert, and redefine horror movie clichés. Actors with a genuine passion for the genre are

encouraged to apply. Costume designer and FX artist already on board.

The Director: (Lead, Male, 30-45): A mysterious figure, always masked, who is orchestrating the horror. He's methodical, chilling, and obsessed with cinema. Requires strong physical acting as the character seldom speaks.

Lila (Lead, Female, 20-28): The classic cheerleader archetype, but with a twist. Initially appearing naive, she evolves into a strong, cunning antagonist. Dance or gymnastics background a plus.

Derek (Supporting, Male, 20-30): The typical jock who becomes trapped in a psychological game. Requires range, from cocky bravado to genuine vulnerability.

Final Girls (Supporting, Female, 20-30): A group of diverse women who are familiar with horror clichés. Each has a unique strength and background. Must be able to portray fear, resilience, and intelligence.

Various Victims (Supporting, Male/Female, 18-40): Individuals who epitomize classic horror clichés. Various roles available, from the unsuspecting couple to the skeptic who brushes off warnings.

Detectives (Supporting, Male/Female, 25-50): A seasoned detective trying to unravel the mystery. Requires a strong, commanding presence.

Extras (Background, Male/Female, 18+): Various roles available, including police officers, partygoers, and pedestrians.

‘There,’ Ripley shouted. ‘At the bottom.’

Ella scrolled down.

Please submit a headshot, resume and reel to harryfaulkner@inhell.com.

‘Harry Faulkner. Got you,’ Ella shouted. She searched his name online and got a couple of hits, although his profile pages on movie sites listed no complete films, no credits, not even a profile photo.

‘Not exactly Spielberg, is he?’ Ripley asked.

‘He’s listed on the Internet Movie Database, but he might have created that profile himself.’

‘Vain son of a bitch. Forget that, we need to know if he’s on a real database. Check for a police record.’

Ella switched to the Maywood PD database, threw in Harry Faulkner’s name and hit enter.

She blinked rapidly, thinking maybe it was a trick of her tired eyes or perhaps just a coincidence. But as more information loaded, the stark reality became undeniable. Harry Faulkner’s mugshot appeared, accompanied by details of minor charges.

‘We got him,’ Ella said with a clenched fist. ‘This has to be him.’

‘Same guy?’ Ripley asked. ‘Address looks local.’

Ella checked it. ‘Four miles from here, two miles from Jessica Owen’s apartment.’

‘What was he charged for?’

‘Looks like... oh Christ...’

‘What?’

A chill ran through Ella’s fingertips, up her arms and settled into her shoulders. ‘Harassment. Filming women without their consent.’

‘It fits,’ Ripley shouted as she rushed to pick up her jacket. ‘If this guy wants to be famous so bad, let’s make it happen.’

Ella was closer than she thought. She felt the momentum swinging back in her favor. The director’s reel was playing out in real life, and she was determined to rewrite its ending. Gaining her composure, Ella readied herself to meet the man behind the camera.

She was up, pistol and ammunition fully loaded.

‘Act three, take one,’ she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

‘Here I was thinking film directors lived in luxury,’ Ella said. With a hand on the doorknob to the apartment complex, something sticky grazed her palm.

‘Hollywood is where dreams go to die,’ said Ripley. ‘And I guess places like this are the morgue.’

Inside, a dim, flickering bulb revealed a dank hallway. The wallpaper was stained and yellowed, its floral pattern barely recognizable. Doors to the apartments were marked with numbers that had either faded away or been crudely repainted, and an old elevator with an *out-of-order* sign hung at the end of the hall.

‘We’re looking for apartment 3B,’ Ella said.

They started up the rickety staircase, the wooden steps groaning under their weight. As they ascended, the sounds of muffled conversations, crying babies, and blaring televisions filtered out from behind closed doors.

Reaching the third floor, they were met with a pungent odor – a mix of stale cigarettes, mold, and something undefinable yet wholly unpleasant. Ella wrinkled her nose in disgust.

‘You think a serial killer lives here?’ she whispered.

‘Wouldn’t be the first murderer I’ve busted in a pig sty. You?’

Ella had no doubt. Harry Faulkner fit the profile to a tee. A failed film director desperate to showcase his depraved artistry, and if he couldn’t get the world’s attention through art, he’d resort to shock tactics. She wasn’t certain if Larry was motivated by narcissism or revenge, but there was a chance both ingredients made up the lethal cocktail that was his psychopathology.

‘I’m certain,’ Ella said as she nodded at apartment 3B. A blue door, paint peeling off, the word *Faulkner* etched into the wood.

And it was slightly ajar.

The two detectives exchanged a brief, wary glance. Ripley gestured to Ella, signaling her to take the lead. Ella composed herself, Ella slowly pushed the door open but kept her distance, pistol at the ready.

‘Harry Faulkner?’ she called out. ‘Make yourself known’

No reply.

She stepped an inch closer.

‘Harry? Are you in here?’

Nothing. But somewhere within, a woman’s voice stirred. Moans, murmuring.

Ella grabbed Ripley by the shoulder. ‘Hear that?’

Ripley nodded, her hand now resting on her own weapon. ‘Sounds like mumbling. Maybe a prayer or... a plea?’

Ella stepped over the threshold, pushing the door further open with a creak. Protocol said that agents couldn’t breach premises without consent from the occupant, not unless they deemed someone to be in danger.

‘No time for taking chances. What if we just caught him bringing a victim back here?’

‘Go,’ Ripley commanded.

Ella was inside, the atmosphere instantly shifting from the dreary corridor to an overwhelming sensory overload. The interior was equally shabby as the rest of the complex, but Harry Faulkner’s character was on full display at first glance.

They were straight into a living room, yet it was less a living space and more of a tribute to the macabre. A morbid yet captivating art installation. Every available wall space was plastered with old movie posters – faded classics like *Nosferatu* and *Psycho* - but among them, more obscure titles peppered the walls, perhaps underground films known only to true aficionados. The color palettes of these posters were dominated by deep reds and blacks.

But it wasn’t just the walls that told stories of Harry’s obsessions. The room was filled with an array of bizarre

ornaments. A glass case showcased grotesque sculptures, twisted representations of human figures, some with elongated limbs, others with hollowed-out eyes. The attention to detail was eerily exquisite, suggesting that Harry, or whoever had made them, had spent considerable time crafting each piece.

Shelves that lined one side of the room were stacked with VHS tapes labeled with dates and cryptic titles. Ella made out *First Take*, *Mistress of the Night* and *Final Cut*.

But Ella had no time to admire the surroundings because the woman's high-pitched voice cut through the air again. She spun on her heels, following the sound, drawing her to a small hallway flanked by two closed doors.

Ripley was close behind. 'In here,' she shouted, fixing her hand around the door handle. Ella gripped her pistol. Ripley stormed inside with a shoulder barge.

A bedroom. One single bed against the wall, old and wooden. A windowsill was lined with empty bottles. Ornaments from a bygone age decorated a dresser. The only anomaly was a laptop, still propped open.

But the centerpiece of the macabre display was an old woman.

She sat in an ornate, antique chair, her frail form almost swallowed by its grandeur. Her eyes were milky white, and she clutched a tattered photograph in her trembling hands. She mumbled incessantly to herself, lost in her own world.

'Ma'am?' Ella called.

The woman cried something inaudible. Not words that resonated with Ella's experience of the English language. The white orbs she had for eyes flickered but registered nothing.

'Miss, we're looking for Harry Faulkner. Is he here?' Ripley this time.

The woman's mumbling grew louder, the cadence of her speech indicating distress. They sounded like a chant or a prayer, repeated over and over, Ella thought.

'She's blind,' Ripley finished.

A different kind of victim? An old woman, perhaps one reminiscent of a witch?

‘Ma’am, can you hear me? We’re police officers. We’re here to help,’ Ella said.

‘Harry... gone,’ the woman hissed.

‘Gone? Where?’ Ripley asked.

The woman’s voice grew rougher, summoning the use of a second set of vocal cords. Her pallid eyes flickered like broken TV screens. ‘He’s gone... taken by the shadows,’ she growled. She clutched the photograph – which Ella now saw was completely blank – to her tattered white gown.

‘Shadows? What shadows?’

‘The ones in his mind. The ones from his films. They became too real for him... and for me.’

Ella had to take a step back and take in the whole scene at a glance. Who was this woman? Harry’s mother? She scrutinized the woman’s façade: dead eyes, clothes straight out of the past, grey strings of hair caressing her emaciated frame. She was otherworldly, like a character ripped from a horror reel.

‘When was he last here?’

‘A long time ago.’

Ella’s analytical mind raced. The room was full of incongruities. An ancient chair more suited to a grand parlor than this derelict room. An old woman who seemed more phantom than flesh. A blank photograph clutched with an intensity that suggested it held profound significance.

It was almost a little unbelievable.

‘Ripley,’ said Ella. ‘I think we might have got this all wrong.’

Her partner stepped back. The old woman stared off into the distance, inhabiting her imaginary world again.

‘No,’ the woman snapped. ‘Harry... left. No more.’

Behind the woman’s shabby clothes, Ella assessed her body type. Gaunt, wrinkly. She would have made the perfect witch

if not for the stumpy fingers.

‘Wrong?’ Ripley asked.

Ella turned her attention to the witch and asked, ‘Ma’am, are you blind? Is that why your eyes are like that?’

‘Blind,’ the woman groaned.

‘Completely?’

‘Yesss.’

‘Sorry to have bothered you,’ Ella said. She spun around, made a beeline for the laptop, picked it up and stuffed it under her arm. Next, she picked up an ornament off the dresser – a tiny crystal skull – and pocketed it. Ripley regarded her with confusion, a hint of disbelief hiding in there too.

And the woman hissed again. ‘Put that back.’

‘Put what back?’ Ella said. She gestured to Ripley to get going.

‘Skull. It’s mine.’

‘Thought you were blind?’

‘I am.... Blind. But.... I can feel its absence.’

