

A RACHEL BLACKWOOD MYSTERY—BOOK 3

NOT  
THIS  
CLOSE



BLAKE PIERCE

# NOT THIS CLOSE

(A Rachel Blackwood Suspense  
Thriller—Book Three)

BLAKE PIERCE

## **Blake Pierce**

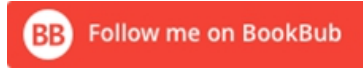
Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, 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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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to

hear from you, so please feel free to visit [www.blakepierceauthor.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.



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## CHAPTER ONE

Sophia's heart raced as she stole a glance at her boyfriend, their eyes meeting for a brief moment before she looked away, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" Sophia whispered, a hint of trepidation lacing her voice as she glanced over her shoulder, ensuring they remained unseen.

"Relax, Soph," Javier reassured her, his hand gently encircling her waist and drawing her closer along the wilderness path. "It's just a walk, nothing to worry about."

At eighteen, Sophia was a breathtaking vision of youth, her sun-streaked blonde hair falling in loose waves around her delicate, fair-skinned face. Her large, piercing blue eyes were windows to a curious and adventurous soul, always seeking the thrill of the unknown.

She bit her lip nervously, while her slender fingers fiddled with the hem of her t-shirt. Despite her uneasiness, there was an irresistible allure to the forbidden that drew her further into this secret tryst. It was unlike Sophia, who was typically responsible, but something about him made her daring, even reckless.

The object of her affection stood tall beside her, his sun-kissed skin glistening with sweat from their earlier activities. Javier was a striking young man, his chiseled features framed by dark, tousled curls that seemed to dance with each gust of wind. His intense brown eyes held a magnetic spark.

It was almost enough to make her forget how alone she was...

She didn't know Javier very well, and how often had she been warned by her mother not to wander off with strange men. Especially those who were nearly a decade older than her...

She shot him a shy, sidelong glance; they'd met at the resort... Only a week ago.

But things had moved fast between them, as if it were meant to be.

He guided her under an overhanging branch, moving further into isolation, the resort no longer visible behind them.

Sophia's heart raced as they stepped onto the soft sand of the beach. The natural beauty of Galveston Island surrounded them, with a canvas of endless blue sky overhead, meeting the shimmering waters at the horizon. Waves rolled in rhythmically, crashing on the shore with a soothing cadence that seemed to mock her inner turmoil.

"Wow, this place is breathtaking," Javier remarked, his hazel eyes reflecting the vibrant colors of the setting sun.

"Isn't it?" Sophia breathed in the salty air, momentarily forgetting her nerves. "I've always loved the ocean."

As they stood there, the wind whispered through the tall sea oats that lined the dunes, further emphasizing the isolation they sought. Their footprints were the only evidence of their presence on the once-pristine sands.

"Ready for our jog?" Javier asked, offering Sophia a warm smile that was meant to reassure her.

"Sure," Sophia replied, trying to mirror his enthusiasm. Her chest tightened with a mix of excitement and anxiety. She knew they were testing boundaries, but there was something magnetic about the thrill of it all – the secret rendezvous, the stolen moments away from prying eyes.

He was only a few years older than her... at least, that's what he'd told her.

As they began jogging along the shoreline, their feet sinking into the damp sand with each step, Sophia felt her body responding to the physical exertion. The rush of adrenaline coursed through her veins, pushing her to keep pace with Javier, whose strong legs effortlessly carried him across the uneven terrain.

The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over the sands of Galveston Island as Sophia and Javier continued to venture farther from their resort. She noticed how

the once-crowded beach had thinned out, now replaced by stretches of unspoiled shoreline that seemed to extend infinitely into the distance.

“Javier,” Sophia said, her eyes darting back toward the diminished coastline that held the outline of their hotel, “we should probably start heading back soon.”

“Come on, Soph,” he replied with a teasing grin. “Live a little! We’re finally alone, away from all the tourists and the noise. Let’s enjoy it while we can.”

“Fine,” she conceded, unable to resist his infectious enthusiasm.

As they reached a particularly secluded spot, Sophia paused, though.

She hesitated, panting under the shifting branches, and realizing just how alone they were.

She glanced at Javier, who took a step towards her, also breathing heavily and reaching up with one hand to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

“Come closer,” he murmured, flashing that charming smile.

