

BLAKE PIERCE

NOT
THIS



TIME

A RACHEL BLACKWOOD MYSTERY—BOOK 2

NOT THIS TIME

(A Rachel Blackwood Suspense Thriller
—Book Two)

BLAKE PIERCE

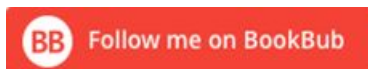
Blake Pierce

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,

comprising nine books (and counting); of the FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the new SHEILA STONE suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); and of the new RACHEL BLACKWOOD suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

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PROLOGUE

Terror hid, watching the idyllic from the shadows.

The sun dipped low in the sky, casting a golden hue over the sprawling ranch. Wildflowers danced in the gentle breeze, their vibrant colors dotting the landscape like nature's confetti. Crimson Indian paintbrushes stood out against the verdant grass, while clusters of bluebonnets swayed beneath the weight of bumblebees. The scent of blooming jasmine and honeysuckle filled the air with an intoxicating sweetness.

Near the stables, several horses cantered back and forth, stirring up dust clouds with each hoofbeat. Their sleek coats shone in the fading light – a chestnut mare with a white star on her forehead, a dappled gray gelding, and a spirited black stallion. The rhythmic thudding of their hooves against the earth was punctuated by occasional snorts and whinnies, a symphony of equine vitality.

Amidst this idyllic scene, two young girls played near the paddock fence, their laughter ringing out like wind chimes. The older girl, around twelve years old, had long chestnut hair that tumbled down her back, reflecting the sunlight like a cascade of copper. Her eyes were as green and mysterious as the surrounding forest, and her freckled cheeks flushed pink from their exertions. She was Amber, the daughter of the ranch owner and a budding equestrian.

Her companion, Lily, was a few years younger, her golden curls bouncing as she jumped and twirled around. A scattering of freckles decorated her button nose, and her ice-blue eyes sparkled with mischief. The girls were cousins, their bond forged through summers spent exploring the ranch together, sharing secrets, and daring each other to feats of bravery.

As they frolicked among the wildflowers, their laughter mingling with the sounds of the horses, it was hard to imagine the dark cloud that would soon descend upon their innocent world.

Amber plucked a vibrant blue cornflower from the ground and tucked it gently behind Lily's ear, the petals contrasting beautifully with her golden curls. Lily giggled, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she suddenly reached up and snatched the flower from her hair.

"Try to catch me," she taunted, her voice lilting like a songbird's melody.

And with that, she bolted away, the stolen flower clenched tightly in her small fist. Amber couldn't help but laugh, her competitive streak flaring to life. "You're on!" she shouted, already sprinting after her younger cousin.

The girls raced through the sun-dappled meadow, their laughter echoing across the open expanse. Amber felt a surge of exhilaration as she closed the gap between them, the wind whipping through her hair and cooling her flushed cheeks. She could see Lily just ahead, her golden curls bouncing with each stride, the blue petals of the cornflower peeking out from her clenched hand.

"Can't catch me!" Lily called, breathless but still grinning, as she veered left, darting toward the dense woods that bordered the ranch.

"Watch me!" Amber retorted, her eyes fixed on the prize. Her long legs carried her swiftly over the uneven terrain, expertly navigating the rocks and fallen logs that threatened to trip her up. The thrill of the chase quickened her pulse, her heart pounding in her chest like the rhythmic drumming of hooves.

As they entered the tree line, the sunlight filtering through the leaves cast dappled patterns on the forest floor. The air was cooler here, scented with the earthy aroma of damp soil and decaying leaves. Amber knew every twist and turn of these woods, every hidden path and secret clearing, and used this knowledge to her advantage as she continued her pursuit.

"Almost got you!" she panted. The gap between them was narrowing, and Amber could practically feel the delicate petals of the cornflower within her grasp.

“Never!” Lily’s laughter rang through the trees, her voice a beacon guiding Amber through the shadows. Though she was younger and smaller, Lily proved to be a worthy adversary, darting around tree trunks and leaping over fallen branches with surprising agility.

“Give it back, Lily!” Amber shouted playfully, trying to catch her breath as she lunged for the blue flower.

As Amber rounded the tree, she thought she had caught up to Lily. But instead, her cousin’s triumphant laughter gave way to a sudden silence. Amber skidded to a halt, her eyes widening in shock at the sight that greeted her.

“Amber... what...?” Lily whispered, her voice trembling. Her small hand clutched the cornflower so tightly that its petals began to crumple. The playful banter that had filled the air just moments before vanished, replaced by an oppressive weight that seemed to constrict their chests.

“Stay behind me,” Amber commanded, her protective instincts taking over. She positioned herself in front of her younger cousin, shielding her from the gruesome scene before them.

Wedged against a gnarled tree, a lifeless body hung limply. One arm dangled by its side, while the other was twisted at an unnatural angle, caught in the relentless embrace of the branches above. Dark crimson stained the victim’s clothing, evidence of a violent struggle that had ultimately resulted in death. The face, once a canvas for human emotion, was now a mask of terror, frozen in time.

The girls exchanged a horrified glance, each searching the other’s face for some semblance of understanding or reassurance. But all they found were reflections of their own fear, mirrored in wide, unblinking eyes.

“Wh-who is it?” Lily stuttered, her voice barely audible.

“I don’t know,” Amber admitted, trying to sound braver than she felt. “But we need to tell Dad.”

In that heart-stopping moment, Amber’s breath hitched in her throat as she stared at the gruesome sight before them. She

felt Lily's hand trembling within her own and knew that their shared terror was on the verge of erupting.

"Stay close to me," Amber ordered, fighting to keep her own voice steady. Her mind scrambled for a plan, some way to make sense of what they had stumbled upon. But all rational thought seemed to evaporate as the girls finally gave in to the primal urge welling up inside them.

Their screams tore through the once-tranquil forest, shattering the silence like glass. The intensity of their cries echoed through the trees, fueled by pure horror. Their voices strained and cracked, but they couldn't stop - it was as if the sound was the only thing keeping them tethered to reality.

And they both turned and ran.

As they did, it was as if the corpse was watching them, staring after their every move.

CHAPTER ONE

Rachel's hands clenched the steering wheel as she navigated the car down the winding road that led to her family's old home. The ranch in the Hill Country loomed ahead, its weathered exterior a testament to the passage of time. Her heartbeat quickened with each turn, the weight of her personal connection to the location settling heavily on her shoulders.

This was a familiar place—the place she lost her parents.

“Been a while, hasn't it?” Rachel whispered to herself, her voice barely audible over the rumble of the engine.

She tilted her white Stetson hat, her fingers brushing the single feather fluttering in the brim.

As she did, the turquoise beads in her raven-colored hair shifted under the hat, clinking softly. The beads and feather were artifacts of a Native heritage that went as deep as the roots in this land.

She couldn't help but recall the countless afternoons spent wandering the property with her parents and Aunt Sarah, picking wildflowers and laughing under the warm sun.

As the car rolled to a stop in front of the house, Rachel forced herself to take a deep breath. She still owned the property, despite the painful memories that clung to every corner like cobwebs. Selling it would feel like losing another piece of her family, and she couldn't bear to let it go.

“Alright,” she muttered, gathering her courage.

With a determined stride, Rachel approached the porch, her boots crunching on the gravel pathway. She paused for a moment, allowing herself to absorb the sight of her childhood home. The once-vibrant paint was chipped and faded, and the shutters hung crookedly, but the house retained an undeniable charm.

“Mom and Dad would be heartbroken to see you like this,” Rachel murmured. She shook her head, banishing the emotion, and took a step forward. This wasn’t just about reminiscing; there was work to be done.

Rachel glanced around the property, her keen eyes taking in every detail.

Her parents had disappeared from this property nearly two decades ago.

Their bodies had never been found—Rachel had only been ten at the time.

And now...

She swallowed, hands clenching at her side...

She was back.

Her Aunt Sarah had made it clear; it was Rachel’s job to figure out what had happened. And if she didn’t? It was a testament to Rachel’s neglect.

No... she was back.

And she wasn’t going to allow the cold case to intimidate her like it once had.

Rachel stepped approached the rusty chain of the gate that barred her way up the old, weathered steps. She could still remember when it was shiny and new, a symbol of protection for her family’s home and the people who lived within its walls. Now, it only served as a reminder of how much time had passed since she last set foot on this land.

The sound of metal scraping against metal filled the air as she fumbled with the lock, hands trembling slightly with anticipation. The chain resisted, as if protesting her intrusion after all these years. Rachel clenched her jaw, determined to push past the physical and emotional barriers before her. With a final tug, the chain gave way, clattering to the ground like the heavy weight of her past.

“Let’s see what secrets you’re hiding now,” she muttered, taking a deep breath and stepping onto the property.

Upon entering the house, Rachel was instantly hit with the musty smell of old furniture and the lingering scent of dust that had accumulated over the years. For a moment, it seemed like time had stood still—except for the subtle changes that marked the passage of years. Wallpaper peeled at the edges, revealing the bare bones of the house beneath; cobwebs adorned every corner like ghostly lace.

“Hello?” she called out hesitantly, not expecting an answer but compelled to announce her presence nonetheless. Her voice echoed through the empty halls, bouncing off the walls and amplifying the heavy silence that hung in the air.

“Of course no one’s here, idiot,” she chastised herself, shaking her head. “It’s been years.”

As Rachel moved further into the house, her footsteps stirred up clouds of dust, momentarily obscuring her view. She squinted, trying to make out familiar shapes through the haze. Memories flooded back, some warm and comforting, others icy and unwelcome.

Her thoughts wandered to Aunt Sarah, the woman who had once been her rock, her guiding star in the darkness. To think that their bond could grow so fractured was a pain that gnawed at Rachel’s heart. She hoped that by solving the mystery of her family’s past, she could mend the rift between them.

Continuing through the house, she catalogued each room, each piece of furniture, as if recording evidence for some future trial. Every surface was layered with dust, a testament to the passage of time and the weight of memories left behind.

Her determination wavered when she entered the kitchen.

She paused, staring at the corner of the room, under an old table.

“Hello there,” she said, studying the evidence of a recent inhabitant. A worn sleeping bag lay crumpled in the corner, surrounded by empty food containers and discarded wrappers.

She ran her fingers along the edge of an empty can, feeling the jagged metal beneath her fingertips. She clenched her jaw, anger simmering beneath the surface.

Rachel's heart pounded against her ribcage, echoing the drumbeat of her ancestors in her ears. The tightness in her chest made it difficult to breathe as she tried to process the implications of someone squatting in her family home. Sweat beaded on her brow, a mixture of fear and anger churning within her.

Someone was squatting in her family's home...

A clue?

No... No, twenty years later. An abandoned house was easy pickings.

But still...

She stared at the sleeping bag, frowning.

Then, she pulled a phone from her pocket and placed a call.

Once it connected, she said curtly, "Greywolf, I need a favor."

If anyone would do it, it would be her old Ranger friend. He'd been something of a mentor figure to her for years. "Yeah," she continued at his grunt of a response. "It's Blackwood. I need a camera installed at the following address. Actually, multiple cameras. Every angle. And keep it dl. Don't let anyone know." A pause, a reply. She frowned. "No. Don't ask why. You gonna do it? Yeah. Thanks."

She rattled off the rest of the information, frowning as she did, feeling her stomach tightening. Greywolf wasn't the sort to pry. It was one of the many reasons she liked him so much.

Someone was here, and maybe they had found something. Especially if they'd squatted for years... Maybe they'd stumbled on something... some small clue.

She refused to look in the direction of the shattered window in the kitchen.

The blood-stained glass had long since been cleared.

She hesitated, feeling a flicker of unease, and then turned on her heel, moving swiftly back out of the house.

As she did, her phone rang.

Were the cameras ready to set up so soon?

“Yeah?” She paused, listening.

Then frowned.

A new case.

A welcome challenge. She picked up the pace, moving away from her family’s old home.

She refused to admit it to herself, but she was glad for a reason to focus on another hunt. On something far less personal.

She reached her car, tilted the brim of her hat, and slipped into the front seat.

CHAPTER TWO

Rachel sat in the worn leather chair, its stuffing pushing through cracked seams. She leaned forward, forearms on her thighs, hands clasped as she listened intently to Ranger Graywolf.

The single bulb above cast ominous shadows across his weathered face. “We got a body on a ranch—a ranch with deep roots in the area. Belongs to the Clarks.”

She glanced at Ethan Morgan, her partner. His eyes were distant, deep in thought. He had handsome features and kind eyes that often crinkled in the corners when he was smiling. His upbringing couldn’t have been more different than hers. He came from a large family with a religious background.

Rachel, on the other hand, had been orphaned at the age of ten.

Still, she liked her new partner—and it helped that he was easy on the eyes.

“The Clark family won’t take kindly to us poking around their ranch,” Graywolf continued. “They have a history of driving off unwanted visitors with rifles and threats.”

Rachel leaned forward, her voice low but firm. “Tell me about the Clarks. I want to know who we’re dealing with.”

Graywolf rubbed his chin, calloused fingers scraping against gray stubble. “The patriarch is Silas Clark. He’s lived on that ranch his whole life, inherited it from his father. Now in his 60s but still runs the place with an iron fist.”

Rachel pictured a weathered rancher with cold, flinty eyes. The kind of man who demanded unquestioning obedience.

“Got three boys and a mess of grandkids all living on the property,” Graywolf continued. “The whole clan keeps to themselves, don’t come to town much. Outsiders aren’t welcome.”

Rachel's jaw tightened. She knew about closed communities and their unwritten rules. Her own upbringing had taught her self-reliance.

"Shit," Ethan said. "I know folk like that. They generational?" He spoke in his usual soft, southern accent, and despite herself, Rachel found the quality somewhat charming.

"Ten generations, apparently," said Graywolf, nodding.

Rachel met the gaze of her old mentor, Thomas Graywolf. The only other person of Native descent in her field office with the Texas Rangers. He was watchful, and his hair was pulled back in two braids, draped down his back. His weathered, leathery features were creased with worry as he glanced at her.

An exchange passed between them. A silent communication that only they were privy to.

He was worried about her.

But Rachel had handled hostility from suspects before.

"And both bodies were found on the Clark property?" Rachel said. "Were they Clarks?"

"No. Not members of the family."

"So possibly the Clarks were the killers?"

"Possible."

Rachel leaned back. "Who found the bodies?"

"A couple of young girls. Found it in a field. They ended up telling their father. One of Silas Clark's younger sons."

Rachel crossed her arms. "And they're the ones who called the cops?"

"No," Graywolf said. "An anonymous tip came in, later. When the police arrived, the Clarks were in the middle of moving the body."

Rachel stared at him.

Ethen let out a long breath. "Shit? Really? Tampering with evidence?"

“They said they were just trying to help,” Graywolf replied, his face impassive, wearing no expression. Rachel gave a small shake of her head.

Rachel knew that this case was going to be a difficult one. The Clarks would be a tough nut to crack, and their closed-off community made them even harder to investigate. She stood up, the worn leather chair creaking beneath her weight. “We need to go out there and talk to the Clarks,” she said. “See what they know about these bodies.”

Ethan stood up, his expression serious. “You’re right,” he said. “But we need to be careful. We don’t want to start a war with these people.”

She nodded. “You feel like you should take point?” she asked, glancing at him.

“I... what? I didn’t say that.”

“No, but you know these types, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Nah. Just... know *of* them.” He glanced uncomfortably at Graywolf, who clearly seemed to intimidate the new hire. Ethan had only been with the rangers for a few days now. He said, “I was homeschooled, sure. But not... you know, part of some commune or whatever.”

Rachel nodded, shrugged. Gave a quick farewell tip of her hat to Graywolf, then moved out the door.

Rachel and Ethan headed out to the parking lot, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows as it sank towards the horizon. She slid into the driver’s seat of the dusty sedan, fingers curling tightly around the wheel. Ethan folded his tall frame into the passenger seat, pulling the door closed with a metallic thunk.

“You ready for this?” Ethan asked, his voice low and sounding somewhat anxious, though she wasn’t sure why. Rachel gave a curt nod, throwing the car into drive and peeling out onto the main road.

They drove in silence for a while, the rural landscape scrolling past outside. The Clark ranch was located deep in the backcountry, nearly two hours away, down increasingly

narrow and winding roads. Rachel's mind turned over the details of the case, probing for connections as the setting sun splashed crimson across the sky ahead of them.

"You look nervous," she said quietly, glancing at Ethan.

The handsome, lanky man shifted in his seat, pretending he hadn't heard at first, glancing out the window.

But then he leaned back, rubbing a hand over his brow.

"What is it?"

He mumbled something.

"What was that?"

He looked at her. "I know Jeb Clark."

"Who?"

"The youngest son of Silas. Jedediah Clark. Goes by Jeb. Knew him for a year in school."

Rachel looked at Ethan now. "How long ago?"

"Almost fifteen years."

"Why didn't you say anything in there?"

"Cuz."

"Not a reason."

"Just because."

"Ethan?"

He sighed, and said softly, "We weren't exactly friends. He kissed a girl I was dating."

"So?"

"I kicked his ass."

"Really?"

"Nah. He kicked mine. Two of his brothers jumped me on the way back from school. The three of them pounded me into the ground. Broke my wrist." He was scowling now.

Rachel gripped the steering wheel, frowning. “In some parts, that might be a conflict of interest,” she said.

He looked at her. “Yeah, but I know the Clarks.”

“You said you didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, I lied. I know Jeb, at least. He’s a mean sucker. If you’re tangling with the Clarks, you need me with you.”

Rachel considered this briefly, but sighed. She needed the backup, and if Ethan was as rooted in the area as it sounded, he would be an asset.

“Just keep the personal shit personal,” she said.

“Of course. I mean, he probably won’t even remember me.”

Rachel gave a small nod, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that this was going to be a difficult case. The Clarks were a tight-knit community that didn’t trust outsiders, and now they were investigating two murders that happened on their land. She knew they needed to tread carefully and be prepared for anything.

CHAPTER THREE

The wailing sirens pierced the silence of the countryside as Rachel pulled up to the secluded ranch. She stepped out of her truck, boots crunching on the gravel driveway, and surveyed the chaotic scene. Police vehicles and an ambulance surrounded the property, lights still flashing red and blue against the night sky. In the distance, she spotted the county coroner's van, still parked haphazardly near the main house.

“What in tarnation is the coroner still doing here?” Ethan muttered under his breath as the door on the passenger's side slammed shut.

She shot him a look, shrugged. He was frowning towards the vehicle.

The coroner should've long since cleared the body by now. Unless something... or someone... was holding them up.

Rachel strode toward the ranch house, senses on high alert. As she approached, two men emerged from the shadows near the entrance, shotguns gripped in hand. Rachel halted, pulse quickening.

“That's far enough,” one of the men growled, his voice like gravel. “No one goes inside until the sheriff gets here.”

Rachel stood her ground, eyes narrowing. She rested her hand casually on the revolver at her hip.

“Doesn't seem like y'all are the law around here,” Ethan said evenly, stepping up next to her. “Why don't you put those guns down before someone gets hurt?”

The men scowled, unmoving. The barrels of their shotguns glinted in the moonlight.

A tense beat passed. Rachel's jaw clenched, ready to draw her gun. She had to get control of this situation and fast.

She eyed the two armed men up and down. “Where’s the coroner?” she said.

“Nowhere,” replied the first man.

Now that she had a moment, she was able to examine both figures. They were thickset, with thick necks and sausage-sized fingers. The taller one had a beard with

bits of hay stuck in it, and the shorter one had a scar above his eyebrow. They both wore flannel shirts and dirty jeans, and Rachel couldn’t help but think they looked more like hired thugs than upstanding citizens.

“Are you members of the Clark family?” Rachel said, trying to keep her voice calm. “We’re not here to cause any trouble. Just let us through, and we’ll be out of your hair.”

The two men exchanged a look, then the shorter one stepped forward. “Who are you? Don’t look like you’re from these parts.”

The shorter one had small, piggy eyes and an upturned nose, which looked as if it had been broken more than once. Rachel couldn’t help but notice the way Ethan kept glancing off to the side, as if trying to avoid meeting this shorter man’s gaze.

On a hunch, she said, “Jebediah Clark?”

He blinked. “I know you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Obstructing a ranger is a criminal offense. You know that, don’t you?”

He scowled at her.

“This here is private property.”

“And there is a body reportedly found on this property.”

He shrugged. “Don’t give you the right to come unannounced.”

Rachel glanced at Ethan, who was still trying to hide his face by glancing off towards the emergency vehicles stalled by the house.

Rachel hoped they hadn't done anything to the coroner, otherwise the investigation would escalate quickly.

Rachel took a deep breath, keeping her eyes locked on Jebediah's. "Look, we're just trying to do our jobs here. We need to see the body and speak with the sheriff. That's it."

Jebediah hesitated, looking Rachel up and down. She could see the wheels turning in his head as if he was trying to figure out whether or not to trust her.

Suddenly, a woman's voice called out from the direction of the house. "Jebediah, what's going on out here?"

Rachel turned to see a woman approaching them, her long blonde hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She wore a faded denim jacket and jeans, and her eyes were red-rimmed as if she had been crying.

"Who are these people?" the woman asked, her gaze flickering between Rachel and Ethan.

Jebediah hesitated for a moment longer. "Doesn't concern you, Milly. Dad said I was supposed to handle tressers."

"They ain't trespassers, Jeb. They're rangers," snapped the blonde woman.

It looked like the two were about to devolve into sibling bickering.

But just then, the crunch of tires on gravel cut through the standoff. A police cruiser pulled up, and Sheriff Hank Collins—who Rachel recognized from the briefing file—stepped out, his expression grim.

"Evening, ladies, gentlemen," he said, his voice steady but firm. "Jeb, Milly, why don't y'all head on home and let me handle things from here."

The men glared at the sheriff, gripping their weapons tighter.

"Not a chance," one spat. "We ain't leaving 'til we get some answers."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed, and he rested his hand on his holstered pistol. Rachel watched the exchange closely, tension coiling through her muscles.

"Now listen here," Sheriff Collins said, his tone sharpening. "Y'all are obstructing an ongoing investigation. I'm gonna have to insist that you clear on out and let us do our job."

The men stood defiantly, fingers twitching near their shotgun triggers. The sheriff's jaw clenched, his eyes burning with frustration. His hand gripped his revolver.

"Dammit, Jeb. Imma tell Silas this was your call. You wanna face that?"

Jeb hesitated, bit his lip. He glanced at the blonde-haired woman who frowned at the lot of them with a disapproving frown.

Then, with a snort of disgust, Jeb lowered his shotgun.

The other man shuffled his feet, rifle lowering slightly.

Jeb muttered something under his breath, and the sheriff stiffened.

"What was that?"

Jeb looked at him. "You heard me. You got weak blood there, *Collins*. Your mama marry outside the family and suddenly you're too big for your britches."

Rachel hesitated, trying to understand this comment. Was Chief Collins related to the Clarks?

Now, she could sense the tension rising again.

Collins reached up, pulling a badge off his chest and placing it on the hood of his car. He stepped forward, jutting his chin at the shorter man. "Why don't you say that again? Huh?"

"So you can lock me up? Pshaw. Get bent, *Collins*."

"No badge. Just a civilian here. What'd you say, Jeb?"

The shorter, scar-faced man sneered. And then he threw a sucker punch.

The punch landed squarely on the sheriff's jaw, sending him staggering backwards. For a moment, no one moved. Rachel was frozen in shock, unsure of what to do. Then, the blonde-haired woman rushed forward, grabbing Jebediah's arm. "What the hell are you doing?" she hissed. "That's the sheriff!"

Jebediah shrugged her off, looking wild-eyed and crazed. "He ain't nothing but a lap dog for the government! Always meddling where he doesn't belong!"

Rachel could feel her blood pumping. Where was law and order? It felt like a foreign country. This was getting out of hand, fast. She drew her gun, taking a step forward. "That's enough," she said firmly. "Put your weapons down and back away from the sheriff."

Jebediah turned to face her, his eyes blazing with fury. "You want some too, ranger?" he spat.

But just then, Sheriff Collins came hurtling forward. He tackled Jeb around the waist, bringing them both crashing to the ground.

The two men erupted into a flurry of blows, back and forth, rolling on the ground in a cloud of dust.

Rachel watched in grim horror as the men fought, each landing punches and kicks on the other. She knew she had to act fast before someone got seriously hurt. She stepped forward, gun still drawn, and pointed it at the brawling men. "That's enough!" she shouted, her voice echoing across the clearing. "Both of you, stop fighting right now!"

The men ignored her, locked in their savage struggle. The sheriff was on top now, raining blows down on Jeb's face and chest. Blood was streaming from the man's nose, and Rachel could see bruises forming on his cheekbones. She took a deep breath, then fired a warning shot into the air. The sound was deafening, and it seemed to have the desired effect. The men froze, staring up at her with wide, startled eyes.

"Enough!" Rachel shouted again, lowering her gun slightly.

The two men slowly climbed to their feet, eyeing each other warily. The sheriff's face was bruised and swollen, and he was breathing heavily. Jeb was nursing his bloody nose and wiping the dirt from his clothes. Rachel could see that both men were angry, but also that they were starting to calm down a little. She kept her gun aimed upward, just in case.

“Alright,” she said, her voice firm. “Now, everyone just take a deep breath and let's talk this out.”

She shot the sheriff a long, withering look. He was hardly acting professionally, but she'd been warned.

Things in this town were done differently.

Everyone had connections to everyone, and everything could get personal.

It was at this realization, a small shiver tremored up her spine.

CHAPTER FOUR

The evening sun sank below the horizon, casting long shadows across the empty ranch. A lone figure sat atop a painted horse, obscured by the growing darkness. He watched the distant ranch house through narrowed eyes, his face obscured by a wide-brimmed hat.

The wind carried the faint sound of laughter from the ranch yard. It grated on him. Fingers tightened around the reins, leather creaking. He wanted nothing more than to gallop down and silence them, but he waited. Patience was key.

The back door swung open, spilling light across the yard. A woman emerged, her smile visible even at this distance. She paused on the porch, gazing out into the growing night.

His pulse quickened, fingers itching. Soon, he told himself. Soon she would be his. Wheels were already in motion.

For now, he would watch. And wait.

The rider continued to observe the ranch house from his vantage point atop the ridge. His keen eyes followed the woman's movements as she crossed the yard and entered the barn. He tilted his head, listening intently for any other sounds carrying on the night air.

The painted horse beneath him shuffled impatiently, eager to be off. He tightened his legs, stilling the animal. Not yet.

A light came on in the barn, and he caught a glimpse of the woman through the open doors, busying herself with the evening chores. He imagined himself down there with her, imagined the fear in her eyes when she realized she wasn't alone. A smile twisted his lips.

Soon, he reminded himself. But the waiting was agony.

He watched as she exited the barn and locked up for the night. His fingers flexed involuntarily. As she started back to

the house, he pulled the brim of his hat lower and turned his horse away.

Not tonight. But her time would come. He would make sure of it.

With a nudge of his heels, the killer rode off into the growing darkness, anticipation burning inside him.

The man rode slowly along the ridge overlooking the ranch, keeping to the shadows. He had been watching this woman for weeks now. Learning her habits. Studying her movements. Tonight his patience had nearly broken, but he held back. It wasn't time yet.

The anticipation was exquisite torture. He imagined wrapping his hands around her slender throat, squeezing until the life drained from her eyes. But he couldn't afford to be hasty. Everything had to be perfect.

He directed the painted horse along a narrow trail, ducking under low-hanging branches. The woods closed in around him, swallowing him in darkness. No moonlight penetrated the dense canopy overhead. He relied on instinct alone to guide his way.

Up ahead, he spotted the soft glow of a campfire through the trees. As he drew nearer, the smell of woodsmoke filled his nostrils. He dismounted and secured the horse, then crept forward on foot towards his campsite. No one knew he was here...

No one knew how long he'd been here.

So very, very long.

A coyote howled in the distance, breaking the silence. The killer tensed his senses on high alert. He didn't want any more distractions tonight.

He moved slowly, stalking forward, head bent, eyes on the ground.

He inhaled the scent of the earth, of the air.

No one understood what had to be done.

But he knew.

He paused by the campfire, snatched the gun where it rested on a rock, lifted it in his hand.

Not a normal gun. No.

But one that was part of the important ritual. One that had to be used to *mark*.

To cull.

He nodded, allowing a small smile to creep across his face.

He took aim with the weapon at a tree. Pulled the trigger two times.

Pfft. Pfft.

Not the sound of a gun, either.

But he watched as the projectiles struck dead center.

He nodded in appreciation, and then continued back in the direction he'd come from.

CHAPTER FIVE

Truck headlights blazed unforgivingly, casting the group's long shadows onto the dusty road. Rachel's heart raced as her gaze darted between Sheriff Hank Collins and Jebediah Clark. The two men had come to blows moments ago, their faces flushed with anger. Jeb's mean eyes fixated on Collins, his jaw clenched. Beside him stood his brother, Samuel, equally imposing in demeanor and twice so in stature.

"Look," Rachel began, stepping forward cautiously, "we don't want any trouble. We just need to gain access to the crime scene." She gestured to herself and her partner, Ethan, who nodded firmly in agreement.

Sheriff Collins wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The tension in the air was palpable, the Clarks' hostility towards outsiders and the government well known throughout town.

As sons of the ranch-owner, Silas, they were fiercely protective of their property, and this situation was no exception.

"Y'all ain't gettin' on our land without a fight," Samuel growled, crossing his arms over his chest. His words were a challenge, a warning.

Rachel exchanged a quick glance with Ethan before taking another step closer, determined not to let their investigation be stonewalled by the stubborn ranchers. "Listen, we're just here to do our jobs. We have a murderer on the loose, and we need to find them before more lives are lost."

"Or maybe you're just lookin' for an excuse to snoop around our land," Jeb countered, his voice laced with suspicion. He narrowed his eyes at the detectives, sizing them up.

Rachel could feel the tension in the air, thick and palpable like the dust that swirled around them. Jeb's eyes locked onto

hers, a look of fierce protectiveness – no, defiance – etched across his face. Beside him, his brother stood tall and silent, arms crossed, sizing up the two detectives with equal skepticism.

Rachel's gaze fell upon one of the horses tied to a hitch on the side of the road. Her keen eye caught something amiss, and she couldn't help but point it out.

“Hey, Jeb,” she called out to the rancher, who was already turning away. He turned back with an impatient scowl, clearly annoyed at being addressed once more. “Your horse there,” she continued, gesturing towards the animal. “The bridle's not done up properly. See how the bit is too low in his mouth? It's gonna make him uncomfortable, might even hurt him if you're not careful.”