Ella wasn’t buying it. This place wasn’t a home, with its purposeful design, creepy movie memorabilia, unsettling art.

It was a stage.

Ella pulled the skull from her pocket, tossed it at the woman.

Her hands flew to grab it.

Ella used the moment to pull out her pistol, aim it at the old crone.

‘You can stop playing games now, Harry Faulkner.’

The old woman’s posture shifted. She straightened up, the frailty in her mannerism dissipating. Her grip on the skull tightened, and she placed it gingerly on the dresser. She turned her milky eyes towards Ella, a slight smirk playing at the corner of her lips.

‘Bravo, Detective.’

With a grace that belied her supposed age, the woman began removing the grey wig, revealing a head full of dark, stringy hair. The milky contacts came off next, revealing piercing blue eyes, the same eyes Ella had seen in photographs of Harry Faulkner.

Ella breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The man in front of her – the Maywood Horror Slayer or whatever the press had taken to calling him today – was locked in her sights. The only way he was leaving this apartment was in chains.

Beside her, Ripley's face was a picture. Half confusion, half disgust. Ella wasn't sure why.

Harry leaned back into the chair, looking almost relaxed. 'What gave it away, detective?'

'Two things,' Ella said, her target still locked on the suspect. 'Your game is bound by the rules of horror films. There was bound to be one final twist.'

The character's true self slowly manifested, morphing from an old crone to a young man. Now, Harry Faulkner's true face emerged. Now that Ella looked closer, he didn't look too different from the character he was playing, a little like a spider that had assumed a human form.

'You got that right. And the second?'

Ella pulled out her handcuffs. 'Old women don't tend to have Adam's apples. Now, come on, get changed. Your story ends in a prison cell.'

CHAPTER THIRTY

Behind the glass, Harry the old crone looked remarkably composed for a man whose world had come crashing down. His blue eyes glinted with a mix of mischief and defiance, his posture relaxed as if he were in his own living room rather than a holding cell. Ella had been surprised at his lack of resistance.

Chief Daniels appeared with two coffees in hand. He handed them to Ella and Ripley. 'You got him,' he said.

'It's looking good,' Ripley grinned. 'Smug son of a bitch has done nothing but talk.'

'He confessed?'

'No, but he won't shut up about art and movies and whatever. It's his grandiosity doing the talking. His way of controlling the narrative.'

'Well, I've got good news for you both. As one of my guys was inspecting his place, he saw something on Faulkner's laptop. A screenplay or something, about the very murders happenin' around here.'

Ella's ears perked up. 'A screenplay?'

'Something like that.'

'Check the date the document was created. If it was longer than three days ago, that's good circumstantial evidence.'

Ella left her coffee unsipped because she was itching to get into the interrogation room, gagging to break open this man's head and rummage through the contents.

'Any actual evidence?' asked Ripley.

'Not yet. Forensics are gonna sweep the place for DNA from the victims. Sit tight.'

'Come on Mia, we need to get in there quickly.'

'What's the rush, Dark? Let him stew. It's what he deserves.'

‘I need to hear it out of his mouth. He needs to confess.’

‘You didn’t hear the crap he was talking back in the car? I was close to shutting him up myself.’

‘Yeah, but it was... grandstanding. Pretentious nonsense. He didn’t give us anything we could actually use.’

Ripley breathed an exaggerated sigh. ‘Fine. The sooner he confesses, the sooner we’re out of LA. Got your case file?’

Ella tapped her folder. ‘Always.’

‘Then lead the way.’

Ella moved from the corridor into the interrogation room, welcoming the sudden temperature drop. Less chance of breaking a sweat in a freezing cold room. Harry sat like a statue, still inhabiting the role as an old crone for reasons Ella was yet to understand.

‘Harry Faulkner,’ Ella began, placing a file on the table. It was heavy, filled with evidence against him. ‘You’ve been quite busy.’

He sat there, the embodiment of arrogance and entitlement. His fingers were steepled in front of him, his posture one of feigned relaxation. But Ella could see the tension in the set of his jaw, the barely-there twitch in his left eye.

Harry grinned, revealing unnaturally white teeth. ‘Every artist needs his portfolio.’

Ella clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to reach across the table and shake some sense into him. ‘Art? Is that what you call it? Those were real people, Harry. People with lives, families, dreams.’

‘Okay,’ Ripley jumped. ‘I can’t focus with this distraction. Faulkner, why are you dressed like an old woman?’

Harry grinned and said, ‘You caught me at a moment of introspection, and I thought I’d use it to my advantage. Sometimes, you have to *feel* the characters, you know?’ His gaze didn’t waver. ‘But these women? To the world, they were inconsequential. But in my films? They became immortal. They became stars.’

Harry's words were as close to a confession as one could get without actually confessing, Ella thought. But even so, something about it seemed off.

'Okay, Harry, I'm going to go through this piece by piece, and I want you to stop me if I get anything wrong.'

'Ooh, a game,' Harry grinned. 'I like playing games.'

Ella ignored the comment and got to the task at hand. She was going to lay everything out while she analyzed Harry's reactions. At the moment she saw authenticity, she was going to capitalize.

'Last year, you posted a casting call on the Dread Pages for a film you were directing called In Hell. Correct?'

'Correct.'

'About six months ago, production began on your little slasher flick, but then halted three months later.'

Harry shifted slightly, 'Budget issues. Real art is dead. It's all superheroes and franchise prequels these days.'

Ella resisted the urge to question a low-budget horror movie as real art. 'Cut to three days ago, a woman named Kathleen Carter shows up dead in an abandoned cabin. The next day, Jessica Owen is slaughtered outside her home. Last night, Ginny Mathers was killed whilst babysitting.'

Ella watched Harry's expression. To Ella's surprise, he remained Stoic. Until now, she assumed that someone of his psychopathology would relish the details.

'Tragedies, all of them,' Harry smiled. 'And what do those dead girls have to do with In Hell?'

Ella slid her phone across the table, showing a picture of the message at Kathleen Carter's crime scene. Harry leaned closer, eyes squinted.

'I am in hell, help me,' he said. Harry shifted again, uncomfortably this time. His shoulders tensed, blink rate shot up.

Ella didn't like it.

Ripley said, 'Nice little reference to your film there, Harry.'

‘Well, sometimes you have to... you know...’

‘Have to what?’

‘Plant the seeds.’

Ella needed to dig deeper. There were plenty of details about each crime scene that only the killer would know, and if Ella could make Harry slip up, it would be as good as a confession. She just needed to get there.

‘Tell us about your film, Harry,’ she said.

‘In Hell? It was gonna be a masterpiece. Pure social commentary on the state of the film industry.’

‘How so?’

Harry suddenly became a lot more animated, color in his cheeks, conviction in his tone. ‘Tropes turned on their heads. Discomfort at every turn. It was going to question everything the audience thought they knew about morality, artistry, right and wrong.’

Ella didn’t buy it. ‘Harry, come on. It was about a masked guy hacking up women. Not exactly the Sixth Sense, is it?’

‘*Was* about?’ Harry snarled. ‘Don’t talk about my film in the past tense. It *will* be finished. I filmed some scenes for it, just the simple ones. The set for the finale is still standing. I just need... interested parties.’

‘A set?’

‘Yeah. Nice place I rented out in Hollsworth. I spent a fortune on it.’ Harry gazed longingly at the two-way mirror. ‘It was for the final scene. Was going to be... something else.’

Ripley jumped in, never one for grandstanding. ‘Faulkner, I’m going to get serious here. We’ve got three dead women, and a lot of signs say that you have something to do with it. Any comments?’

Harry leaned back, staring at the ceiling as if searching for the right words. ‘Comments? You want comments? Detective, in this world, there’s perception and there’s reality. You see me as a killer, but I see myself as a creator. In my hands, these women became something greater than themselves, something eternal.’

Ella's temples began to throb, Harry's word vomit constricting her skull. She was hearing words but none of them registered.

'Harry, you obviously know how to sit on a fence, but we're not here for that. Give us a yes or no. Did you kill these women?' Ella sweetened the deal with a flurry of crime scene photos. She flung them across the table one by one. 'Look, here's Kathleen Carter. Gorgeous young girl. Eviscerated, intestines pulled out like silly string. Looked a bit like Kirsty from Hellraiser. Not so pretty anymore is she?'

Harry took one look at the photo then cast it aside. 'No.'

'How about Jessica Owen? Impaled through the chest with a shotgun, straight out of the Michael Myers playbook, apparently. Maybe her killer couldn't get it up, so this was his way of penetrating her. Real strong girl, Jessica. An athlete. Could have kicked her killer's ass in a fair fight.' Ella threw another glossy picture at Harry. His eyes lowered, then rose within a second.

And now a third. 'Ginny Mathers. See this photo? The poor girl was babysitting when she was killed. You know what'll happen when the prison gangs get word you put kids at risk?'

Harry's lips were shut tight. Ella watched his movements, scrutinized every inch of his punchable face. He stayed silent.

Ripley jumped in, 'A famous serial killer in prison, *and* one who put minors in danger? Sheesh.'

Harry's expression began to harden. Something was changing in him.

'To borrow from a famous horror movie, your suffering would be legendary, even in hell,' Ella said. 'So tell me, Harry Faulkner...' she found a picture of the third mask, the nameless mask, and thrust it in his face. 'Is this you? Are you *the Director?*'

Harry's once defiant eyes widened as they locked onto the photograph. For a moment, all his bravado and posturing vanished, replaced by genuine shock. With a trembling hand, he took the photograph and laid it neatly on the table.

'He's...' Harry began. 'He's alive.'

Ella didn't take her eyes off Harry, watching the internal battle play out on his face. She'd finally dug beyond the surface. 'Who's alive?'

'The Director. This is him, but... he shouldn't exist.'

Ella and Mia exchanged a look of confusion. More word-vomit? More grandiosity?

'Make sense, Faulkner,' Ripley said. 'Talk any more shit and I'll lock you up for life.'