But was it just her imagination, or did it look more lupine than it had back at the resort bar when they’d first met.

“Javier,” she murmured between breaths, “I... I can’t help but feel like we shouldn’t be out here.”

“Relax, Soph,” he assured her, his fingers brushing her arm. “We’re just enjoying each other’s company and this beautiful place. What could go wrong?”

He took a step towards her, but she found herself involuntarily stepping back.

It was one thing to be teasing and flirting with an older man where her sister could see...

But another thing entirely to come out here—so alone.

Galveston Island had been a bucket list trip for her. The island was located off the coast of Texas, and it was known for

its pristine beaches, crystal clear waters, and unique wildlife.

As Sophia looked out over the horizon, she noticed a flock of seagulls soaring overhead in perfect formation.

As she briefly stepped back, Sophia's foot slipped on the soft sand beneath her, causing her to stumble.

"Whoa!" she gasped, as Javier darted in, fast.

She let out a little yelp, but he'd only been trying to catch her before she fell. He steadied her, concern etched in his handsome features.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice laced with worry.

"Y-yeah," she stammered, feeling heat rise in her cheeks. "Just... tripped over my own feet, I guess."

They shared a sheepish laugh, the tension momentarily broken.

Sophia felt the sand beneath her toes shift as she took a step forward, the grains warm and silky against her skin. The sun blazed overhead in a brilliant blue sky where its warm caress still stretched across the horizon while the orb of light slowly drifted nearer and nearer to the distant mountain peaks, casting a golden glow on the vast expanse of beach that stretched out before them.

"I... I want to go back," she said slowly.

Javier was holding her hand. "Oh, no... no, come now. You don't."

"I do," she said, more insistently.

He gave her a playful little tug closer. Except it didn't seem *all* that playful.

"Javier, please. Let me go!"

He frowned at her, and said, "You know... I wasn't totally honest with you back at the resort."

She swallowed, staring at his eyes.

"Wh-what about?" she stammered.

“I...” but then he frowned, trailing off. “Hey, what’s that?” Javier suddenly asked, his curiosity piqued by something protruding from the sand near their feet.

“Where?” Sophia said instinctively as she squinted, shielding her eyes from the sun’s glare as she tried to see what had captured his attention.

“Right there,” he pointed, his finger hovering over an odd-shaped object half-buried in the sand.

The salty breeze tousled Sophia’s hair as she and Javier stared down at the object.

It looked like a tree root rising from the sand—except it wasn’t like any of the other tree roots surrounding them.

It was as if this one had been ripped up, the root ends split and spread.

Sophia, if only for something else to orient her attention towards, reached out and tugged at the root.

It was far, far too soft to be a root.

She felt a chill down her spine, and instantly, her stomach twisted in squeamish distaste.

“Javier... is this...?” Sophia’s voice trembled, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

She let out a sudden small scream despite herself, stumbling back and kicking up sand.

Javier jolted in place.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. “It’s a human hand, Soph.”

Indeed, as they stared towards the item, Sophia could make out the fingers, pale and lifeless, half-buried in the sand. Panic gripped Sophia’s heart, and she could feel Javier’s hand tightening around hers.

“We need to call the police,” she said, her voice shaking with fear.



But Javier looked around, stammering, “N-no... why get them involved? This isn’t our fault. We didn’t do this.”

She found this to be a very odd reaction to what she’d said.

But all she could focus on was the hand rising out of the sand like some corpse reaching towards the sunshine.

She knew they had to do something, but Javier’s reluctance made her uneasy.

“We have to call the police, Javier,” she said firmly. “This is serious.”

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes darting around as if trying to come up with a plan.

“Okay, fine,” he finally relented. “But let’s not make a big scene. We don’t want to ruin our vacation over this.”

Sophia nodded, grateful that he had seen reason. She pulled out her phone and dialed 911.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“No reception,” she said.

“Really?” Let me see.

He tried to snatch the phone from her hand, but she pushed his hand away.

“Hey!” he snapped.

And suddenly, his voice grew cold and harsh.

This time, when he snatched her forearm, he was none too gentle about it.

“Hey!” she said.

“I told you,” he snapped, “No cops!”

He yanked her phone free and chucked it off into the woods.

For a moment, she just stared, uncertain what she was seeing.

She blinked a couple of times, opened her mouth, closed it again, and then took a couple of stumbling steps back.