Jeb's expression shifted from annoyance to incredulity as he glanced between Rachel and his horse. The look in his eyes seemed to say, ‘Who do you think you are, telling me how to handle my own horse?’ But Rachel held his gaze, her own eyes full of sincerity and concern for the animal. She may have been a Texas Ranger, but she was also a woman who knew and respected the ways of the land and its creatures. The Clarks had little reason to trust her, but in this moment, she was just a fellow horse lover offering advice.

Jeb's laughter rang through the air, sharp and disbelieving. “You really think you know better than me, Ranger?” He spat out the last word like a curse. The tension in the air felt as thick as the clouds of dust kicked up by their horses' hooves.

“Here's an idea,” Rachel said, her voice steady and strong. She knew men like this. And she needed to remember to play the game *their* way. It was all a pissing contest. All about pride and legacy. But sometimes, a challenge could break through even the hardest of shells.

At the very least, it was worth a shot.

Besides, her irritation was beginning to lower her inhibitions. “Why don't we put it to the test? A race. You and me, right now.”

Jeb scoffed, amusement sparking in his eyes. “You sure you want to embarrass yourself like that?”

Rachel ignored his taunts. She drew a slow, steady breath and continued outlining the terms.

“From here to the old oak tree at the end of the road and back,” she proposed, pointing towards the distant landmark. “If you win, I’ll turn around and leave right now. No more questions about your land or your business. But if I win, you let us onto the crime scene. Deal?”

Ethan was watching her closely, looking surprised. She ignored her partner.

Jeb eyed her warily, clearly taken aback by her boldness. In the silence that followed, Rachel could practically feel the weight of Ethan’s gaze on her, his unspoken concern for what she’d just wagered. But in every hunt, there was a moment when the trigger was pulled.

When all lots were cast, and it came down to the skill of the hunter.

“You’re not scared, are you?” she said, her tone even.

Before she’d even finished, he jammed his chin at her like a pointing figure.

“Deal,” Jeb finally agreed. “Samuel, you mind if she rides Coal?”

Samuel narrowed his eyes, looking irritated by the notion of a state agent riding his horse. But another part of him also seemed interested in watching her humbled by his brother. He shrugged and nodded once.

As they mounted their horses, Rachel’s mind calmed.

The horse responded to her touch, allowing her purchase in the saddle. She adjusted the stirrups. But then reached up, removing the saddle completely.

Jeb watched out of the corner of his eye.

“You sure there, girlie?”

She shrugged. She'd grown up riding bareback. It gave her more knowledge of how the animal was feeling. She could sense the tense muscles, the way it wanted to surge forward.

"Ready?" Jeb called out, his voice filled with confidence. Rachel met his gaze.

"Ready."

The evening light illuminated the shadows of the cracked ground, and Rachel's heart pounded as she prepared for the race, her thoughts an amalgam of anticipation, determination, and fear. She could feel the eyes of the rancher's family upon her from the house at the edge of the oak tree, their suspicion evident even without words.

"Alright," said Jeb's brother, Samuel, a tall, lean man with a weathered face and gray eyes that seemed to calculate Rachel's every move. "We'll let you have your race. But if you lose, you keep your word. You leave."

"Fair enough," Rachel replied, her voice steady despite the rapid rhythm of her heartbeat.

As Jeb readied his horse, murmurs spread among the small group by the house, who'd stepped onto the porch - the ranch hands, the younger members of the Clark clan.

"Y'all should know," one of the ranch hands drawled, spitting tobacco into the dirt, "Jeb, here's the best rider this side of the Rio Grande. Gonna be a real shame when you lose."

She didn't reply. Talk was cheap. Her fingers tightened around the reins as she glanced at Ethan. He offered her a small nod of encouragement, his eyes filled with concern.

"Enough talk," Jeb growled, mounting his powerful, well-groomed stallion. The animal snorted impatiently, sensing its master's eagerness for the race to begin. "Let's get this over with."

Rachel took a deep breath, feeling the heat radiating from her own horse beneath her.

“Remember,” Jeb’s brother called out as he raised a handkerchief above his head, poised to signal the start of the race, “first one to that oak tree and back wins.”

“Good luck,” Ethan whispered, his words barely audible over the sound of pounding hooves and the gathering crowd’s excited chatter, as a few more figures emerged from the barn. Two more women joined the ranch hands on the porch of the cabin.

The handkerchief dropped, and Rachel’s heart raced in time with her horse’s hooves as she urged it forward. Jeb charged ahead on his stallion, a practiced ease hinting at the countless hours he’d spent riding.

Rachel drew on her connection with her horse, remembering her aunt’s teachings about understanding an animal’s emotions and movements. She leaned closer to the horse’s neck, whispering calming words to the animal while gently guiding it with the reins. Her focus remained on navigating the rugged terrain, avoiding ruts and loose rocks that could lead to a stumble.

She could feel the tension through her legs, which pressed against the steed’s bare back.

As they neared the oak tree, Jeb held a clear lead. But Rachel noticed his stallion’s breathing grow more labored, its stride faltering ever so slightly. Seizing the opportunity, she tapped into her horse’s energy reserves, applying gentle pressure with her legs and urging it to quicken its pace.

“Come on, girl,” she murmured, feeling the powerful beast respond to her guidance. They swiftly closed the gap between them and Jeb, the wind whipping through Rachel’s hair as the exhilaration of the race took hold.

Jeb shot her a look of disbelief as she pulled up next to him, her horse’s nostrils flaring with exertion as they surged ahead. Rachel could see the sweat glistening on Jeb’s forehead as he leaned forward, urging his mount to go faster. But it was too late. Rachel’s horse had already taken the lead, its muscles rippling beneath her as they raced forward.

She could hear the crowd cheering as they approached the ranch, Ethan's voice ringing out above the din.

“Go, Rachel! Go!”

Rachel drew level with him. He pushed his stallion harder, but Rachel knew that the animal was reaching its limits. In contrast, her own horse still had strength to spare. She was lighter than he was, and her horse had no saddle, easing its burden even more.

She allowed herself the briefest moment of satisfaction as they rounded the oak tree, sensing that victory was within reach. But as they rounded, out of sight, Jeb reached out, grabbing at her reins, trying to tug her steed off course.

Rachel's instincts kicked in, and she pulled back on the reins, causing her horse to rear up and avoid Jeb's grasp. She gritted her teeth, anger and adrenaline fueling her movements as she urged her horse to gallop even faster. Jeb had gained the lead again due to her hesitation.

As they began the return leg of the race, the crowd's shouts to Jeb grew louder, their anticipation palpable. Ethan's face shone with pride and anticipation as he watched Rachel deftly maneuver her horse.

They surged ahead, and once more, Rachel's lighter touch caught up with Jeb.

He tried to kick out, but she'd anticipated it this time, and avoided him.

His effort caused him to falter now.

She surged past him, patting her steed on the flank as she did, keeping low to the horse, inhaling the scent of its flying mane.

The two of them left Jeb's struggling stallion behind.

As they crossed the finish line, the crowd fell silent.

The dust from the race still hung in the air, casting a golden haze over the scene as Rachel watched Jeb twist at his defeated mount's mane, trying to elicit pain.

He scowled at the creature.

She scowled back at him, but he was ignoring her gaze.

She turned to Samuel, who looked sullen.

“Where’s the crime scene?” she said.

He frowned at her.

“A deal is a deal,” she reminded him.

He muttered under his breath.

Ethan added, “We’re playing nice, Sam. But we can play dirty too. You really want the full force of the state coming down on this place?”

Samuel muttered something under his breath, but then turned, gestured and indicated for them to follow him, his shoulders slumped.

CHAPTER SIX

The wind whistled through the trees as Rachel and Ethan trudged behind Samuel Clark, their reluctant guide. They picked their way carefully over gnarled roots and fallen branches, their breath visible in the cool air. The woods seemed to close in around them, the shadows cast by the sun-dappled leaves playing tricks on their eyes.

Samuel's height was somewhat withered by the permanent scowl etched into his face. He had made it clear from the outset that he didn't trust the two rangers. Rachel could feel his distrust like a cold breeze on the back of her neck, but she brushed it off. They had a job to do, and Samuel's opinion of them wasn't important right now.

"Watch your step," Samuel grunted, nodding towards a particularly treacherous section of the path. "Wouldn't want you city folk breaking an ankle out here."

"Thanks for the heads-up," Ethan replied, his tone neutral. He moved gracefully over the uneven terrain, his large family upbringing in the countryside serving him well in situations like this. Rachel couldn't help but admire his ease in navigating the rough landscape.

As they neared the crime scene, Rachel felt a knot of tension in her stomach tighten. This wasn't her first case, but the thought of seeing another life cut short still weighed heavy on her heart.

They emerged from the woods near a horse paddock, the animals grazing peacefully just beyond the paddock. Rachel paused to take in the scene, her instincts honing in on every detail.

"Over here," Samuel muttered, pointing towards a nearby copse of trees. As they approached, Rachel steeled herself.

The body of a woman lay sprawled amongst the underbrush, her lifeless eyes staring blankly up at the sky, one

arm draped in a Y of the tree. “Her name was Sarah,” Samuel said quietly, his voice betraying a hint of emotion. “She was married to a hand from one of our competitor’s ranches – Jack.”

Rachel glanced over. “Sarah have a last name?”

“Givens,” he replied with a shrug.

Rachel nodded once, took a note of it on her phone, and Ethan began examining the area around the body. She joined him, eyes moving with practiced precision over the vegetation. They moved slowly, methodically, knowing that even the smallest clue could be the key to cracking the case wide open. And as they worked, the knot in Rachel’s stomach loosened ever so slightly,

She was back on the hunt.

She peered at the body, the way one of the arms was wedged in the Y of a tree branch, as if it had been intentionally placed there.

The woman’s face was streaked with scrapes and mud.

Her feet were bare.

Rachel frowned at those feet, hesitant. She moved around the body and spotted deep cuts in the heels of the woman.

“She was running through the woods,” Rachel said softly.

“Hmm?” Ethan glanced over, and frowned. “Think she was being chased?”

Rachel sighed, nodding once. She looked up at the canopy of leaves above, the shadows of the vegetation like the small forms of a shoal of fish. The woman’s body didn’t have a strong scent yet, suggesting it was fresh.

“Where’s the coroner?” Ethan asked, glancing around.

Rachel had been wondering the same thing.

She frowned towards Samuel, who pretended as if he wasn’t listening as he leaned sullenly against a white fence post.

She returned her attention to the victim. The woman's clothing was torn like her skin. Rachel wondered how long she'd been sprinting through the woods. Who had been chasing her?

The scent of damp earth and the distant sound of horses neighing filled the air as Rachel and Ethan

circumnavigated the crime scene. The sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows that seemed to reach out like skeletal fingers across the forest floor.

"Hey!" a gruff voice barked, pulling Rachel's focus away from the eerie atmosphere.

She looked over and spotted a small gathering by one of the paddocks. An unfamiliar man stood with his arms crossed. The man had muscled forearms but a flabby belly.

His greasy hair

was slicked back, revealing a receding hairline and a pair of beady eyes that seemed to dart around nervously.

Now, he had one meaty palm out, and was taking retreating footsteps, while holding out his hand.

"No, no—Silas said. You ain't goin' nowhere! Hang on. Don't make me sit you!"

And ahead of him, emerging from the tree line, a second figure was matching forward, shaking his head firmly, and wagging a finger.

"N-no!" stuttered the man in a white lab coat and an ID tag pinned to his lapel. "E-e-enough! I've sat long enough. Now I'm going to see the body. Get out of my way!"

"I think I found the coroner," Ethan muttered under his breath.

It almost looked like the large, beer-bellied rancher was trying to corral a flighty lamb. The coroner in question had a nervous energy about him that matched his stutter. He had a round face with large cheeks, almost childish in appearance. But his hair was white and wispy, like a cloud.

“Hang on now!” said the larger rancher. “Stop! I said stop, damn it!”

The man in question continued to sidestep back along the edge of the horse fence, blocking the coroner from advancing any closer to the body. The coroner’s eyes darted between the rancher and the lifeless form of Sarah, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

“Oi, Tom!” shouted Samuel.

The large rancher looked back and blinked in surprise as he spotted the two rangers standing by the body.

“We got company, pal.” Samuel shrugged.

Tom and him exchanged some unspoken communication. But the big man’s eyes narrowed and he scowled towards Samuel Clark.

“Let this city slicker poke and prod at Sarah? I don’t think so!” Tom spat, his face contorted with anger. “Jack killed her, plain and simple. No need for all this fancy science mumbo jumbo.”

“Jack?” Rachel said. “Who’s Jack?”

Tom turned, glaring at her. “Her husband—that’s who.”

“The victim’s husband?”

“That’s right. And who are you?”

“Ranger Blackwood,” she said. “This is Ranger Morgan.”

Ethan gave a little nod of greeting, which was lost on Tom.

“Why do you think Jack killed her?” Rachel said, facing the angry rancher.

The coroner took this opportunity to smooth back a wisp of white hair and skirt past the large rancher, moving towards the body with hurried, scurrying steps.

Tom didn’t notice. Instead, he turned to face Rachel. “Cuz.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“Just cuz.”

Rachel shook her head.

Tom sighed, crossing his large arms over his flabby belly, taking a small step forward which caused a pinecone to crunch underfoot. He said, "Jack was jealous. Figured Sarah was stepping out on him."

"Was she?"

Tom shrugged, frowning. "I mean... there was talk and like."

"You seem quite fond of Sarah," Rachel said quietly.

"Yeah? I knew her since grade school. She's good people. Our mommas sing hymns together. What you accusing me of, lady?"

"No accusation," Rachel said quickly. "Just trying to understand the situation."

"Well, understand this," Tom said, his voice low and menacing. "Jack's dangerous. He's got a temper. And he's quick on the draw."

Rachel and Ethan exchanged a glance.

"Did anyone see Jack around here?" Ethan asked.

Tom shook his head. "No one's seen him. But he's got a place up in the hills, not too far from here."

Rachel nodded. "Can you show us where it is?"

Tom hesitated. "Gotta see..."

"See what?"

He shot a look at Samuel again.

The coroner was now poking around the body, muttering to himself as he stepped one way, then the other, frowning as he did.

"Going to take some time," he said to no one in particular. He shot a look at Rachel, frowned, and shook his head. "I was delayed."

"No rush," she replied. "Well... *some* rush."

He nodded urgently, sighing and returning his attention to the body.

The coroner added, trying to keep her voice steady, “The more time we waste here, the colder the trail gets.”

Tom kept trying to intervene, approaching the coroner in an intimidating manner.

But Ethan stepped forward, blocking the bigger man’s path. There was hostility at every turn, Rachel realized, and she was beginning to grow impatient with it.

Tom glowered at them both, his jaw clenched tightly. After a tense moment, he finally stepped aside with a growl, allowing the nervous coroner to proceed.

“Appreciated,” Rachel said softly, keeping her irritation in check, watching as the coroner returned his attention to Sarah’s body, hands trembling slightly as he continued his examination.

Rachel took a deep breath, inhaling the sharp scent of pine needles mixed with the faint coppery odor of spilled blood. She surveyed the clearing where the body lay, noting the trampled grass and crushed leaves underfoot. Her gaze lingered on the victim, a stark contrast against the verdant backdrop.

“Where do we start?” Ethan asked, his voice hushed but determined. He stood beside her, observing the scene with equal intensity.

He had decided to ignore Samuel and Tom’s suspicious gazes. Rachel didn’t blame him. She was finding the desire to do the same.

“Footprints, signs of a struggle, anything out of place,” Rachel replied, her mind racing through potential evidence. She knew they had to be thorough, lest they miss something crucial.

Ethan nodded, his eyes already scanning the ground for any promising leads. They split up, each taking one side of the small clearing. As Rachel moved cautiously around the perimeter, she couldn’t help but feel a chill run down her spine

- the knowledge that a killer had walked these very grounds haunted her every step.

The area was well-trodden, though. Likely from the children who'd discovered the body.

But as her eyes moved along the ground, she hesitated, her gaze shifting back to the tree.

The arm was wedged in the Y of the lowest branches.

Intentional. The body was left there intentionally.

So she approached the tree, eyes moving along the bark.

And that's when she saw it. A small stain of pink paint caught on a rough patch of bark just a few inches above the arm. She leaned in closer, her fingers reaching out to touch the paint. It was dry to the touch.

"Hey Ethan," she called out, her voice low but urgent. "Come over here."

He rushed over, his eyes scanning the area around the tree. "What did you find?"

Rachel pointed to the paint stain.

Ethan leaned in closer. "Paint?"

"Mhmm."

"Mean something to you?"

She shook her head, glancing at him. "Was hoping it might mean something to you."

"I grew up in these parts, but not on a ranch."

She nodded, turning back to Samuel and Tom. "This paint mean anything?"

Tom looked over, snorted. "Probably from whoever painted the fence."

"Wrong color," Rachel replied.

He just shrugged, clearly indifferent.

Rachel took a picture of the oddly placed paint stain, then stepped away from the body. "How much longer do you

think?” she said, addressing the coroner.

He glanced at her, frowned. “Gonna take a while.”

“Perhaps we should speak with this Jack fellow,” Ethan suggested, his brow furrowed.

Rachel turned towards the beer-bellied rancher. “Tom,” she said, “This Jack fellow—you say he lives in a cabin in the mountains?”

“Mhmm.”

“Think you could show us?”

He frowned at them, but Rachel didn’t blink or look away.

“And what’s in it for me?”

“You cared about Sarah? You say Jack was involved... Why not do right by her?”

Tom considered this for a moment, and Rachel took one step to the side, allowing him a view of the corpse. His eyes lingered on the dead woman, and he looked momentarily stunned.

At last, he let out a sigh and said, “I’ll show you where that prick lives. Just give me a shot at him first.

Rachel didn’t say anything to this. She’d handle his temper when they were closer to the target.

For now, by the sound of things, they needed a guide. And the coroner needed time to give a proper report.

Tom shrugged, shaking his head. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “My trucks down that way.”

He turned and began to trudge along the muddy road.

Rachel followed closely behind Tom, keeping a watchful eye on Ethan, who brought up the rear. The path grew steeper as they climbed, the trees closing in around them until the sky was nothing more than a narrow strip of blue.

Tom led them deeper into the forest, his boots crunching against the underbrush as they went. Rachel couldn’t help but

notice the gun that was tucked into the back of his waistband. She wondered how many other weapons he had stashed away.

“Where’s this truck of yours?” Ethan said, and Rachel could detect the doubt in his tone.

But Tom just grunted. Rachel, however, who had keen eyes in the wilderness, nudged her partner and pointed. She’d spotted the rusted, old frame of the flatbed through the trees and brambles.

They approached the vehicle, which was left running by the sound of its grumbling engine.

Rachel once again felt as if she were wandering into some unfamiliar land with laws and regulations she didn’t know.

Part of her almost felt as if gunmen were watching from behind every tree.

But no... no, she was just being paranoid.

She slipped into the front seat of the truck as Ethan hopped into the back bed.

Tom joined them a second later, and they began to move, driving deeper into the dense wilderness surrounding the archaic ranches.

“Like I said,” Tom said over his shoulder, “Jack is a dangerous man. You’d best shoot first and ask questions later.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The moon hung low in the sky, casting a soft blue light on the dense forest surrounding Jack's cabin. The air was cold and crisp, carrying with it the distant howl of a wolf. Rachel, Ethan, and their guide pulled up to the clearing in front of the cabin, guided by the headlights of Tom's old truck. They killed the engine, apprehension gnawing at them as they stared at the small wooden structure before them.

"Doesn't look like much, does it?" Ethan muttered, his breath forming wispy clouds in the chilly night air.

"From what we've been told, Jack doesn't strike me as the type who cares about appearances." Rachel replied, her gaze fixed on the dark windows of the cabin. She shivered, remembering the warning they had received earlier.

"Alright," Rachel said, turning to face Tom. "We need you to stay here and keep an eye on the truck. We don't want to spook Jack if he's got something to hide."

"Are you kidding? I'm not staying out here alone," Tom protested, his eyes wide. His grip tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white.

"Look, we need you to hold down the fort. If Jack gets suspicious and tries to make a run for it, we'll need a quick exit," Rachel explained. She could see the frustration in his eyes. Did he want to confront Jack in person for a specific reason?

She wasn't sure what was going on here, but for now, he'd brought them to their target.

Ethan added, "Besides, you're familiar with these woods. You can alert us if something seems off."

Tom looked like he wanted to protest further, but Rachel was already slipping out of the truck. Ethan hopped out of the

bed, and the two of them began striding together, shoulder to shoulder, up the leaf-strewn drive.

As they made their way towards the cabin, Rachel couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled in her gut. Every step seemed to echo loudly through the still night, and she found herself glancing over her shoulder more than once, half-expecting to see something lurking in the shadows.

"Stay on your toes," she whispered to Ethan, who nodded solemnly in response.

The heavy scent of pine and damp earth filled Rachel's nostrils as she knocked firmly on the cabin door. She glanced at Ethan, who was standing close by, his eyes alert and his hand resting near his holstered gun.

No answer.

Rachel knocked more firmly, her fist pounding against the door.

"Law enforcement. Rangers!" she called.

Still no reply.

She stepped back, glancing at the cold, dark windows. The house didn't look occupied.

A sudden creaking noise caused her heart to skip a beat.

She tensed, and the sound approached the door. She thought she heard muttering from within.

The door slowly opened to reveal a tall, burly man with unkempt hair and a beard that looked like it hadn't seen a razor in months. His eyes were piercing, but what truly caught Rachel's attention was the dark red blood that covered his hands and stained the front of his shirt.

"Who the hell are you two?" the man snarled, his voice gruff and suspicious.

"Jack Thompson?" Rachel asked, trying to keep her voice steady despite the unsettling sight before her.

"That's me. What do you want?"

Rachel took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the investigation pressing down on her. “I’m Rachel Blackwood, a Texas Ranger, and this is my partner, Ethan Morgan. We’re here to ask you some questions about your wife, Sarah.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Jack’s face, but he quickly regained his composure. “Well, you caught me at a bad time. I was just skinning a deer out back.” He gestured toward the garage. “Come on, then. Let’s get this over with.”

As they followed Jack into the dimly lit garage, Rachel couldn’t help but feel a shiver of dread creeping up her spine. The air inside was thick with the metallic tang of blood, and the sight of the deer carcass hanging from a hook made her stomach churn. She had seen her fair share of gruesome scenes during her time as a Ranger, but the intimate setting of this one was particularly unnerving.

“Sorry about the mess,” Jack said gruffly, wiping his hands on a dirty rag. “Now, what do you want to know?”

Rachel hesitated at this. Did he really not know? His wife had been missing for more than a day... But then again, he was off in the mountains. No reception, and his wife worked in town. Maybe it was a normal arrangement.

Or maybe he was playing them.

The faint scent of copper hung heavily in the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of freshly cut wood. Rachel’s eyes remained locked on Jack as he slowly wiped his blood-stained hands on the dirty towel. The garage was dimly lit, casting an eerie glow on the animal carcasses hanging from the ceiling. Shadows danced on the walls as the flickering light played tricks on her senses.

“Jack,” Ethan began, his voice steady and measured. “We have some news that we need to share with you.”

Rachel could see the muscles in Jack’s jaw tighten as anticipation settled over him. She watched every minute detail of his face closely, searching for any clues that might betray his true emotions.

“Sarah,” Ethan continued, locking his gaze with Jack’s.
“She’s been found dead.”

A sudden stillness enveloped the room, punctuated only by the sound of their breathing. Rachel studied Jack’s reaction intently, looking for the slightest hint of guilt or surprise. But all she saw was devastation and shock written across his face.

“Dead?” Jack whispered, the word barely escaping his lips. His eyes flickered with a hollow sadness, but something seemed off. Perhaps it was his blood-stained shirt. Rachel couldn’t quite place it, but the way he held himself, the way his eyes darted away for just a moment, struck her as odd.

“Can you tell us about your relationship with Sarah?” Rachel asked, her voice betraying no hint of the suspicion brewing within her.

Jack looked at her, his eyes now glistening with unshed tears. “We were... We were happy. We fought sometimes, like any couple, but we loved each other. But hang on... dead? You’re sure?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Did anything unusual happen recently between the two of you? Any arguments or disagreements?” Ethan interjected, picking up on Rachel’s line of questioning.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Jack replied, his voice catching in his throat. “Just... Just the normal stuff. Why are you asking me this? Where is she? Who did this?”

“Jack,” Rachel said softly, her eyes narrowing as she continued to scrutinize his every move. “I’m very sorry for your loss. We’re just trying to piece together what happened. We need to understand your relationship with Sarah to do that.”

“Is there anyone else who might have wanted to hurt her?” Ethan asked, maintaining a calm demeanor.

“No,” Jack choked out, wiping away a tear that had begun to roll down his cheek. “I can’t think of anyone who would want to do that.” He hesitated, gripping the handle on a butcher’s knife, his fingers tight. “Else?” he said.

“What?” Ethan asked.

“You said anyone *else*. And now you’re here... talking to me?” His eyes widened above his hairy face. “Shit... you think... *I* had something to do with this?” His hand tightened on the knife.

Ethan took a nearly imperceptible step back.

Rachel decided not to react. Not yet. She trusted her reactions in case things got violent.

But for now, she kept her tone professional. “We just need to rule you out, sir. It’ll help us find who did this.”

“I still... how did she die?”

“We’re trying to find out. Can you help us by answering a couple of questions?”

“I... I mean. Sure. What the hell? Ask anything.”

He was staring at her, slack-jawed. An act? Or true shock?

She felt her heart go out to the man briefly, but she didn’t know if she was being played yet.

“First, can you tell us where you were last night?” Rachel asked, her eyes narrowing as she studied Jack’s expression for any signs of deception.

“Sure. I was here, at the cabin. Alone.”

“Can anyone verify that?” Ethan interjected, his tone firm but not accusatory.

Jack scowled, his brow furrowing with irritation. “No. Like I said, I was *alone*.”

“Interesting,” Rachel murmured, her mind racing as she tried to piece together the puzzle before her. If Jack was telling the truth, then they had no solid evidence against him or *for* him. But there was something about the way he held himself, an air of defiance that seemed to dare them to accuse him without proof, that set her on edge.

“Is there anything else you’d like to ask me?” Jack growled, his patience clearly wearing thin. “And when can I

see Sarah? Hmm?”

“Actually, yes,” Ethan said, stepping forward slightly. “We’ve heard rumors about the state of your marriage, about how things might not have been going well between you and Sarah. Care to comment on that?”

“Those rumors are none of your damn business!” Jack snapped, his face turning a deep shade of red that matched the blood on his hands.

“Easy, Jack,” Rachel chimed in, attempting to diffuse the situation. “We’re just trying to find out what happened to Sarah. We’re not here to point fingers without cause.”

“Then ask your questions and leave me be,” Jack replied tersely, his jaw clenched with barely contained anger.

“Alright,” Rachel acquiesced, her gaze never leaving the suspect’s face. “One last thing. Do you know of anyone who might have wanted to hurt *you*?”

Jack hesitated for a moment before responding, his voice barely audible. “Yeah. Yeah, I can think of some folk who have an axe to grind. Tom Clark for one.”

Rachel tried not to glance back at the truck idling down the drive. She hoped Tom would stay put.

The moon cast a silvery glow on the ground, casting eerie shadows through the trees as Rachel and Ethan stood in front of Jack’s garage behind his cabin. They exchanged a glance, both feeling the weight of uncertainty bearing down on them. Rachel’s mind raced, trying to make sense of Jack’s reaction and the unsettling feeling that gnawed at her.

“Got a restroom in the house?” she said suddenly.

Jack stared at her.

She shrugged, watching him, her gaze holding a question. *Nothing to hide, right?*

He seemed to sense the query, and with a grunt, he shrugged. “Go for it,” he snapped. “First floor. Don’t touch anything.”

She nodded, and turned, moving towards the cabin.

Rachel held her breath as she approached the door, listening intently for any sounds. She pushed through the back door, which creaked ominously, feeling the weight of Jack's gaze fixated on her. She didn't look back.

Inside, the cabin was dimly lit and cluttered, with piles of dirty clothes and empty beer cans scattered about. Rachel wrinkled her nose at the stench of stale cigarette smoke and unwashed dishes, but pressed on.

As she made her way to the bathroom, Rachel noticed a stack of papers on the kitchen table. Curiosity getting the better of her, she approached the table and began rifling through the papers. Bills, junk mail, and old receipts littered the pile, but one sheet of paper caught her eye.

It was a handwritten note, scrawled in messy cursive. Rachel's heart quickened as she read the words.

“Meet me at the old mill, midnight. Don't tell anyone.”

No signature, no indication of who the note was meant for. Rachel's mind raced with possibilities. Was this a secret rendezvous? Or was it simply a harmless note between two lovers?

Quickly snapping a photo of the note with her phone, Rachel made her way to the bathroom, relieved to find it empty. As she washed her hands, she studied her reflection in the mirror, trying to control the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

She moved away from the sink, making sure to turn the light off and on, so Jack—watching from outside—would know she'd ventured to the bathroom. The pouring water would resound in the pipes she'd seen behind the house.

She moved silently through the dimly lit rooms, her eyes scanning for anything that seemed out of place. Her senses heightened, every creak of the floorboards and distant rustle of leaves outside sent shivers down her spine.

She made her way to a wooden stairwell with a rail that looked like one long, twisting branch.

As she ascended the stairs, the scent of stale air and dust filled her nostrils. Rachel paused, her hand resting on the worn wooden banister, when she spotted an open door at the end of the hallway. She approached with caution.

She heard a sound behind her and stiffened, glancing down the stairs.

Had Jack followed her into the house?

No... no, just the wind.

She frowned, feeling like a hare caught in a hunter's sites.

Inside the room at the end of the hall, Rachel's gaze landed on a pair of suitcases sitting on the bed, half-packed with clothes and personal items.

Otherwise, the room seemed empty.

Two suitcases.

Half packed...

Her brow furrowed as she considered the implications. Had Jack intended to leave? If so, why?

She peered into the compartments.

Women's clothing.

Not Jack.

Sarah.

His wife had been packing...

She thought of the note she'd spotted on the table downstairs. A lover's rendezvous? Or something innocuous?

She took one last look at the packed bags before turning on her heel and making her way back downstairs.

Rejoining Ethan outside, she approached Jack once more. The scent of raw meat and iron lingered in the air, a constant reminder of the evening's macabre setting.

"Jack," Rachel began, her voice steady despite the tension that thrummed beneath the surface. "I found some bags upstairs, half-packed. Can you explain that?"

Jack's eyes flickered with an unreadable emotion before he responded, his voice low and gravelly. "You went snooping?" His hand tightened on the cleaver.

Ethan's tightened on his gun.

"I spotted it," she said. "Now answer my question." Her tone was harsher now, cranking up the pressure.

She didn't back away one inch, refusing to give him even the slightest whiff of fear.

He was a large man, a mountain man, but she'd faced predators five times his size before without quailing.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair, indifferent to the gore he trailed with his fingers. "It's none of your damn business."