'Okay, okay,' said Harry. 'Look, here's the truth. I did *not* kill these women. I am *not* the Director.' He clutched the photograph. 'This mask is for the character in my film, but I don't own this mask. I've never *seen* this mask in the flesh, only in pictures.'

Ella wrapped a palm around her face, embracing the darkness within. She quickly ran through the events in a linear fashion, taking Harry's word at face value.

'Pictures?' she asked.

'Uh huh. In fact, I've never posted pictures of the Director's mask anywhere. It was going to be a surprise for everyone on set, but we never got to that point.'

Ella considered the implications. She came to a quick conclusion. 'So, who else knows what the mask was supposed to look like? Because one of those people has to be our killer.'

'A few people saw the concept art. But...'

Ripley leaned forward, 'But?'

'But, well, concept art and latex are two different things.'

'Harry,' Ella said. 'How many victims are there in your film?'

'Four,' Harry said.

One left to go, Ella thought. She checked the time. Seven PM. It was fast running out.

'And how does it end?'

Harry scoffed. 'You think I'm going to reveal that? You're out of your mind.'

Ella wanted to reach over the table, knock the idiocy out of him. There were lives at stake, and he was more concerned with the sanctity of a film no one would watch.

‘Now’s not the time for games. I need to know the ending to your film.’

‘Detectives, I know I’m a suspect, but I’m innocent, and the attention my film will get from this is going to be insane. My character is real – and actually taking lives. Don’t tell me it doesn’t pique *your* interest.’

Ripley stormed out of her seat, leaned across the table and grabbed Harry by his shirt. She yanked Harry to a standing position. Ella felt the recoil.

‘Listen to me,’ Ripley said in a low voice, her fiery stare locked on his. ‘I could care less about your stupid film. I never watched Halloween, and I certainly won’t watch your trash. Now, you better start talking. Whoever has seen your mask is our killer, so who is it?’

She thrust him back into his chair. Harry gripped the arms to keep himself from toppling. Sometimes, it looks like a little physical encouragement to truly break a suspect down.

Harry wiped himself. ‘They say art imitates life. I guess it’s the other way around here.’

Still no dice. Ella’s patience was rapidly wearing thin. Every second Harry decided to revel in the spotlight was another second closer to another potential murder.

Ripley slammed her fist on the table, making Harry jump slightly. ‘Enough with the theatrics! Tell us what we need to know.’

Harry’s lips curled into a smug smile. ‘Why should I? You need me. You need my story.’

Ella’s mind raced. The weight of every detail, every sentence spoken, every reaction observed seemed to bear down on her all at once. Memories, recollections, and facts started to form a spiral in her head. It was like she was standing in the center of a vast puzzle, each piece a shimmering fragment of evidence. As they danced around her,

she began to pluck them out of the air, forming a picture that should have been visible two days ago.

The room seemed to grow quieter, the fluorescent lights humming softly in the background. Ripley's impatient tapping, Harry's anxious breathing, they all faded as Ella's thoughts honed in on the singular task of making sense of it all.

And then it clicked.

She wasn't going to get anything useful out of Harry Faulkner, and if she had to put money on it, she'd bet that he wasn't her killer. He was too smug, too pretentious, too artificial. He was a dreamer, someone who thought he was owed a career in the arts because he'd consumed other people's creations.

But their killer was a real creator – in more ways than one.

Ella shot to her feet, making for the door. 'Mia, enough of this clown. We need to go.'

Ripley side-eyed her, clearly of the opposite opinion. 'I'm not leaving until Mr. Faulkner tells who us who's doing this.'

Ella squeezed the door handle. 'We don't need to – he's already told us.'

'What?' Harry cried. 'I haven't told you anything.'

Ella held up three fingers and said, 'Sometimes, Faulkner, you have to read between the lines. We're looking for your special effects guy, aren't we?'

For the first time since meeting him – from blind crone to shackled prisoner – Harry Faulkner showed raw emotion. His expression dissolved from smugness to genuine shock. He turned a shade paler.

Harry stayed quiet, his silence speaking volumes.

'And not only that,' Ella continued, 'but you told us where to find him.'

Ella rushed outside, ready for the last voyage. Every piece slot into place like a perfect jigsaw, and now she just needed to get to the final scene before the curtain dropped.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Aurora adjusted the strap of her bag as she stepped onto the sound stage. She glanced at her watch - 7:58 pm – then reread the folded note that had been slipped under her door earlier today.

Sound stage. 8 pm. Important news. Sorry for the note, lost your number – Harry F.

She hadn't been back since the day the production was suddenly halted. Rumors swirled about budget cuts, but there were also whispered tales of disagreements between the cast and Harry, but if there was a chance that *In Hell* was back on the menu, then she was going to do whatever it took to play her part. Aurora Davis had always wanted to play the coveted final girl, a role that paved the way for starlets like Jamie Lee Curtis and Sigourney Weaver to the big leagues. And Aurora, with her rich brunette waves, unpretentious features and lean figure, perfectly fit the mold, even by her own admission.

Aurora had never actually seen this stage before because Harry had once mentioned it was reserved for the climatic showdown, the scene where Aurora and the masked lunatic died in each other's arms in some melancholic twist ending that would, according to Harry, *make the viewers feel something*. But Harry hadn't mentioned what this place was supposed to be, and from the relics on display, she guessed it was some kind of shrine.

The dim, shadowy expanse was filled with artifacts of horror films from generations past in a tribute to the terror and suspense that had thrilled audiences for decades. Aurora saw old costumes encased in glass, mock props, and even gaffed body parts dangling from hooks. A butcher knife and blue jumpstair lay displayed on a satin pillow, its gleaming blade catching the limited light. In another corner, a worn hockey mask was mounted on a wall. The entire stage felt like a macabre museum, a shrine dedicated to the very essence of horror.

She hesitated for a moment, taking in the haunting beauty of it all. The nostalgia was thick in the air, but so was anticipation. The promise of what ‘In Hell’ could be, and her crucial role in it, filled her with a mix of emotions, and she doubted Harry would call her here just to deliver bad news. For all she knew, they could be filming something here tonight, perhaps the flashback scene she remembered seeing in the script.

‘Hello? Harry?’ Aurora shouted.

There was no immediate response, just the echoes of her voice bouncing back at her. She strained her ears, listening for any signs of movement or a familiar voice in return. Instead, the only sound was the faint, distant hum of machinery, perhaps a generator, and her own heartbeat thudding in her chest.

She took a few cautious steps deeper into the studio. Aurora clutched her bag tighter, wondering if she should have brought someone with her. But she dismissed the idea quickly – it was a professional invitation, after all, and Harry was eccentric, not dangerous.

The further she ventured into the sound stage, the more intricate the displays became. Vintage movie posters from classic horror films adorned the walls, a callback to an era where practical effects reigned supreme. There were tributes to iconic monsters like Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Wolfman, alongside prosthetics from newer movies, showing the evolution of the genre over the years. At one display, an old-school clapboard stood next to a modern digital one, perhaps symbolizing the intersection of old and new.

Stepping away from the unnerving spotlight, Aurora’s eyes were drawn to a sign hanging from the ceiling: ‘Dressing Rooms’. Deciding that Harry was probably in the midst of some elaborate directorial vision, she decided to follow the sign’s direction down a narrow corridor.

The passage led her to a door with her name written on a makeshift label. Aurora pushed it open, revealing a simple dressing room. A chair sat before a large mirror surrounded by bulbs, most of which were burnt out. A few dim lights still

glowed, offering a hazy illumination. On the chair was a costume – her costume from the movie. It was unmistakable, especially with the intentional rips and faux bloodstains that were designed to give it an authentic, post-chase look.

On the table was a note, written in the same messy handwriting as the message through her door.

Aurora, for tonight's magic. Put this on. We're bringing the finale to life.

Despite the odd circumstances, Aurora couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement. Maybe this was it. Maybe they were going to rehearse the final scene.

Aurora admired the dress for a moment, then began undressing. She checked there were no cameras and this wasn't some voyeuristic effort, because after all, everyone knew about Harry's past. However, separating a man's art from his personal life was a required skill for Hollywood.

The costume was a snug fit, just as it was during their prior shoots. As she looked in the mirror, adjusting the ensemble and scrutinizing the fake blood splatters, she felt an actor's thrill. Aurora had always admired the women who'd played the iconic final girls. They were symbols of strength, resilience, and sheer willpower. Tonight, she was stepping into those shoes.

Once dressed, she took a moment to breathe, feeling the weight of the role. If this was a potential ticket to stardom, she was ready to take the ride.

While Aurora adjusted her costume in the mirror, a sudden noise interrupted her thoughts. It sounded like footsteps, but not the usual, familiar stride of a crew member or actor she was accustomed to. It was uneven, deliberate, as if someone was taking their time moving around, possibly trying to avoid making too much noise.

'Harry? Are you there?' she called. 'I'm in the dressing room.'

There was a brief pause, then the soft rustle of fabric and another deliberate footstep, closer this time.

The door creaked open, slowly revealing a silhouette framed by the dim hallway lighting. Aurora's heart leapt as she recognized the familiar shape, the dirty leather, the uneven eyeholes, the contorted grin, the pointed chin.

It was the director – but the fictional one.

She stood before the film's antagonist, the character she was fated to die alongside. Hideous mask, brown apron, both soiled with fake blood. A startled gasp escaped her lips, her fingers involuntarily gripping the edges of the dressing table. The figure stepped closer, remaining silent, the void-like eyes of the mask staring at her.

Aurora's heart rate was skyrocketing, her palms sweaty, and her breathing shallow. But she tried to find her voice.

'You... you must be the actor they've hired to play the Director? Harry must have thought it'd be a good scare to have you come in like this.'

The figure didn't reply, just cocked its head to the side, analyzing her with an eerie stillness.

Slowly, almost theatrically, it raised its hand, revealing a butcher knife, its blade gleaming in the soft light. Certainly the most realistic prop she'd ever laid eyes on.