“Javier, what the hell?” she exclaimed, her voice rising in fear.

“Relax, Sophia,” he said, a sickening smile spreading across his face. “We’re all alone out here. Just you and me. And this is a chance for us to really get to know each other.”

Sophia felt her heart racing in her chest, and she tried to pull away from him, but he was too strong for her.

“Let me go,” she begged, tears streaming down her face.

But he only tightened his grip on her arm, pulling her closer to him.

“I’m sorry, Sophia,” he said, his voice dripping with false sympathy. “But what sort of idiot just—you know—calls the cops over nothing! We don’t even know what this thing is.”

He kicked at the hand again.

She gaped at him, and then realized just how far they were.

She was holding a phone that hadn’t connected to the cops—no help was coming.

No reception.

And then, before she could even scream, he brought his other hand up and struck her across the face.

Sophia felt the world spin around her, and she stumbled backward, falling onto the sand.

She tried to rise, but as she did, she spotted him surging in.

In one hand, he’d snatched up a rock from the shore.

She screamed this time, managing to cry out before he brought the rock swinging down on her head.

Suddenly, all went black.

## CHAPTER TWO

The moon cast its ghostly glow over the abandoned house, enveloping it in a spectral veil—a home that had once been exactly that. A home. But it had become a tomb in Rachel Blackwood’s mind. Trees surrounded the property like ancient sentinels, their branches reaching out with skeletal fingers towards the decaying structure. Rachel and Ethan sat in their car, parked just far enough away to remain unseen but close enough to keep an eye on any movement.

“God, I can’t believe I used to live here,” Rachel murmured, her hands tightening on the steering wheel as she stared at the crumbling walls of her parents’ old home.

Ethan glanced at her. “Mind not usin’ the Lord’s name, please?” he spoke in his usual polite, southern drawl, and he punctuated the sentence with a faint, nervous little smile, as if worried she might be upset.

Quickly, he added, “I bet it’s strange for you, huh?”

She ignored the first part, knowing that the two of them had such disparate upbringings that there was no point trying to extricate his sense of decorum.

Besides, usually, Ethan was like an excited golden retriever—eager to please, and overly energetic.

Rachel nodded, taking a deep breath to steady herself. She kept glancing at the phone in her hand where she’d spotted the three intruders on the hidden security camera at her parents’ old home.

No movement. The camera showed a blank room.

Where had they gone?

“Anything?” he prompted.

“Shit all,” she replied. “Okay, let’s go.”

They exited the car, moving cautiously towards the house, their footsteps muffled by a thick carpet of dead leaves. The wind whispered through the trees, carrying with it the scent of

decay, a reminder that nature was slowly reclaiming this once-beloved home.

As they approached the house, Rachel's heart pounded against her chest, a silent drumbeat that seemed to echo in the stillness of the night. She couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding, as though unseen eyes were watching their every move. But there was no time for fear; she needed to focus on the task at hand.

"Remember," Ethan whispered, his voice barely audible, "we need to stay quiet. If anyone's inside, we don't want to give them any reason to bolt."

She didn't reply. Doing so, she felt, would've defeated the purpose of the warning itself. Years of living in the woods had honed her senses, sharpening her observation skills and reflexes to a razor's edge. As they approached the house, she scanned the area for any signs of activity – a flicker of light behind a window, a stray footstep in the underbrush. But aside from the eerie creaking of the trees and the distant hooting of an owl, all was silent.

Together, they crept closer to the dilapidated building, each step measured and deliberate. As they neared the structure, Rachel could see the remnants of her childhood home – the broken swing hanging limply from a tree, the overgrown rosebushes that now resembled tangled brambles. A pang of nostalgia pierced through her determination, but she pushed it away, focusing on the mission at hand.

Leaning against the wind, Rachel reached for the rusted gate. The hinges groaned under the pressure, releasing a guttural creak that echoed through the night. She winced, taking note of the sound and its potential to alert anyone inside her childhood home.

"Okay, let's move," she whispered, nodding to Ethan. He nodded back, his eyes reflecting the steely determination that matched her own.

Moonlight wove through the branches overhead, casting eerie shadows on the ground as they moved toward the side entrance. Rachel's heart raced in her chest, and she focused on

the rhythmic crunching of leaves beneath their steady footsteps.