"Did you know about her plans?" Ethan interjected, scrutinizing Jack's reaction closely.

"It wasn't like that."

"Tell us what it was like, then?"

"You wander into my house? Go snooping? Then demand I tell you something? You're really starting to piss me off. Things ain't done like that around here. I know Sheriff Collins. He's a friend."

"We met the sheriff. Why don't you just answer our questions. Why was your wife packing bags?"

Rachel studied him intently, trying to discern any hint of deception from his body language. Her instincts were on high alert, but nothing concrete emerged from the man's stoic demeanor besides simmering anger. She exchanged a glance with Ethan, who seemed equally frustrated by their lack of progress.

"Jack," she continued, "can you tell us more about your relationship with Sarah? Were there any issues between the two of you?"

"Every couple has their problems," Jack replied defensively, his jaw tensing. "But we loved each other. That's

all you need to know.”

“Is it?” Rachel challenged, her dark eyes unwavering. “You say you loved her, but did you ever hurt her, Jack?”

“Of course not!” Jack’s voice rose sharply, his face contorting with anger. “I would never harm my wife.”

“Then why are you so reluctant to discuss your relationship with us?” Ethan demanded, taking a step closer. “If there’s nothing to hide, then there should be no reason for secrecy.”

“Enough!” Jack barked, slamming a bloodied hand down onto the table, causing them all to flinch. “I’ve answered your questions, and I’ve cooperated with this investigation. But I’ve had enough. Get off my land! Now!”

“Jack,” Rachel said, her voice calm but firm, “we’re just trying to find the truth. If you have nothing to hide—”

“Leave!” Jack roared, his anger boiling over at last.

“I think you need to come with us,” Ethan said, stepping forward.

Jack tensed, a growl in his throat. “You gonna make me?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Try. Go on. *Try!*”

Ethan began reaching for his gun. Jack moved first. There was a loud shout, then a gunshot.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rachel watched in horror, the gunshot resounding in the stillness of the mountain. Jack's knees buckled beneath him, and he crumpled to the garage floor, clutching his wounded shoulder. Blood seeped between his fingers, staining the cracked concrete beneath. Rachel could see the pained grimace etched on his face as he gasped for air.

Rachel's eyes darted around the darkened driveway, and her heart raced as her gaze fell upon the figure standing by the edge of the trees, illuminated by the dim light from the cabin. Tom Clark's face was a mask of white, his eyes bugging as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd just done.

"Tom?" Ethan breathed out in disbelief, his voice strained with urgency. He tightened his grip on his own weapon, trained at Tom's head.

"Put the gun down, Tom!" Rachel barked, her voice steely. She could see that Tom's hands were trembling; a desperate man could be just as dangerous as a seasoned killer.

"Stay back!" Tom warned, a chilling edge to his voice. His eyes flicked between Rachel and Ethan, betraying a hint of panic. "I didn't want to hurt Jack, but he was going to attack you! You both saw it!"

Rachel's eyes never left Tom's gun, which wavered dangerously in the air

He'd come here with a mission. He'd wanted to shoot Jack.

And now, the man groaned, letting out a strangled breath from where he lay on the ground.

This cry of pain prompted Rachel to motion.

Ethan was already moving forward, and Tom had pointed his gun at the ground.

“Contain him!” Rachel muttered as she brushed past her partner and moved in the direction of the struggling widower.

Rachel sprinted to Jack’s side. She knelt beside him, she could hear his shallow gasps for breath and see the terror in his eyes.

At first, she’d thought he’d taken the bullet center mass, but now, up close, in the dingy garage, under the corpse of the hanging doe, she spotted that Jack’s shoulder was a mess. Though... it was uncomfortably close to his heart.

“He hit you good—shit,” she said hurriedly, meeting the look of panic in Jack’s gaze. She reached out, knocking the butcher’s knife away just in case.

Seconds before, this man had seemed intent on attacking, but now he just lay there, a trembling mess.

As she worked to bind the wound with a clean rag from the butcher’s table, she could feel Tom’s piercing stare on her back. The air was thick with tension and uncertainty.

“Rachel,” Ethan called out, his voice tense but steady. “We need to get him to a hospital.”

“I know,” she replied, her own voice firm. “Just keep an eye on Tom.”

The sound of Ethan’s voice echoed through the night, the urgency in his tone palpable as he ordered Tom to drop his weapon. “Put it down, now!” he bellowed, the gun in his own hand pointing steadily at the Clark.

Rachel could feel sweat prickling across her brow as she knelt beside Jack, quickly assessing the damage done by the bullet. Blood soaked through his shirt, pooling on the cold ground beneath him. She forced herself to focus on her training and not the multiple distractions occurring around her.

“Stay with me, Jack,” she said softly, ripping a piece of cloth from the rag she’d recovered to create a makeshift bandage. Carefully, she applied pressure to the wound, trying to stem the flow of blood. Jack grimaced in pain but didn’t cry out, his eyes locked onto hers in a silent plea for help.

“Rachel,” Ethan called out, his attention still on Tom. “We have to get him out of here.”

“Working on it,” she shot back, her fingers trembling as she fumbled with the torn fabric.

“Keep talking to him,” Ethan advised, his voice strained as he continued to hold Tom at gunpoint. “Keep him conscious.”

“Jack,” Rachel began, her voice steady, though her nerves were frayed. “Listen to me. We’re going to get you help. Alright? You’re going to be fine.”

She wasn’t sure this was true. Was this man his wife’s killer? How was Tom involved in this?

As she spoke, she worked quickly and efficiently to clean the wound, her hands steady now as she focused on the task at hand.

“Rachel, we need to move,” Ethan urged, his eyes darting between Tom and the dark mountain road that stretched out before them. “We’re running out of time.”

She glanced over and noticed Tom was now disarmed, his hands cuffed behind him. The fight seemed to have left the man now that he’d shot Jack.

Rachel wasn’t sure what this meant.

She gestured at her partner.

“Help me lift him,” Rachel said, her jaw set with determination. Together, she and Ethan carefully hoisted Jack onto their shoulders, taking care not to jostle him too much as they moved toward the truck parked nearby.

“Keep an eye on Tom,” Rachel reminded Ethan, her voice low and fierce. “I don’t trust him for a second.”

As they loaded Jack into the vehicle, the tension in the air was palpable.

“Jack, I need you to sit up,” Rachel instructed, her voice firm but gentle as she helped him into a sitting position. He gritted his teeth against the pain, sweat beading on his forehead as he fought to stay conscious. With one arm

wrapped around his waist and the other bracing against her shoulder, she managed to heave him to a sitting position in the passenger seat of Tom's truck.

"Remember to breathe, Jack," she reminded him. With some difficulty, she secured the seatbelt around his trembling form before slamming the door shut.

"Is he all right?" Ethan asked, still keeping a watchful eye on Tom as Rachel climbed into the driver's seat.

"He's stable for now, but we need to get him to a hospital," she replied, her hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turned white. "Call it in and keep an eye on our friend back there."

"Understood," Ethan said, pulling out his radio. He gestured with his gun at Tom who kept stuttering, "I was trying to help! I was protecting you!"

Ethan and Tom got into the back of the truck, pulling themselves into the open compartment.

With Jack secured in the truck, and her partner keeping an eye on the shooter in the back, Rachel pulled away from the cabin, tires crunching on gravel as she navigated the narrow driveway. The mountain road ahead was treacherous, but she pressed down on the gas pedal with determination. As they picked up speed, the wind whipped through her hair.

The darkness seemed to close in around them, but she refused to let fear slow her down. Her entire body tensed with each maneuver, her muscles straining as if she were physically dragging Jack along the ground herself.

She stole a glance at his pale face illuminated by the dashboard lights. What secrets was he hiding? Why had there been two suitcases upstairs? Had he known his wife was leaving him?

And what about the note she'd found? The cryptic rendezvous...

Was he the killer? Had Tom known it and gotten revenge?

Or was something else going on here?

“Rachel, I’ve got HQ on the line—they’re directing us to the nearest hospital,” Ethan informed her, his voice strained but steady over the radio chatter, shouting through the open window behind the cabin. “We need to get off this mountain and onto Highway 35. It’s about ten miles from our current position.”

“Got it,” she said, her voice barely audible as she calculated their route in her head. “Hang on, everyone.”

As the truck hurtled down the mountain, Rachel’s thoughts raced alongside it.

Was the killer bleeding out in the seat next to them?

Was it the man who’d fired the shot?

Or was it someone else completely?

CHAPTER NINE

The truck's headlights sliced through the darkness as it navigated the treacherous mountain roads. Rachel gripped the wheel, her knuckles as tight as her jaw, as she glanced over at Jack slumped in the passenger seat. Blood oozed from his gunshot wound and pooled beneath him, staining the upholstery. In the back of the truck, Ethan sat with their prisoner, Tom, who was handcuffed and silent, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"Stay with us, Jack," Rachel urged, her voice tight with emotion. Her frustration bubbled just beneath the surface, threatening to spill over at any moment. She knew she had to keep him conscious, but the urgency of their situation made it all the more difficult. With each passing second, Jack's life slipped further away.

"Rachel, we need to drive faster," Ethan called out from the back, his voice strained as he kept a close eye on Tom. He shared her worry for their prime suspect.

"Going faster won't do us any good if we crash," Rachel snapped, her grip tightening on the wheel. The road ahead twisted like a snake, leaving her no choice but to navigate it with caution.

"Can you hold on just a little longer?" She asked, glancing at the bleeding man. Jack's breathing was shallow, his skin pale and clammy. His once piercing eyes were now glazed and unfocused. She couldn't tell whether he was still conscious.

"Don't die on me," she commanded, her voice snapping like a whip.

Suddenly, Jack's body convulsed, a guttural sound escaping his lips. Rachel's heart lurched in her chest as she realized he was choking on his own blood—she hadn't thought there had been any internal injuries. Perhaps when he'd struck the floor?

Or maybe Tom's bullet had been coated in something. Panic clawed at her insides, desperately trying to escape.

"Hey!" She cried, reaching over and shaking him. "Stay with me, damn it!"

But as quickly as the convulsions began, they stopped. Jack's body went limp, and his head lolled to one side, eyes wide and unseeing.

"Jack?" Rachel asked tentatively, her voice catching in her throat. She grabbed his wrist, searching for a pulse. But there was nothing. He was gone.

"Damn it!" She slammed her palm against the steering wheel. Their prime suspect now lay dead in the seat next to her. The man who'd shot him was in the back, watching everything with cold eyes.

"Rachel," Ethan called out. "What happened?"

She shook her head. "He's dead. No pulse."

"Damn it," Ethan murmured, his eyes never leaving Tom, who stared at the floor with a mixture of guilt and fear. Even though he was handcuffed and under guard, Tom was now more dangerous than ever, because it was clear that he knew something. Something that had led him to shoot their prime suspect.

The Clarks did things their own way in these parts, and Rachel had just gotten a taste of their version of frontier justice.

But this thought didn't sit well with her. Her eyes narrowed.

The truck's tires crunched on gravel as Rachel pulled over to the side of the winding mountain road, her hands gripping the steering wheel so hard that her palms ached. The dense forest around them seemed to close in like a suffocating embrace, and an eerie silence filled the air.

She hopped out of the car, feet crunching against loose gravel on the shoulder of the dark mountain road.

"Get out," she growled at Tom, her voice barely audible over the sound of the idling engine.

Ethan unlocked the handcuffs from the bar in the bed of the truck, allowing Rachel to yank Tom out by his arm. His feet stumbled against the ground, and she pushed him up against the side of the truck, pinning him there with a hand against his chest.

“Tell me why you shot Jack,” she demanded through gritted teeth, her dark eyes blazing with fury.

Tom hesitated, his gaze darting between Rachel and Ethan, who stood nearby, his hand resting on his weapon. Finally, he yelled back at her, “You want to know why? I told you. He was going to shoot you. I saw him reaching!”

“Bullshit.”

“Prove it!”

“Don’t test me, Tom. I’ll bring the whole state of Texas down on your daddy’s ranch.”

He glared at her with sullen eyes.

“Now, why the hell did you shoot him?”

He scowled again. “Because Jack killed his wife!”

Instead, she pressed harder into Tom’s chest, her fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt. “You don’t know that.”

“Ask anyone in town!” Tom shouted, desperation etching lines across his face. “Jack was always mixed up in bad business, and it finally caught up with him. The two of ‘em were at odds.”

Rachel shook her head. “I don’t believe you, Tom. You hear that? That howling sound?”

She paused for dramatic effect. She’d been listening to the wolves for the last fifteen minutes, their calls echoing through the open window of the truck. The scent of coppery blood in the front seat was now lingering on the air.

She stared at Tom a second longer, and then snatched his wrist, dragging him. Her fingers dug into his arm, biting deep.

He yelped as she dragged him forward, towards the side of the truck. She snatched the cuffs from where Ethan still held

them, dangling in his hand.

“What the hell are you doing?” shouted Tom.

The sound of the distant wolves grew closer, echoing along the desolate mountain slopes.

She yanked open the passenger door, giving Tom a good look of the dead man he’d shot.

She then cuffed him to Jack.

“Hey! Hey, what the hell!” he protested.

She pulled Jack unceremoniously from the front seat, muttered a small apology to the dead, and then yanked him out.

The body was two hundred pounds of dead weight. He toppled to the ground on the side of the road, dragging Tom’s arm down with him.

She then slammed the door, circled the truck, and hopped back inside. She turned the key, starting the engine.

“Hey!” Tom yelled through the window. “What are you doing? You can’t leave me here! Hey! Hey!”

She began to drive, and his expression shifted into one of terror.

His fingers scrabbled against the glass, leaving smudges.

She drove along, moving slowly. Tom tried to keep up, dragging the body behind with him.

She rolled the window down a bit more, so she could see the fear in his eyes, and so he could see the unyielding steel in hers.

“I think I’m going to let you sit here with your choices,” she said, her voice a snarl.

“Hey... hey, hang on. You’re a ranger.”

“This is Clark land,” she said, spitting the words like venom. “Haven’t you heard? Things are done different around here. I saw the packed bags in Jack’s room. His wife was going to leave him. Was the cryptic note sent by you? *Meet*

me at the old mill, midnight. ' Was she going to meet up with you?'

Tom gaped at her, stunned into silence.

"Rachel..." Ethan muttered through the window behind her, but she ignored him.

"Hear those wolves? Think you can outrun 'em? They sound hungry. Too bad you got a man smelling of deer blood and human guts hanging on to you. Maybe, if you're quick, you can cut off your hand. Run for it." She didn't look away. Didn't give him an inch of remorse.

He just stared at her in terror.

"Wh-what?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding a single time. The brim of her hat cast her eyes in dark shadow. "You don't wanna talk. Fine. You can walk."

"You can't do this!" he yelled, trying to reach into the truck and grab at the lock. But she rolled the window up so he couldn't reach.

"Hey!" he yelped.

"Tell me why you shot him!" she yelled.

"I told you! He's a killer! He got what was coming!"

"Fine... You can sort it out with the wolves. Hopefully, a bear doesn't come along. I hear the mountains are full of 'em. Maybe mountain lions too!"

Rachel was bluffing. She knew it. She hoped Ethan knew it. But the key was that Tom *didn't*.

She kept her gaze fixated on him, refusing to budge.

He stared back at her, slack-jawed.

Rachel's dark eyes flashed with anger, the fire within her soul igniting as she stared down at Tom. He was a pathetic sight, handcuffed to a corpse and kneeling on the cold, unforgiving ground of the mountain road.

“Tell me everything,” she demanded, her voice like thunder rumbling through the quiet night air. “Or I’ll leave you here on this mountainside with nothing but the wolves for company.” As if on cue, a distant howl echoed among the trees.

Tom’s face contorted in fear, his gaze darting toward the shadowy forest surrounding them.

Suddenly, a twig snapped in the woods. Rachel’s hand instinctively went to her holster. Tom’s eyes darted towards the sound, fear etched across his face.

“Please,” he whimpered, tears now streaming down his face. “Please don’t leave me here to die.”

Rachel’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. She knew she couldn’t leave him there.

“Tell me the real reason you shot Jack.”

“Shit, fine, you psycho!” he wailed. “Just... just don’t leave me...”

“Talk.”

“It-It wasn’t just about his wife,” he choked out, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Damn it... It was a moonshine deal gone bad.”

Ethan watched warily from the side, his arms crossed over his chest. Rachel could tell he was struggling with her chosen tactic.

“Go on,” Rachel urged, her voice hard and steady as stone.

“Jack owed money, a lot of it,” Tom stammered, desperation clear in his voice. “The note you saw... I’m guessing it was a drop-off rendezvous. He got involved with us.”

“Us who?”

“My family.”

“Clarks?”

“Yeah. That’s right. He thought he could make some easy cash. But when things went south, he couldn’t pay up.”

The wind whispered through the trees, carrying with it the scent of damp earth and pine needles. Rachel's mind raced. She imagined the weight of that debt pressing down on Jack, crushing him under its burden. How desperate must he have been to risk everything?

Was that why his wife had wanted to leave him?

"Did Jack's wife know about the deal?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"She didn't," Tom replied, shaking his head. "She was innocent in all of this."

Rachel clenched her fists.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, her eyes scanning the horizon as if searching for answers among the stars.

"He never paid up," Tom continued, shakily, "and it started causing problems between our families."

"Problems?" Ethan echoed, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Enough for you to kill him?"

"Look, that's not how I wanted it to go down," Tom said, his voice wavering slightly. "But yeah, there was tension. The kind of tension that could lead to bloodshed. I don't call the... er, you know... shots."

He winced.

If Tom's words were true, then this moonshine feud had been the driving force behind shooting Jack. And yet, something still didn't add up. It didn't explain his wife's death.

"Jack's wife," she said, narrowing her eyes at Tom. "What about her? Was she collateral?"

Tom shook his head vehemently. "No. We never touched her, I swear."

Was he telling the truth? He seemed scared enough to be. He was crying... Unless he was one excellent actor, she believed him.

She took a deep breath, feeling the cool mountain air fill her lungs.

The harsh wind howled through the trees, their branches groaning as if in agony. Rachel's breath came out in small puffs, barely visible against the darkening sky. She studied Tom's face, searching for any hint of deception. He looked away, avoiding her gaze, but she wasn't about to let him off the hook.

"Tom," she pressed, her voice low and insistent, "I need you to be straight with me. Is there anything else you're hiding? Anything that could help us figure out what happened to Jack's wife? The way I see it, you're the prime suspect in her murder."

"Me? Hello, no." Tom hesitated, his eyes darting between Rachel and Ethan in the dim light. He swallowed hard, and when he finally spoke, his voice was barely a whisper. "There's something... something I didn't mention before."

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest, anticipation tightening her muscles like a coiled spring. "What is it?"

"The bags... the bags you found in Jack's house—the ones you mentioned," Tom said, his words coming out in a rush. "They weren't packed for his wife to leave him. They were meant for the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Yeah... yeah, she had a rare condition. Everyone knew about it. Couldn't have kids. Was always a second away from needing to be rushed to the hospital..." As he said it, she wondered if the irony echoed as loudly to him as it did to her.

He wasn't looking at the corpse bound to his wrist.

Rachel frowned.

"His wife was sick?"

"Very."

"Someone killed a sick woman?"

“I... I guess so. But like I told you, it was probably Jack anyway. He’s an asshole. Er... was.”

Rachel pointed at him. “Shut up. Let me think.”

He went quiet, biting his lower lip.

She could feel her anger still swirling in her chest like some great vortex.

Ethan was still watching her through the window dividing the cabin from the back of the truck.

“What are you thinking?” he said.

She didn’t reply at first. She hated to admit it, but Tom’s story made sense.

And if he was telling the truth...

Then, neither Jack *nor* Tom was the killer. Jack had seemed genuinely shocked at the news of his wife’s death. He’d cared for her enough to *leave* two packed suitcases out in the open. What sort of husband on the verge of matricide would look after his wife’s well-being like that?

And Tom... seemed genuinely certain Jack had done it. Which meant Tom hadn’t.

But someone who scared Tom had put him up to the shooting. And Jack had just been caught in the crossfire.

She felt a jolt of pity, her heart heavy.

Someone else was involved in all of this. Another Clark? Maybe Silas Clark, the patriarch of the clan. A man who seemed to put the fear of God in his brood.

Or maybe some other player she wasn’t even aware of.

“Rachel?” Ethan prompted.

Before she could respond, her phone buzzed in her pocket. Reluctantly, she tore her gaze away from the body on the road and answered the call. “Blackwood.”

“Ranger, it’s Sheriff Collins. Another body’s been found on the Clark property. I need you and Ranger Morgan ASAP.”

Her blood ran cold, the bitter wind biting into her exposed skin. “Understood, we’re on our way.”

As she hung up the phone, she looked over at Tom. “Get in.”

He stared.

“Now,” she said.

He hurried forward, and Ethan reached over the side of the truck to help him up. “Jack first,” Ethan said. “Lift him.”

Tom muttered and protested, but did as he was told.

Rachel gripped the steering wheel, staring at where her phone lay on a blood-stained seat.

Another body.

On Clark land.

Shit.

She shook her head, glancing in the mirror to make sure everyone was situated.

She wondered how she was going to explain the corpse cuffed to Tom to the processing officer back at the precinct.

“Quick stop to drop off the dunce,” she said.

Ethan flashed a thumbs up. Tom frowned.

She gunned the engine and ripped down the mountain road.

Once they dropped Tom off, though, they’d have to head back to the crime scene.

The last time they’d tried, the Clarks had punched a sheriff. A few hours later, a Clark had shot their lead suspect.

Who knew what the family would do when they found out one of their own had been arrested?

Not to mention... who was this newest victim?

Rachel frowned, biting her lip, which caused a flash of pain, and focusing on the road ahead.

The scent of blood lingered in her nose.

CHAPTER TEN

The moon's pale light cast eerie shadows on the ground as the predator moved silently through the night, his breath shallow and controlled. He could feel the familiar itch pulsing within him. His thoughts raced with chaotic fervor, yet his movements remained precise and calculated, contradicting his unstable nature.

As he approached the house, he felt a surge of adrenaline course through his veins – an intoxicating mix of fear and excitement. The darkness seemed almost alive, wrapping itself around him like a shroud, concealing his presence from the world. He studied the dwelling before him, taking in every detail: the weathered wooden facade, the overgrown vegetation, the single light flickering in an upstairs window.

“P-perfect,” he whispered to himself, smirking behind the darkness. His voice shuddered and shook, contrasting his confident gait.

He crept closer, each step careful and deliberate, his eyes scanning the surrounding area for any signs of movement. His fingers twitched in anticipation, eager to carry out their task. Though the hour was late, he knew that anything could give him away – the snap of a twig beneath his feet, the rustle of leaves as he brushed past them, a stray beam of moonlight reflecting off his blade.

“Patience,” he reminded himself, his voice barely more than a faint exhale.

His heart pounded in his chest, a frenzied rhythm that threatened to betray his calm exterior.

As he neared the house, the darkness seemed to cling to him even tighter, as if urging him to press forward. He paused for a moment, listening intently for any sounds within – laughter, footsteps, the creak of floorboards. But all was silent, save for the gentle hum of insects in the night air.

As the predator's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he noticed the paint markings on the side of the house. They glowed faintly under the moonlight, a cryptic message that only he could decipher. He traced a finger over the markings, feeling a shiver of recognition run down his spine.

The wind picked up, rustling through the leaves, and he jerked his hand away from the markings, suddenly aware of his vulnerability. Casting a cautious glance around the perimeter, he ensured that no prying eyes were watching his movements.

He moved stealthily towards the back door, his steps light and measured. As he reached for the doorknob, he paused for a moment, his mind wandering back to the paint markings and their significance.

With a final, determined breath, he turned the doorknob. Locked. No matter—he'd prepared for such eventualities.

He retrieved a set of lockpicks from his pocket and began to work on the lock. It was an old lock, and it gave way after a few seconds of fiddling. The predator pushed the door open, wincing at the squeak it made. He paused, listening for any signs of movement within the house. But all was silent.

He stepped inside, closing the door behind him. The darkness within was absolute, and for a moment, he was disoriented. He let his eyes adjust to the darkness, and soon, he was able to make out his surroundings. The scent of mildew and decay filled his nostrils, making him wrinkle his nose.

The floorboards creaked softly beneath him as he made his way through the darkened house, each step calculated and deliberate. The killer's anticipation swelled within him, pulsing like a living thing, driving him forward with an electric thrill. He could almost taste the fear that would soon fill these walls, the very air tingling with the promise of what was to come.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim interior, he began to make out the faint shapes of furniture scattered throughout the room. His fingers grazed over the back of a worn leather chair, its surface cold and slick to the touch. He smiled, imagining his

target sinking into its welcoming embrace, unaware of the danger lurking nearby.

He paused on a rug. An animal pelt. A beaver? No. Faux fur.

He stared down, feeling his anger rising.

Fake fur... what did they think they were doing?

He stared at the fake carpet, and for a moment, he forgot his mission. Forgot the pain markings on the house. Forgot...

Everything.

He glared at the carpet, teeth twisting into a snarl. He then glanced towards the kitchen, spotting the sink. Did it have a garbage disposal?

He reached down, plucking the thin carpet off the ground with an angry jerking motion.

He marched over to the garbage disposal. The mission was on hold for a moment. His personal vendetta taking precedence.

He pulled a hooked knife from his belt. Using it, he ripped the fake rug apart, feeding it piece by piece into the disposal.

The disposal made an angry, growling noise, like an engine running old oil.

The house didn't stir, but he thought he heard a floorboard creak above.

He ignored it, feeding the final piece into the disposal. It lodged and stuck.

The grinding sound died.

He smirked. The disposal had gotten stuck.

It was an act of petty vengeance, but it felt good, and it was a reminder.

He was in control here.

When he finished, he glanced around the kitchen, his eyes settling on a small window overlooking the backyard.

Taking a deep breath, he turned and made his way towards the stairs, his mission still on his mind.

He was almost there.

He stepped onto the landing, his eyes peering into the darkness ahead.

The hunt was on.

He moved cautiously through the house, pausing every so often to listen for any sounds of approaching footsteps or voices. Each moment spent waiting tightened the coil of anticipation within him, and he reveled in it, allowing the tension to fuel him.

Finding a vantage point from which to observe his unsuspecting prey, he settled into the shadows, his body tense and coiled like a serpent ready to strike. He breathed in deeply, savoring the musty smell of the aging house, a scent that would soon mingle with the copper tang of blood.

His senses were on high alert, attuned to the slightest shift in his environment.

Of course, he'd timed it perfectly. This particular *culling* was timed for a late night arrival of a late night person.

He waited, checking his watch. A minute. Thirty seconds.

He counted it down.

And then, like clockwork... a sound.

The distant sound of a car door slamming sent a jolt of excitement through him, and he had to restrain himself from leaping out of his hiding place.

It was late... The night shift had ended at the warehouse...

A hard worker. Two jobs. But that didn't matter. The victim needed his mercy, however he decided to dole it out.

He wrinkled his nose, picturing that fake carpet.

"Amateur..." he whispered. "Steady," he admonished himself, his thoughts a feverish whirlwind. "You've waited this long. Don't ruin it now."

As the footsteps outside drew nearer, the killer's fingers twitched involuntarily, itching for the moment when they would finally close around the throat of his prey. The thrill of the hunt consumed him, leaving no room for doubt or hesitation.

The front door creaked open, and the killer held his breath, his entire being poised on the edge of a knife, ready to strike.

He waited at the top of the stairs, hidden just within an old, aged closet.

The air around him grew colder, the darkness of the enclosure pressing in on him like an unwanted embrace. He could feel the tension hanging heavy in the atmosphere – it was almost palpable. The predator's heart pounded in his chest, every beat echoing in his ears as he listened to his prey move through the house.

“Can you sense it?” he thought, a shiver of excitement running up his spine. *Do you know you're being watched? Hunted?*

He took in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of dust and fear that filled the house. His eyes, well-adapted to the darkness, followed the shadow of his intended victim passing by the doorway. Their breathing, quick and shallow, betrayed their unease.

He waited, watching as they came up the final step.

And then he emerged from the dark.

“Catherine,” he said quietly.

She froze, refusing to turn, refusing to confirm with her eyes what her ears feared.

“Catherine,” he said, almost gently. “Look at me.”

She let out a faint whimper. “Jeb... Jeb's just behind me,” she said.

“No, dear, your husband is still out, harassing the Texas Rangers. You and I are alone.”

He saw the way her shoulders tensed. Saw the fear shiver down her spine.

He stared at her, with pity, with a cold calculating pity. “it will be over... Don’t fear.”

“If Jeb finds you in here...”

Jebediah Clark. A firecracker... Not one to be culled.

He loved his wife...

The predator wondered what Jeb would do when he found out what had happened.

He allowed himself a small smile of anticipation.

And then Catherine tried to bolt, her skirt tripping up her efforts as she darted towards the stairs. He reached out, snatching her ponytail. She screamed.

He laughed.

It was all over so quickly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rachel and Ethan stepped out of their car, feeling the weight of wary eyes on them. They had arrived at the second crime scene located even deeper on the Clark's land. Now, they stood at the base of an incline behind an old, red barn with peeling paint and missing boards.

The scent of manure and mulch lingered heavily with decaying grass clippings which had been left too long in piles behind the barn.

Besides the odors, the air was heavy with suspicion and tension, as if the locals could sense the intrusive nature of their investigation.

She could feel eyes watching her from the porch of the small white house at the top of a hill. She didn't know who lived in that particular home.

But Jebediah Clark had followed them along with a younger boy—the kid couldn't have been much older than fourteen, but he shared his father's mean eyes, and leaned against the wooden boards of the barn next to Jeb.

Rachel glanced around, taking in the lay of the land - the vast expanse of open pastures, the clusters of ancient oak trees dotting the landscape, and the brooding sky overhead.

"Seems like we're not exactly welcomed here," Ethan remarked, his voice barely above a whisper. He was looking towards the porch of the white house, where a woman and a man stood with rifles in hand, staring down at them.

The rifles weren't aimed, but were certainly visible.

"Can't say I blame them," Rachel replied, adjusting her jacket against the chilly breeze. "We did just arrest one of their own."

"Tom shot a guy."

“Let’s hope we’re not next.”

As they approached the area cordoned off by yellow police tape, Jebediah Clark spat off to the ground, watching them closely from where he was standing nearby. He leaned against a wooden board with more mold than wood, arms folded across his chest, his steely gaze locked onto them. His silence spoke volumes.

Family and land meant everything to these folk. And their roots went as deep as the sins staining the earth.

“Mr. Clark,” Rachel called out, forcing a polite smile. “Sorry to intrude on your property again.”

Jebediah merely grunted in response, his expression unchanging.