Aurora tried to muster a nervous laugh, desperately hoping to dispel the tension.

'That's a good prop. Very authentic. So, we're rehearsing the finale tonight, huh?'

The masked figure took another deliberate step forward, the knife now more prominent in its grip. Her confidence began to crumble as she realized there was something distinctly off about the whole situation. If this was method acting, she wasn't into it.

'Look, if this is some sort of initiation or prank, it's really not funny. Harry, if you're out there watching this, call it off!'

The masked man edged closer, his feet shuffling, his dirty butcher's apron swaying with every step.

Suddenly, the reality of the situation began to sink in. Aurora was alone on an isolated sound stage, confronted by

someone who may or may not be an actor, wielding what could potentially be a real weapon.

‘Harry,’ Aurora shouted, ‘if you don’t quit this, I’m out. Screw your film.’

The Director shuffled closer still, now close enough to touch. Aurora retreated against her dresser, adrenaline pumping loudly in her ears. She knew Harry was eccentric, but even he wouldn’t go this far.

Then, a surge of panic came in a crashing wave. The Director surged at her blade-first. Aurora’s fight or flight response kicked in, propelling her out of the character’s path to safety. But before she could completely evade his advance, Aurora felt cold steel graze her arm.

A sharp pain erupted, followed by the warm sensation of blood washing over her flesh. She glanced down, seeing the angry red gash contrasting sharply against the faux blood stains on her costume.

Desperation clawed at her insides, and her mind raced.

This was no act.

This was something else entirely.

A ruse, a trap.

Aurora was not on a set rehearsing for the movie’s climax. She was in a real-life horror scenario, facing an actual threat.

Aurora lunged for a glass bottle from her makeup station, smashing it against the table to create a sharp-edged weapon.

‘Stay back!’ she warned, then at a moment of opportunity, Aurora spun and bolted to her left, heading for the door.

Tonight, Aurora Davis would truly find out if she had what it took to be the final girl.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

‘It has to be here,’ Ella shouted from the driver’s seat. Ripley sat in the passenger seat, shouting directions from her online app. ‘It has to end at the film set.’

Harry Faulkner had talked a lot but said very little, but amongst the posturing and the showboating had been a few nuggets of useful information.

‘I’m with you, Dark. I know a poser when I see one. Our unsub has balls – Harry Faulkner doesn’t.’

‘Right? And based on everything I’ve heard so far, the finale *has* to take place at Harry’s film set. It’s a perfect fit.’

‘One mile up ahead,’ Ripley said. ‘Keep going, but piece this together for me. I believe you, but I don’t see it.’

In the absence of traffic, Ella pushed down on the gas. They were reaching the outskirts of Maywood, where Los Angeles met the San Gabriel Mountains. The landscape transformed from the city’s sprawling streets to a rugged terrain of thick woods, isolated warehouses, and the odd building.

‘Okay, so we know our killer is focused on final girls. Every victim so far had a connection to a famous final girl. Remember on Jessica Owen’s death video? He said *I’m finishing what we started*. Notice the group term. *We*. Harry wouldn’t be so inclusive. His film is his baby, no one else’s.’

‘Right, so?’

‘That means Harry isn’t our killer, but given that our guy is using the same mask used in *In Hell*, he’s somehow connected to the film.’

‘I agree,’ Ripley said.

‘At every scene, he’s left clues leading us to the final showdown. The messages, the videos, the red herrings. Harry said his film had four victims, that means we’re at the last one. And our killer *wants* us to meet him there. This whole finale is part of his grand plan to create a real-life horror film.’

‘Up here and left,’ Ripley said. ‘Half a mile away.’

‘Got it.’ Ella veered in the direction, leaving Maywood behind and entering Hollsworth according to the signage.

‘And remember how we couldn’t trace the sources of the masks? Remember how they were high quality and hand-crafted?’

‘Yeah. He probably brought them online.’

‘No,’ Ella said, finally seeing the obvious. The world was much darker now, observing everything through the eyes of a horror-obsessed psychopath. ‘He’s making them himself. Remember what we saw in the casting call? It said *the costume designer and FX artist were already on board*. Obviously, Harry would have shown his special effects designer the mask concept.’

Ripley pointed to a desolate building in the distance. Harry’s rented warehouse.

‘Okay, Dark, I get it, but what does *this* film have to do with everything? Our killer mimicked the classics. Why has he finished with some rinky-dink film that doesn’t even exist?’

Ella had wrestled with that question too, but the answer lay in the killer’s previous actions. ‘Because he’s not just a serial killer, he’s a slasher villain. Textbook psychos don’t think about the end game, but horror icons do. Michael and Jason don’t end up in jail, so someone is going to have to take his place inside.’

Ripley slapped the dashboard. ‘And when a murder crops up on Harry’s film set, all eyes are going to stick on the eccentric director.’

‘It’s a perfect out,’ Ella said. ‘He already did a decent job of framing Alex Morton, and Harry Faulkner has a history of voyeurism. I wouldn’t be surprised if our killer plants Alex’s phone at Harry’s place. With Harry’s deviant past, it would be easy to believe he attended Alex’s watching parties.’

‘Here,’ Ripley cut her off, pointing at the giant black cube in front of them. The parking lot was a few acres of barren land. Ella sped towards the door and slammed the handbrake

on. She double-checked her ammunition levels, then leaped out of the car with Ripley not far behind.

The warehouse loomed large and foreboding, a black monolith silhouetted against the evening sky. The entrance seemed tiny in comparison; a rectangle set into the wall, an unhooked chain dangling off the handle.

‘Someone’s been here already,’ Ella said.

‘This chain would have blown off in the wind if it had been here for three months,’ Ripley confirmed. Ella gripped the handle, turned and twisted, but couldn’t breach it.

‘Son of a bitch has locked it from the inside.’

‘Time to get our hands dirty,’ Ripley said.

‘This is solid metal, Mia. I couldn’t kick...’

‘So is this,’ Ripley said as she pulled out her Glock 17 and aimed it at the lock. Without warning, Ripley squeezed the trigger, brightening the night with flames for a hundredth of a second. The metal lock exploded, steel versus steel, releasing the door from its chains.

Ella, taking a moment to recover from the sudden explosion, nodded approvingly at Ripley. ‘Finally got that misdemeanor.’

‘About time. Let’s go.’

Ella cautiously stepped into the warehouse, the door swinging inward with a groan. The dim, shadowy expanse inside immediately caught her attention. Like a moth to a flame, she was drawn to the center, where an elaborate shrine dedicated to horror films of generations past was set up.

The interior was reminiscent of a macabre museum. Vintage costumes from legendary horror films were encased in glass, each positioned as if to capture a moment of sheer terror. She recognized the dirty butcher knife and jumpsuit belonging to Michael Myers, its blade gleaming ominously as it lay on a satin pillow. In another corner, the unmistakable worn hockey mask from Friday the Thirteenth series was mounted, staring blankly at the onlookers.

The entire shrine was an homage to horror, a visual representation of the genre's legacy. Rows of gaffed body parts hung from meat hooks, swaying slightly as a result of her entry. Mock props of different sizes were scattered around, some eerily realistic.

'Now we know why,' Ella called to her partner. 'References to Michael Myers, Pinhead, Jason Vorhees. Every move has been meticulous. It was all about this film.'

'Enough horror trivia,' said Ripley as she rotated on her heels, pistol jabbed in every direction. 'Let's find this guy.'

Ella edged forward, navigating the maze of walkways, props, glass cabinets. It was reminiscent of Harry Faulkner's apartment, perhaps not by accident.

She ventured deeper inside, senses on overdrive. Every step she took echoed in her ears, and the dim lighting made it hard to discern shapes from shadows. The warehouse smelled of stale air and rust, with a faint undertone of something metallic – blood?

She tried to focus, to block out the creeping dread that was gnawing at her. The shrine's intricate detail, the meticulous placement of each prop, was a stark reminder of the killer's obsession and dedication. It was one thing to chase a criminal through the well-lit streets of LA; it was entirely another to be caught in the very web of horror they'd spun. This was no ordinary crime scene – it was the killer's domain, and they were his unwelcome guests.

Her fingers tightened around her gun, taking some comfort in its familiar weight. She reminded herself that they were there for a reason – to end the nightmare and bring the perpetrator to justice. With each step, Ella repeated this mantra in her mind, trying to steady her racing heart.

And then, just as she started to regain some semblance of composure, a shrill, terrified scream pierced the air. It echoed, filtering through horror props, the perfect soundtrack to a horror shrine.

'Someone's here, Dark,' shouted Ripley.

'We need to cover this place top to bottom.'

‘You head right,’ Ripley pointed. ‘I’ll go left.’

Ella hastened across the main room, pistol drawn, eager to meet this human monster in person. On the way, she caught a portrait photo of Norman Bates, grinning at her with his sinister smile.

Her old friend Norman. The first person she tried to profile but never managed to finish.

She clocked her gun, new determination in her veins.

This story was going to have an ending, she told herself.

In the distance, Ripley’s footsteps were faint, but Ella could still hear them from the other side of the warehouse, moving with the same purpose. And even though the horror rules stated that you should never split up when in danger, Ella was going to rewrite those old clichés tonight.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

The Director moved like a phantom through the studio, deliberate and silent strides, rehearsed countless times in his mind, like a predator stalking its prey.

The slow, rhythmic beating of his heart was the only sound that seemed real to him as he carefully observed every movement, every flicker of light, listening intently for any footsteps or whispers. He was patient, knowing that the element of surprise was on his side. Among the glass displays and mounted props, Curtis weaved his path, using the reflections in the glass to keep an eye on his surroundings. Occasionally, he would pause, pressing himself flat against a wall or hiding behind a particularly large prop.

Everything had gone to plan, almost too perfectly. Aurora Davis was lost in the maze of backstage rooms, bleeding, weakening, too terrified to step out into the main room. She'd left her cell phone on the dresser, and so the Director had smashed it to pieces. And, of course, the detectives had arrived on cue, no doubt having pieced his clues together. He'd seen two women arrive, the same two he'd seen hanging around Jessica Owen's death site. He hadn't expected women, but now it seemed he had three final girls for his grand finale. Could any other horror icons lay claim to that?