The side door was barely visible, hidden behind thick ivy that had claimed the wall over the years. As Rachel reached out to open it, she found herself momentarily entranced by the intertwining vines, a vivid reminder of nature's relentless claim on abandoned spaces.

Another part of her recognized this for what it was...

Her subconscious wants to flee.

She didn't want to set foot in this space.

She swallowed.

But she needed answers.

She'd set up the cameras in her parents' old place when she'd found evidence of squatters. No one knew what had happened to her parents all those years ago, and now... she hoped to find out.

The chances that these hoods wandering about were anything but copper thieves was low... but any lead was a lead on a cold case.

"Rachel, focus," Ethan urged gently, bringing her attention back to the task at hand. She nodded, her fingers gripping the cold metal handle.

She pushed the door open with deliberate care. It swung inward, revealing the dark hallway beyond. They exchanged a glance before slipping inside, their movements fluid and silent.

"Stay close," Rachel warned Ethan in a hushed tone, feeling the weight of memories pressing down on her. The scent of stale air and decay filled her nostrils, contrasting sharply with the fresh scent of the Texas night just outside the door.

Rachel and Ethan moved cautiously through the darkened hallway, their eyes scanning every shadow in search of the intruders. The wallpaper, once a vibrant blue, now hung in tatters like the shroud of a ghost, its edges curling away from the walls.

“Kitchen first,” Rachel whispered, her voice barely audible. Each word felt heavy, laden with the weight of the past she had long sought to escape.

Ethan nodded, his brow furrowed in concentration as they approached the door. It creaked open on rusty hinges, revealing the room where many of her childhood meals had been shared.

“Anything?” she asked, her heart pounding in her chest as they entered.

“Nothing so far,” Ethan replied, his gaze darting about the space. Dust coated the countertops, and cobwebs stretched between the cupboards like delicate lace. Yet there were no signs of disturbance, no indication that anyone had trespassed upon the memories held within these walls.

“Let’s move on,” Rachel said, swallowing the lump that inexplicably formed in her throat. She knew they had little time, and yet the house seemed to demand her attention, whispering secrets only she could hear.

They continued their search, methodically working their way through the living room and dining room, each space echoing with the ghosts of laughter and love that had once filled them. But still, there was no trace of the intruders.

“Upstairs,” Rachel urged, feeling a growing sense of urgency. She led the way, ascending the creaky staircase as silently as possible. The banister wobbled precariously beneath her touch, a testament to the decay that had taken root in her absence.

As they entered the master bedroom, Rachel felt a sudden chill race down her spine. The room was a shrine to the past, a time capsule preserving the memories of her parents in every object that adorned it.

“Over here,” she whispered sharply, her keen eyes catching sight of something amiss. The floorboards near the foot of the bed had been pried up, their edges splintered and frayed.

“What do you think they were after?” Ethan asked, concern lacing his voice as he joined her beside the damaged boards.

“Could be anything,” Rachel murmured, her mind racing as she tried to piece together the puzzle. “Money, valuables... or maybe even something more personal.”

She trailed off, frowning.

She stared at the splintered wood.

Her parents weren't wealthy—they never had been. Why would a group of vandals come in and pry up the floorboards?

She frowned, crossing her arms and staring at the splintered and frayed flooring. Nothing else had been disturbed. They'd come directly here... as if they'd *known* something was under the floorboards.

She stared into the dark gaps of the floor.

Cobwebs and rusted nails were all that met her inquisitive gaze. She bent slightly, peering in as if to study the wood like a cadaver.

Just as Rachel's hand brushed the sharp edge of the opening, a sudden flash of light caught her attention through the window.

Headlights.

Ethan turned sharply, too. He'd spotted it a split second after her.

She froze, her heart pounding in her chest as she peered out into the dark night. There, just beyond the edge of the property, she saw them - the three hooded intruders, hastily clambering into a nondescript black sedan parked on the quiet street.

“Rachel, what do we do?” Ethan whispered, his eyes wide. “They're skedaddling.”

“Cover your ears,” she warned Ethan. The intruders were preparing to speed off, no doubt eager to escape with whatever secrets lay hidden beneath the floorboards.

Unless they hadn't found anything.

It only took her a split second to reach a decision.