“Y’all best be careful where you step,” Jebediah warned, his voice low and gravelly. “Wouldn’t want you messing up any evidence or whatnot.” He peered at them, then back towards the road. “Where’s the man that belongs to that truck?”

“Tom’s not here right now. He’s answering some questions down at the station,” Rachel said.

Jebediah stiffened.

“What the hell do you mean?”

But Rachel didn’t think mentioning the shooting and arrest would go over well. Someone on this land had issued the order for Jack to be shot, though... She wasn’t the only one who would know what had happened.

Ethan just waved him away. “You’ll see your brother soon enough.”

“And what does that mean?” Jeb’s eyes narrowed. His son, who was chewing on some sunflower seeds, just watched everything with those dull, gray eyes.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?” Ethan asked.

The kid just shrugged, wrinkling a nose covered in freckles.

Jeb snapped, “Don’t talk to my kid, asshole.”

Ethan held up his hands in placation.

Jeb watched him. “Say... do I know you?”

Ethan looked away, turning his face towards the corpse, and ignored the question. Rachel still wasn't sure how to handle the information that Ethan was *very* local to these parts. He'd been in a fistfight with Jeb and some of his brothers in their youth, and Ethan clearly still carried the wound. If not to his flesh, then certainly to his pride.

Rachel and Ethan continued towards the crime scene. As they moved further away, she could still feel the denizens of the ranch's gaze on them, as if they were watching their every move, waiting for them to slip up. She tried to shake off the feeling, knowing that the locals were only a small part of the challenges they would face in solving this case.

The moon cast its soft beams upon the crime scene, revealing a chilling sight. The victim lay lifeless against a gnarled tree root that seemed to clutch her like a monstrous hand, her body sprawled across the dirt in an awkward angle. Her limbs were tied with coarse ropes, which had cut into her flesh, leaving angry red marks that marred her pale skin. Her dark hair was matted with dried blood, and a deep gash ran across her forehead.

Rachel knelt beside the body, examining the woman's clothing. She wore a tattered silk dress that was once vibrant red, but now stained by dirt and blood. The dress was torn in places, exposing bruised flesh beneath. Ethan stood at a distance, watching Rachel work while surveying the surrounding area.

“Another senseless death,” Rachel muttered, anger simmering in her veins as she traced a finger along the rope burns on the victim's wrists.

“Any idea who she is?” Ethan asked.

“Nothing yet. We'll have to wait for identification.”

“Seems like the killer has a pattern though, huh?” Ethan said, his eyes narrowing. “The way the victims are found...”

it's methodical, almost ritualistic. The branches on the last one. Roots here. Dresses torn. Like he chases them.”

“True,” Rachel agreed, straightening up from her crouched position. “And he makes it personal. Likes working up close.”

Ethan glanced back at Jebediah, still observing them, before lowering his voice. “Speaking of messages, we need to talk about Tom. They’ll start to get suspicious.”

“Let ‘em be suspicious,” Rachel replied, her gaze steely. “We can’t risk letting any information out before we’re ready.”

A gust of wind rustled through the trees, sending a shiver down Rachel’s spine as she surveyed the gruesome scene before her. The victim’s lifeless eyes stared into the void, her body contorted unnaturally against the tree root to which she was bound. Rachel clenched her jaw and forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

A mess of blood and roots *wasn’t* the same thing to Rachel’s eyes as most. She was trained to read the patterns in the earth, the dirt.

She’d spent a good part of her life as a big-game hunter for ranger services, for law enforcement, and for local municipalities that needed the extra, weathered hand. She was a fair shot with a rifle, and deadly in the woods.

The crunching of gravel drew their attention away from the grisly sight. Sheriff Collins strode towards them, his face a mixture of irritation and annoyance as he came down the hill around the side of the barn. He ignored Jeb completely. The smaller, mean-eyed man was smirking at the bruise on the sheriff’s cheek.

Collins wasn’t thrilled about the audience in the case, and it showed in every line on his weathered face.

“Rachel, Ethan,” he greeted curtly, folding his arms across his chest. “Anything I missed?”

Rachel shrugged. “Coroner still busy with the last one?”

“On his way. Asking for a couple uniforms before he sets foot back on the land...” Collins shot a nasty look towards

Jeb, which was returned.

Ethan shrugged, and in a tone suggesting he'd done so many times before, he rattled off, "Multiple lacerations on the torso... ligature marks on the wrists and ankles..." he murmured, his voice barely audible as he continued his assessment. "Signs of blunt force trauma to the head, possibly pre-mortem..."

Rachel shot him a glance. Ethan just shrugged back at her. "I was homicide for a decade before this posting."

"Right. I forgot."

He winked.

The sheriff, though, took in the information, nodding knowingly as if he wanted them both to know that he'd already gleaned the information for himself.

Rachel knelt down next to the lifeless body, her keen eyes scanning the scene with practiced precision. She reached out a tentative hand and rested it on the victim's cold, clammy skin. The chill sent a shiver through her, but she held her composure as she observed her surroundings. The poor soul was bound to the tree root, her once vibrant clothing now tattered and stained by the unforgiving elements.

"Her body is cool to the touch," Rachel murmured, glancing up at Ethan who stood nearby. "She hasn't been here long... Otherwise, she would've been found. But she wasn't recently killed."

"Yeah," Ethan said. "Makes sense. Killed somewhere else, then dumped here? The rigor mortis is just starting to set in, and there's no sign of bloating or discoloration that would indicate advanced decomposition."

"Any idea how she was killed?" Rachel asked.

"Nah. I have some experience with this shit, but gonna have to wait on the coroner for that one. Too early to determine an exact cause of death."

Rachel stood up, frowning, ignoring Jeb's watchful gaze. She said, "Might need to check the woods, then. If the body

was dumped here, but killed elsewhere, someone had a vehicle to drop her off. No roads around. Save that one.”

She waved towards where the truck was idling a few hundred feet away.

“Maybe they came down that road.”

“And not get spotted by the lookouts on the porch?” she waved towards the man and woman she’d spotted before.

“Hmm. Fair.” Ethan frowned.

Rachel figured they’d have to interview the onlookers soon enough, but if the killer was trying to keep a low profile, he would’ve approached from the woods.

Which meant, he might have left some trace behind.

“Let’s check for tire treads,” suggested Ethan, his voice barely above a whisper. “If the body was dumped recently, there might be signs of the vehicle that brought her here.”

Rachel nodded, her eyes scanning the ground with practiced precision. She knew that even the most careful criminals made mistakes, and it was up to her and Ethan to find those missteps and use them to their advantage.

The two of them moved away from the corpse, backs to Jeb and his son, marching towards the thick woods behind the barn.

The forest was dense, with tall trees blocking out most of the moonlight and casting long shadows across the ground. They moved cautiously, their eyes scanning the ground for any signs of disturbance.

After a few minutes of searching, Rachel spotted a patch of dirt that had been mused. She knelt down and examined the ground closely.

“Look at this,” Rachel said, pointing to a small patch of crushed leaves. “It looks like someone was standing here for a while.”

Ethan crouched down beside her, his eyes narrowing as he examined the area. “Yeah, you’re right. And there’s a trail

leading away from here.”

They followed the trail, moving deeper into the woods. The further they went, the more signs of disturbance they found. Broken twigs, footprints in the mud, and disturbed patches of dirt all pointed to someone moving through the area.

Finally, they stumbled upon a small clearing.

“Over here,” Rachel called out, spotting a set of faint tire impressions in the soft earth near the edge of the clearing. “Looks like we might have a lead after all.”

Ethan hurried over, pulling out his phone to take photos of the tracks as Rachel crouched down for a closer look. “These are fresh,” she mused, her fingers tracing the grooves in the dirt. “The killer couldn’t have been gone long when we arrived.”

“Good thing we got here when we did,” Ethan replied, snapping another photo from a different angle.

As they continued to document the tire treads, Rachel’s mind raced with possibilities. What kind of vehicle had left these marks? Who was driving it? And most importantly, why had they chosen this location to dispose of the body?

Twice on the Clark’s land.

Someone who hated the deep-rooted family and wanted to cause trouble?

Or perhaps the Clarks themselves?

Tom was brazen enough to shoot a man in front of two state rangers. What would the rest of their clan feel they could get away with on their own land?

She frowned, staring at the muddy trail.

“Make sure you get close-ups of the individual treads,” she instructed Ethan, her voice steady and focused.

“Got it,” he confirmed, taking several more pictures before stowing his phone away.

With the tire treads documented, Rachel and Ethan were about to leave when a sound caught their attention.

They both turned sharply.

Rachel frowned as the sound of heavy footsteps approached. She glanced at Ethan, who had swiftly taken a protective stance between her and the source of the noise. She stepped from behind him—he was obscuring her line of sight. The moon dipped below the trees, casting eerie shadows that danced across the crime scene.

“Who’s there?” Ethan called out, his voice firm but tinged with uncertainty.

A trio of tall, imposing men emerged from the thick foliage, the fading sunlight glinting off their steely eyes.

A tall man. A *very* tall man with thick arms, despite his age, emerged from the trees. He had a large, silver beard, and half his teeth seemed to be missing and replaced by gold and silver.

He was also covered in tattoos. It looked to be the same man who’d been watching them from the porch, but he’d now come for a closer look.

And up close, she recognized him from his photos.

Silas Clark, flanked by two of his grandsons, stopped a few feet away from Rachel and Ethan. Their presence seemed to darken the atmosphere, like storm clouds rolling in over the peaceful countryside.

“Evening, rangers,” Silas drawled. “Seems you’ve found somethin’ interestin’ on our property.”

She knew they had to tread carefully here; Silas and his family were deeply protective of more than just their land, and any perceived intrusion could have dire consequences.

“Mr. Clark,” she began, choosing her words carefully. Silas didn’t reply at first, as if he were weighing her words. He stroked his long, white beard. Then crossed his arms over his broad chest. His grandsons mirrored his stance, their expressions a mix of suspicion and disdain. “Well, you ain’t gonna find nothin’ here. We ain’t got no part in this mess.”

“Actually,” Rachel countered, her voice steady despite the knot forming in her stomach, “We don’t want to involve your

family any more than necessary, but we're finding it difficult to leave you out of it with the constant intrusions."

She didn't back down. She knew men like this. Men who were so used to their own bubble that they assumed the power they wielded in their day-to-day extended to every walk of life.

It was the same attitude that had pulled Tom's trigger.

Was this the man who'd put his own son up to it?

She watched the thickset, tattooed giant with narrowed eyes.

Silas studied her for a moment, his own gaze narrowing as if trying to decipher her true intentions. Then, with a sly grin that made Rachel's skin crawl, he spoke.

"Y'know, it's a shame about that girl," Silas said nonchalantly. "I knew her, y'know. She was a... well, let's just say she made her living in a less-than-honorable way."

"You know the victim?"

"The one back that way. Yeah," he said, jutting a thumb over his shoulder. "Canda."

"Canda?"

"Candace."

"Candace?" Rachel said.

He nodded once, his golden teeth flashing.

"Is there anything else you can tell us about her?" Ethan asked cautiously, his eyes flicking between Silas and the grandsons.

"Nothin' that concerns you," Silas replied, smirking as he locked eyes with Rachel. "But I reckon you'll find out soon enough. Candace is well known around these parts." He winked. "She gets around."

Rachel stared at him. "Are you saying she's a prostitute?"

"Now she's wormfood. But yeah. She was a whore."

"Have you used her services?" Ethan said.

Silas didn't reply to this. He just looked at Rachel. "You got a dark tinge to you, girl. Where are you from? Mexico?"

She shook her head once. "No, I'm from Texas."

"My family's roots run twelve generations deep, girlie."

She shook her head. "I don't know if that math checks out."

"Well... I was never much for numbers as such. For one. There's three of us and two of you, right?"

"Are you threatening us, sir?"

"Nah. Just showing off." He smirked.

"Well," Rachel said slowly, "My family's roots... go back to before your first ancestor set foot on these shores. So I think I'll stick around if it's all the same to you."

Silas chuckled, his voice low and menacing. "Is that so? Well, I reckon we'll see about that. You might find it hard to get anywhere in these parts if you don't learn to respect the locals."

Rachel bristled at his words, but she knew better than to engage in a verbal sparring match with a man like Silas. Instead, she stepped back, putting some distance between them.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Clark. We'll be on our way now."

Silas watched them go, his grin widening as they moved towards the trees.

She lost sight of him as she and Ethan fell into step, moving hurriedly away.

"Candace, a prostitute," Ethan said under his breath. "Think the ID is good?"

"Worth looking into," Rachel said. "How hard could it be?"

He snorted.

"What?"

"With a name like that? In a place like this? Might be like finding a condom in a damn haystack."

She stared at him.

“What?”

“You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

He winced. “Too much? I thought we were getting this whole partner banter thing down.”

She shook her head. “I’m more of the stoic silence type. At least... where you’re concerned.”

“See. See right there, banter. We’re going to make a great team, Rachel. I’m telling you right now,” he said, his southern drawl turning energetic along with a skip in his step as he led her back towards the crime scene.

Rachel just shook her head, stifling a yawn.

It was getting late.

The coroner would be delayed, and there was nothing more to glean from the crime scene.

“How about we check into the motel,” she said, “then figure out if Candace is connected to any of this.”

Ethan gave her a nod, but ducked his head as they passed Jebediah.

Rachel feared that particular storm was still brewing, but for now she said nothing, nodded politely at Jeb and his son, and moved back towards the waiting truck.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The moon hung low in the sky, casting a pale glow upon the dusty road as Rachel and Ethan pulled up to the tired facade of the small motel. The flickering neon sign cast eerie shadows over the building, giving it an almost sinister appearance. As they stepped inside, the sound of their footsteps echoed through the empty lobby, mingling with the hum of a vending machine in the corner.

Behind the counter stood a tall, wiry man with weathered skin and dark eyes that seemed to hold a thousand stories. He greeted them with a nod, his gaze lingering on Rachel for a moment before turning his attention back to the reservation book.

“Two rooms for tonight, please,” Ethan spoke up, breaking the silence that had settled over the room.

“Got it,” the man replied gruffly, his fingers deftly flipping through the pages of the book. As he scribbled their names down, his eyes flickered back to Rachel, curiosity evident in his expression. “You look familiar,” he said slowly. “Your face reminds me of someone I used to know.”

Rachel furrowed her brow, searching her memories for any trace of recognition. “I’m not sure,” she replied hesitantly. “I haven’t been in this town for years.”

“I know your face,” he said, nodding with more certainty.

Rachel wasn’t sure how to respond to this.

The man mused as he scribbled in his book. “You live on the reservation?”

“I used to. Bout a half hour from here, actually. Lived with my aunt.” She studied the old, weathered features of the native man.

“Hmm...” He looked up again, his brow lowering, his lips pressed into a pensive expression. “I know...” His eyes trailed

to her hat, to the feather in the brim, to the small, turquoise seed beads in the fringe of her hair.

“Ah,” the man’s face brightened, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “You must be Sarah’s niece then. Rachel, right?”

Surprise flickered across Rachel’s face, and she nodded. “Yes, that’s me. You knew my aunt?”

She could feel Ethan’s curiosity rising as he glanced at her.

“Indeed, I did,” the man responded, leaning against the counter with an air of nostalgia. “She was quite the character, your Aunt Sarah.”

Rachel reached for a card from her pocket and approached the pay terminal as he turned it towards them. But after a second, he waved her away.

“No. It’s fine.”

She blinked. “What?”

“A gift.”

She hesitated, glancing at Ethan. “What about him?” she asked, jamming a thumb towards him.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Seventy per night.”

Rachel held back a snicker at the crestfallen look on Ethan’s face. She supposed the friendly discount was only for Sarah’s niece. She wasn’t complaining—Rangers weren’t exactly overpaid.

Ethan grumbled briefly as he wrangled the card reader under the desk attendee’s watchful gaze.

“Duff,” said the man behind the counter, extending a hand to Rachel.

She took it. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

“She really was a fine woman.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your aunt.” He smiled, revealing a couple of rotten teeth. Briefly, she was reminded of Silas’ golden smile, and she felt a

shiver. But her curiosity overshadowed the chill.

“Lived out there all by herself, didn’t need nobody for nothin’. She was an expert hunter, you know. Used to bring me some of her catches to stuff.”

“Really?” Rachel leaned in, her curiosity piqued. “I knew she lived alone, but I never realized she was into taxidermy.”

“Yep,” the man nodded, his eyes crinkling with fond remembrance. “She did some fine work on a couple of beavers I caught once. Made ‘em look like they were ready to build a damn right there in my living room.”

Rachel couldn’t help but smile at the image, feeling an unexpected warmth for this stranger who knew her aunt. Sarah lived only an hour from this town, so she supposed it made sense.

“Sarah always said you had a good head on your shoulders,” the man continued, his voice taking on a more serious tone. “She’d be proud to know you’re out here, trying to make a difference.”

“Thank you,” Rachel murmured. Of course, she knew better. Her aunt blamed her for the unsolved disappearance of her own parents. Nothing anyone said would take that knowledge away.

“Alright now, you two best get settled in,” the man said, handing over the keys to their rooms. “It’s late, and I reckon you’ve got a long day ahead of you tomorrow.”

As they turned to leave, Rachel couldn’t shake the feeling that their conversation held more significance than she first thought.

Rachel followed Ethan down the dimly lit hallway to their rooms.

Eager to process the day’s events, Rachel fumbled with the keys as she unlocked their shared motel unit. The door creaked open, revealing a large room divided by an open doorway. Faded wallpaper clung to the walls, and the musty scent of old carpet filled the air. A sense of weary nostalgia settled over the

space, a testament to the many travelers who had sought sanctuary within these walls.

“Home sweet home,” Ethan quipped, setting down his duffel bag with a thud. He eyed the two doors on opposite sides of the room, each leading to an identical bed. “At least we won’t be fighting over blankets.”

“Very funny,” Rachel replied, forcing a smile despite her exhaustion. Her gaze lingered on the beds for a moment before turning back to the task at hand.

“I’m gonna grab a shower,” Ethan announced, already unbuttoning his shirt as he made his way toward the bathroom. “You want one first?”

“No, go ahead,” Rachel said, shaking her head. “I need to do some research anyway.”

Ethan nodded, disappearing behind the bathroom door. Moments later, the sound of running water filled the room, accompanied by the distant hum of the motel’s aging plumbing.

Rachel wasted no time in pulling out her laptop, settling into the stiff-backed chair near the room’s only window. In the dim light of the streetlamp outside, she began piecing together the information they had gathered thus far. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, searching for any details about the prostitute named Candace.

She couldn’t shake the feeling that the clock was ticking, the urgency of the situation weighing heavily on her shoulders.

“Maybe Aunt Sarah knew something...” she mused, recalling the conversation with the motel’s owner. It seemed unlikely that her aunt’s connections to this town would be significant. It had been a while since Sarah had lived in the area.

Still... it couldn’t hurt to ask, could it?

She considered this a moment, wincing as she did.

Her relationship with her aunt was...

An uncomfortable one.

At the age of ten, she'd been orphaned when her parents had vanished. Their bodies, or persons, had never been found.

Her aunt had taken her in, looking after her like one of her own, but Rachel had grown up an orphan, and they'd both known it.

What Aunt Sarah had in the way of wilderness skills, hunting expertise and local knowledge, she somewhat lacked in the parenting department.

As Rachel had grown older, the rift between them had also grown. Especially after Rachel had moved from her job as a big game hunter for local law agencies, to the Texas rangers.

She'd had a chance to work for the reservation police as well, but had figured the best way to help her people was on the outside, where her folk were sometimes overlooked.

But her aunt, along with most of the other denizens of the rez, hadn't exactly agreed.

Things had only drifted further as the pain of losing her sister had caused Sarah even greater grief. She'd taken out that pain on Rachel.

Still... the two of them had been close once upon a time.

Rachel sighed, pulled out her phone, staring at it.

What would her aunt know about a prostitute anyway?

It wasn't like Sarah was even local anymore...

She bit her lip... but maybe her aunt would know the sort of person who could point her in the right direction... Maybe she'd know about the local brothels.

Rachel finally relented, sighing and lifting her phone.

She nearly put it back down as she listened to the sound of the shower running in the other room, but then she summoned courage and placed the call.

She sat stiff-backed, resolute in the small motel chair, staring at a blank wall as the phone rang.

Finally, a voice answered on the other end. "Hello?"

“Aunt Sarah?” Rachel’s voice was hesitant, almost unsure.

There was a pause before the older woman spoke. “Rachel? Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m sorry to call so late, but I’m in your old stomping grounds and I was hoping you could help me out with something.”

“What’s going on, Rachel?” Sarah’s voice was tight, guarded.

Rachel hesitated, unsure how to broach the subject.

The long pause stretched.

Sarah cleared her throat. “This... this isn’t about...”

“What? No.” Rachel wasn’t even sure what the end of that sentence was going to be, and she didn’t want to find out.

She didn’t hesitate this time, not wanting to stall any longer. “Look, I know it’s a bit strange, but you know people. You’ve always known people. Especially those that are behind the scenes.”

“What does that mean?”

Instead of explaining, Rachel said, “I... I’m looking for information about a prostitute named Candace. I was wondering if you knew anything about her.”

Another pause, longer this time. Rachel could hear the sound of her aunt’s breathing on the other end of the line.

Finally, Sarah spoke. “Where are you, exactly?”

“Longview.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Sarah trailed off... Her voice gained an edge. “What have folk been telling you about me?”

“About you? Nothing. Just...” Rachel paused, but then decided she didn’t want to dig. So instead, she said, “Just looking for some information on a case.”

“Ah... Right. I don't know many folks from Longview. And not any by that name.”

“Do you know how I might find her?”

“Yes.”

No hesitation now. It was a matter of pride to her aunt that she could track any type of quarry, be it human or animal.

“Well?” Rachel prompted.

“There's a few brothels in the area, but they don't advertise themselves. You'd have to know someone to get in, or have a good cover story,” Sarah replied.

“I see...”

“Can you tell me anything else?”

“Like what?”

“Was she one of ours?”

“Umm... No. White girl.”

“Oh. That narrows it down then. Just one place.”

“One place?”

“In Longview, yeah.”

Rachel felt her heart skip. “Care to give a name?”

“Sure. It's called the Velvet Lounge. It's not far from where you are. But Rachel...” Her aunt hesitated, swallowing.

“Yeah?”

“Be careful. Those places are dangerous.” Sarah's voice was stern, but Rachel could hear the concern there too.

Rachel thanked her aunt and ended the call.

As she did, she bit her lip, staring at the phone and wishing things weren't so abrupt between them.

She sighed, massaging the bridge of her nose and shaking her head. There were other things to worry about.

She wondered what Lily might do in situations like this. Her childhood best friend was a free spirit. She liked to play

things her own way.

But while Rachel had always admired her old companion for the skill, she'd never shared it.

She sighed, turning her attention back to her laptop. The screen had gone dark, and she could see the reflection through the open doorway between the two motel rooms.

She stared vaguely at it. It was very late, now. And if she wanted to dig around without being seen, it was best to visit the brothel earlier, when it wouldn't be crowded.

Besides... she needed some sleep.

"Focus, Rachel," she admonished herself. She was distracted as the sound of the shower ceased, and a moment later, the bathroom door creaked open in the other room.

Her back was to him, but she spotted his movement in the reflection on her computer screen.

Ethan emerged, his hair damp and tousled, a towel wrapped around his waist.

She pauses briefly, knowing she probably ought to look away. But she found his frame... fascinating.

Besides, he was still wearing a towel.

The distraction of the handsome ranger in nothing but a towel helped to ease her mind a bit.

"Find anything?" he called out from the other room, his voice tinged with curiosity as he rifled through his duffel bag for a change of clothes.

"Nothing concrete yet," Rachel said distractedly, watching him in the reflection.

Ethan stepped aside, likely for modesty's sake. But her back was to him, and so he didn't try very hard to hide.

Rachel's gaze flicked to the reflection of the open doorway that separated the two halves of the shared room. A glint of light caught her attention, and she found herself drawn to the image of Ethan undressing by the mirror. She couldn't help but

watch him, curiosity piquing as he removed his shirt, revealing a toned, sinewy physique.

God, he's...fit, she thought, swallowing hard. Her heart thudded in her chest like a caged bird, and she felt a blush creep into her cheeks. Yet she couldn't tear her gaze away.

As Ethan stood before the mirror, Rachel noticed long, jagged scars along his waist, their appearance resembling those from a mountain lion attack. The sight of them sent a shiver down her spine, and she wondered about the story behind them.

She knew that Ethan came from a large, close-knit family, and she couldn't imagine how they must have felt when he sustained such injuries.

The soft creak of the floorboards jolted Rachel out of her reverie. Startled, she realized that Ethan had caught her staring at him in the mirror. Her face burned with embarrassment, and she quickly looked away, pretending to be engrossed in her computer screen. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest, a mixture of guilt and curiosity making her feel uncomfortably vulnerable.

"Sorry," Ethan said quietly, his tone neutral but tinged with an edge of awkwardness. "I didn't mean to put on a show."

"Ah, no problem," Rachel stammered, forcing a casual laugh. "I was just... um, researching." She gestured vaguely towards her laptop, hoping Ethan would take the hint and not press the issue any further.

"Right," Ethan replied, clearly unconvinced but willing to let it go. He turned off the light near the mirror and headed towards his bed, the darkness swallowing him up. The sound of rustling sheets reached Rachel's ears as he settled in for the night, relieving her of the tension that had been building in the room.

She let out a faint breath, shaking her head slowly.

She then got to her feet and moved over to her own bed, slipping under the covers.

The hum of the air conditioner filled the room, its white noise doing little to ease the tension that had settled in the pit of Rachel's stomach. She lay in bed, her eyes open and staring up at the water-stained ceiling as she tried to piece together the puzzle before her.

Who had killed those two women?

And why on the Clark's land?

"Tomorrow," she whispered to herself, her voice barely audible above the drone of the air conditioner.

As if on cue, a gust of wind rattled the window, casting eerie shadows across the walls. The motel's neon sign flickered outside, casting an unsettling glow across the barren room.

She opened her mouth, wanting to call out to Ethan.

To ask him...

What?

Just to hear his voice?

Why?

She frowned at herself... She was being silly, and she wasn't even sure why.

She frowned to herself, shook her head, and then closed her eyes, determined to retreat into the embrace of sleep before the hunt commenced tomorrow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The afternoon sun glinted off the windshield as Rachel and Ethan pulled up to the unassuming building that housed the brothel in Longview, Texas. Dust swirled around the car like a heavy fog, coating everything in its path with a fine layer of grit. The sign above the door simply read “Paradise” in faded neon lights, an ironic name for a place where dreams were more likely to die than come true.

It hadn’t opened until the afternoon, and much of their morning had been spent double and triple checking blueprints on the place.

“Changed the name from what your aunt told you,” Ethan said.

“Yeah, I guess things change even in a small town.”

“Not much,” replied Ethan.

“How far from her did you grow up?” she asked, shooting him a sidelong glance.

“Only a couple towns over. Knew Jeb, though.”

“I remember you saying that.”

He massaged at his chin, a far off look in his gaze.

She didn’t comment on his musings.

Instead, she turned her attention to the task at hand.

“You still good being backup?”

“If you say so,” he muttered.

She flashed a thumbs up.

“Stay sharp and keep your eyes open,” Rachel instructed her partner as she stepped out of the vehicle. The door creaked in protest, and she shut it firmly behind her. She could feel Ethan’s gaze on her as she walked towards the entrance, but her mind was elsewhere.

Rachel couldn't shake the image of Ethan half-naked, the memory of his toned muscles and the confidence with which he carried himself. It was a distraction she couldn't afford right now, but part of her wondered how bad it might be to catch another glimpse of him. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, and focused on the mission at hand.

She approached the front of the brothel. Her boots crunched against the gravel beneath her, and she took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of stale cigarettes and cheap perfume that hung in the air.

"Afternoon," she greeted the bouncer as she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He didn't move to intercept her. She was wearing more makeup than she was accustomed to, and she was in plain clothes.

The dimly lit room was filled with the muffled sounds of laughter and hushed conversations. A group of scantily clad women lounged near the bar, eyeing Rachel with a mix of curiosity and guarded suspicion. She knew she had to tread carefully.

It was only the afternoon, but by the looks of things, the place was still active.

Sin never slept in Longview, it appeared.

Rachel winced as the phrase her aunt so often used echoed in her mind.

She was turning into Sarah.

She approached the bar.

"Can I help you?" one woman asked, stepping forward. She was tall and slender, with high cheekbones and striking green eyes.

"Hey, I'm looking for someone," Rachel said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I heard she might've worked here. A girl named Candace?"

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she ran a hand through her long, dark hair. "Candace? I don't know any Candace.

Who's asking?"

"A friend. She's my sister," Rachel lied.

The woman eyed Rachel up and down. "You're Mexican?"

"No."

"Native?"

"Yeah."

"From Texas?"

"Mhmm."

"What tribe?" the green-eyed woman pressed. She was sure asking a lot of questions.

Rachel said, "Cherokee."

The woman nodded slowly, seeming to accept Rachel's answers. "Well, I don't know any Candace, but I can ask around for you. What's your name?"

"Rachel," she said, sticking to the first name she had given.

The woman extended a hand. "I'm Jade."

Rachel shook her hand and offered a small smile. "Thanks, Jade. I appreciate any help you can give me."

Jade gave her a nod before turning to walk away. Rachel watched her go.

The woman paused at the back of the room and promptly ignored Rachel, leaning against a heavysset man that looked like he belonged to the long haul truck she'd spotted in the parking lot.

The trucker was eyeing the few women in the lounge like a chef at a meat market, looking for the perfect cut.

Clearly, Jade wasn't interested in helping.

Rachel glanced around and met attention that was mostly indifferent or downright hostile.

She was a stranger in this place, and stranger meant trouble.

Her eyes landed on a woman behind the counter, near the drinks. The bartender was a pretty, young woman, but wasn't wearing makeup. She had a small two-spirit beadwork necklace.

The woman met Rachel's eyes. Something passed between them. It was like two otters in a giant ocean of fish. Very few natives mingled outside the reservation these days, and Rachel wasn't sure if the sentiment was the same as she remembered, but shared history meant something.

At least...

So she hoped.

She approached the bar, leaning against the lacquered surface.

A man in a suit, on a terrace above her, was watching the customers with a lazy gaze. A guard. She wouldn't want to catch his attention.

She ignored the man and instead faced the bartender on the same floor as her.

"Excuse me," Rachel said, raising a hand.

The bartender turned to her. "Yeah, what can I get for you?"

"I'm not here for a drink," Rachel said, keeping her voice low. "I'm looking for a girl named Candace. You know her?"

To the point. She'd never claimed to be good at undercover work. Rachel was far too blunt and direct for such a thing to be effective. But she didn't blink as she waited.

The bartender's expression shifted, and Rachel could see the fear in her eyes. "You a cop?"