And once he'd piled up the bodies, all attention would be on Harry Faulkner.

But the Director had to give Harry a little credit. Harry had introduced his former self to the alter ego that soon became his entire being.

Before the mask, he was Curtis Madden, a freelance special effects designer shunned by Hollywood due to his family connections. His uncle's own creations had once suffocated a man on set, and so Curtis – despite his inherited love for the special effects game, was bearing the burden of his uncle's actions.

But Harry Faulkner had taken a chance and hired Curtis for his soon-to-be-famous movie *In Hell*. And when Curtis saw that mask – with its intricate detailing, its glossy, haunting eyes, and the cruel, twisted smile – he felt an immediate connection. It was as if the mask had been waiting for him, calling out to him. He couldn't craft the prototype fast enough, and once the latex had dried, he spent countless hours wearing his creation, inhabiting the character within, becoming a new person free of the burdens that had been forced upon him. Crafting the Director's mask, bringing those chilling features to life, it wasn't just artistry – it was an awakening.

Growing up, his fascination with horror led him to collect movie memorabilia, posters, and even copies of original scripts. His room was adorned with iconic masks and figures, each representing a world where the macabre was celebrated. Yet, to him, horror wasn't about the fear or the blood. It was about the story, the psychology behind the characters, and the depths to which humans could plunge when faced with their deepest fears.

But even as Curtis submerged himself in this world, it remained a passive engagement. He loved the stories, the creativity, and the nuances. But he was an observer, a consumer of tales spun by others.

The transformation from Curtis to the Director didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual evolution, fueled by his newfound role in the filmmaking process. The Director wasn't just a moniker; it was an embodiment of his deepest desires and fantasies. It was a role that allowed him to take control, to dictate the narrative rather than just consume it.

The very act of wearing the mask had given the Director a newfound identity, a purpose. In the darkness behind that lifeless facade, he felt invincible, released by the weight of his own humanity. When assuming the role, he wasn't just mimicking the killer from the movie; he became the killer. The line between fantasy and reality blurred, and the Director found himself lost in a dark fantasy of his own making. Every scene he orchestrated, every victim he chose, every meticulously planned murder – it was all a tribute to the films that had shaped him.

Drawing inspiration from Harry's script, as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of horror films, he began to craft his own story. Each murder was meticulously planned, each victim a tribute to the iconic final girls of slasher films past. The meticulous detail he put into the masks he left behind at each crime scene was proof of his dedication to the craft.

As the Director moved through the studio, memories of past films played in his mind. The iconic scenes, the screams, the thrill of the chase. He saw himself as the rightful heir to the legacy of horror icons, eager to etch his own name alongside theirs.

In the dim glow of the shrine, the Director's attention was suddenly drawn to a faint silhouette moving further in the distance. The nimble, stealthy movements betrayed an experience, a training of sorts. It wasn't Aurora's panicking scuttle, nor the clumsy footfalls of an unsuspecting victim. This was someone with purpose, someone cautious yet determined.

From the scant light refracting through a display case, the Director made out the outline of the brunette detective he'd spotted earlier. Her shoulder-length hair framed a face that, even in shadow, carried an unmistakable intensity. There was a hint of nerdy charm in her appearance, with glasses that occasionally caught the glint of ambient light. To the Director, it made her all the more appealing.

While most would see a trained detective, wary and ready, the Director saw something different. She was the perfect Final Girl—smart, resilient, and good-looking. The archetype that had eluded him until now.

In this expansive, macabre playground, he felt in control. The props, the atmosphere, the dim lighting – it all worked to his advantage. He'd been careful, meticulously crafting this environment, turning the tables on any would-be hunter. Here, he was the predator, and they were the prey.

Moving seamlessly through the shadows, he maintained his distance, watching her every move. The slightest shift in her posture, the turn of her head, even the rhythm of her breathing, he noted it all.

Hiding behind one of the old film projectors, he spotted a tray of old props on a table nearby. As the Final Girl skulked through his trap – like a mongoose into the snake pit, he gently clinked a metal can with his fingernail then retreated into the shadows.

The tinny sound echoed around the film set, a brief note amplified by the tension. Instantly, the Final Girl whipped around, uncertainty flickering in her eyes as she scanned the room. To an observer, it would seem she was ready for anything, her senses on high alert.

But to the Director, the brief moment of vulnerability was electric. An adrenaline bolt of excitement jolted through him, feeding the insatiable pleasure he derived from this dark game of cat and mouse. It was a high, an intoxicating rush that no drug or thrill could match. It was the pure, unbridled joy of controlling the narrative, of pulling the strings in this macabre theater.

To him, this was more than just a hunt; it was an art form. Like the scenes in his cherished horror films, this was a dance—a dance of suspense, of fear, and ultimately, of death.

He wanted to savor this, the culmination of all his planning, his masterpiece, but he had to strike soon. The brunette detective might think she was hunting him, but in this domain, amidst his creations, the Director was always in control. And soon, she'd realize that she was just another player in his grand performance.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Ella was on high alert, finger trembling on the trigger as she navigated this amateur horror museum. She tried to put herself in the killer's shoes, to anticipate his moves. Where would he strike from? What would be his next play? Who was this victim – and was she still alive? Finding her came first, apprehending the unsub second.

He'd been steps ahead so far, leaving breadcrumbs, taunting her with his intricate scenes, orchestrating a horror story in real life. But now, the stakes were different. Ella was in his lair, and he was no longer the puppet master from the shadows.

She continually looked back towards the door that Ripley had blown open, because a part of her believed that this unsub would flee at the first opportunity. However, she knew that wasn't his end game. There needed to be a final victim – or victims. A bloodbath that punctuated the end of his reign. Any other climax would be unfit for a villain of his caliber.

As she delved deeper into the shrine, past rows of costumed mannequins and mock-murder weapons, Ella thought she heard scuffling, breathing, even whistling.

As she took another cautious step, she heard a faint sound – a soft whisper of fabric or maybe a faint shuffle. Ella swiftly turned on her heels, her gun aimed at what she hoped would be the source of the sound.

But there was no living figure in front of her. Just a baby carriage idly rolling in her direction.

The carriage wheels squeaked ominously, echoing in the otherwise silent room. It continued its slow trajectory toward Ella until it came to a stop just a few feet from her. The disheveled white lace canopy obscured the contents of the carriage from view.

For a split second, Ella found herself frozen, memories of old horror films flashing through her mind. The iconic scene from *Rosemary's Baby* seemed to play out in her mind's eye,

but she knew this wasn't a movie. This was real, and she needed to maintain her composure.

She approached the carriage with caution, gun raised and ready. She hesitated for a split second before mustering the courage to pull back the canopy.

Empty. Ella spun back around, the acoustics of the large, mostly empty space played tricks on her ears, amplifying every little sound, casting echoes in odd directions. The whispered legacy of horror icons seemed to drift through the air, mingling with her own breaths, which came out in short, shaky bursts. The display cases, reflecting the sparse light available, played tricks on her vision, struggling to differentiate between movements and reflection.

Even so, she was certain the unsub was close, watching her every move, waiting for the perfect moment. This was a game for him, and he was enjoying watching her squirm. But Ella was not about to be outplayed.

The maze seemed to blur together in a haze of props, displays, glass boxes and piles of handwritten notes. With every step, Ella felt like she was walking deeper into the fever dream of a madman who was obsessed with a twisted kind of fame. Ella hurried around a corner, gun pointing at the darkness, and at the end of the makeshift row, she saw something that turned her blood to lava.

Four mannequins in a row, three of them made up to look like famous final girls. Laurie Strode with a knife in hand, Kirsty Cotton clutching the Hellraiser box, and Ginny Field in her iconic sweater.

But it was the fourth mannequin that drew her attention.

The figure was blank, devoid of any defining features or clothing. Just a white canvas in human shape.

Then, realization was over Ella like a cold wave.

It was an open slot, awaiting its heroine – or, in this horrifying game, its next victim. It would be here that the killer truly blended reality and fiction, because Ella realized exactly who the scream a minute ago had belonged to.

The final girl from In Hell. It was the closest thing the killer had to a real-life scream queen, and this mannequin was symbolic of her intended demise.

Ella's senses were sharpened, every nerve firing on all cylinders. The mannequins gave way to a dead end, so Ella spun around, and it was then that she froze, feet nailed to the ground. Her breath caught in her throat as she locked eyes onto the black voids of the killer's mask, the brown leather reflecting the cold gleam of the surrounding display cases. Freakish height, long arms, a dirty brown apron draped over his lanky frame. A horror villain in all its hideous glory – and he was only a few feet away from her.

A myriad of thoughts rushed through Ella's mind: Should she shoot on sight? Talk him into submission? And where was Ripley?

It all happened in less than a second, and suddenly the monster lunged at Ella with outstretched arms. She squeezed the trigger, firing off a deafening gun blast that heralded the smashing of glass. The killer knocked her wrist to one side, and so Ella's bullet had flew off to the side, breaking the structural support of one of the cabinets. Glass shattered, raining shards as horror relics scattered across the floor. Ella struggled to keep her footing on the slick, polished ground now littered with broken glass and scattered props, and the gun flung from her hand, across the room, out of sight.

The monster was upon her, having withdrew a butcher's knife from his apron and was now slashing wildly at the air. Ella toppled backward, away from the attacks, narrowly avoiding swipes to her abdomen.

The final game was on, she told herself. It ended here on this film set, and she was going to ensure the good guys won.

Ella backed herself into a corner – something her FBI trainer would have killed her for. Searching for an advantage, she grabbed one of the mannequins and shoved it at the masked murderer. He swatted it aside easily, but it bought Ella a crucial moment to scramble to her feet and seize Kirsty Cotton's figure next, throwing it in his path. This was followed

swiftly by Ginny Field's, each one creating a temporary barrier between her and the killer's frenzied advances.