In one swift motion, she drew her gun from its holster, her grip steady and firm despite the tremor of anticipation that quivered through her fingers. As the car began to pull away, she took aim, focusing all her energy on the target before her.

"Sorry, boys," she muttered under her breath, and squeezed the trigger.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the still night, shattering the silence like the pane of glass. Rachel's shot found its mark; the front tire of the car exploded, sending the vehicle careening off course.

The car smashed headlong into a nearby light pole, its once-pristine body now crumpled and twisted like a discarded soda can.

"Nice shot," Ethan breathed, his eyes alight with a mixture of awe and relief. "You got them."

"Not yet," Rachel replied grimly, her gaze locked on the wreckage outside.

She double-checked, making sure the vehicle was incapacitated, and then she broke into a sprint, racing down the stairs and back out the front door.

As she ran, fleet-footed over crunching leaves, the beads braided into her bangs tapping against the side of her olive skin, her hawk-like gaze fixed on the intruders stumbling out of the wreckage with a desperate panic in their eyes. They glanced around wildly, searching for an escape route as they took off on foot.

"Rachel, wait!" Ethan called out as he gave chase behind her, but she was already moving.

The intruders glanced back, their faces ghostly pale beneath the moonlight. They increased their pace, desperately trying to put distance between themselves and the madwoman with the gun.



The world around her blurred into a kaleidoscope of colors as she closed the gap, her senses becoming one with the wind that whispered through the trees as she navigated the treacherous terrain with ease.

Branches snapped and leaves crunched beneath Rachel's boots as she raced through the dark forest, her heart pounding in her ears. The moonlight filtered through the canopy above, casting eerie shadows on the uneven terrain.

"Gotcha," she muttered under her breath, her eyes narrowing as they locked onto the slowest of the three intruders. He stumbled over a gnarled root, struggling to keep pace with his accomplices. Rachel felt a predatory grin spread across her face - he was hers now.

"Hey!" she called out, her voice sharp and ringing through the woods. The slower intruder glanced back, panic etched across his features.

The two others were ahead of him now, and they didn't slow, cursing as they redoubled their pace.

The slower, stumbling man's eyes widened, and he picked up speed, his legs pumping frantically. But it was no use; Rachel was already closing in. As the other two intruders disappeared into the darkness, she focused her attention on her prey.

"Please!" the man gasped, desperation lacing his words. "I don't want any trouble!"

She didn't bother to reply. Talk was cheap. With the grace of a panther, she leaped forward, tackling him to the ground.

"Get off me!" the intruder shouted, struggling against Rachel's iron grip. She held him down, and her fingers found the edge of his hood, and she ripped it away from his face.

She didn't recognize him.

He had dark hair, scruffy facial hair, and piercing blue eyes that glinted with fear and anger. He struggled against her, but she held him fast, her eyes cold and calculating as she assessed him.

“Who are you?” she demanded, her deep brown eyes boring into his soul. “Tell me why you were in my house.”

“Please,” he whimpered. “It’s all a misunderstanding!”

“Wrong answer,” Rachel growled, tightening her grip on his collar.

As the man’s eyes darted around, searching for an escape that didn’t exist, Rachel knew she had him cornered. He was going to talk, and she was going to make him.

The night air was thick with tension, and the distant cries of cicadas formed a haunting soundtrack to the unfolding drama. She studied the intruder’s face, still trying to place it, still half expecting to see a familiar visage – perhaps someone from her past that held a grudge or sought vengeance.

Instead, she found herself gazing into the eyes of a stranger. His face, twisted in fear and desperation, held no secrets for her. It only deepened the mystery and fueled her need for answers.

“Who sent you?” Rachel demanded, her voice tight with barely restrained fury. “Why are you here?”

“La-lawyer,” was all the man could stammer out, his breath coming in shallow gasps. “I want my lawyer.”

“Wrong answer again,” Rachel snarled, her grip tightening on his collar. Her mind raced, trying to piece together the puzzle before her. Something told her this man wasn’t working alone – and the others had managed to slip through her fingers.

She pressed, searching his face for any sign of recognition or deceit. “Tell me everything you know, or I swear I’ll make you wish you’d never set foot on this property.”

“I don’t know shit!!” he demanded, his body quivering with fear under her unyielding grasp.

“Useless,” Rachel spat, her frustration mounting. She glanced back at the house, the place where her parents’ lives had been stolen away from them. This man was just one piece of the puzzle, but she needed to unearth the whole truth.