Rachel shook her head. "No, I'm not a cop. I'm trying to find her for a friend. Maybe this will help." Rachel pulled out a photo from her pocket, showing it to the woman. "That's her."

The woman shrugged. "It's hard to say. This place can be temporary, and people come and go all the time."

“You sure you don’t know her?” Rachel said, meeting the woman’s gaze.

The woman shrugged. “Your friend an old white guy?”

“What?”

“I mean... you said you’re asking for a friend. Is he an old white guy? Because I’d like to hear it from him.”

She waited impatiently, and it took Rachel a second to realize what the woman meant.

An old white...

She reached for her wallet, and peeled off a couple bills. She slid them across the counter.

The woman eyed them, but then sighed. “Sure, I can show you the restroom,” she said, loud enough for the guard above them to hear. “Follow me,” the woman replied, leading Rachel through the brothel. As they walked, Rachel couldn’t help but steal glances at the other women in the room, wondering how many of them were also hiding secrets.

As they walked deeper into the brothel, Rachel’s senses were assaulted by the heavy perfume and smoky air. The dim lighting cast eerie shadows on the walls while sultry music played softly in the background. Trying her best to blend in, she kept her eyes fixed on the native woman, hoping no one would notice her tense posture and darting glances.

Rachel swallowed hard, remembering her aunt’s warnings about the place. Though it had a new name, she doubted it had grown any gentler to outsiders. But she couldn’t turn back now; she needed answers.

“Over there,” the woman said, pointing across the room to a small table nestled in the corner. “That’s where Candace used to sit. Sometimes she’d be with clients, sometimes by herself.”

“So you did know her?”

They were standing in a small hall behind a bead curtain. Alone, for now.

“I did.”

The woman glanced at her. “You sure you’re not a cop?”

“You think they like hiring Cherokee?” Rachel countered.

This direct mention seemed to cause the other woman to relax a bit.

“Did you see anyone unusual around her before she disappeared?” Rachel asked, keeping her voice low and steady.

The native woman frowned, her eyes scanning the room as if searching for the answer.

Rachel sighed, and handed over another bill.

This seemed to loosen the bartender’s lips. “There was one man... tall, with dark hair and cold eyes. He came in a few times, always watching her from a distance. I didn’t like the way he looked at her.”

“Did you ever talk to him? Did Candace ever mention him?”

“No, he never spoke to any of us. Just watched.” The woman’s voice wavered slightly. “I told Candace to be careful, but she just laughed it off.”

“Do you have an address for Candace? Her real name?”

“You are a cop, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“I don’t know her name. How would I?”

“Who might?”

“The office.”

“And where’s that?”

“That guard you saw? Behind his lazy ass. Now I need to be getting back before they notice I’m gone.”

Rachel bit her lip, but nodded. “Fine...”

She watched as the bartender retreated, hurrying away. Rachel paused, standing in the dark hall, by the bead curtain.

She knew it was probably a bad idea...

But the best way to find out who Candace *really* was seemed to be by finding a name and address.

So how the hell was she going to get past the guard on the stairs?

She bit her lip, considering her options.

She looked around, and her eyes landed on the chair where Candace used to sit.

She frowned at it, then her gaze moved up.

Sprinklers. And a fire alarm.

She hesitated only a moment before hastening forward, stepping through the bead curtain.

The room was dimly lit, but Rachel could still make out the sprinklers on the ceiling. She spotted a chair beneath them and moved towards it. She stood on the chair and yanked off the cover on the sprinkler head. Water sprayed out, drenching the room. The fire alarm blared, and Rachel could hear shouts and commotion from outside. She climbed down the chair and made her way towards the stairs. The guard had left his post, probably to see what was going on. Rachel took the opportunity to slip past him and head towards the office.

The door was locked, but Rachel was prepared for that. She pulled out a set of lock picks from her pocket and got to work.

It took only a few seconds before the lock clicked, and Rachel quietly pushed open the door. No computer visible. She frowned.

No technology at all that she could see. The room was dark, but she could see the faint outline of a desk and a filing cabinet against the wall. She moved towards the cabinet, pulling out drawers.

Old fashioned paper files.

She grabbed one and pulled it out.

She flipped it open, scanning the information inside. Some sort of financial document. Nothing to do with the girls.

Just as she was reaching for a second file, a voice spoke from behind her.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Rachel spun around, her heart racing. A man was standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. He was tall, with dark hair and cold eyes. His long, rock-stair hair parted, revealing two gray eyes.

He glared at her, his lips twisting into a snarl.

And then he moved towards her, hand reaching for a weapon on his hip.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She stepped back, holding up her hands defensively. “Hey, hang on—just here for the boss,” she said.

It wasn’t much of a play, but the man hesitated at her tone.

This was all the opportunity she needed. The moment his brow furrowed, and his hand tensed on the gun, she lunged.

The impact sent him stumbling backward, his arms flailing wildly in an attempt to regain balance. The element of surprise worked in her favor, as she focused her energy into making every punch count.

Right, left, left, uppercut.

He stumbled back.

She danced out of his reach as he tried to swipe at her.

Rachel could feel the sweat beading on her sun-kissed skin, but she refused to relent, knowing that her endurance would be the key to overpowering her larger opponent.

With a swift motion, she lunged forward a second time, after he’d hesitated, thinking she was backing off. The surprise caught him off guard, and she twisted the guard’s arm, forcing him to release his grip on his gun. In one fluid movement, she snatched the weapon from his grasp, leaving him momentarily defenseless.

Her jet-black hair, adorned with traditional beads, whipped around her face as she continued the engagement. There was no time for dialogue, no opportunity for negotiation.

The guard’s eyes widened, staring at his own gun which now pointed at him.

A brief lull in the combat. Both of them going still, quiet.

He gaped at her, opening and closing his mouth and letting out a weak moan.

“I... Hey...”

“Down, on the ground!” she snapped.

His eyes flicked to her, then past her towards the file cabinet she’d been rummaging through.

He stared at her, but then gave a curt shake of his head.

“Can’t,” he whispered.

She frowned.

“Can’t let you.”

“I’m armed,” she snapped. “Get on the ground, *now!*”

But something like genuine fear appeared in his eyes. Not fear directed at her, nor at the gun in her hand. It was almost as if she wasn’t there, as if he were staring straight *through* her.

He swallowed, giving a faint shake of his head. “You don’t understand,” he whispered. “He’ll cut me to ribbons.”

“He? He who? Your boss? What’s his name?”

But the guard let out a leaking sound, the hiss of air creeping through pursed lips. He looked downright terrified. The fear of death wasn’t in his gaze. Rather, his terror was distracted by whatever phantom image he conjured in his mind. His boss... What sort of man elicited this type of terror?

But Rachel was still determined to find Candace’s file. To figure out *who* was dumping bodies on the Clark’s land.

The man still hadn’t dropped, and he was shaking his head now, looking as if he were trying to gear himself up to action once more.

“Down!” she snapped.

But before she could say anything else, Rachel caught a faint sound echoing down the hallway outside the file room – the unmistakable thud of heavy boots against the floor. Her senses heightened, she realized that more guards were fast approaching, no doubt drawn by the commotion within. There was no time to waste.

With renewed urgency, she darted forward. He'd been expecting a gunshot, but instead, she delivered a powerful swipe to the guard's jaw with the butt of his own gun, causing him to reel backward in pain. As he stumbled, she spun around and lashed out with a roundhouse kick, her leather boot connecting with the side of his head. The force of the blow sent him sprawling onto the floor, unconscious.

Rachel's heart raced in her chest as she scanned the room, assessing the situation and formulating a plan. She knew that facing additional guards would be risky, but there were no windows, no additional egress points.

So she crouched behind the filing cabinet, buying herself seconds.

No sooner had the first guard let out a moaning gasp from the floor than two reinforcements burst through the doorway, their eyes scanning the room for signs of the intruder.

"Hey, Mattie, what happened? Shit—he's unconscious."

The other guard said something, but it was muffled, and she couldn't see them from where she crouched alongside the cold, metal filing cabinet.

As the guards approached, Rachel's breaths came in measured, silent gasps, her mind racing to calculate her next move. She could feel her nerves humming with energy.

The first guard stepped within striking distance, heralded by his shadow, and Rachel sprang into action. She lunged forward, her fist connecting with the man's throat in a lightning-fast punch that left him gasping for air. Before he could recover, she pivoted on her heel and delivered a swift kick to his midsection, sending him flying backward into the second guard.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Rachel closed the distance between herself and the remaining guard, her fists raised and ready for combat. The man barely had time to react before she was upon him, her powerful strikes landing with stunning precision.

Like a panther.

An animal that would often react *fast*. Or perhaps like the charging buck.

Sometimes, especially in the wild, the first strike was the last one.

A series of quick jabs to the guard's face left him dazed and off-balance, creating an opening for her to grapple him to the ground.

As they struggled on the floor, Rachel felt him trying to grab at her throat. He was strong, and part of combat was a willingness to change tact. Rachel broke free of the guard's grasp and scrambled to her feet. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for something she could use to her advantage. She didn't have long to wait – her gaze landed on an open file drawer near one of the fallen guards.

Seizing the opportunity, Rachel darted forward and grabbed the heavy drawer by its handle. With a grunt of effort, she swung it like a makeshift club, the metal edge connecting with the guard's temple in a resounding thud. The man crumpled to the floor, his eyes rolling back in his head as he fell unconscious.

As Rachel stood panting over her three defeated foes, she couldn't help but feel a momentary pang of guilt. These men had likely been sent to protect the brother's secrets– but she knew that she couldn't afford to show them mercy.

With the guards taken care of, Rachel turned her attention back to the filing cabinet. Her fingers flying over the tabs, which she now read.

And then... after a few seconds of flipping through folders. She spotted one.

Candess Hernandez. *Candace*. It said under a heading labeled *work name*.

She let out a breath. The woman's face was far prettier in the photo, but her eyes more world-weary than the corpse Rachel had found on the Clark's farm.

Rachel's breathing was heavy, her chest heaving as adrenaline coursed through her veins, creating echoes of the

fight.

She let out a shuddering breath, holding the file close. She gave it a quick once-over a final time, using her memory to hold onto bits and pieces of information.

She spotted, for instance, that the young woman was twenty-seven years old and had been working for the Clark brothers for six months prior to her disappearance. The file contained notes on her work performance but nothing that would suggest why she was targeted.

Rachel knew that she needed to keep digging, but for the moment, she had what she came for. With a final glance around the room, she slipped the file into her waistband and headed for the door, moving quickly and quietly to avoid detection.

As she stepped out into the hallway, she realized that her brow was still slick, and she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. She glanced over her shoulder, but the hallway was empty. Still, she felt a chill run down her spine.

She moved down the dark hall, eyes scanning the walls. There was a window at the far end. She was on the second floor, but it would have to do.

There was no way she'd want to go back down the main floor. Her shoes were stained with blood.

She took hurried steps forward when suddenly a door under a red *exit* sign was flung open.

It nearly slammed into her, but she avoided it by darting back like a startled hare.

Her hand was already moving to her weapon as a tall man stumbled into the hall, but a second later she froze.

"Ethan?" she whispered.

Her partner was staring at her, wide-eyed. "Shit... what happened?"

"I thought you were supposed to stay in the car!" she retorted, keeping her voice low and glaring at him.

The door shut behind him with a *click*, leaving the two of them alone in the hall.

“Yeah, well, got bored,” he said, his eyes full of concern.

She shook her head. “You were worried and came running? Dammit, Ethan. Can’t I trust you to stick to the plan?”

“Well, I’m here now, so... What’s going on?”

“Ran into some trouble. But got what we came for.”

“Good! So let’s go!”

“Window?”

“What? No... Exit. Right here!” But even as he turned to indicate the door he’d just come through, there was the sound of voices from the stairwell. Loud, angry, male voices.

Then the sound of a gun being cocked.

“Shit,” Ethan said.

“Window?” she repeated.

“Yeah—yeah, go! Go!”

The two of them sprinted along the hall towards the second-floor window, moving fast.

Rachel could hear the footsteps of the angry men getting louder and closer. She knew they wouldn’t hesitate to shoot if they saw them. They made their way to the window, and Rachel quickly pushed it open. She motioned for Ethan to go first, but he shook his head.

“Go, Rachel,” he said firmly. “I’ll cover you.”

Rachel gave him a quick nod and climbed out the window, the cool evening air hitting her face.

She shimmied along the ledge, using a PVC pipe to help her drop low enough to release her grip. She hit the alley floor and rolled.

Ethan fired off a couple shots. “Stay back!” he yelled.

And then he came through the window, far less gracefully, but just as effectively.

He was falling towards her.

“Shit,” she had time to say. And a split-second decision. Dart out of the way? Or help soften his fall.

She chose the latter.

Rachel braced herself and caught Ethan, his weight nearly knocking her off balance. She didn't try to support him, but rather allowed his weight to absorb into her arms and down her knees. They stumbled for a moment before regaining their footing, and Rachel could feel her heart pounding in her chest.

They took off running down the alley, feet thundering against the pavement. Behind them, the sound of shouting grew louder, and Rachel knew that they needed to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their pursuers.

They turned a corner and found themselves in a narrow alleyway.

Ethan was already on the radio, his voice low and urgent as he called for backup. Rachel could hear the sound of sirens in the distance, growing closer by the second.

Ahead, the car was parked, the engine still running, the door open.

The two of them sprinted towards the waiting vehicle, the file on their second victim shifting up and down along Rachel's waistline.

It was only as she reached the car and flung into the passenger seat that she realized her knuckles were bruised from pummeling the guards.

“Drive!” she shouted.

Ethan was already putting them in gear.

The tires squealed, and they left the scent of burnt rubber lingering behind them as they raced away from the brothel and back in the direction of the ranch territory.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The waning moon cast a cold, blue hue over the quiet rural street as Candace wearily trudged up her driveway. The long day at the hospital hung heavy on her shoulders, like a cloak made of lead. She could feel every second of those twelve hours, and the weight of what had taken her to the emergency room pressing on her shoulders... She hadn't *wanted* to choose this line of work... and the pill she'd swallowed for a john had been an extra fifty on top of the usual bedroom favors. The trip to the ER had been an awkward one. Especially since her *client* had dropped her off then sped away.

"Finally," she muttered under her breath as she reached the front door and fumbled with her keyring, searching for the right key. Her tired eyes squinted against the glare of the setting sun, struggling to focus on the small pieces of metal. As the door swung open, she sighed in relief, anticipating the comforting embrace of her cozy home.

But something caught her eye as she stepped inside. Turning her attention to the side of her house, she spotted bright red paint splattered across the exterior wall. Her brow furrowed in confusion, she stepped closer to inspect the damage. The paint was haphazardly applied, like the work of a careless painter or the aftermath of a paintball battle.

"Are you kidding me?" Candace grumbled, feeling anger bubble within her chest. "Not again." The vandalism was just another reminder of how her once safe and peaceful town had changed over the past few months.

She'd heard bodies had been found on the Clark ranch. Young women.

She shook her head in anger, her eyes narrowing. Predators liked to lurk out in the boonies—they thought they could get away with all sorts of shit.

But frontier justice wasn't a thing of the past.

She secretly hoped Silas Clark got his hands on whoever was causing trouble...

The stories around the patriarch of the Clark family were legendary in the small town. And she knew a thing or two about Silas... and some of his boys. She smirked. In her line of work, you found out all *sorts* of nasty little secrets.

She allowed herself a grim sense of satisfaction, considering what Silas might do to a vandal...

But the red paint on the side of her house was a nagging reminder. She clenched her fists, trying to shake off the irritation that threatened to spoil her evening.

“Ugh, what is wrong with people?” Candace muttered as she shook her head in frustration. Her heart raced at the sight of the red paint splattered on her house - a result of the escalating vandalism in town. She tried to convince herself that it was just another random act, but deep down, a nagging thought stirred: Why her? The anger bubbled inside her, fueled by exhaustion and the persistent feeling of being targeted.

With a deep breath, she unlocked her front door and stepped inside. The familiar smell of cinnamon and vanilla greeted her as she flicked on the lights, casting a warm glow over her living room. A sense of relief washed over her; she was home, and she was safe.

She shrugged off her jacket and hung it on the coat rack. She moved through the house, drawing the curtains and switching on the lamps, creating an atmosphere of cozy solitude.

As she made her way to the kitchen, she couldn't shake the feeling of unease. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for any sign of a disturbance. But nothing was out of place, and the only sound was the soft hum of the refrigerator. She let out a deep sigh, trying to calm her racing heart.

The fridge door opened, bathing her in a warm glow from the light.

Her fingers traced along cold glass, and she let out a little breath she hadn't realized had been pent up behind clenched

teeth and pursed lips.

Her muscles eased, and she hadn't even noticed her left hand was still curled into a taut fist.

As the cool breeze from the open fridge door wafted across her skin, leaving a soothing sensation where it brushed by, she poured herself a glass of wine, savoring the rich aroma before taking a sip. She leaned against the counter, eyes closed, allowing herself a moment of peace.

A creaking sound pierced the silence, echoing ominously through the hallway.

Her hand stiffened on her wine glass. Her body tensed, coiling like a spring. Her pulse quickened, and she instinctively held her breath, straining to hear any other sounds out of place.

"Probably just the house settling," she murmured to herself, hoping to quell the unease that had taken root deep within her chest. But her intuition clawed at her, whispering that something was wrong.

"Hello?" she called out hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is anyone there?"

She forced herself to stand upright, her legs trembling beneath her. The room felt suddenly oppressive, as if the very air was holding its breath along with her.

She cautiously moved towards the hallway, her heart pounding. She paused at the edge of the shadows, an irrational fear seizing her as she reached out to flick on the light switch.

With a soft click, the hallway was bathed in light, revealing nothing out of the ordinary. Candace let out a shaky breath, laughing softly at herself. "See? Everything's fine." She spoke more to herself than anyone else, but the reassurance felt empty, as if her home was no longer the sanctuary it once was.

"*Maybe I should call someone,*" she thought, her fingers hovering over the phone. "No, don't be silly. They'll think you're paranoid." She hesitated, torn between the desire for reassurance and the fear of being seen as weak.

That's when she saw it.

A window open at the end of the long hall.

She frowned.

She hadn't left that open, had she?

Had the wind caught it?

She felt a faint shiver now. She approached the window cautiously, listening to the soft whistle of the wind creeping past the pane.

As she got closer, she noticed something glinting in the moonlight on the windowsill. She leaned in to get a better look, her fingers reaching out to touch it when a sudden noise made her jump.

It was a low growl coming from the darkness beyond the window. Candace froze, her heart hammering in her chest as she tried to identify the source of the sound. Was it an animal? A person?

She took a step back, her hand slipping from the windowsill as she reached for something, anything to defend herself. Her fingers brushed against a heavy handheld vacuum cleaner, which she kept by a hall table, and she gripped it tightly, ready to swing if necessary.

The growling grew louder, more insistent, and Candace's blood ran cold as she caught sight of two glowing eyes in the darkness. They were yellow and feral, and they seemed to be staring straight at her.

She relaxed, staring at the creature on the forest fringe.

It was just a wolf.

She recognized its sleek, muscular form and the sharp, pointed ears. A wave of relief washed over her, and she chuckled softly at her own paranoia. "Just a wolf," she murmured, watching as it padded away into the night.

As she closed the window and locked it, she couldn't shake the feeling of unease that lingered within her. She knew it wasn't just the vandalism or the wolf that had her on edge. She

felt like she was being watched, like someone was waiting for her to let her guard down.

Candace decided to take a warm shower to calm her nerves. She walked down the hallway towards her bathroom, still clutching the vacuum cleaner. She paused for a moment, listening for any sounds out of place, but everything seemed normal.

She turned on the shower and let the hot water wash over her, the steam filling the room and relaxing her tense muscles. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to drift away, but the nagging feeling of being watched still lingered in the back of her mind.

As she got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself, she heard a faint noise coming from her bedroom. It was barely audible, like the sound of something brushing against fabric. She held her breath, listening intently, and heard it again.

She tiptoed down the hall, her heart pounding in her chest, and pushed open the door to her bedroom.

That's when she saw it - a tall, dark figure standing *on* her bed.

For a moment, she didn't even react, the scene was so bizarre. She even blinked curiously, like some night-time owl, as she tried to make sense of the unfamiliar sight.

A man was in her bedroom, standing on her bed and staring straight at her. And he had something glinting in his left hand.

"Welcome home," said a voice.

And then the dark figure surged, leaping at her out of the shadows, its movements swift and predatory. Her heart seized in terror, adrenaline surging through her veins as she screamed, the sound raw and primal.

With the primal scream still echoing through the room, Candace tried to turn to run.

But the exhaustion of the day with clients and then the evening at the hospital hung heavy.

The tall, shadowy figure came charging at her, surging through the hallway like a wraith.

She turned to run, the scream lodged in her throat, but she knew it was far, far too late.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The first glimpses of moonlight streaked the horizon, casting long shadows across the precinct through thick, bullet-proof windows. In a dimly lit interrogation room, Rachel sat hunched over a stack of financial records, her fingers drumming against the tabletop as she intently scanned the documents. Ethan stood at her side, his brow furrowed in concentration as they analyzed the second victim's file.

"Hey, look at this," Rachel said, tapping a line item on one of Candace's bank statements. "Multiple payments to a fertility treatment center?" She glanced up at Ethan, who leaned in to get a closer look.

"Interesting," he murmured, his eyes narrowing. "Do you think it could be related to the case?"

"Maybe," Rachel replied, her mind racing with possibilities. She remembered the hospital issues Jack's wife had faced and wondered if there was a connection. "Jack's wife had some pretty serious health problems, didn't she? And now we find out that Candace's been visiting a fertility clinic?" She shook her head, uncertainty gnawing at her. "It feels like too much of a coincidence."

Ethan rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his family-oriented nature shining through as he considered the implications. "If Candace was having trouble conceiving, it could explain her visits to the clinic. Maybe she was trying to get out of the lifestyle... wanted a family or something. A ranchhand? Someone who fell for her? Shit... But what about Jack's wife? Was she also struggling with fertility issues?"

"Hard to say without more information," Rachel admitted, her frustration mounting. "But it's definitely worth looking into. If there's a connection between the two victims and their hospital visits, it might give us a lead on who's targeting them."

“Agreed,” Ethan nodded

Rachel leaned back in her chair, the harsh fluorescent lights overhead casting shadows across her face as she mulled over the information. An unsettling thought began to take root in her mind, and she couldn't shake it off. Turning to Ethan, she voiced her concern.

“Something's been bothering me,” she said, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “What if someone has access to the hospital records and is using them to target these victims?”

Ethan's brow furrowed as he considered her words. “You mean, like a doctor or a staff member at the hospital?”

“Maybe,” Rachel replied, her gut churning with unease. “Or someone who knows how to hack into their system.”

“Can't be many hospitals around.”

“You used to live here. How many hospitals are there?”

“I mean... When I was local... only about two?”

“What were their names?”

“St. Mary's and Mercy Hospital,” Ethan said, his voice trailing off as he thought back to his time in the area.

Rachel nodded. She knew they needed to act fast before another victim was targeted, but the leads they had were thin at best. Glancing up at the clock, she realized they had been working for hours, and exhaustion was beginning to set in.

“Ethan, we should call it a night,” she said, rubbing her temples wearily. “We're not going to solve this tonight.”

“You're right,” he replied, his voice tinged with disappointment.

As they contemplated their next move, Rachel's eyes fell on a piece of paper lying among the scattered files on the table.

She hesitated, and reached out, turning the paper towards her.

Initially, she'd brushed it aside, as it had seemed like a junk note with hastily scribbled words.

But now, as she stared at it, she was able to decipher, in the cramped, bad handwriting, the title of the handwritten list.

Client List.

Rachel stared, picking the paper up slowly.

It was a list of Candace's clients.

"What is it?" Ethan said.

She didn't reply at first, her eyes like those of a hawk, sweeping over the paper, and trying to decipher the hastily penned names.

She read them one at a time. More than one simply read *John D. John Doe*. But others, likely locals since they'd be recognized, were penned in.

And then she stopped.

There, in big block letters, with a small star next to it.

One name standing out among the rest: Silas Clark. He had been a repeat customer of Candace's, judging by the dates next to the name, and Rachel couldn't help but wonder if there was more to that connection than met the eye.

Her body had been found on Silas' land.

The first victim had also been found there.

What if she was overlooking the obvious?

She tapped her finger on Silas's name. "I want to know more about this Clark family. Maybe they can provide some insight into Candace's hospital visits."

Ethan glanced at the name and nodded in agreement. "It's worth checking out. If there's any link between Candace, the Clarks, and these hospital visits, might explain some things."

With renewed determination, Rachel gathered the relevant files and stood up, the legs of her chair scraping against the linoleum floor.

"I thought we were calling it a night," Ethan said.

She hesitated. "Yeah... yeah, we need to."

Rachel frowned, glancing at the files. She sighed. “Maybe bright and early would be better anyway. Clarks might not shoot us if they’re not under the cover of night.”

“You really think they might shoot us?”

“You know them better than me. You tell me.”

Ethan hesitated, and then shrugged. “Jeb might.”

“Is that just because he once gave you a lickin.”

Ethan rolled her eyes at the exaggerated southern accent she’d just put on. “You teasing me?”

“Mhmm.”

She smiled and turned, but not before casting her glance back and giving him a once over.

“Like what you see?” he said.

It was a question that instantly changed the tenor.

The two of them were alone in the precinct interrogation hall. The evening had moved on tonight. Other officers could be heard moving around downstairs, but for now, they were alone.

She realized Ethan was watching her casually, but there was a question in his gaze.

She stared back.

“How’s that?” she said.

“You were watching me back at the motel,” he replied. “In the reflection of your computer.”

He stared at her. She blinked.

It was true, of course, but she’d thought they’d neatly brushed that incident under the rug. What sort of person just blatantly *mentioned* something like that? What game was he playing?

She frowned, opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“Am I wrong?” he said casually. He crossed his arms.

“Might have caught a glimpse,” she said. “Felt like you were putting on a show.”

He held out the flats of his palms. “Don’t be so defensive, Rachel.”

“Ranger Blackwood,” she snapped, frowning.

He didn’t look perturbed by her sudden burst of temper. Instead, he smirked. “Ah, see, now you’re blushing.” He leaned in, peering down at her, drawing close.

He was only a couple of inches away now.

Rachel tensed. For a moment, she wondered if she ought to punch him in the neck.

But those instincts subsided, and others took their place as the two of them stood in the precinct, with only a sliver of warm breath to separate them.

“Rachel?” he whispered, his breath hot on her cheek.

She felt shivers down her spine. How long had it been since she’d spent time with a handsome man?

Her love life was an abysmal thing. How could a trained hunter, with her experience, fail to ever bag a proper man?

She’d never been good at choosing men...

But she could feel her skin tingling, could feel her breath coming in short puffs.

She found that she didn’t want to throat punch him. How romantic, she thought.

She wanted to know what those lips tasted like. What those...

She trailed off, trying to push aside the thoughts.

He exhaled once more, and whispered, “It isn’t nice to stare.”

And then he brushed past her, winking as he did.

He was chuckling to himself as he moved out into the hall.

She stood stiff, hands at her side. She gaped after him, stunned.

“What the hell was that?” she finally managed to splutter out.

“Revenge!” he called over his shoulder. “Now I know you think I’m handsome!”

“Do not!” she retorted.

“Do to!” he shot back, still sauntering away down the hall with a casual, cocksure gait. “I have that effect on women.” He turned back and wriggled his eyebrows.

She glared, pointed a finger. “I should’ve throat punched you.”

“But you didn’t. So now I know. You think I’m *purrrrrty*.” He grinned. “Makes us even.”

“How the hell does it make us even?” she snapped.

“You caught me at a vulnerable moment,” he retorted, “and now I caught you. Makes us even. So we heading back to the motel or not?”

She just glared after him. He smirked again, and continued towards the stairs.

Rachel stood there, her heart still beating fast from the unexpected encounter with Ethan. She knew she shouldn’t let her guard down around him, but she couldn’t help the attraction she felt towards him. It had been a *really* long time since she’d last been with someone.

Taking a deep breath, she shook her head and tried to clear her mind. She had work to do, and she couldn’t let her personal feelings get in the way of her investigation. She grabbed the files and headed towards the stairs, her mind racing with all the possible connections between the Clarks and Candace.

Mostly, she wanted to forget the embarrassment in the doorway. She should’ve pulled away. Should’ve slapped him.

Because she hadn't... he was right. He'd read it. She thought he was *pretty*.

She scowled, stomping down the stairs two at a time. She redirected her irritation, focusing once more on the case.

Tomorrow, she'd go speak with Silas Clark.

His reputation preceded him, but none of that mattered if he was a murderer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the first light of morning painted the horizon in hues of orange and pink, Rachel felt an uneasy knot tighten in her stomach. She gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white as she navigated the dusty roads leading to the Clark ranch. Beside her, Ethan kept his eyes on the tablet, scrolling through Silas Clark's records.

"Listen to this," Ethan said, breaking the silence that had enveloped them for miles. "Silas has been accused of assault, fraud, and even arson, but he's never been arrested for anything serious. It's like he's always one step ahead of the law."

"Or someone's protecting him," Rachel muttered, her suspicion of the old rancher growing darker with every mile. "It's no secret that he has a lot of influence in this town, and I can't shake the feeling that he's connected to these murders somehow." She hesitated. "I just figured why would a man dump bodies on his own ranch... but maybe he's just brazen."

The road stretched out before them like a winding ribbon, flanked by miles of parched scrubland dotted with cacti and tumbleweeds. The sun crept higher into the sky, casting long shadows that seemed to reach out and grasp at their car as it sped along the desolate landscape.

"Look, there's the entrance," Ethan pointed towards a rickety wooden gate adorned with a rusted sign that read 'Clark Ranch'. The metal hinges groaned in protest as Rachel swung the car onto the property, sending a cloud of dust billowing up behind them.

The ranch itself was a sprawling expanse of dry, cracked earth and sun-bleached buildings. An air of desolation hung heavy over the place, as if life itself had been choked out of the land. A cluster of gnarled mesquite trees provided scant shade for a few weary cattle, their ribs visible beneath their taut skin. The main house stood at the heart of the ranch, its

once grand white facade now chipped and peeling under the relentless Texas sun.

“Something doesn’t feel right about this place,” Rachel muttered, her eyes scanning the scene before them. “It’s like the whole ranch is holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.”

“Silas isn’t going to make this easy for us,” Ethan replied, his voice low and steady. She glanced at him, but glanced sharply away once more.

Rachel couldn’t help but feel a pang of embarrassment as she recalled the incident from the motel room yesterday. The vision of Ethan’s naked form was seared into her mind, and she chastised herself for being so unprofessional. But then his revenge... leaning in for that kiss while she refused to recoil, then laughing at her... She frowned. Her cheeks burned, but she desperately tried to focus on the task at hand. She knew she couldn’t afford any distractions; Silas Clark and his family were proving to be increasingly dangerous.