The next few moments were a cacophony of grunts, glass shattering, and the hollow thuds of the mannequins as they met the floor. Seizing a moment of opportunity, Ella lunged for a mock-weapon from one of the displays – a chainsaw prop that looked all too real. As she gripped the handle, to her surprise, she felt the familiar purr of an engine.

It wasn't a prop. It was real. She pulled the starter cord, and the chainsaw roared to life, its serrated chain gleaming.

If this guy – whoever he was – wanted a climactic ending, he was going to get it.

Ella steadied herself, her grip tightening on the chainsaw's handle. She swung it, creating a buffer zone between her and the assailant. The blade gnashed through the air mere inches from his mask, and he stumbled backward, narrowly avoiding Ella's attacks.

Tables turned. Ella pressed forward, using the chainsaw's menacing hum to drive the killer back. The hunter now became the hunted. Every step she took, he retreated two, desperate to avoid the relentless advance of the whirling blade. He took long strides backward, pulling down glass cabinet in his wake as Ella stormed across a glass runway towards her target.

Ella's heart thudded loudly in her chest, resonating with the roar of the chainsaw. Each slash she made with it was a measured assault, her muscles straining with the weight and the kickback of the machine. The smell of gasoline mixed with the acrid stench of sweat, filling the air as Ella's arms ached from the vibration. Her every movement was met with the unyielding resistance of the chainsaw, but she pressed on, determined to end the nightmare.

Every swing, every lunge, made the chainsaw's chain bite the air, the sharp teeth cutting through the thick tension. The raw power of the tool reverberated through her bones, giving her an adrenaline surge that numbed the pain and fatigue. The room echoed with the clash of metal on metal, the roar of the chainsaw, and the screech of glass underfoot. Ella's feet

moved in a dance of desperation, each step meticulously calculated to maintain her advantage. Her balance was constantly tested as she navigated the debris, her boots occasionally sliding on shards of glass and slick patches of fluid from the broken displays.

Then, the killer reached a dead end. He was cornered against the wall, chainsaw-wielding Final Girl blocking his exit. She knew that she wouldn't be able to talk the man into backing down, and so far, he'd remained perfectly silent – not even a grunt of rage.

Ella raised her chainsaw high, searching for any emotion in those hollow eyes behind the mask. She saw none, and made the only decision she could.

'I take no pleasure in killing,' she said, channeling her inner Leatherface. 'but there's just some things you gotta do.'

The killer became frenzied, arms out, desperate for a way out. Then, right as Ella was about to cut the man, weaken him, subdue him – the revs of the chainsaw died out.

Ella glanced at her weapon, pulled the cord again, tried to shake it back to life.

Dead.

The brief pause was all the killer needed. He lunged at Ella, his butcher's knife at the helm. Ella threw her dead chainsaw in his direction, but the man elbowed it out of the way as he thrust his blade towards Ella's stomach. She sidestepped, landed a knee to his midsection and took the opportunity to take him off his feet. She swept her foot around to the back of his legs as she pushed him down, sending the masked man down to the glassy floor spine-first.

His frantic attacks persisted, but Ella managed to clutch his wrist and drop her knee down into his stomach. She was on top of him, controlling the battle, breathing ragged but her eyes filled with a fiery resolve. She was ready to end this nightmarish game.

With her free hand, Ella reached for her cuffs, but in the brief second it took for her to summon her strength, the killer's

eyes - dark voids behind his mask - darted around rapidly, seeking an advantage.

Using a sudden burst of strength and the element of surprise, he twisted his wrist out of her grasp. Ella barely had time to register the movement when she felt the piercing pain in her arm. The cold steel of his blade had found its mark, sinking deep into her flesh. Blood immediately welled up around the wound, soaking her sleeve and dripping onto the killer's dirty apron.

The pain seared through Ella's arm, her muscles reacting instinctively by contracting. The split-second lapse in her strength and attention was all the killer needed. With a powerful surge, he bucked his hips and thrust his shoulder upward, leveraging Ella off him. In a tangle of limbs and a whirl of movement, the positions were suddenly reversed. Ella found herself on her back, her bloodied arm throbbing in agony. And cold glass shards pressed to her skin.

The masked murderer loomed over her, his ominous leather mask evoking memories of the slasher films Ella once loved. His breathing, rapid and deep, suggested he felt nothing but exhilaration in the moment. The butcher's knife, now slick with Ella's blood, reflected orange beams of light as he summoned it high.

Numbed by the pain, Ella concluded she couldn't overpower him in her current state. Any attempts to block would be futile.

Physicality was out of the window.

That meant she needed to use the mental approach.

'We know you're not Harry Faulkner,' Ella spat. 'He's safe, innocent. You won't get away with this.'

The masked man froze, then shoved one hand around Ella's neck.

If she destroyed his ego, she could destroy him.

'Slasher villains always lose in the end,' she laughed. 'Michael, Jason, Jigsaw, all of them. Dead.'

The killer eased, perhaps suffering a moment of contemplation. Ella had lied – Harry Faulkner was far from innocent and she wasn't sure if Michael or Jason were dead – but penetrating her attacker's mind was a step closer to breaking his body.

And then her moment came.

With every ounce of strength she had left, Ella lunged upwards, zeroing in on the edges of his mask. She burrowed her nails into the latex and began ripping, shredding it like paper, exposing the monster below the surface. She began stripping away his alter ego, kicking him out of his fantasy world, exposing his identity.

The man's hands shot to his face with a scream as he tried to pull his mask lower and conceal his features. Ella glimpsed a mouth, a stubbly chin, two flared nostrils. The horror he had crafted was built on anonymity, on the power and dread of the unknown. Now that he was unmasked, some of that power seemed to wane. Ella, despite her pain and exhaustion, felt a surge of hope. Without the mask, he was just a man – twisted, yes, but mortal.

Seizing the momentary advantage, Ella thrust her knee into his abdomen, causing him to double over. He clutched his chest, and then Ella swiped the knife out of his hands and threw it in the distance. She heard it clink somewhere.

Now it was a fair fight.

The killer toppled off her, crawling through broken glass, heading towards the display at the center of the room. She'd felled the beast, and now she just had to deliver the final blow.

She strode in his direction, pinpointing the weak spots she could focus on. But then the half-masked killer, the fictional-turned-real character, bolted to his feet with renewed determination.

He might only have had half a face, but more concerning was the pistol clutched to his chest.

Gaping wound in her arm, glass lodged in her spine, and now five bullets pointed in her direction. The same bullets Ella had loaded five minutes before.

She'd fought her way out of a deadly struggle, unmasked the monster, only for the tables to turn.

Ella scanned her surroundings, searching for anything that could break out of the situation. The shattered glass, broken props and debris all provided options, but she couldn't grab them without the killer shooting.

She had to stall.

'Guess you're not the talking type, huh?' she said.

The corners of his mouth twitched, words forming but retreating. He was desperate to remain in character, to be whatever this villain's name was.

'Come on, Krueger, what's the matter? You wanted a final girl, you got one. You gonna talk to me or not?'

The man slowly shook his head then outstretched Ella's pistol. She took a step back, but the killer advanced, pistol trained on her chest. Even if she tried her luck and darted in one direction or the other, she doubted she could outrun a bullet. Not to mention, he had five opportunities to smoke her.

'Shoot me then, you coward, but I promise you won't get out of here alive.'

Ella glanced to one side and saw Norman Bates staring at her again. She guessed if she died now, it was just another unfinished project of hers.

The killer cocked Ella's pistol. She raised her hands. If nothing else, the blasts might alert Ripley to their location.

'Go on. Empty the whole chamber in me. I dare you.'

A parting gift for Ripley. If he used all the bullets, Ripley would have an easier time taking him in. If her last final act was a selfless one, maybe God would go easy on her once she reached the gates.

Another step closer. A smirk on his lips.

'You of all people should know... sometimes, dead is better.'

The killer's mask twitched slightly, as if her words had struck a nerve, but she knew he was far beyond reasoning

with.

She saw his finger caress the trigger. Ella shut her eyes and recalled treasured memories: her Dad, Ben, and her old dog, Smudge. They said that your life flashed before your eyes in your last moments, but Ella had been close to death enough times to know that wasn't true.

Then a deafening gunblast, echoing around the vast film set. Ella braced herself for the impact, but a second passed and it never came.

Another blast.

A piercing, shrill scream.

Ella awoke to a different world. A new, unexpected scene that had manifested from nowhere, as though the projectionist had loaded a new film reel while she'd been lost in her memories.

Because there was someone else here, and whoever she was, she'd knotted herself onto the killer's back.

The masked man flailed around, arms waving, firing off gunshot after gunshot, raining dust and lightbulb shards from the ceiling. The woman was a young brunette, athletic and intense, clothed in a white, bloodstained dress and now assaulting the masked man like a maniac bride from hell.

At last, she heard the man's voice. His guttural screams reverberated off the few remaining glass cases as he and the stranger flurried in a circle. Ella crept low, out of the bullet's direction. She counted three, four, five bullets.

Time to strike.

Time to get real.

Ella raced towards the unexpected human knot, fists clenched, fire burning through every vein in her body. Adrenaline replaced the pain, and as the killer spun to face her, Ella thrust her knuckles into his face.

The recoil sent shockwaves down her arm as he toppled back. The girl on his back, though smaller, was a whirlwind of fury, her fingers dug deep into his flesh and her teeth biting down on any skin she could find. She climbed off his back,

kicked him in the spine and sent him back in Ella's direction. Ella swung again, connecting with the man's nose and erupting blood beneath his disguise. It poured out like a stream, disorienting him, felling him to his knees. The mystery woman took another jab at the base of his skull, rocking him like a bobblehead, then Ella summoned every ounce of strength she had left, shifted it to her leg and delivered a final crescent kick to his temple.

The killer collapsed in a heap. Motionless, possibly dead. Ella saw no signs of life, no twitching.