“Fine,” she growled, her eyes narrowing as she weighed her options. “You want a lawyer? You’ll get one – right after I take you in and charge you with breaking and entering, trespassing, and anything else I can think of.”

“Please, just let me go,” he begged, his voice barely a whisper as tears streamed down his face. “I’m not the one you want.”

He didn’t seem like some tough guy... he seemed like... a frat boy. Or some accountant.

He was actually trembling under her, and he looked scared.

“Maybe not,” Rachel conceded, her mind already planning their next move – tracking down the other intruders and following this thread to its bitter end. “But you’re a start.”

“Rachel,” Ethan called out from the shadows, his concern evident in his voice. “We need to get him out of here before anyone else shows up.”

“Right,” she agreed, unwilling to let her emotions dictate her actions any longer. The wind rustled through the trees above them, a gentle reminder that nature was always watching, always waiting.

“Let’s go,” she said, hauling the trembling man roughly to his feet. “You’re going to tell us everything we want to know, or so help me.”

“La-lawyer,” he choked out once more, but Rachel could see the resignation in his eyes. He was trapped, and he knew it.

A cacophony of night sounds assaulted Rachel’s ears as she yanked the intruder to his feet, her grip firm around his bicep. The earthy scent of damp soil filled her nostrils, mingling with the acrid smell of burning rubber from the crashed car.

“Get up,” she growled, her voice low and menacing, like the distant roll of thunder. “You’re under arrest.”

The man stumbled as he complied, his face a mask of terror beneath the moonlight filtering through the dense foliage overhead. Rachel gave him a forceful shove towards

their waiting car, hidden amidst the shadows of the tree-lined street. She was aware of Ethan close behind her, his presence as reassuring as a well-timed rainstorm breaking the oppressive heat of a Texan summer.

“Wh-what are you gonna do to me?” the intruder stammered, his eyes darting between Rachel and Ethan.

“Depends on how cooperative you are,” Rachel replied, her stare as unwavering as the roots of an ancient oak.

“La-lawyer,” the man repeated once more, sweat beading on his brow as if he were standing in the midday sun.

She squeezed his arm tighter, feeling her temper rising, but she bit back a retort, gave him another shove, and pushed him towards their waiting vehicle.

## CHAPTER THREE

Rachel woke with a start, laying in her own bed, back at her sparsely furnished apartment.

It took her a second to remember what had happened as her head bounced off the pillow.

“Shit,” she muttered, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. And, because Ethan wasn’t in earshot, she added, “God dammit...” She closed her eyes, and an image flash of a face passed across her mind.

“Smug jerk,” she muttered.

The intruder had lawyered up the moment he’d gotten back to the station, and after processing him, she’d returned home empty-handed.

She had spent the night tossing and turning, haunted by dreams of her parents and the unsolved mystery that surrounded their disappearance. Shadows danced on the bedroom walls as the first light of dawn began to creep through the window. She rubbed her eyes, struggling to force them open against the heaviness of exhaustion.

“Crap,” she whispered to herself, realizing how late it was. She couldn’t afford to be late to work, not today.

With a sense of urgency, Rachel threw back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her feet met the cool hardwood floor, and she forced herself to stand despite the ache in her muscles.

Rachel’s phone vibrated incessantly on her bedside table, the sound drilling into her ears like a persistent woodpecker. Her flustered fingers fumbled for the device as she tried to find purchase on it, feeling as though her world was spinning off its axis.

She’d told the processing officers to contact her the moment the intruder was willing to speak.

“Come on, come on,” Rachel muttered under her breath, but she paused when she realized the steady stream of text messages had nothing to do with the man she’d arrested last

night. Her eyes widened when she saw Lily's name flash across the screen. A wave of guilt washed over her; she hadn't spoken to her childhood best friend in weeks, their bond fraying beneath the weight of her work.

*"Rachel, I really need to talk to you,"* the message read, Lily's desperation palpable even through the stark words on the screen.

*"Hey! Sorry, I've been swamped,"* Rachel typed quickly, her thumbs flying over the keys. *"Can we meet up later tonight?"*

*"Of course."* A pause, then another message. *"Stay safe out there, Rach. Don't break any hearts."*

Rachel snorted at the sign-off, gave a quick thumbs up, and then snatched her work clothes from where she'd left them discarded on the chair by her bed.