“Looks like we’ve got company,” Ethan murmured, drawing Rachel’s attention back to the present moment. Their car came to an abrupt stop in front of the main house, where Silas and his sons loomed large on the porch, their imposing figures casting long shadows across the dusty ground.

Rachel took a deep breath as she assessed the men before her. Silas stood in the center, his beard white as snow but his eyes cold and calculating, the shotgun cradled in his arm like a menacing promise. Jeb, his ever-present bodyguard, glowered next to him, his massive hands curling into fists—the size of his hands belied his short stature. Two other ranchers flanked them, all wearing expressions of hostility.

Rachel and Ethan shared an uncomfortable look, and pushed open their doors, waving hands to clear dust.

As Rachel emerged from the vehicle, she turned to face Silas.

“Morning, folks,” Silas drawled, his voice dripping with false cordiality. “What brings you to our humble abode?”

“Mr. Clark, we’re here to ask some questions about Candess Hernandez.” Rachel tried to keep her tone steady. She stood with a relaxed posture, her voice calm and her eyes watchful.

“Who’s that?”

“You might have known her as Candace,” Rachel replied. “From your visits.”

“Is that right?” Silas replied. His face expressionless. He shifted his grip on the shotgun, and Rachel forced herself not to flinch.

“Look,” Ethan interjected, stepping forward. “We don’t want any trouble. We just want to clear up some inconsistencies in the case.”

Silas narrowed his eyes, sizing them up before responding. “Well, now, I reckon we might be able to help with that. Won’t you come on up and have a seat?”

Rachel’s heart pounded in her chest, but she knew she couldn’t show any fear. She locked eyes with Silas, silently communicating her resolve.

“Thank you,” Rachel said, speaking softly and evenly. She felt as if she were staring at a motionless crocodile. The stationary creature didn’t communicate safety, only a reprieve. “We appreciate your cooperation.”

“Of course, my dear,” Silas replied, his voice dripping with insincerity. “We’re all about helping out our fellow man... or woman.”

She followed Ethan up the wooden steps. Silas lowered his large frame into a rocking chair, and gestured at another, smaller, dusty chair facing it.

Ethan remained standing, but Rachel lowered slowly. Now wasn’t the time for fear.

Not when stepping foot into an adder’s nest.

Now was the time for quick, decisive action.

As they settled onto the creaky wooden chairs, Rachel steeled herself. She'd once crawled through swampy marsh in search of a python in the Everglades. It had taken her six days. For one period, she'd remained motionless in the crook of a tree, a bowie knife in hand, for almost twenty-four hours.

She wasn't sure why she remembered that hunt now... But it kept bubbling to the surface of her mind.

The sun glared down on them as Rachel took in the scene before her. Silas sat, but had turned, peering over the rail.

She realized now, his shotgun aimed at a small group of groundhogs that were scurrying about near the edge of the property. His face was a mask of concentration, his dangerous eyes narrowed and unblinking.

"Damn vermin," Silas muttered under his breath, and suddenly, without warning, he pulled the trigger. The gunshot rang out like a cannon blast, echoing through the still morning air. Rachel didn't flinch—she'd been expecting it. Beside her, Ethan tensed but remained outwardly calm.

"Mr. Clark!" Rachel called out, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart. She had to remind herself she was here to ask questions. "We need to talk."

Silas lowered his gun and turned to face her, an amused smirk playing across his lips. Jeb lingered in the doorway next to him, his eyes narrowed. "Well now, missy," Silas drawled. "I didn't know you had a thing for groundhogs."

"Actually, I'm more interested in what you might know about the recent murders," she replied, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "I've been looking into your background, Silas, and the more I learn, the more I believe you might have some answers."

"Is that so?" Silas raised an eyebrow, his amusement quickly morphing into something darker. He slung his shotgun over his shoulder, the barrel pointed skyward. "And what makes you think I'd be willing to share those answers with the likes of you?" He paused, though, and glanced at Jeb. "See that big sucker?" He was pointing over the porch.

Jeb stepped forward now. Gun raised.

And he squeezed off a shot.

Two groundhogs now lay dead on the ground. The Clarks were fair shots, even with a shotgun.

Rachel swallowed hard, her palms slick with sweat. She knew she was walking a tightrope here, trying to balance her need for information against Silas' volatile temperament.

"Mr. Clark, I'd like to ask you about Candace," Rachel began. "You were in her client book." She glanced at his sons surrounding him, then back at him. "Would you prefer we talk about this in private?"

"Nah." He shrugged. "Might remember her. Hard to say. Only bought a few head of cattle from me every now and then," Silas replied nonchalantly, stroking his thick white beard. "Why? You think there's something fishy there?"

"Actually, I do," Rachel said, her voice steady despite the anxiety churning in her gut. "I've learned that Candace had some fertility issues. Did she ever mention them to you?"

The corner of Silas' mouth twitched, and Rachel could see the gears turning behind his dangerous eyes. "Suppose she did say somethin' 'bout not bein' able to have kids," he admitted, shifting his weight on the wooden planks of the porch. "But that ain't none of my business."

"Did she ever discuss those issues with you? Did she ever ask you for help, or advice, or anything of that nature?"

"Help?" Silas barked out a laugh, the sound harsh and mocking. "What kind of help would a man like me be able to give her?"

"Maybe she wanted to borrow money. Jack had borrowed money, we heard. Did she do the same? To pay for fertility treatments, or to hire a surrogate. Something like that."

"Sure, she asked. But I didn't lend her anything. I told her I ain't in the business of handin' out charity."

"Except that's not entirely true, is it?" Rachel countered, her pulse quickening as she recalled the allegations against

Silas and his family – the debts, the threats, the mysterious deaths. “There are plenty of people around here who’ve borrowed money from you, Mr. Clark. And some of them didn’t live to tell the tale.”

The air seemed to thicken around them, and Rachel could feel the weight of Silas’ scrutiny bearing down on her like a leaden shroud. He just watched her, and his family members flinched as if his silence were as frightening to them as a scream.

“Funny you mention charity, Mr. Clark,” she said, her voice cool and steady despite the unease that simmered beneath the surface. “Seems to me like there’s a pattern with the people who borrow money from you – they have a tendency to wind up dead.”

Silas’s face darkened, his eyes narrowing into dangerous slits. He shifted his weight, the shotgun cradled in his arm suddenly feeling more menacing than ever.

“Are you accusin’ me of somethin’, Ranger Blackwood?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

“I’m just stating facts.”

“Well, let me ask you somethin’, Ranger. How’s my boy Tom doin’ in jail? I heard from a pal you locked him up couple nights ago.” He raised his eyebrows. “Figure the family should know that sorta thing, don’t you?”

The question caught Rachel off guard, and she hesitated for a moment before answering. Of course, she’d expected the Clarks to know by now, but the calm way in which Silas was asking her put her off guard.

“He shot a man in cold blood,” Rachel said. “I have to wonder if you put him up to it.”

“So when’s Tom coming home?” Jeb cut in, his face red as if from sunburn.

Rachel shook her head. “I don’t know. That depends on the trial.”

“Ah, yes, the trial,” Silas said mockingly, his lips twisting into a cruel smile. “And how do you think that’ll go for him, eh? Seein’ as how you’re so keen on findin’ the truth and all.”

“Tom will have his day in court, just like anyone else.”

“Seems to me like you’re the one who ought to be worried, Detective. Diggin’ around in other people’s business can be a dangerous game.”

She glanced towards the two groundhogs. One of them was still moving. Suffering. The one Jeb had shot.

The creature left a trail of blood from where it was trying to drag itself to its burrow.

Jeb was watching it. He didn’t put it out of its misery, but kept his hand on his pistol, and occasionally shot glances towards Ethan.

“When was the last time you saw Candace?” Rachel said.

“What are you implying?”

“She was dead on your land, sir. You saw her. You slept with her, didn’t you?”

“Ya got some nerve, half-breed,” he sneered, standing now and stepping closer to Rachel. She remained seated. “Think you can come onto our land and accuse us of murder? You don’t know who you’re messin’ with.”

She opened her mouth to reply, intent on keeping things calm. She’d riled him. Angry men made bad secret-keepers. This was progress.

But before she could follow up, Ethan stepped forward, scowling.

“Enough!” Ethan barked, positioning himself between his partner and the furious man. His protective stance was flattering, but completely unnecessary. Rachel frowned at the back of her partner’s shirt.

Jeb stepped forward now. He’d been glancing at Ethan, and now his eyes widened in recognition. “Holy shit. It’s Ethan

Morgan. Hot damn. Whachoo doin' back around here, Morgan?"

Jeb faced the much taller man, but his sneer bled into his words.

Now, Rachel got to her feet.

Silas was standing on one side, with Jeb and two other ranches behind him.

Rachel and Ethan were now shoulder by shoulder, both glaring at the patriarch and his son.

More than one gun was brandished, and Rachel knew they were outnumbered.

The tension felt thick, and at any moment, Rachel half expected it to all devolve into a gunfight.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The tension caused Rachel's own hand to stray to her weapon.

And for a moment, she thought the scene on the porch of the Clark ranch would devolved into an all-out shootout.

But a few seconds passed, and Ethan stepped forward.

He remained calm, his hand hovering near his own weapon but not making any sudden moves.

"We're just here to do our job," he said evenly. "We're investigating a murder and we need your cooperation."

Jeb scoffed. "Cooperation? You come around here accusin' us of killin' some whore and expect us to just roll over and help you out? You've got another thing comin'."

Silas stepped forward now, his face twisted in anger. "And what makes you think we had anything to do with it, huh? We got no reason to kill nobody. Candace was just a passing fancy, nothing more."

Rachel studied the men's faces, looking for any signs of deception. But she didn't know these folks; she didn't know how to read them, and that was half the problem right there.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that they were hiding something.

Silas snorted. "You're wasting your time, rangers. We don't know anything."

Jeb nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you're better off looking somewhere else. We got nothing to say to you."

Rachel frowned, glancing from one harsh stare to another.

Sometimes, as the saying went, you caught more flies with honey.

Other times, you ignored the damn flies all together.

Rachel glanced over her shoulder, nudged Ethan and jerked her head, indicating they ought to head back down the steps of the porch.

He raised an eyebrow at her, but she gave the faintest of nods.

Jeb noticed the interchange and smirked. “Now go on there, Morgan. Do as you told, like a good boy. Remember the last time we dusted up.”

Ethan didn’t react to this comment, but Rachel spotted his left hand closing into a fist.

She caught his arm, and turned.

“Good day, gentlemen—we’ll speak again soon.”

“No, we won’t!” Silas snapped.

She didn’t reply. The point wasn’t to win the argument. Ethan didn’t say anything as she led him away down the steps.

But as soon as they’d cleared the garden fence, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and under his breath, he muttered, “What gives? They’re guilty as sin.”

“I don’t know that,” Rachel said.

“YOu heard them. They were taunting us.”

“They were taunting you, mostly,” she replied. “Now get in the car and drive.”

He hesitated, then muttered, “You got that look in your eyes.”

“What look?”

“We’re not actually leaving, are we?”

Rachel smirked. “Nah. Just figure they better think so.”

Ethan’s eyebrows inched up, but he kept his gaze fixed forward. The two of them exchanged a knowing glance. They were still being watched from the porch of Silas Clark’s imposing ranch house, where Jeb Clark stood with a shotgun cradled in his arms. Rachel could feel the weight of his gaze on them, scrutinizing their every move.

“Ready?” Ethan asked, his voice low and tense.

“Let’s do it,” Rachel replied, her determination shining through despite her nerves.

They made a show of getting into their car, waving casually at the house before driving off the property. As soon as they were out of sight, they circled around, parking behind a cluster of trees to conceal their vehicle. Rachel ducked under a mulberry bush, moving quietly, her feet padding against the soft earth. Ethan followed suit, and soon they were crouched behind a small shed, looking out at the Clark ranch.

Rachel could see that the tension in Ethan’s shoulders had eased somewhat, and she knew that he trusted her judgment.

“Okay,” she whispered. “We need to get closer, but we have to be careful. They might have guards posted.”

“What exactly are we looking for, all secretive?”

“I don’t know. Something. Anything.”

“We found two corpses on their land. That not enough?”

“It is... but it doesn’t tie them to the murders. I want motive.”

Ethan nodded, and they moved slowly and deliberately, scanning the area for any signs of danger.

Finally, they reached a spot where they could hear the voices of the men on the porch. Rachel motioned for Ethan to stay put, and then she crawled forward, using the shadows and foliage for cover.

Peering through the leaves of a nearby bush, she could see Silas and Jeb sitting on the porch, smoking cigars and talking in low voices. They looked relaxed, but Rachel knew that appearances could be deceiving.

The men were speaking in hushed voices. Rachel watched a few moments longer, then shook her head and began to move away from the porch.

As they stealthily traversed the vast property, Rachel couldn’t help but think about the victims. Their unseeing eyes

haunted her subconscious.

She frowned, moving along the small incline lined with mulberry bushes, shielding them from view.

She scanned a copse ahead of them, searching the land for *something*.

Light filtered through the dense canopy of trees, casting eerie shadows on the damp ground below. The air was thick with the scent of wet earth and decaying leaves, their decay a stark reminder of the death that had brought Rachel and Ethan to the Clark farm.

“Over there,” Rachel whispered, pointing towards an old horse paddock and a dilapidated pig pen. The rusted hinges on the gate creaked as they carefully pushed it open.

“Be careful,” Ethan warned, his voice barely audible. He kept glancing back in the direction of the treeline, where the path led up to the ranch. But so far, no one had spotted them.

Rachel paused long enough to clear their trail, using the edge of her boot to erase any footprints they had left behind. Then, they entered the paddock, their steps muffled by the soft dirt and hay underfoot.

“What are we looking for?” Ethan asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Anything that might connect them to the murders,” Rachel replied, scanning the area with sharp eyes.

The first paddock was empty, save for a few bales of hay stacked against one corner. Rachel crept forward, studying the ground and approach the second paddock.

The smell hit her before she even got close. It was a mixture of rotting flesh and manure, and Rachel had to fight the urge to gag.

As they approached, she could see that the pen was empty save for a few scraps of feed and a couple of water troughs. But as she looked closer, she noticed something strange.

On one of the troughs, there was a small smear of red. Rachel’s heart began to race.

“Ethan, look,” she whispered, pointing to the stain. “I think we found something.”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “Wow. How’d you see that?” he leaned in for a better look.

She just waited.

But Ethan hesitated, shrugging one. “That could be anything. Maybe they just slaughtered a pig.”

“Maybe,” Rachel agreed.

They moved closer to the trough, examining the stain. It was dry, but still a dark red color. Rachel took out a small plastic baggie and carefully scraped a sample of the blood into it.

They continued to comb the area, searching for clues beneath rotting planks and overturned feeding troughs. The tension between them was palpable, fear and anticipation coiling in their stomachs like a snake ready to strike. Every rustle in the bushes, every snapping twig, sent bolts of adrenaline racing through Rachel’s veins.

“Nothing,” Ethan muttered with frustration as they came up empty-handed. “What if there’s nothing here?”

Before she could reply, her phone buzzed softly in her pocket. She glanced down at the screen, relief flooding her face as she read the message from Thomas Greywolf.

How are things on the ranch?

She hesitated, frowning. Of course, Thomas didn’t know they were quite literally on the ranch, but her supervisor had often taken an interest. As the only two who shared the same heritage with the rangers, Thomas had taken her under his wing.

She sent back a quick reply. *Fine. I will keep you posted.*

She sent the message, then was about to add a follow-up question when she paused.

“Wait,” Rachel said suddenly, her eyes narrowing as she spotted something unusual near the edge of the paddock.

“What’s that over there?”

Rachel’s gaze locked onto a tree, where she noticed a distinct marking on its trunk. A vibrant paint splatter stood out against the rough bark, reflecting the moonlight.

“Look at that,” she whispered to Ethan, pointing at the tree. “I’ve seen this before.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice barely audible.

“Positive,” she replied, determination lacing her words.

They approached the tree cautiously, careful not to make a sound. Rachel took out her phone and snapped several photos of the paint for evidence.

This wasn’t the first time she’d seen a streak of strange paint on the Clark Ranch. She thought back to the first victim, wrinkling her nose.

“Alright, let’s keep moving,” Rachel said, putting her phone back in her pocket.

Ethan didn’t reply. He’d gone still by a fence post, and was leaning against it.

“What?” she called.

He pointed towards a small house nestled within a clearing. The dilapidated structure seemed to be swallowed by the darkness that surrounded it.

“Wait a minute,” Ethan murmured, his brow furrowing in thought. “That’s Jeb’s place.”

“Jeb Clark?” Rachel questioned, recalling the man and his shotgun.

Ethan just nodded and began moving, slowly, heading towards the house.

As they moved towards the structure in the woods, Rachel couldn’t help but feel a mixture of anticipation and dread. The paint marking, the eerie location, and now Jeb’s mysterious house – it all seemed to be converging into something much bigger.

“Stay close,” Ethan whispered, his voice betraying the slightest hint of trepidation.

As they neared the house, Rachel’s eyes were drawn to more of the same paint markings she had seen on the tree earlier. They adorned the front of the house like a sinister graffiti artist’s signature, their purpose just as enigmatic. The sight sent a shiver down her spine.

“Look,” Rachel whispered, pointing at the markings. “It’s the same paint.”

Ethan nodded, his jaw set firm as he scanned the area for any signs of danger. “Stay sharp,” he advised. “There could be traps. It’s Jeb,” he added as explanation.

Rachel took a deep breath, attempting to steady her racing heart. Each step felt more treacherous than the last, her sweaty palms betraying her anticipation.

As they approached the open door, Rachel’s shallow breathing intensified, the air seeming to grow thinner with every inhale. She tried to focus on the task at hand, pushing aside the mounting dread that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Let’s check for any wires or triggers before we go inside,” Ethan suggested, his voice low and cautious.

“Good idea,” Rachel agreed, swallowing hard. Their eyes scanned the entryway, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

Taking one last steadying breath, they stepped through the threshold.

The musty air inside the house clung to their lungs like a suffocating embrace, making it even harder for Rachel to breathe. The creaking floorboards beneath their feet added an eerie soundtrack to their cautious exploration. They moved in tandem, each taking turns to cover the other as they navigated the darkened rooms.

Rachel frowned, trying to shake off the cold sweat forming on her brow.

The dim light from the hallway filtered through the crack, revealing a sliver of what lay beyond. “I’m going to check that room,” Rachel said.

“Be careful,” Ethan warned, his eyes never leaving the papers.

As she approached the door, her instincts screamed at her to tread lightly.

She paused, standing in front of the door.

For a brief moment, it was as if time lingered, suspended.

She stared at her hand, which trembled by the door handle.

She swallowed briefly, her frown etched into every groove of her face.

“What is it?”

She didn’t reply to Ethan’s query. Instead, she reached out and pushed the door open.

It was almost an inevitability, she decided.

As the door swung in, and as she stared into the dark, she went quiet and still.

There, lying lifeless on the cold, hard floor, was a woman.

Dead.

Blood seeping through her dress, staining her hair where it rested on the linoleum.

“God,” Rachel choked out, her hand flying to her weapon. “Ethan, come here. Quick.”

“Wha—” he stammered, rushing to her side. When he saw the grisly scene before them, his face paled. “Oh no.”

The dim light from the flickering bulb above cast eerie shadows on the walls, amplifying Rachel’s racing heart. She focused on the lifeless body before her, forcing herself to take deep, steadying breaths, despite the overwhelming scent of blood and decay. The woman’s twisted form lay sprawled on the floor, her eyes vacant and unseeing, staring up at the ceiling.

“Rachel,” Ethan whispered, his voice tight with shock.

“Careful,” She said, “watch where you step. This is a crime scene.”

“This is Jeb’s house!”

“I remember you saying that.”

“No... it means...” Ethan was staring at the woman on the ground. Specifically, Rachel realized he was staring at the woman’s hand, twisted behind her back.

The hand is wearing a wedding ring.

“Oh shit,” Rachel said softly.

Ethan nodded. “It’s his wife. They were sweethearts. She looks... older now.” He shrugged.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Very. She once kissed me behind the bleachers.”

Rachel stared at him, but he wasn’t looking in her direction. “I remember her...” He let out a faint breath. “Jeb’s going to kill us.”

“What?”

Ethan looked at her now, his face pale as if he’d seen a ghost. “Jeb wouldn’t have done this. Silas neither. Body is in rough shape—she’s been dead at least a day, maybe two.”

“So Jeb would’ve known?”

“Nah. They argued a lot. He would sleep in his daddy’s barn on more than one occasion. Wasn’t rare for them to go without talking for days at a time.”

“Convenient for an alibi.”

Ethan shrugged.

Rachel frowned grimly. She realized the implications too. If this was Jeb’s wife, and Ethan seemed certain, then the chances that he’d have killed her, left her in their own home, then casually taken potshots at groundhogs seemed very, very low.

Which meant the killer was still out there.

“We need to get out of here, Rachel,” Ethan said firmly.

“It’s a crime scene.

“Now! Jeb finds us here, it’s a shootout. A bloodbath.”

“It’s a crime scene,” she repeated more firmly. “Call in backup.”

“Rachel!”

“Do it!” she retorted.

The tension in the room stretched between them. Ethan shook his head, muttering to himself as Rachel returned her attention to the corpse.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted him withdraw his phone to place the call.

Meanwhile, she lowered slowly, staring at the lifeless eyes of their third victim.

Three dead women.

And they were no closer.

And yet, somehow... Rachel frowned, peering through the window behind them...

Somehow, she felt as if they were being watched at this very moment.

Something... *dark*... lurked out in the trees.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rachel had never felt so exposed at a crime scene before. But she'd refused to retreat, and now, standing amidst the chaos of flashing lights, police vehicles and coroner vans, she wondered if she'd made the right choice.

The crisp air bore the scent of damp leaves as Rachel stood outside the dilapidated ranch house, her breath visible in the cold evening light. A shiver ran down her spine as she surveyed the crime scene, her eyes lingering on the broken front door hanging from its hinges like a wounded animal. The once-charming building looked sinister now, its weathered paint peeling off like dead skin, revealing the rotten wood beneath.

Though a good number of people were watching, it was the one who *wasn't* that caused her concern. There was no sign of Jebediah Clark. His wife had been killed... but he wasn't here.

She scanned the area for any sign of the man who owned this place. His wife had been found murdered inside, her body lying lifeless on the cold floor. Rachel swallowed hard, trying to push aside the gruesome image of the woman's pale, cold face.

"Still no sign of him," replied Ethan, his voice tinged with concern. He glanced at Rachel. "You think he's going to cause problems?"

Rachel nodded, folding her arms tightly across her chest. She couldn't help but feel uneasy about his absence, knowing all too well that Silas Clark, Jeb's father, and the rest of their clan were capable of causing significant trouble. The additional law enforcement personnel surrounding the scene was both reassuring and alarming – a testament to the Clarks' notorious reputation.

"Me too," Ethan admitted, his gaze drifting towards the house.

“Right,” Rachel agreed, mentally preparing herself to step back into the sinister embrace of the ranch house. As they approached the entrance, she couldn’t help but feel the weight of the situation bearing down on her. The air seemed thicker, heavier with the knowledge of the horrors that lay within those walls.

A sharp gust of wind cut through the trees, causing Rachel to shiver as she stepped aside, allowing a forensic tech to move past her. The crime scene was now swarming with officers and forensic technicians, but her eyes were instantly drawn to a makeshift barricade of sawhorses near the edge of the property.

She nudged Ethan, nodding in that direction.

He went still as the two of them stood by the old wooden railing. Behind the sawhorse, Silas Clark stood like an ominous sentinel, flanked by his armed relatives. Their eyes bore into the investigators, scrutinizing every movement.

“He looks like trouble,” Rachel muttered under her breath, feeling the weight of Silas’ piercing gaze on her. She tried to focus on the task at hand but couldn’t shake the discomfort gnawing at her insides.

“Let him watch,” Ethan said, his voice hardening. “We’re doing our jobs, and we won’t be intimidated by him or his family.”

As if on cue, Silas barked an order to one of his sons. The young man scurried away, shouldering his rifle as he disappeared behind the house.

“Welcome to Texas,” Ethan said dryly.

Rachel nodded, trying to ignore the unsettling sensation of Silas’ eyes boring into her. She knew she had to concentrate on the investigation, but the presence of the Clarks made it difficult.

Rachel’s gaze shifted from the Clark family back to the dilapidated ranch house, where she had spotted an odd detail earlier.

She tugged at Ethan's arm, grateful for an excuse to put the Clark's out of sight.

She led him around the side of the house, stepping over broken boards and scattered debris, her boots crunching on the dry leaves that carpeted the ground. The air was heavy with the scent of decay, a fitting backdrop to the grisly scene they'd discovered inside.

"Look here," she said, pointing to a series of small paint stains splattered across the weathered wood siding. They stood out like beacons against the graying timber, their vibrant colors a stark contrast to the somber surroundings.

Ethan squatted down to get a closer look, his brow furrowed in concentration. Rachel watched as he carefully ran his gloved fingertips along the edge of one of the stains, then lifted them to his nose for a quick sniff. She could see the gears turning in his mind as he analyzed the substance.

"Interesting," Ethan murmured, straightening up. "This is livestock marker paint. It's used by ranchers to quickly identify cattle for various reasons – vaccinations, breeding, culling, and so on."

"Really?" Rachel asked, trying to connect the dots between the paint and the crime. "But why would it be here?"

"Good question." Ethan rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he studied the stains once more.

"It's like the paint I saw on the other victim."

"You're sure? Same type?"

"Looks like the same color," she said, running her fingers along the orange outline.

Rachel couldn't help but feel uneasy again, the weight of Silas Clark's stare still lingering even though he was out of sight. She knew the answer to this mystery was crucial, a piece of the puzzle that could crack the case wide open. But how did it all fit together?

Rachel's brow furrowed as she chewed on her lower lip, trying to make sense of the paint stains and their correlation to

the crime. The sun had dipped below the treeline, casting eerie shadows across the dilapidated ranch house. In the growing darkness, the paint stains seemed to take on a sinister quality. She could feel the chill in the air settling into her bones, but it wasn't the cold that made her shiver.

“Rachel?” Ethan’s voice broke through her thoughts. “You okay?”

She nodded, forcing herself to focus. “Yeah, I just... I can’t shake this feeling that we’re missing something obvious. Something important.”

“About the paint?” Ethan asked, his eyes meeting hers with concern.

“Maybe. I don’t know,” she admitted, her fingers fidgeting with the fringe of her jacket.

“Remember, when you’re lost, turn to what you know best,” Aunt Sarah had told her years ago. The words resonated within her now, and she closed her eyes for a moment to concentrate. What did she know best?

Her knowledge of animals and livestock was extensive, thanks to her upbringing. How could that help her now? Her eyes snapped open as a sudden realization dawned on her.

“Of course!” Rachel exclaimed, her hand slapping against her thigh in excitement. “Livestock markers aren’t just used for cattle; they’re also used for other animals like horses and even smaller ones like sheep or goats. And it’s not just for identification purposes – sometimes, it’s to indicate the animal’s purpose or fate.”

Ethan caught on quickly, nodding as he followed her train of thought. “So you think that whoever killed Jeb’s wife might have marked her with this paint? Like they were labeling her for some reason?”

“Exactly,” Rachel agreed, her pulse quickening at the implications. “If we can determine the meaning behind this marking, we might just be able to uncover the killer’s motive.” She hesitated now, frowning.

“What?” Ethan said. “What is it?”

“Nothing... sorry... I was just thinking about something my aunt taught me a long time ago. About culling.”

Ethan glanced at her, curiosity piqued. “Culling?”

“Right. It’s a practice used in animal husbandry, where you separate weaker or less productive animals from the rest of the herd. My aunt, she had a small cattle farm, and she was always so diligent about culling.” Rachel’s eyes narrowed, her thoughts crystallizing into a chilling realization. “The main reason to do it is to improve the overall quality and productivity of the herd.”

As she spoke the words, the pieces fell into place. A cold shudder ran down her spine as she turned to Ethan, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if that’s what’s happening here? What if someone is marking and culling women, thinning the human herd? The fertility treatments... hospital visits... The victims had health concerns.”

Ethan stared at her, his expression a mixture of horror and disbelief. “You think that’s what this is all about? That whoever killed Jeb’s wife marked her for...culling?”

Rachel nodded slowly, the weight of her own conclusion settling heavily upon her shoulders. She had absentmindedly taken a few steps back and now could peer along the side of the house. She looked away, her gaze drawn back to Silas Clark and his relatives, still being held behind the police sawhorse. Silas’ eyes bore into her, making her skin crawl.

“Maybe it’s not just about Jeb’s wife, or Candace or Jack’s wife,” she muttered. “Or about the Clarks at all... there are probably others out there who’ve been marked for the same fate.”

“Then we have no time to waste,” Ethan declared, his face hardening with resolve.

Rachel considered their options, standing on the leaf-strewn ground under the darkening sky.

“We need to find out who has access to the hospital records of all three of them,” Rachel said quietly.

She glanced once more towards Silas.

There was still no sign of Jeb.

He hadn't exactly been an even-keeled, calm sort when his wife was alive.

Now that she was dead?

Far less likely.

Rachel felt a cold shiver, shook her head and said, "We need to cross-reference those hospital records."

Ethan was already moving, heading along the side of the house, back towards their waiting car.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The rain pattered against the windshield as he trailed her car, his eyes never leaving her glowing taillights. He could feel the anticipation rising inside him like a coiled snake poised to strike at the perfect moment. It was an intoxicating feeling, one that had consumed him time and time again. The thrill of the hunt, the sweet taste of victory that came each time he claimed another.

Of course, he never fully admitted this to himself.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, his brow furrowed.

He allowed himself a small shake of his head, a glimmer of compassion.

He didn't *want* them to hurt.

He wanted them to survive.

But, of course, the weak and the wounded harmed the herd.

It had always been the case.

Culling wasn't just for farmers. To cull meant to preserve the strongest and eliminate the weakest. He was simply doing his part in maintaining the balance of the world.

He pulled up next to her at the stoplight, watching her as she absentmindedly tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. She was beautiful, just like all the others he had hunted before her. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a messy bun, and the light from the streetlamp illuminated the curves of her face. He felt a thrill run down his spine as he contemplated what he would do with her once he had her.

He followed her as she turned onto a deserted back road, her car bouncing over the potholes. He could see her silhouette in the driver's seat, her head bobbing as she sang along to the radio.

His four-fingered hand tightened on the steering wheel, and he glared at the missing digit.

Testament to his will.

He picked up speed, following behind the red Pontiac. She drove slowly.