'Perfect ending,' Ella said as she fell against one of the props. She clutched her wound, now feeling the weight of her injuries. 'Thanks for saving my ass.'

The mystery woman cautiously circled the fallen monster, her breathing uneven, eyes darting everywhere, anticipating the next threat. She hesitated, then gingerly offered her hand to Ella. 'I'm Aurora,' she whispered, her voice barely audible.

'Good to meet you. You're the final girl in this stupid film?'

Aurora's eyes welled up. 'I thought this was just a movie set. I didn't expect... this.' She shuddered, her gaze fixed on the fallen killer. 'Yes, I think we're both final girls.'

Ella, despite her pain, tried to reassure her. 'We survived. That's the most important part.'

'Turns out it was a trap,' Aurora said, her voice shaky.

'We're alive. Not sure about that guy,' Ella nodded at the fallen killer. 'Now let's cancel this production.'

The two final girls exchanged a look, one that spoke volumes of their shared ordeal. There was an understanding, a bond forged from the horrors they'd endured.

A silence enveloped them, broken only by their heavy breaths, but the silence was abruptly shattered. The shards of glass began to crackle as the masked man suddenly rose from the dead, jumping to life from beyond the grave, blood still pouring from what remained of his latex mask.

Aurora froze, her face drained of color. Her eyes were filled with terror, and her body shook uncontrollably.

Using one hand to push himself up, he revealed a sharp, glinting shard of glass clutched in the other.

One last scare.

Ella, though weakened, was the first to react, shoving Aurora to the side. 'Move!'

The killer lunged, groaning alien grunts as he crossed the glass pathway towards his intended victims. Ella readied herself for one more fight, one final twist. It was the only way such a horror could end.

Bang.

The sound pierced her eardrums, sparked a fire in her senses.

What the hell happened?

The masked man crumpled in a graceless heap. Behind him, the silhouette of Mia Ripley came into view, smoking pistol in hand.

In a swift movement, she removed her cuffs and slapped them on the nameless man's wrists.

'Ma'am, are you alright?' Mia asked as she sheathed her gun. 'Do we need medics?'

Aurora waved off the request. She glanced between her saviors and asked, 'Still breathing. Who are you both, by the way?'

'FBI,' Ella said. 'I'm Agent Dark. That's Agent Ripley.'

Aurora laughed. 'Ripley? Like Ellen Ripley, from Alien.'

Mia pulled the masked man to his feet. Ella saw movement in his lungs. She breathed heavily, relieved he would see the inside of a jail cell and not be confined to the ground before justice could prevail.

'Yup,' Ripley said. 'I've seen that one.'

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Ella had never been so happy to be in an airport lounge. Exhausted travelers dozed in their chairs or typed away on their laptops. The hum of distant conversations mixed with the occasional overhead announcement created a gentle background murmur. Ella sat beside Ripley on a two-seater, coffee in front of each of them. Her arm was bandaged, and her complexion was slightly paler than usual, but she was very much alive and ready to move on.

Perhaps not as much as her partner was.

‘So long, California,’ Ripley said.

Ella said, ‘Last time ever, huh.’

Ripley reached for her coffee, which *may or may not have whiskey in* by Ripley’s vague admission. ‘I’ll drink to that. Have you seen the news?’

Ella couldn’t miss it. News of the murders was on every website, every channel, every social media page. Sensationalized to hell, but in a week, something else would come along and dominate the headlines, banishing Curtis Madden to a life of obscurity.

‘Let the press go crazy. It’s a pretty wild story, after all.’

Ripley pulled out her phone and showed Ella a recent update on some news site. The headline read *Film Actress Turned Real Life Heroine*. Below was one of Aurora Davis’ professional shots.

‘She’s finally getting her fifteen minutes,’ Mia laughed.

Ella leaned back, happy that Aurora was embracing the spotlight. ‘She deserves it. If it wasn’t for her, I might be dead. I might actually reply to one of those journalists in the morning, maybe give Aurora some praise.’

‘When Lifetime turn this case into some shit TV movie, I think Aurora would make a good you.’

‘You think?’

‘Yeah. She basically you, just younger and hotter.’

‘True. Who’d play you?’

‘Sigourney Weaver,’ Mia answered instantly. ‘She’s the only one.’

‘Obvious choice,’ Ella nodded.

Ripley scrolled through the page and said, ‘I just wish they wouldn’t turn this into a spectacle. Three women are dead.’

‘I know. But it’s the world we live in. Sensationalism sells. Fear sells.’ She paused. ‘But so does hope. People are drawn to stories of survival, of resilience.’

‘You sound almost optimistic,’ Ripley remarked with a smirk.

Ella laughed softly. ‘Maybe I am. Despite everything. Or perhaps because of it. We faced a nightmare and lived to tell the tale. That has to count for something... And our ending was better than anything that creepy director could come up with.’

‘Speaking of Harry Faulkner, Daniels is holding him on obstruction. Harry does indeed know Curtis, and probably knew he was the killer the moment we showed him the mask.’

‘Well, he wanted attention, now he’s going to get it,’ Ella said.

‘Not the type of attention he expected. Oh, and I got you a gift.’

Ella sat up. ‘You did?’

‘Yup.’ Ripley reached into her bag. ‘As Aurora was inside that film set, blowing the door off won’t count as a misdemeanor.’

Ella feigned a frown. ‘That’s too bad.’

‘But there’s an old saying in law enforcement. If criminal damage doesn’t do the trick, stealing evidence will.’ Ripley pulled out a roll of film and threw it in Ella’s lap. She uncurled it and looked through the negatives one by one.

‘In Hell,’ Ella laughed.

‘The only copy. I swiped it from the evidence after cops cleaned Harry’s place out.’

‘You did? That’s a misdemeanor.’

Ripley shrugged. ‘Maybe. Daniels said it wasn’t really evidence. He already has everything he needs to lock both Harry and Curtis up for a long time.’

Ella rerolled the film and put it in her bag. ‘Good riddance to crap artists. Curtis is talking?’

‘No, but he set up cameras on the sound stage. Cops have the whole scene on tape.’

Ella reached for her drink. ‘Of course. He filmed every other kill. He had to capture this one too.’

‘You know, I still don’t understand that guy’s motivations. Most serial killers we catch fall into boxes, but Curtis Madden is... alien.’

Ella had given the idea some thought since her ordeal came to an end, and she’d reached a similar conclusion. ‘I think he was pulled between two different personalities. One side of him wanted to be a creator, the other side of him wanted to tribute his true love - horror films. I think he craved attention, but serial killers can’t get attention unless they’re caught. That’s why he was drawn to this *Director* character, because through that alter ego, he could do a both. He could be a monster but an anonymous one whilst boasting of his special effects skills at the same time.’

‘You know Dark, I used to love criminal psychology, but these days they fall into one of two categories – alive assholes or dead assholes.’

‘Four months,’ Ella said. ‘Four months until you never have to profile anyone again.’

Ripley checked her watch. ‘Bring it on.’

An announcement declared that the two AM flight to Reagan International in Washington D.C. was ready for boarding. The agents collected their bags and trudged towards their terminal.

‘Ready to go home?’

Ella was in two minds. She, too, couldn't wait to leave Maywood to its own devices, but she knew what awaited her on the other side.

Logan Nash. Possible assassination by Logan and his group. FBI misconduct. Certain punishment once Logan's case went to trial.

But she wasn't about to hide from her problems. She took a deep breath and looked at Ripley, her steely resolve showing through her exhausted eyes. 'I am ready to face whatever comes next. Maywood was one chapter, and that chapter has ended. Now, it's time to face the next challenge. I'll handle Logan and whatever storm he brings.'

Ripley nodded in agreement, her own determination evident. '*We'll* handle whatever storm he brings. We're in this together, remember?'

Ella offered a brief smile, 'You think after all we've faced, I'd be used to this by now. The adrenaline, the risks. But Logan... he's a different kind of monster.'

As they reached the boarding gate, Ella looked back one last time at the bustling airport lounge. The bright California lights felt a world away from the darkness that had engulfed them over the past days.

The film might be over, Ella thought, but she didn't know what was hiding in the end credits.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Mia found her front door unlocked, and inside, the smell of fresh coffee and sizzling bacon made a welcome change from her usual lemony air freshener. She was momentarily taken aback by the unexpected coolness, having braced herself for a sweaty and humid entry.

The sounds of light jazz emanated from the living room, and she spotted Martin in the kitchen, his back to her.

Her new flame – with his trademark blue shirt and athletic build despite him being in his late fifties – was humming along with the jazz tune, clearly lost in his culinary endeavor.

Mia leaned against the door frame, watching him with a hint of a smile on her face. ‘Someone’s in a good mood this morning.’

Martin glanced out of the window, keeping his back to the new arrival. ‘Mia Ripley, I’ve been expecting you,’ he said as he spun around, his hazel eyes lighting up.

She arched an eyebrow. ‘At this hour? I thought you’d still be asleep.’

‘Perks of dating a night owl,’ Martin laughed. ‘Sit down. Breakfast time.’

Mia took off her jacket and moved to the dining table. She watched as Martin set a plate in front of her, loaded with fluffy pancakes, crispy bacon, sausages, toast and a side of scrambled eggs. He sat across from her, pushing a steaming mug of coffee her way.

‘The works,’ Mia nodded, impressed.

‘You told me this was your favorite once upon a time, somewhere to the tune of twenty years ago. I’ve got a good memory.’

Mia chuckled as she twirled her fork in the syrup. ‘Well, you’re full of surprises. It feels like a lifetime ago since I had a meal like this.’

There was a brief silence, the soft jazz in the background filling the gap. Martin sipped his coffee, watching Mia as she picked at her food.

‘So?’ Martin asked.

‘So?’

‘Are you going to fill me in or what?’

‘Bit early for that, isn’t it?’

Martin gave her a sarcastic eyebrow-raise. ‘You know what I mean. Your trip to the Golden State.’