In fact, most of what she did was slow on account of her limp. She didn't know him, but he knew of her... at least in part.

Years ago, they'd met before. She wouldn't remember him. She'd been... *busy* at the time.

The night she'd gotten that limp, in fact.

He could still picture the car crash. He'd been one of the first responders who'd shown up. It had been a bad crash. A drunk driver had plowed into the side of her car, T-boning it.

He could still picture the scene, years ago. Poor Ms. Carter's car wrapped around a telephone pole, crushed from the side. Glass and metal scattered across the road, along with the blood and screams of the injured. He had been assisting one of the paramedics that night, and he had watched as they pulled her from the wreckage, her leg twisted at an unnatural angle.

He had felt a strange connection to her then, one that had only grown stronger with the passing years. He had watched her from afar, learning everything he could about her. He knew her schedule, her routine, her favorite places to eat. He knew who her friends were, and even her daily habits. But she'd moved houses recently...

Changing the pattern.

He wrinkled his nose. He hated when his marked-ones *changed* anything.

He knew what he had to do. He had done this so many times before. It was like second nature to him now.

He'd followed her for nearly three miles now, and she was still none the wiser.

He watched as she bobbed her head in her car, singing along with some unheard music.

As he followed her along the winding roads, he studied her movements, her every turn and hesitation. She seemed oblivious to his presence, or perhaps she was simply too naive to think that someone could be watching her so closely. It didn't matter; soon enough, she would be his.

He pressed down on the accelerator, closing the distance between them until he was just a few car lengths behind her. He could see her silhouette through the rear window, her braid whipping back and forth as she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

“Pull over,” he whispered, flipping on the flashing lights.

He hit the siren next.

Her car swerved to the side of the road, and he pulled up behind her. He stepped out of his vehicle and walked towards her car, his heart pounding in his chest. He could feel the excitement building inside him, the anticipation of what was to come.

As he reached her car, he tapped on the window, motioning for her to roll it down. She looked up at him, her eyes wide with fear. No recognition though. She had no clue who he was.

The woman hesitated for a second before complying, her eyes flickering to the rearview mirror as she rolled down her window. He watched her closely, taking in the way her chest heaved with rapid breaths as she braced herself for whatever was to come.

“Evening, ma'am,” he drawled, leaning against her window. Up close, he could see the beads of sweat forming on her brow, the tremor in her hands as she rolled down the window. “License and registration, please.”

“Of course, officer,” she stammered, fumbling with her purse as she searched for the requested documents. Her fingers were shaking so badly that she nearly dropped them, her eyes darting between him and the road as if contemplating escape.

He savored her fear, letting it fuel the fire that was already burning inside of him.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice smooth as silk, a stark contrast to the storm raging within him. As he took her information, he made a mental note of her address, committing it to memory. “Everything seems to be in order, Ms. Carter. Just try to drive more carefully in this weather, alright?”

“Y-yes, sir,” she stammered, relief washing over her face like a tidal wave. “I’ll be more careful. Thank you.”

“Hang on now,” he said, flashing a charming smile. “No reason you’re rushing, is there?”

She hesitated. “i... umm... No. No, of course not.” She stammered, staring at him.

He gave her a good-natured smile.

She paused. “I, er... no. No, of course not.”

He watched as her eyes flickered with uncertainty, her fingers drumming nervously against the steering wheel. He could feel her fear, and it only made him more excited. She was rubbing at her leg, though, wincing as she did.

It hadn’t healed.

He felt a flash of regret.

He didn’t like what he was *forced* to do. But he had to do it all the same.

“Are you sure?” he asked, leaning closer to the car. “You seem a little on edge. Is everything alright?”

She swallowed hard, her eyes darting between him and the road ahead. “No, everything’s fine,” she said quickly. “I just have somewhere to be, that’s all.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Somewhere important?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. I have an appointment.”

He leaned in closer, his breath hot against her face. “What kind of appointment?” he asked, the words laced with a hint of danger.

She swallowed hard, her face flushing with embarrassment. “It’s... it’s personal,” she said weakly.

He chuckled darkly. “I see. Well, I’ll let you go then. But be careful, Ms. Carter. You never know who might be watching you.”

With that, he stepped back from the car.

“Th-thank you...” she gave him an odd look.

“Have a good evening,” he replied, tipping his hat as he stepped back.

As he passed the rear of her car once more, returning to his own vehicle, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a tiny container of dark red paint. His fingers trembled with excitement as he unscrewed the cap, dipping his forefinger into the thick liquid. There was something almost sensual about the motion.

He pressed his finger against the back of her car, leaving a small, bloody handprint on the surface. It was a mark indicating that she was now his. He had marked her, and she didn’t even know it.

He got back into his car, a thrill coursing through his veins as he watched her drive away. He knew where she lived now, where she had moved to. He knew everything about her.

As she pulled away, his eyes never left her taillights, their crimson glow a beacon guiding him to his next conquest. Tonight, he would visit her home, marking her as his prey, sealing her fate in blood and darkness. And soon enough, she would know everything about him too.

As he drove home, the paint on his finger drying to a crust, he couldn’t help but grin. The chase had begun. And he was going to win.

“See you soon, Ms. Carter,” he whispered, driving up an old, dusty road in the police cruiser.

A second later, he realized his lights were still flashing. He reached down, flipping the switch off.

And once more, he blended into the evening, disappearing into the dark, and becoming just another vehicle on just another, old, country road.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The dimly lit, cramped room at the police precinct was a veritable labyrinth of case files and evidence boxes, each casting long shadows across the worn and stained floor. The musty scent of yellowing paper and stale coffee hung heavy in the air as Rachel sat hunched over the desk, her dark eyes scanning through hospital records with a laser-like focus. Beside her, her tall, dark-haired partner, methodically sifted through stacks of photographs and witness statements.

“Rachel, any luck on your end?” Ethan asked, his voice soft yet tinged with urgency.

“Give me a minute,” she replied, her fingers deftly flipping through pages of medical jargon and scribbled notes from doctors. Growing up on her own had taught her the importance of self-reliance, and she had learned to trust her own instincts above all else.

“Okay,” Ethan acquiesced, knowing better than to interrupt her when she was this focused. His own upbringing had been rooted in close family ties and religious teachings, which provided a stark contrast to Rachel’s solitary nature. Their differences made them an unlikely pair, but Rachel had decided they worked well together.

As Rachel continued to pore over the hospital records of the three victims, her keen attention to detail became evident. She scrutinized each line of text, searching for patterns or connections that might bring them closer to solving the mystery.

Three victims. No apparent connections... but that wasn’t possible, was it? The faint hum of the overhead fluorescent lights mixed with the muted sounds of footsteps and distant conversations outside the room, creating an eerie soundtrack to their investigation.

“Wait,” Rachel suddenly whispered, her brow furrowing as she stared intently at a specific section of one victim’s file. “I think I found something.”

Ethan leaned in, his curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

Rachel double-checked the find.

She’d given up on hospital records and was now going through insurance claims. Something caught her attention. She nodded now, realizing she was right.

“Each of these victims had visited the same chiropractor within a week of their deaths,” she explained, her eyes narrowing as she processed the potential implications.

Rachel squinted at the records, her fingers tracing the neat rows of text. The pages felt crisp and cold in her hands.

“Look at this,” she said, tapping on the highlighted section with excitement. “All three victims visited Dr. Marcus Caldwell for chiropractic adjustments within a week of their deaths.”

Ethan leaned closer, his breath warm against Rachel’s cheek. Their shoulders brushed as he studied the records. “That’s an interesting coincidence. “

She imagined the chiropractor’s office, the sound of bones cracking under practiced hands, the satisfied sighs of patients as their pain was momentarily relieved. It was in those moments, she realized, that a predator might find opportunity – access to personal information and a chance to identify vulnerable targets.

“Let’s pull up everything we can on this Dr. Caldwell,” Ethan suggested, already reaching for his laptop.

“Look at this, Ethan,” Rachel said, her voice barely above a whisper as she pointed to the records spread across the table. The dimly lit room cast eerie shadows on the stacks of case files and evidence surrounding them. “Dr. Caldwell had access to their medical history, their addresses... everything.”

Ethan leaned in closer, his already furrowed brow deepening with concern.

“What do we know about Mr. Caldwell?”

Rachel was already pulling up his DMV information.

Ethan waited for her to continue.

“According to this, he’s 38 years old, no criminal record, and has been practicing chiropractic medicine for the past 10 years,” she said, scrolling through the information on her laptop. “He used to work as a paramedic. He was also involved in the police academy. Strange... But there’s something off about him, Ethan. Look at this picture.”

She turned the laptop screen towards him, revealing a photo of a tall, muscular man with piercing blue eyes and a chiseled jawline. He exuded a sense of confidence and power that was almost palpable through the screen.

“Er... what’s off about him? Looks like a good-looking dude.”

Rachel frowned. “I mean... *look* at him.”

“I am...”

Ethan was now glancing at her as if confused.

She sighed, realizing she’d have to spell it out. “He looks like he’s twenty-two.”

“And?”

“He’s had a bunch of work done, Ethan.”

Another pause, longer this time. “And...?”

“And,” she said emphatically, “what does a guy with that jawline need a face lift for?”

Ethan stared at her. “Are you intimidated by hot dudes?”

She snorted. “Please. No. I’m telling you, he’s literally wearing a mask.”

“Oh... I mean... A bit of botox and a little nose job isn’t a *mask*,” Ethan said.

Now it was her turn to look at him.

“What?” he said defensively.

She didn't smile often, but now, her grin was out in full force. "Tell me you did."

"Did what?"

"You got botox, didn't you?"

"No," he grumbled.

"You did! Didn't you?"

He scowled at her. "How about we refocus on Caldwell. Let's go speak with him."

Rachel chortled to herself, turning her attention once more back to the chiropractor. It wasn't so much that he'd had work done, but that he'd uploaded a photo of himself looking nearly two decades younger than his actual age.

Most people put their best foot forward on the internet.

Then again, most on the internet acted like narcissists in her opinion. She'd never been much one for social media.

Besides, there was something in his eyes... in that smile.

It seemed genuinely inauthentic.

Even as she considered this and began to close the lid of Ethan's laptop, a sudden sound reported through the precinct.

Ethan hesitated. "What was that?"

But Rachel was already moving fast. "Gunshots!" she yelled as she flung open the door to the interrogation room and broke into a dead sprint.

As if echoing her footsteps, more gunshots pierced the air outside the police station, shattering the silence that had enveloped the cramped hall.

The cacophony of commotion outside the cramped room intensified, the discordant symphony of shouts and hurried footsteps punctuated by distant screams. Rachel's heart raced in her chest.

She scanned the space ahead of her. The few cops remaining on office night shift were taking cover behind

overturned desks, facing the windows that looked out at the parking lot.

She spotted spiderweb cracks along the windows, then heard another salvo of gunfire.

More bullets impacted the bullet-proof glass.

Rachel ducked behind a wall, pulling Ethan down with her.

She heard shouting coming through the sealed door, and harsh laughter. A slurred voice shouted something incoherent, and there was a brief lull in the gunfire.

Across from her, she spotted an officer behind a desk with his handgun clutched between trembling fingers.

He was shaking so badly, he dropped his gun.

Rachel's own fingers tightened around her gun, the grip firm. Her eyes locked onto Ethan's for a brief moment as she checked her ammunition, a silent acknowledgement passing between them. With a swift, practiced motion, she slid the magazine into place and racked the slide, chambering a round.

"Ready?" she asked, her voice betraying no hint of fear, only grim determination.

Ethan hesitated. "Wait, what? No—stay down!" he snapped. "We don't know who it is."

"Yes, we do," she shot back. "It's Jeb."

Ethan stared at her.

"Jeb Clark?" she said a bit more emphatically.

"It... what... how do you know that?"

"I saw him," she said. "Through the door."

"In the split second you had?"

He gaped at her.

"It's dark outside!"

She shrugged. "I have good eyesight."

"Apparently," he muttered.

Rachel was now peering around the edge of cover, looking through the door out into the dark night.

Again, she spotted Jebediah Clark sitting in the back of a pickup truck with a gun clutched in one hand.

But now she realized her mistake.

He wasn't alone.

She hadn't spotted the others at first, she supposed, because they'd been crouched out of sight. But now, as she peered towards them, she realized that two oversized, overweight, blading men with big, thick beards were sitting next to each other in the back of the truck.

One of the men was passing a bottle to the other, who took a long swig before raising his rifle and firing off a few more shots towards the front of the precinct. He then whooped and hollered.

"Give her back, you bitches!" screamed Jeb, his voice thick with the effects of alcohol. "Give her back *now!*"

His voice shook as he spoke, laden with emotion as well as inebriation.

Rachel felt her heart pang, despite what she knew about the Clark son.

His brother was in jail—that was bad enough, but his wife was now dead.

The bodies had been found on his family's land, which meant his father was under close scrutiny.

Still...

He'd lost some of her sympathy when he'd decided to shoot up a cop precinct with some of his drinking buddies.

"Give her back!" Jeb was saying louder now. "Come on. I know she's in there!"

"Jeb!" a voice suddenly called out. "Hey Jeb, it's me!"

Rachel glanced over, stunned to realize it was Ethan's voice now booming out from behind cover.

She frowned at him, but didn't intervene.

She remained tense on the ground, taking cover. The sound of bullets had stopped for a moment. Jeb Clark and his two overweight drinking buddies had decided to take a break from shooting up the front of the precinct, but Rachel was feeling an itch now.

She couldn't stay here.

She had to *move*.

Time was of the essence. Dr. Caldwell was still at large, and if he was the killer, then he might still be on the hunt.

She couldn't remain pinned down, and she didn't have the patience to deal with Jeb Clark and his idiot friends.

Ethan was shouting now, "Jeb? You really want to think this through now. You're shooting up a police station! How do you think this ends for you and your buddies there?"

At first, there was no reply. Then, Jeb's slurred voice called out, "That you, Morgan?"

Ethan remained hidden behind a concrete support beam. "Yeah," he said. "It's me." His hand was tensed on his weapon, but Rachel noticed he wasn't taking aim yet.

She admired his restraint.

"Give her back, Morgan! I know you have her in there!"

"Who? Your wife? She's dead, Jeb. We didn't kill her."

"I said give her back!" he swore, and there was another burst of gunfire. This time, a bullet tore through the open door and slammed into a desk, shattering a computer on top and sending shards of glass skyrocketing.

Ethan remained low. The other cops in the precinct also kept their cover.

Rachel, however, was slowly slinking away from the shootout, towards a side exit marked with a glowing red sign.

She couldn't linger. She needed to *move*.

“She’s dead, Jeb!” shouted Ethan. “I’m sorry for your loss, but getting yourself shot over it isn’t going to help anything! Think about your dad!”

“Shut up!” shouted Jeb. “Just... just shut up!”

Ethan glanced back at her now. Rachel was pointing towards the exit and tapping her wrist. No time. A killer was out there. She didn’t have the time to talk down a few drunk idiots. Shooting them wouldn’t have taken much time, but clearly that wasn’t Ethan’s play.

He wanted to talk it out.

And while she admired his restraint, she couldn’t wait.

Ethan gave her a quick thumbs up and a shooing motion towards the door, as if giving permission, or perhaps just saying *I’ve got this*.

She mouthed, “Be careful.”

And he flashed a wink and another thumbs up.

Then, Rachel began slinking towards the door, crawling on her forearms and keeping low.

Rachel slipped out of the door and into the cool night air of the alley. She felt a rush of relief wash over her as she made a beeline for her car. She had to get away from the police station, from Jeb Clark and his friends.

It was a bold call, and she knew it.

In almost any other situation, she might have made a different choice.

But for one, the police outnumbered Jeb and his goons. For another, Jeb was using small caliber bullets. He was trying to scare them... not kill them. At least, so she hoped.

But finally, if Dr. Caldwell was the killer, *someone* had to stop him.

Her hands were tense, but as she slid into the driver’s seat of her car, she felt a sense of calm wash over her. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. Her hands were

shaking slightly as she started the engine and pulled out of the rear lot. For now, the gunfire had subsided.

She pulled her phone from her pocket, placing it on the seat next to her and searching for Caldwell's address.

It was the first result from his DMV file.

She frowned at the seat next to her, logging the directions, and then putting on a burst of speed, racing away from the precinct, the gunfight, and off—very much alone—into the unknown to face a killer.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Rachel pulled to a screeching stop at the end of a driveway with a rooster-shaped mailbox facing a cobbled road.

Another back country road, but this time, the lawns were well-manicured, and the house at the end of the drive, about a quarter mile from her, looked more like an estate than another backwoods bunker.

Rachel took a deep breath and stepped out of her car, eyeing the large, imposing house at the end of the drive. She checked her gun, making sure it was loaded and ready to go. She couldn't shake off the feeling that Dr. Caldwell was inside, waiting for her.

She walked slowly up the drive, trying to keep quiet, but the crunch of the gravel beneath her feet seemed to echo loudly in the stillness of the night. She approached the front door, and her hand grazed the doorknob, but she hesitated.

What if he wasn't inside? What if she was wrong?

She tried the door.

Locked.

So she circled around the house. People that lived out in the country often left their doors unlocked.

A sense of safety and community...

Now, she hoped Caldwell wasn't as paranoid as most serial killers.

She reached the back of the house and tried the door.

Also locked.

Shit.

She glanced along the frame of the large structure and paused.

She spotted a window that was slightly ajar, allowing a breeze through. She approached it and carefully slid it open, slipping inside the darkened house. The air was musty and stale, and Rachel wrinkled her nose. She took a few steps forward, and the floorboards creaked beneath her feet. She froze, listening intently for any sign of movement.

The house was dark, but she could make out the shape of furniture in the dim light filtering in through the windows. She crept forward, her heart pounding in her chest.

Suddenly, she heard a noise. A creaking sound, like someone was walking on the floorboards above her. She froze, her gun raised, and waited.

Seconds ticked by, and there was no further sound. She took a deep breath and continued up the stairs, her gun at the ready.

She reached the top of the stairs and found herself facing a long hallway. She could see a faint light coming from one of the rooms at the end of the corridor. She moved slowly towards it, her heart pounding with every step.

As she got closer, she could hear the sound of someone breathing. It was slow and steady. Almost like a panting noise.

She hesitated, then frowned.

She pushed open the door.

Suddenly, a blur of shadow rushed at her, snarling and barking.

Rachel stumbled backwards, moving fast, avoiding the blur, her gun pointed at the shadow. But she didn't squeeze the trigger.

The creature had backed away as she had, startled—it seemed—by her appearance. Not who it had been expecting, perhaps.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realized it was a large dog. A Doberman, its teeth bared, saliva dripping from its mouth.

It was growling, slobber dripping from its jowls. The Doberman lunged towards her, but Rachel managed to dart out of the way, narrowly avoiding its jaws.

The dog circled around, growling and barking. Rachel scrambled back until her shoulders pressed against the wallpaper, her eyes darting around the room, searching for anything she could use as a weapon that wouldn't kill the animal.

She'd always had a soft spot for creature—even the fanged and toothy varieties.

“Down! Stay!” she commanded firmly. The dog hesitated, continued growling.

She shot a look past it into the room it had been in. Besides a kennel in one corner, the room was empty.

So she darted through the room, moving through the space the dog no longer occupied as it had circled her.

The hound charged at her again, following her into the room. She lunged for the metal kennel, using it as a shield to defend herself.

The dog snarled and tried to snap at her fingers, but again, the metal mesh of the cage kept it at bay.

She circled slowly, and now her back was to the open door, the kennel held between her hands.

The dog was ferocious, but not very smart.

She backed away, once more out into the hall, lodging the kennel inside the threshold, and then slamming the door.

The dog's barking grew fainter with the door closed, and she let out a faint breath of relief.

She reached up, wiping sweat from her forehead, but then scanning down the empty hall once more.

No one had come in response to the commotion.

No other sounds.

Was Caldwell even here?

Or was he out another hunter.

She felt a shiver, and she moved fast, checking one room after the next.

Thankfully, there were no more furry surprises.

But also no sign of the suspect.

Desperate, she began calling out, over the yowls of the Doberman. “Caldwell! Texas Rangers! Answer!”

But there was no response.

The rooms were all empty. She even checked the oven in the kitchen.

He was nowhere to be found.

She cursed under her breath, taking the stairs three at a time as she pulled her phone from her pocket.

But before she could enter a call, her hand began to shake. The phone was vibrating.

“Ethan?” she said hurriedly.

“This is Officer Cortez. Your partner asked me to call you.”

“Is he okay?” she said quickly.

“Yes. Yes, but he’s busy booking the suspects.”

“He handled it?”

“After... er... a fashion, yes.”

Rachel nodded in appreciation. “Hey... listen up, I need an APB on a car. You listening? This is a high priority. The vehicle belongs to a man named Theo Caldwell.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The static of Rachel's police radio filled her car, the sound cutting through the silence like a knife.

She jolted upright from where she'd been slouched in the seat, driving down the darkened roads outside Dr. Caldwell's residence.

Now, the voice crackled through the speaker. "Ranger Blackwood, we have an APB hit on Theo Caldwell's vehicle. Last seen heading toward the forest preserve."

"Copy that," Rachel replied, her voice tense but steady. The news reignited the fire in her gut, and she gripped the steering wheel tighter as she pressed the accelerator to the floor. Her jet-black hair whipped around her face as the wind whipped through the open window, and her deep brown eyes narrowed.

"Stay on him, I'm en route," she added, her voice heavy with the weight of urgency. Her thoughts raced, a wild horse galloping through her mind. She couldn't afford to let Dr. Caldwell slip away. Did he have another victim with him?

It gave her some sense of ease that Ethan had taken care of things back at the precinct. It almost felt as if it allowed her to focus fully on the chase.

But while Ethan had handled Jeb without anyone getting shot, according to the police scanner, she was still pursuing a potential killer without her partner. It couldn't be helped.

As her car sped down the road, the dim glow of the headlights illuminated the asphalt before her, casting eerie shadows across the barren landscape.

The night seemed to press in on her from all sides, adding a palpable sense of urgency. She gripped the steering wheel tightly, navigating the twisting turns and sudden dips.

The only sounds were her own labored breathing and the hum of her engine as it devoured the miles ahead. Her deep

brown eyes scanned the road, seeking any sign of Dr. Caldwell's vehicle. Every moment that passed felt like an eternity.

"Come on, where are you?" she muttered under her breath, beads of perspiration forming on her brow despite the cool night air.

She was tracking the GPS on her phone, making sure she was on the road outside the forest preserve.

Her gaze moved from her phone to the windshield, scanning the area outside the vehicle. As if in answer to her searching gaze, a glint of metal caught her eye, reflecting the moonlight just enough for her to recognize the outline of a solitary vehicle ahead of her, moving in the dark.

No sign of a pursuing vehicle, though. She frowned, and pressed the button for the radio.

"Come in," she said.

"Ranger Blackwood?" the officer replied. "I lost him. He pulled into the forest preserve but pulled out again. He shut a gate behind him."

Rachel frowned. "Where are you now?" she said quietly.

"By the lake, pulling it."

"Copy."

She closed the channel, her eyes narrowing as she peered at the dark outline of the civilian car ahead of her.

It wasn't the officer.

"Gotcha," Rachel whispered, her voice taut with determination. She floored the accelerator, rapidly closing the gap between them.

Now that she was close, she recognized the make and model of the car. It matched the DMV information.

It was *his* car.

He'd had connections to all three victims.

As she drew nearer to the fleeing vehicle, she flicked on her flashing lights and siren, hoping it would be enough to convince Dr. Caldwell to pull over. “This is Texas Ranger Rachel Blackwood,” she barked into the speaker. “Theo Caldwell, I order you to stop your vehicle immediately!”

But instead of complying, Dr. Caldwell’s car swerved erratically. Rachel gritted her teeth, her knuckles white.

They raced down the empty road, shadows flickering like ghosts against their headlights.

“Fine,” she muttered, her eyes narrowing as she calculated her next move. “If you won’t stop willingly, I’ll make you.”

Switching gears, Rachel pressed on the gas and closed in on Dr. Caldwell’s car, her pulse quickening with anticipation.

With a sudden burst of speed, Rachel swerved her car alongside Dr. Caldwell’s, her tires screeching in protest. A panicked, pale face with indistinguishable features glanced over at her with wide, terror-filled eyes, but she met his gaze with unwavering resolve.

But Dr. Caldwell only clenched his jaw and pressed harder on the gas.

With one final surge of acceleration, Rachel angled her car towards his, strategically tapping the rear end of his vehicle with her bumper.

The sudden impact caused Dr. Caldwell’s car to fishtail, forcing him off the road and onto a long stretch of open space. The ground beneath their tires shifted from asphalt to gravel, sending a spray of dust into the air and obscuring their vision.

The rocky terrain jolted Rachel’s car, a constant reminder that she was venturing into unfamiliar territory. The landscape was a chaotic mess of boulders and tangled roots, each threatening to impede her progress or damage her vehicle. She gripped the steering wheel tighter as her car bounced over the uneven ground, praying that her years of experience navigating the Texas wilderness would be enough.

“Damn it, Theo,” she muttered through gritted teeth.

Dr. Caldwell's car swerved erratically ahead of her, as he too struggled to maintain control on the unforgiving terrain.

Ahead, she spotted an opening in the terrain. She slammed her foot down on the accelerator, closing the gap between their vehicles before ramming her bumper into Dr. Caldwell's car once more.

A sickening crunch echoed through the night as Caldwell's car plunged into a crevasse, its wheels spinning helplessly in the air. Rachel slammed on the brakes, skidding along the ground and kicking up a cloud of dust.

Rachel stepped out of her car, the cold night air biting at her cheeks. The wind howled around her, whipping her long braid into a frenzy as she strode towards the disabled vehicle.

As she approached the wreck, she could see the doctor struggling to free himself from the mangled car. His eyes widened in terror when he spotted her, his hands desperately clawing at the seatbelt.

"Dr. Theo Caldwell!" she shouted over the wind, her voice firm and authoritative. "You're under arrest! Now step out of the vehicle with your hands up!"

The doctor's gaze flickered between her and the steering wheel, as if willing his car to continue.

But then he released a pent-up breath, and he sagged, deflating.

Rachel gestured at him with one hand, her other gripping her weapon.

Reluctantly, he pushed out of the back of the car, wincing as he did.

"What the hell was that for!" he yelled at her, his face twisting into an expression of anger.

"Hands where I can see them!" she said sharply.

Caldwell was staring at her, panic in his gaze. "It isn't what you think!" he yelled. "you've got it all wrong."

"What do I have wrong?" she said, gun pointed at him.

But he flashed a nervous grin. He wagged a finger from side to side. “No, no,” he said. “You’re trying to trap me with your words. It wasn’t anything bad. This is a setup.”

He was rambling, and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Mr. Caldwell, are you high?” she said slowly.

He frowned as if offended by the inference, but as he tried to step towards her, he walked with a wobbly gait.

“Please,” he said, his voice moaning. “I lost someone dear to me. Very dear. I didn’t....” he hiccupped. “Didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

She was surprised to see tears slipping down his cheeks now.

He approached her again, taking another step. “Stay back!” she snapped.

Caldwell now stood in front of her car, the bright lights illuminating his features and giving Rachel a long look at the man.

He was older than she had initially thought, with deep lines etched into his forehead and wrinkles around his eyes. His hair was unkempt, and his clothes were rumpled and stained. His once sharp features were now haggard, and he appeared to be on the brink of collapse.

“She died,” he whispered. “She... died.”

Rachel stared at him.

“Who? Three women died, didn’t they? Did you kill them?”

He let out a long sigh. “It’s just so sad... So very sad.”

He grimaced and shook his head.

“What’s the point?” he asked, scuffing his foot in the sand. “I mean... do you ever just think about that? What the point is?”

“Caldwell, stay back, and put your hands up,” she said cautiously.

But Dr. Caldwell didn't listen, and instead took another step towards Rachel's car.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "I just need someone to talk to."

Rachel hesitated, her gun still trained on the man. She had dealt with her fair share of suspects trying to manipulate her.

"Talk to me then," she said finally, her tone firm but not unkind. "But keep your hands where I can see them."

Dr. Caldwell nodded, his gaze never leaving Rachel's face.

"I know they died," he said quietly. "And I know all three were my clients."

Rachel blinked at his forthright comment.

"I see," she said.

He stared at her. And then, with a small burp, he wobbled and toppled into the sand.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Rachel sat with her hands drumming the steering wheel, shooting glances into her rearview mirror towards where the inebriated Dr. Caldwell's head lolled against the back headrest.

His hands were cuffed in front of him, and she noticed he had abnormally long legs and a strangely short torso. He seemed much smaller, shrunken, where he sat in the back.

His face was flushed, and he continued to slowly murmur to himself and shake his head.

She frowned at him, wondering if he was trying to play her.

Was this really the serial killer who'd been plaguing the area?

As this troubling thought crossed her mind, her phone suddenly began to ring.

She glanced down at the seat next to her, double-checked that Caldwell was still cuffed, and then answered.

"Morgan!" she exclaimed and felt a flash of embarrassment at the relief in her voice.

"Miss me, missy?" came the cheeky reply in its trademark southern twang.

"What happened? Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Ethan said. "We talked it out."

"Shit, really?"

"No. I distracted Jeb for a bit, challenged him to a fistfight."

She stared at the road, then frowned. "Wait... *really?*"

He snorted. "Yeah. He was drunk enough to believe me. Wanted to put me in my place again."

"So... you fought him?"

“Hey, hey,” Ethan’s voice came. “That’s a lot of cynicism for a gal that beat the poor man in a horse race.” A pause. “But no. The moment they lowered their guns, six SWAT officers who’d shown up from the city swarmed them. It was over in seconds. No shots fired.”

Rachel snorted. “Nicely done. Wish I coulda seen his face.”

Ethan sighed. “Really, it was just sad. He seems to think we’ve arrested his wife.”

Rachel winced, picturing the corpse she’d found in Jeb Clark’s home. The man wouldn’t be the same after all of this.

Her eyes darted into the back seat once more, frowning towards Caldwell.

Ethan’s tenor changed. “Did you find him?”

She kept her voice low. “Mhmm.”

“He there with you?”

“Mhmm.”

“Any trouble?”

“Not much,” she said. “Definitely not Jeb Clark levels of trouble.”

She paused, picturing Ethan Morgan’s look of satisfaction when he’d cuffed the man who’d once beat him as a boy.

She was impressed with Ethan’s self-control, even in the face of all of it. He’d never once tried to get his revenge, but had stuck to his job. When he’d had a chance to shoot it out with Jeb, he’d instead employed his words, defusing the situation.

She knew not every encounter could end so cleanly, and some officers might make the argument that he’d endangered others by not going full lethal at the offset.

She wasn’t sure what to think, but she admired Ethan nonetheless for it.

“You coming back here?” Ethan said.

“On my way,” she replied.

“Alright. Be safe. See you soon.”

Rachel hung up, feeling an odd sense of satisfaction.

Her eyes traveled to the rearview mirror again, and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

Caldwell was staring right at her.

“What?” she snapped.

He didn’t look so drunk now. Perhaps his metabolism was impressive, or maybe, like she’d feared, he’d been playacting.

His hands were still cuffed, though, and his voice somewhat slurred as he said, “I know how it looks...”

“Oh?” she said slowly, raising an eyebrow. She surreptitiously tapped the recording icon on her phone, leaving it in the seat next to her. “How what looks?”

“Three of my clients end up dead. I saw it in the news.”

“Mhmm.”

“But... I knew how it would appear.”

“So that’s why you ran?”

“Yes. Well... somewhat.”

“Why not just come in and explain things to us.” She didn’t believe what he was saying, but the more he talked, the bigger chance he might incriminate himself.

“It... it wouldn’t have mattered,” he said. “You know about my background.”

She hesitated. She hadn’t seen anything on his background check, but instead of saying this, she said, “Which part?”

He didn’t notice anything in her tone. Instead, he just sighed and said, “It was a long time ago... I... I was a different person back then.”

“I see.”

“I didn’t think... I wasn’t trying to hurt her. I thought she liked me.”

“And this was the time when...” Rachel trailed off, hoping he’d fill in the details.

“I was seventeen!” he added quickly.

That was why, she realized, it hadn’t been apparent on her initial search. Some juvenile records from that long ago could potentially end up sealed.

“So you hurt another girl?”

“I... We were both young. I didn’t go through with it! I didn’t! Besides, I served my time.”

Rachel just nodded slowly. “So you were scared we’d piece together your connection to the victims and your past. Is that about it?”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it!” He said firmly. “Not a lick.”

It seemed an odd phrasing. But she let it pass. “So you tried to outrun the police? You left your home.”

“When... when I heard that Mrs. Clark had died... I knew what you all would think. Someone is killing my clients!” he moaned.

“So when you heard about the murders... you felt... *sad*?”

“Of course! I care for all my clients!”

Rachel nodded, still studying the strange man and wondering what his angle was. Did he really think he’d convince her?

She frowned. But what if he was telling the truth?

A novel thought. What if it really was a coincidence?

But he was the only connection between the three victims. So she said, “When you heard about the first murder, what did you think?”

“I didn’t know at first. Tom Clark told me.”

“You know the Clarks?”

“Everyone in this town knows the Clarks.”

Rachel's mind began to race. Was it possible that Caldwell was telling the truth? Could it be that he really didn't have anything to do with the murders? She knew she had to tread carefully. If he was innocent, she didn't want to ruin his life by falsely accusing him.

She decided to change tactics. "So, where were you when the murders occurred?"

Caldwell shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I was at home. Alone."

"And you didn't hear or see anything suspicious?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing."

Rachel wasn't convinced. She had a nagging suspicion that Caldwell was hiding something. But what was it? She decided to press him further.

"Tell me more about your relationship with the victims. Did you have any conflicts with them?"

"No, no conflicts," he said quickly. "I was just doing my job, trying to help them out."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "Help them out with what?"

Caldwell hesitated. "Just... personal matters. I can't really say more than that. It's privileged."

Rachel took a shot in the dark. "Was it fertility issues? I didn't know it was under the purview of a chiropractor."

"I... I see." He trailed off. "It was a variety of maladies. Old injuries, but also..." he paused, wincing.

"They're dead now, sir. I don't think they'll mind if you breach privilege." She added, her voice firm, "And it might go a long way in affecting *your* future."

He seemed to deflate. "I also do some counseling on the side. That's why they kept visiting me. It's a popular feature with my clients. I can't advertise it, since technically I'm not licensed..."

He was a fidgety, nervous man, she realized. "Counseling? About what?"

He hesitated once more.

Was he really worried about breaching privilege? He had fled the cops. He had an assault record from his juvenile days.

But what if he was also a man of principle?

What if he was the wrong man?

She pressed, “Sir, what did you counsel them about?”

“Mostly PTSD,” he said quickly. “I have... some experience in the area. It’s while we go through our chiropractic sessions. All three of my clients had run-ins with traumatic health concerns. I was trying to help them through it.”

“PTSD?”

“Yes. It affects nearly one in five people who experience a traumatic event. It’s a common condition, but not many people know how to deal with it. That’s where I come in. I provide them with a safe space to talk about their experiences and help them find ways to cope with their symptoms.”

Rachel nodded, her mind racing. It was possible that Caldwell was telling the truth. But then again, it was also possible that he was a master manipulator, skilled at covering his tracks.

“So... I know that one of your clients had fertility issues. Another had a chronic illness that forced her husband to keep bags packed in order to rush to the hospital. And Mrs. Clark... what about her?”

“An injury,” he said. “She was pushed in front of a train and nearly died. Suffered a concussion. It was in the news a few years ago.”

Rachel stared at Caldwell, frowning. “So all three of the women suffered PTSD episodes?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Rachel leaned back in her chair, deep in thought. It seemed too coincidental that all three women had PTSD and were also clients of Caldwell’s. But then again, it wasn’t impossible for

them to seek counseling for their condition. She decided to dig deeper.

“Sir, did any of your clients ever mention anything strange or unusual happening to them before their deaths?”

Caldwell shook his head. “No, not that I know of. They just came in for their regular sessions.”

Rachel pressed on, “And you never noticed anything odd or out of place during your sessions with them?”

Caldwell hesitated before answering, “I... I did notice something strange during my last session with Mrs. Clark.”

“What did you notice?” Rachel asked, her heart racing.

“She was acting very paranoid and scared. She kept looking over her shoulder and wouldn’t relax. I tried to talk to her about it, but she wouldn’t say anything. I thought it might have been related to her injury, but now...” He trailed off.

She stared at Caldwell. Was he telling the truth? Or playing her.

It was all so troubling.

He didn’t...

She paused, holding the thought back like a dam keeping back floodwaters.

But then she allowed the thought to return.

He didn’t *seem* like the murdering sort.

He was still slurring his words, still quite drunk. He looked ashamed of his actions more than anything. He’d panicked when he’d heard about Clark’s death, and had fled.

But that was just as likely because of the cops as the Clarks.

Jeb had shot up a police station for crying out loud.

If the Clarks had found out of Caldwell’s involvement, there was no telling what they might do to him.

She sighed, shaking her head in mounting frustration.

What was she missing?

She continued drumming her fingers against the steering wheel.

He also had seemed strangely concerned with privileged information.

Was it an act?

Or did he try to stick to his principles? Did serial killers do that?

She was finding her hesitation mounting. She wasn't sure they had the right guy.

She clicked her tongue once, then said, "What other clients do you have that you counsel for PTSD?"

"I... other clients?"

"Yes. Leave no one out. This is your one shot to convince me to look under some other rock. I'm advising you to take it."

He gaped at her, hesitated, but then closed his bloodshot eyes as if trying desperately to think. "I... I think only two others. It's not a large part of my business... but... One is a woman who had a car crash not long ago. She limps now. But..."

Rachel leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. "But what?"

Caldwell opened his eyes and met her gaze. "But one of them is a police officer."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The moonless night seemed to swallow the headlights as the unmarked police car crawled along the desolate Texas road, its tires crunching gravel and echoing into the darkness. The man behind the wheel gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, his eyes hidden behind mirrored aviator sunglasses even though it was well past midnight.

His gaze flicked to the police scanner mounted on the dashboard, its crackling static providing an eerie soundtrack to his obsession. He listened intently for any mention of her name, the mere sound of it sending shivers down his spine. He leaned forward, one hand clutching the steering wheel and the other tapping the scanner impatiently.

“Unit 23, Ranger Blackwood calling in the arrest of Caldwell,” the voice on the scanner finally cut through the static. His heart raced at the mention of both their names, feeding his twisted fixation.

“Finally got him, didn’t you?” The creepy man chuckled under his breath, his free hand fumbling in the glove compartment. He pulled out a crumpled newspaper clipping detailing Ranger Blackwood’s recent exploits and laid it carefully on the passenger seat, ensuring her photo remained visible. He ran his fingers over the image of her face, tracing the contours of her jawline and the curve of her lips.

He imagined the exact expression she would have when he confronted her – the look of shock and realization that would pass over those mesmerizing brown eyes before they closed forever. That vision fueled his resolve, each mile bringing him closer,

He picked up speed in the unmarked cruiser, smiling to himself.

Sometimes, the farmer had to cull the herd.

Other times?

He preserved.

And Rachel Blackwood had been a thorn in his side long enough, like a wild mare ready to be broken.

He nodded to himself.

She also had Caldwell.

Dr. Caldwell had been... a vector. A source, in many ways.

In fact, it was at Caldwell's when the man had *first* spotted the wounded lamb. The one who was now moaning and protesting her bindings from the backseat.

He glanced at Ms. Carter, where she lay sprawled across the seats in the back.

Tears streamed down her face, and her hands were bound in front of her.

She was plain thing, up close. An ugly duckling.

She also had a limp.

Yes... yes, he would take care of her soon enough.

"Calm down," he said firmly, staring into the mirror. "Your misery will be over soon."

Wide eyes stared at him from the back seat, terror filling her gaze. She protested through her gag with faint, mewling sounds.

The man chuckled, relishing the fear in her eyes. He reached into the glove compartment once again, this time pulling out a small, sharp knife. He twirled it in his hand, admiring the glint of moonlight off the blade.

"Don't worry, little lamb," he cooed, turning to face her fully.

Ms. Carter's eyes widened in horror as he leaned over the backseat and pressed the blade against her cheek. A thin line of blood appeared, but the man paid it no mind. He was too focused on the thrill of the moment, the rush of power he felt as he dominated his prey.

The darkness of the night seemed to envelop the police car like a shroud, enhancing the eerie atmosphere that had settled around the man. His breath fogged up the windshield, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. The dim glow of the dashboard cast sinister shadows across his face, emphasizing his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks.

“Damn you, Caldwell,” he muttered, gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity. “You were supposed to help me, not betray me.”

The thought of Caldwell being his counselor – someone who was meant to heal him – only intensified his hatred. It was a bitter irony that the person he had once trusted implicitly now stood in the way of his mission.

Suddenly, the scanner sparked to life again on the desolate road. “Ranger Blackwood calling for backup at mile marker 34. I’ve got a flat tire and need assistance,” the scanner crackled to life, jolting the man out of his thoughts.

“Backup... Ranger Blackwood needs backup,” he repeated, his voice thick with anticipation. He couldn’t believe his luck; it was as if fate had handed him the perfect opportunity on a silver platter. The corners of his mouth turned up in a sinister smile as his mind raced, already plotting out his next move.

“Roger that, Ranger Blackwood,” he responded through clenched teeth, feigning concern. “I’m close by. Hang tight. Help is on the way.”

The woman in the backseat let out a faint whimper, but it was lost to the rush of air as he rolled down his windows and picked up the speed.

The night air gusted in through the open window of the police car, chilling the man’s skin as he tore down the unlit road. His knuckles turned white with the grip he had on the steering wheel, his jaw clenched tightly. He glanced at the gun resting on the passenger seat, a sinister grin forming on his face.

“Can’t forget you,” he murmured to himself, reaching for the weapon. The cold metal felt heavy in his hand as he took a

moment to check the chamber – fully loaded, just the way he wanted it. Satisfied, he returned the gun to its place and shifted his focus back to the task at hand.

His foot pressed harder on the gas pedal, the engine roaring in response as the speedometer needle climbed higher. The thrill of the chase electrified him, each passing mile marker bringing him closer to his prey.

The night seemed to close in around the speeding police car, trees and shrubs mere blurs in the darkness. The car's tires screeched on the slick asphalt, only just maintaining their grip as the vehicle tore around each bend.

Ahead, he spotted a black marring of the sky. Storm clouds rolling across the night.

The storms out here could come quick, blown by the wind over flat terrain.

A downpour pattered the ground, staining dusty road black ahead of him.

The sound of the rain joined the symphony of sobbing from the backseat.

He felt a cold thrill.

The storm's wrath seemed to intensify as the man's police car veered around a bend, its headlights carving through the darkness. Suddenly, he entered the storm. The rain pelted the windshield, and the wind howled like a beast ravenous for prey. As he approached his destination, the sight of Ranger Blackwood's car on the side of the road emerged from the shadows, a vulnerable beacon in the night.

Right there, at the mile-marker, sleek and isolated, like a doe that had wandered from the herd.

"Finally," he muttered under his breath. His heart pounded in anticipation, adrenaline pumping through his veins as he slowed down the patrol car, carefully parking it behind her vehicle. He glanced at the rearview mirror, ensuring no one else was approaching, and stealthily reached for his gun.

He stepped out into the fierce storm, the cold rain instantly drenching him. With his gun hidden behind his back, he began to approach her car, every step heavy. The wind howled in protest, but it did nothing to deter him.

As he closed in on her vehicle, he noticed that the driver's door was open, exposing the dark interior. His pulse quickened, and a thrill of excitement surged through him.

Heart pounding. Rain relentless. Footsteps echoed.

He approached the side of the car, gun in hand. A figure was sitting in the front seat. He smiled, raised his gun, pointing it through the window.

The figure inside was a silhouette, hard to see through the rain-streaked window on the side of the road.

But it didn't matter.

He didn't need to *see* his prey.

He aimed the gun, pointing it. And then he tapped on the window.

Rachel wasn't going to die.

She was going to *breed*.

The figure inside the vehicle didn't react.

He frowned, tapping harder on the window with his gun.

And then he leaned in and froze.

His eyes widened.

The figure sitting in the front seat *wasn't* Rachel Blackwood.

It was Theo Caldwell.

The man was slumped forward, his head resting against the steering wheel. Both his hands were cuffed. He was asleep.

What the hell?

Suddenly, there was grumbling sound like thunder, but it hadn't originated from the clouds above.

Rather, it had come from behind him.

He whirled around, eyes wide.

Headlights flared from his own car. A figure had slipped into his vehicle without him knowing.

He let out a desperate shout as the vehicle surged forward, attempting to cut him down where he stood.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Rachel had spotted the figure of Officer O'Connor creeping up to the side of her window.

She'd been watching from behind the mulberry shrubs on the side of the road, just as she'd intended.

But then, in a sudden lull, as if the storm had briefly hesitated, she'd heard the whimper through the open door. A woman pleading for help.

Rachel had spotted wide eyes over a tight gag peering from the back seat at her, and she'd been forced to make a quick decision.

Caldwell had told her everything.

About his PTSD clients. About some of the fantasies that Officer O'Connor had shared. About how O'Connor had *recognized* Ms. Carter from a car crash years ago.

But other parts he'd left out, and she'd intuited.

His injured hand. He had injuries on his leg, too. An accident, years ago. A lifetime of rejection on dating apps. For promotions. Rejected by some clients. Turned away again and again. He'd wanted to prove his fitness—that *he* wasn't the weak one. It had festered as he'd dwelled on his envy.

And it had set him on a downward spiral.

She doesn't deserve to live! She's too weak...

That's what Caldwell reported him saying before letting O'Connor go as a client.

The police officer had been furious.

Furious enough, it seemed, to kill.

He'd taken out his vengeance on the other clients of Caldwell...

And now he was here for *them*.

Rachel knew how to trap a predator, though—she'd used herself as bait. Used Caldwell as bait.

She'd known O'Connor was out on patrol, because she'd tracked Carter's phone. She'd seen the woman zig-zagging up and down the highways, following a patrol vehicles pattern.

She'd surmised what had happened, and now the proof was in the pudding.

Carter was tied in the back seat.

O'Connor was sneaking towards her car, gun in hand. Caldwell was unconscious in the front seat from where his alcohol use had finally caught up with him.

And Rachel moved now, fast. She slipped into the front seat of the stationary vehicle. The headlights shone, she floored the pedal.

“Stay down!” Rachel warned the woman in the backseat.

And their car lurched forward, springing like a panther as it charged towards O'Connor's back.

But the beat cop reacted fast. He spun around, eyes wide in the bright headlights. He raised his gun.

Then he dodged out of the way, shooting at her car and shattering the window. Rachel cursed as she felt a shard of glass scatter across her face. Rachel was forced to retreat, her tires screeching as she threw the vehicle into reverse.

O'Connor tried to fire again. This time, Rachel's own weapon was in hand.

She wasn't Ethan.

She fired back, and O'Connor cursed, ducking back out of sight as bullets pinged off the hood of the car, sparking in the night, under the thrashing rain.

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest as she backed up the car, trying to create some distance between them and O'Connor. She knew she couldn't stay in this spot for long, or she'd be a sitting duck.

Rachel muttered to herself, her eyes scanning the area for any sign of him as she backed away.

Suddenly, O'Connor appeared from the side of the parked police car and started running towards her vehicle.

The sight of him *running* at her gave her pause. What the hell was he doing?

He'd abandoned his gun, and in one hand held a knife.

She had a flash of insight that filled her with horror.

He wanted her alive.

He shouted, and leapt forward, into the air.

She was forced to slow or risk slamming into the parked police cruiser, but this allowed O'Connor a chance to hit the front of the car and roll up towards the shattered windshield.

She heard the sound of impact, his gasp as air left his lungs.

But this didn't slow him.

He'd angled so his body would roll, and roll it did. Right up against the shattered windshield.

Pieces of glass jutted every which way, blocking his progress. But the glass was weakened, shot to pieces.

And now, he reached out with his knife, his other hand finding the grooves in the hood, holding on as she tried to back up again, veering sideways to shake him.

His arm strained, and he yelled fiercely as he held onto the groove in the top of the hood with his blood-stained fingers.

Now that he was so close, she had a good look at him for the first time.

His features were gaunt, and his eyes were wild and crazed. Blood dripped from a deep cut on his forehead, and his clothes were tattered and torn.

Rachel's heart raced as she realized that this man was not going to give up.

He continued slamming his knife into the windshield, shattering more glass.

He was trying to *break through* the remaining portion of the windshield to reach her.

His hilt hit the glass again. Again. Pieces scattered across her lap.

She was increasing speed, going faster, faster. She raised her own gun, but he lunged *through* the glass with a scream, grabbing at the weapon. She shot once.

He tore through his hand, but this didn't stop him.

Though his hand was now punctured, bloody, he managed to rip her gun away.

And then he screamed, "Pull over! Now!"

His knife was gone. He'd dropped it. His gun was in his hand once more.

He was pointing through the shattered glass.

But he wasn't aiming at her.

His one hand was bleeding horribly, but the other clutched the gun, pointing directly at the captive's head where she lay in the backseat.

"I said pull over, or I waste her!" he screamed.

She was slowing down now, her mind racing. But there was no obvious solution.

Rachel's stomach churned with sickening fear as she watched O'Connor's hand tremble on the gun. The captive in the backseat was a young woman, no more than mid twenties, and she looked up at Rachel with terrified eyes. Rachel knew she had to act fast before O'Connor pulled the trigger.

She slowly eased her foot off the gas pedal, bringing the car to a stop. O'Connor's wild eyes darted between Rachel and the captive, and Rachel could feel the tension in the air. He was breathing heavily, bleeding everywhere.

"Get out of the car," O'Connor growled at Rachel, his gun still trained on the captive.

Rachel hesitated for a second, then slowly opened the door and stepped out. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she could feel the sweat beading on her forehead.

O'Connor motioned for her to come around to the front of the car. She did as she was told, keeping her eyes on the gun in his hand.

"Turn around!" he snapped.

She stared at him, warily.

"I said turn around!" he screamed.

Reluctantly, she complied.

She heard him take a step towards her, could feel the weapon in his hand swinging towards the back of her head.

He wanted to knock her unconscious. Wanted to take her alive... she shivered. And do what?

She didn't want to know.

But as he tried to strike, as he shifted his weight, she knew she had one shot.

One shot for her and for the captive.

The gun came down on the back of her head, but she twisted at the waist last moment, catching his arm with both of her hands.

She twisted his arm, and he cried out as she flung him over her hip. Perfectly executed.

How many times had Aunt Sarah made her drill the same motion? Judo was often useful for helping a smaller opponent overcome a larger one.

O'Connor hit the ground with a thud, the gun flying out of his hand. Rachel quickly scrambled over to it, grasping the weapon and training it on him.

"Get up," she ordered, her voice shaking slightly.

O'Connor groaned, clutching his injured arm.

Rachel could feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins as she stood over him.

“Please,” the captive whimpered from the back seat.
“Please don’t hurt me.”

Rachel’s heart ached at the sound of the girl’s voice. She knew she had to get her to safety.

“It’s going to be okay,” Rachel said softly. “Just stay in the car.”

O’Connor was glaring up at Rachel now. He’d pushed slowly to his feet at her command and clutched at his wounded arm. His bloody hand was mangled and dripping.

He looked like something out of a waking nightmare under the clouds above, the droplets of rain pelting them.

“You’re an idiot,” he said, a snarl in his voice. “You’re lying to her. It won’t be okay. Never. Not for her. She’s damaged goods, Blackwood. Don’t you see?”

“Be quiet. Hands behind your head. Now!”

He didn’t comply. Instead, he took a step towards her, his foot squelching in the mud. “You and I could have replenished the herd. But her...” He pointed an accusing finger at the woman. “I saw her years ago. I gave her *years* to recover, but she’s still weak! Still a broken little thing!”

“That’s why you killed them?”

“I called them!” he screamed at her. The madness was visible in his eyes. “I did what nature does. What any good farmer would do! I helped them. I gave them mercy. This cruel world doesn’t know mercy!”

“You’re lying to me and yourself to justify your own evil,” she said calmly. “Now stop moving towards me, or I’ll shoot you.”

She said it matter-of-factly, her voice as cold as the raindrops slipping down her cheek.

He took another step towards her. He shook his head, “You wouldn’t. I’m unarmed.”

He was within lunging distance now.

“I said stop,” she said quietly.

He took another step towards—

Crack. Crack.

Two gunshots.

Both to his chest.

He toppled, hitting the ground in a pool of his own blood, under the rain.

She was moving already, lunging into the car for the police radio. “Backup needed. Officer down. Paramedics at my location. I repeat, backup needed. Now!”

Her mind was spinning. She glanced in the mirror and spotted the woman in the back staring in horror at the dying man.

Rachel lowered the receiver for a second and whispered, “Look at me. Not at him. Look at me.”

The woman in the backseat nodded, then closed her eyes completely.

Good enough, Rachel thought.

The rainstorm continued around them, and the killer had stopped moving where he lay in the mud.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Rachel lay in the sterile hospital bed, her body adorned with bandages that covered the wounds from her recent ordeal. The rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor underscored the quietness of the room, punctuated only by the soft hiss of the oxygen she breathed through a nasal cannula.

She was currently in the middle of pulling off the nasal breathing device, having decided this was clearly overkill.

“Smoke inhalation my ass,” she muttered under her breath, peeling off medical tape from the bridge of her nose.

She winced as she moved. But felt weak for showing the pain at all, and returned her expression to something a bit more impassive.

Suddenly, the door to her hospital room opened with a gentle creak, and Ethan Morgan stepped inside, his face etched with worry. As he approached Rachel’s bedside, his gaze fell upon the array of medical equipment surrounding her. Although she was on the mend, it was evident that she had been through a harrowing experience.

“Hey, Rachel,” Ethan said softly, his voice tinged with concern.

She gave him a hard look. “Don’t give me that shit.”

He blinked. “W-what?” Then he pointed at the oxygen tube. “Are you supposed to remove that?”

“Yeah,” she said simply. “And you know what shit.”

“I... was just stopping by to see how you’re doing.”

“Fine,” she said, propping up in the bed and keeping her glare on Ethan. “I’m fine. Don’t use that mothering tone when you talk to me. And don’t look at me like that.”

Ethan looked completely taken aback from this blitz assault against his every mannerism.

Rachel watched as Ethan's face fell, and she couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. In many ways, he really was like a scorned puppy.

But she couldn't stand pity.

Not in the slightest. She had grown up without the luxury of pity... or compassion, really. Her aunt had been both father and mother... Distant in both roles, but doing her best. Rachel hadn't grown up with much nurturing. She'd been trained. Been honed into a weapon.

And now, it was clear to her that everyone was overreacting to mostly superficial wounds. She needed to get out of this damn place.

She was pulling at a bandage on her arm when Ethan said, "O'Connor died."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. But don't blame yourself."

She looked at him. "I don't," she said simply. "I blame him." She considered him for a moment, and he didn't reply at first.

It was almost as if he *wanted* her to feel bad but wanted to assure her not to. But she didn't feel bad. She'd shot a psychopath to save a life. To protect herself.

The blame for how things had transpired rested squarely on the shoulders of the killer himself.

Ethan didn't seem to know how to reply, though. He simply said, "Oh..."

He trailed off, and she held his gaze as if challenging him to make an issue of it.

She said, "He put himself in danger. Put us in danger. How's Carter?"

"She's fine. Asked for you a couple of times."

Rachel allowed herself a rare smile. She swung her legs over the bed. "Here, help me," she commanded.

“Are you sure you’re supposed to be moving around?”

“I’m checking out,” she retorted. “Enough damn hospital food.”

Ethan looked panicked at this, but he hurried over to help her rise from the bed.

Her whole body ached, but she refused to say it.

“And don’t get any ideas,” she said, “of sneaking a pack. This hospital gown is closed in the back.”

“I wasn’t...” he frowned. “Trying to even the score.”

She smirked, leaning against him and allowing him to carry her weight as she hobbled towards the door. Her knee was bruised from the collision in the car. Her chest ached from hitting the muddy ground. And her right arm was covered in glass cuts.

As they made their way down the hallway, Rachel couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief. She was finally leaving the hospital, and she could already feel the fresh air outside.

Ethan was saying something, but she was ignoring him. She didn’t need to be convinced to remain cooped up in a hospital bed.

She needed her freedom. Needed to leave.

She picked up the pace, still hobbling along, but determined to escape the hospital.

Still, it was nice to have Ethan Morgan on her arm. The handsome, tall ranger was not just easy on the eyes, but gentle in his demeanor. A golden retriever. A puppy of a man...

But not entirely. He’d handled Jeb Clark expertly. He was an excellent shot too.

She nodded in appreciation, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers as they moved towards the nearest elevator.

The partnership was working out, she decided.

At least for a while longer.

Epilogue

As Ethan pulled away from the hospital parking lot, wincing apologetically at the nurse who'd tried to bring Rachel back to her room, Rachel turned her attention towards the street ahead.

Ethan moved slowly, clearly not wanting to jar her or cause any further pain.

But in her estimate, the doctors and her higher-ups had overreacted to the whole thing.

She shook her head, shifting in her seat at Ethan's side.

Ethan was saying something, but she was distracted. she frowned; then she paused, hesitating at the vibrating phone in her gown's front pocket.

She pulled out the device.

"Who is it?" Ethan asked curiously.

She just shook her head.

It wasn't a call, but rather a notification.

From the security camera she'd set up in her family's old home.

She stared at the screen.

Someone was inside the house.

"What the hell..." she muttered under her breath.

She stared at the notification.

Someone was sneaking around her parents' house.

Someone had been caught on camera.

But who? Why?

And did it have something to do with her parents' disappearance?

The phone buzzed again. And she clicked the video feed, widening it to fill the screen.

She stared at the image on the screen, shock jolting through her body.

A figure she didn't recognize, wearing a dark hood and thick sweater was sneaking around the backyard of her parents' old place.

Rachel felt a sudden rush of adrenaline as she watched the figure on the screen. Her instincts told her that something was terribly wrong. She tried to zoom the camera in to get a better look at the person, but the image was too grainy.

"What is it?" Ethan was saying, staring at her expression. "Are you okay? Should I turn back to the hospital?"

For a brief moment, Rachel considered calling the police. To have them respond to the intruder.

But now, she said, "Can we make a stop? It isn't too far from here."

"Sure, where?"

For a moment, she paused. She wasn't sure how much she could trust Ethan Morgan.

But then she made up her mind. She needed to investigate this on her own.

"Can we stop at my parents' old house? I just need to check on something," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Ethan looked at her, concern etched on his face. "Are you sure that's a good idea? You just got out of the hospital. Maybe we should wait until you're feeling better."

But she gave a resolute shake of her head.

Ethan paused, then said, "Fine, but only if you tell me what's going on."

She glanced at him, but his eyes had narrowed. He was putting his foot down.

She gave a small snort of laughter. “This is the hill you want to die on?”

“I mean, I’d rather not die. But the last time I let my partner go off without me, she ended up in the hospital.”

“Fair point.”

Rachel bit her lip. “I mean... I need you to drive me there. So I’m not wandering off.”

“Why?” he said more firmly.

She huffed in frustration. “It’s my parents old place, okay?”

“Your parents?” he said.

“It’s a long story.”

“We have time.”

“Maybe I don’t want to talk about it?”

“Fine. Then I can drop you off at home, and you can make your own travel arrangements,” he said.

She stared at him. Part of her was irritated, but another part of her realized there was more bite to this golden retriever than she’d first assumed.

She felt a grudging admiration for his backbone.

She said, “My parents disappeared when I was ten. I was raised by my aunt. The case was never solved. Someone’s been messing with things at my parents’ house, and now they triggered the camera.”

She said it deadpan, as if daring him to make a big deal out of it.

“That enough for you to start?”

He gaped.

“Y-yeah. Shit. Really? How come I didn’t know all that?”

“Why should you have?” she retorted.

But before she could say anything rude, or allow her defensiveness to create friction, her phone buzzed again.

She stared at the screen and went still.

Not one trespasser. No...

Three of them.

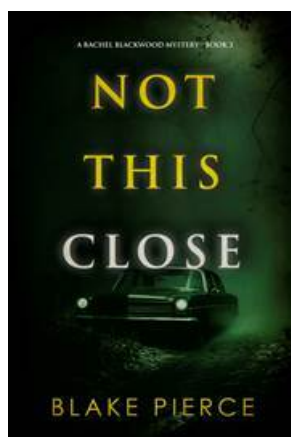
Three figures in dark hoods, hiding their faces and moving around her parents' old place.

Their postures were slouched, their voices low as they whispered incoherently.

Whoever they were, they were clearly up to no good.

"Here's the address," she said, turning her phone to Ethan.
"Now, please, *step on it.*"

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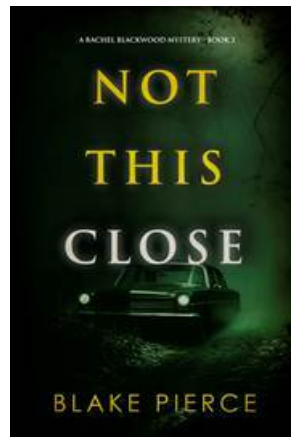
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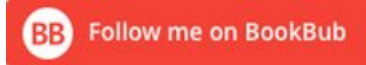
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