With a mouthful of pancake, Ripley said, ‘You ever see that film, Hellraiser?’

Martin pondered the question. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Me neither, and it’s staying that way. And if I ever flirt with the idea of going to California again, shoot me in the head.’

‘Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done that,’ Martin laughed.

Before retiring ten years ago, Martin had been an FBI agent out of Baltimore. Before that, a rifleman on the Iraqi frontlines. He still suffered PTSD from both, but Mia rarely touched on the subject.

Martin looked puzzled for a moment, but then his eyes softened. ‘That bad, huh?’

‘I can’t talk about it, even to you. You know how it is.’

‘I do. As long as you’re back and safe, I’m happy.’

Mia looked down, jamming her fork into her meat. ‘Thank you, Martin. It’s nice to have someone who understands.’

Martin reached across the table, placing his hand over hers. ‘You’re not alone, Agent Ripley. Whatever you’ve seen, I’ve probably seen it too.’

She looked up, her eyes misting over. ‘I appreciate that. More than I can express.’

‘Let’s make a pact, then. Whenever things get too heavy, whenever the shadows of the past loom too large, we’ll sit

down, have breakfast together, and remind each other that there's still good in the world.'

Mia couldn't help but laugh, as cheesy as his comment was. 'Deal. And, just to be clear, breakfast at any time of the day? Even six AM?'

'Absolutely,' Martin winked. 'Especially if it means I get to spend more time with you.'

'Alright, you're making me sick now.'

'Blame the bacon. Never said I was a *good* cook.'

Ripley hadn't realized how much she'd missed being at home. 'Four months,' she said. 'Four months and it's Mia Ripley, last survivor of the class of ninety-one, signing off.'

'Last survivor? Really?'

'It's a line from Alien. But yes. Thirty of us graduated the academy, twenty-nine are gone in one way or another.'

'Quite a statistic,' Martin said. 'Four months and we'll make it hundred percent.'

'The countdown starts now. Anyway, what are you doing today?'

'I was going to grab some groceries, clean the car, maybe watch Hellraiser. What about you?'

Mia laughed, nearly choked on her eggs. 'After this, I'm going to wash the Hollywood off me, then go to bed. You're welcome to join.'

'Alright,' Martin said, 'but don't expect the good stuff. I haven't slept either.'

Ripley slapped his hand. "You spoil me," she laughed.

'And I always will.'

EPILOGUE

After arriving back in D.C. at five AM, all of Ella's vulnerabilities returned an instant wave. She suddenly felt watched, exposed, as though Logan Nash's cronies could be waiting for her around any corner.

So now she was driving through Virginia, heading towards the place her contact had referred her to. Police-designated housing for criminals awaiting trial, for those deemed too untrustworthy to go back to their regular lives.

The rain battered against the windshield as Ella's car wound its way through a series of darkened country roads. Her wipers worked furiously to keep the downpour at bay. The headlights illuminated the narrow road ahead, revealing little more than trees and the occasional wild animal darting across. Each turn felt like a leap into the unknown. The silence was thick, broken only by the rain and the occasional buzz of her car's engine.

Her grip on the steering wheel tightened as the GPS indicated she was getting close to her destination. The safe house was located in a remote area, away from prying eyes. It was perfect for hiding witnesses or anyone that needed to stay out of sight.

Logan Nash was not aware of her arrival, and for all Ella knew, he might not even be here. The house was not guarded twenty-four-seven, and residents could come and go as they pleased, providing they didn't venture further than their court restrictions allowed. Despite Logan Nash being a lifelong contract killer, the evidence against him was merely circumstantial, and was therefore deemed safe for such a low-security imprisonment.

She pulled up to a heavily fortified gate and waited for a moment. She'd called her old contact at Virginia PD and had him add her license plate to the registered vehicles list. That meant she had a three-hour window to come and go.

A camera above the gate focused on her, and then, with a loud buzz, the gate slowly began to swing open. As she drove through, Ella couldn't help but feel she was entering a fortress.

As she drove down the long driveway, she saw the house ahead. It was tiny, resembling more of a cabin than an apartment. Lights illuminated the exterior, likely equipped with security cameras and other measures to ensure it had eyes on everyone who came and went.

She parked up, then took a deep breath before switching off the car engine. She could feel her heart rate picking up as she slowly opened the car door and stepped out. Logan Nash was obviously a dangerous man, but how would he react in such a secluded environment? She had her weapon – a new one, since her old was in an evidence locker in California – and Logan was unarmed.

Approaching the cabin, she noticed a few cars parked in the vicinity. If she had to guess, she'd say some were visitors like her, and others belonged to the residents. There was no clear indication of which car might be Logan's. She took another deep breath, pulling her coat tighter around her to shield herself from the rain, and walked towards the entrance.

Ella rapped on the door, a sharp, concise knock. Silence. The pitter-patter of the rain and the occasional distant roll of thunder were the only sounds. She waited, counting the seconds in her head, then knocked again, louder this time.

There was no response.

A prickle of unease traveled down her spine. Ella tried the door handle, half-expecting it to be locked. To her surprise, the handle turned, and the door creaked open slightly.

'Logan,' she called out. 'Are you home?'

Pushing the door open fully, Ella stepped inside cautiously, her eyes darting around, trying to take in every detail. The living area looked lived-in with an open newspaper and a coffee mug on the table, complete with a film coating that suggested it had been sitting there a while.

'Logan?' Ella called out again, this time with a hint of desperation. Her voice echoed back, but there was no other

response.

She walked slowly through the cabin, checking each room. The bedroom door was slightly ajar, revealing an unmade bed and some personal belongings scattered around. The bathroom door was shut; Ella knocked softly before pushing it open, but it was empty.

She felt a knot tighten in her stomach. The place was devoid of life, yet signs of recent activity were everywhere. Ella felt a mix of emotions: fear, anxiety, frustration. She had come this far only to find Logan Nash gone.

Ella's thoughts raced. Had he caught wind of her coming? Was he watching her right now? Had he fled somewhere untraceable?

It was then she noticed a door that led to a small room at the back of the cabin. Curiously, she approached the door, her senses heightened. It looked like an addition to the cabin, a utility room perhaps.

Slowly, she pushed the door open and took a step inside. It was a tiny room with a washing machine, dryer, and some shelves filled with cleaning products. A small window at the top let in a sliver of the gray outside light.

But the focal point was something else entirely. Something her rational mind struggled to comprehend. Something that made her question whether she was still in California, dreaming up solutions to her problems.

Ella's breath caught in her throat. A rush of disbelief hit her.

She stepped closer. The image before her clashed violently with the scenarios she had played out in her mind during her drive over. There was supposed to be confrontation, information exchanged, maybe even threats. Not this.

Some twisted hallucination? She blinked rapidly, trying to erase the scene from reality.

But it was there, undeniable, tangible, touchable.

Because laying against the washing machine, with his head tilted at an unnatural angle, was the dead body of Logan Nash.

A dark pool had spread around his forehead, the aftermath of a bullet through the skull.

‘This... can’t be real,’ Ella said.

She tried to process her thoughts, but they raced chaotically, bouncing around in her mind like pinballs. Who could’ve done this? Why here? Why now?

A deep sense of dread enveloped her as she thought of the implications of finding Logan Nash dead in a police safe house, especially given that she was the one to arrest him; she was the one to pioneer his imprisonment.

A sense of detachment enveloped her as if she were floating above the situation, observing it from afar. This couldn’t be her reality. It was too surreal. Too violent. Logan Nash, the enigma she had chased for years, the man she had wanted to confront, was dead. Ella knew she needed to call it in, but for a moment she simply stood there, almost triumphant, over the man who’d haunted her dreams for over twenty years.

But her sense of triumph was short-lived. The realization of what she was seeing began to sink in, the gravity of it all pulling her down. Ella’s knees felt weak, and her thoughts spiraled. For all the times she had imagined confronting Logan Nash, she had never envisioned it would end this way. While part of her felt a sense of relief that the man who haunted her life was now gone, another part of her felt robbed.

Robbed of the satisfaction of seeing him face justice, of being the one to ensure he paid for his crime – the murder of her father, the murder of countless others, the families torn apart. All those victims, all the pain and suffering, she had hoped that bringing Logan to justice would provide some semblance of closure, both for the families of the victims and for herself.

Yet, there he lay, lifeless, before justice could truly be served. Someone else had taken it upon themselves to be the judge, jury, and executioner.

She stumbled backward, her hands shaking as she fumbled to retrieve her phone from her pocket.

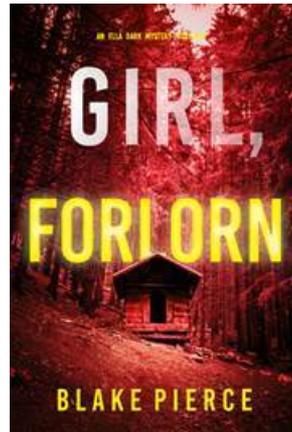
As she dialed the number, she looked around the room once more, searching for any signs of a struggle or any other clues. But the room looked untouched, apart from the lifeless body. Who had done this? And how had they managed to do it in a police safe house?

She had no answers. Just a growing list of questions.

Ella Dark had won the battle between herself and Logan Nash, but at what cost?

Perhaps Ripley had been right. Bullets in the head did solve problems, but they created new ones too.

NOW AVAILABLE!



[GIRL, FORLORN](#)

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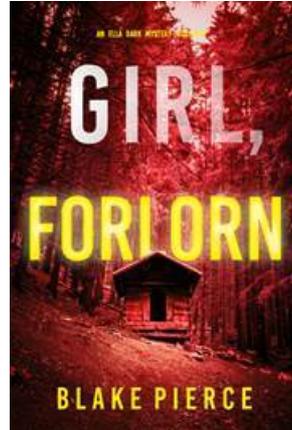
—Reader review (City of Prey)

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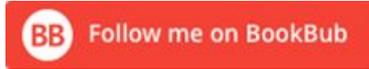
Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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