Her hat, on the other hand, had been treated with a bit more grace, and was resting on the antler-shaped hook by the door.

Her phone buzzed again.

This time it *was* work, but not the processing officers with the intruder.

Instead, Thomas Graywolf, her old mentor, had messaged.

*Where are you?* It said.

She cursed and moved in double-time.

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The moment Rachel stepped into Thomas's office, a sense of urgency washed over her. The dim light from the single lamp on his desk cast eerie shadows across the cramped space, and the strong aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. Ethan was already there, and the lanky southerner stood by the window, his tall frame silhouetted against the morning sun, his eyes focused on something outside.

"Rachel, good of you to join us," Thomas greeted her, his gravelly . His stern expression softened slightly as he glanced

at her weary face, revealing the deep concern that lay beneath his tough exterior. He motioned for her to take a seat across from him.

Thomas looked like something of a statesman, with a strong jaw, even stronger hands, and a crisp, charcoal gray suit. But his silver hair still hung in a traditional, braided style, and his leather boots were all Texas. On his wall, there was a wooden carved bas relief of two deer staring out from a forest. Rachel had long suspected that Thomas liked wood-carving in his spare time, but he'd never admitted it to her.

"Sorry," she muttered, "had something come up."

"I heard about your night-time shenanigans," Thomas said, crossing his arms, which only further emphasized the well-worn knuckles on his calloused hands. "No, don't look at Ranger Morgan. He didn't say a word. I got a call."

"Oh? About what?"

"Law firm saying you were harassing one of their clients."

"He was intruding in my parents' home," she shot back.

He nodded pensively. "So you *were* harassing him?"

"I mean... he ended up in a jail, didn't he?"

"As opposed to where?"

*A cabin somewhere... chained to a wall until he gave answers...* She didn't say the thought that crossed her mind. Instead, she just shrugged.

Thomas shook his head. "Fair enough, Blackwood."

"You'd mentioned this one was urgent."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Rachel. Are we holding up your busy schedule?"

She winced sheepishly, muttered an apology he likely didn't need or hear, and then listened as Thomas said, "Mhmm. Let's get straight to it," Thomas said, leaning forward in his own chair and resting his elbows on the desk. "We've had three women go missing on the beaches of Galveston Island. All within the past week."

“Missing?” Ethan asked, his voice tight. He turned away from the window, his brow furrowed.

“Missing,” Thomas continued, his eyes flicking between Rachel and Ethan. “And there’s no connection between the victims – different ages, backgrounds, social circles.”

“None of them turn up?”

“None.”

“Family’s... friends? No one sees or says anything?”

A quick shake of his head. “No one’s found anything. And people have been looking. At least, that’s what the authorities on Galveston say.”

“Galveston island, huh,” Rachel said. “I’ve never been.”

“Really?” Ethan asked, sounding surprised.

She shrugged.

“Well, you’re visiting now,” Thomas said, glancing between the two. He shot a look at Rachel. “Coast guard is waiting to take you to the port nearest the resort. Think you can play nice with coasters?”

“They started it last time,” Rachel replied.

Ethan shot her a look. “Oh? We’ve got beef with the coast guard?”

Rachel just shook her head. “It’s a long story. I borrowed a boat.”

“Stole a boat, according to their report,” Greywolf said, one gnarled finger rising.

“To chase a suspect.”

“One of *their* persons of interest,” Greywolf countered.

“Who’s side are you on?” she shot back.

“We’re all on the same side, Rachel. Think you can keep that in perspective?”

“No promises,” she muttered.



Greywolf rolled his eyes, but then, his tone sobered as he said, “If you need an extra reason to play nice, one of the missing women is native.”

Rachel let out a faint sigh. She nodded once, then—deciding there was no point in further dallying—she turned and strode through the door.

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The boat ride to the resort dock had passed in chilly silence.

Rachel didn’t recognize either of the coasties who’d been tasked with transporting the rangers to the location, but she supposed her reputation proceeded her.

“Borrowed a boat,” she muttered under her breath after she caught a dirty look from a handsome young man at the helm, but then she thought better of it, and dropped the issue. She tilted her hat back as they coasted into the dock.

Ethan was standing at her side, one hand braced against the rail, his sharp cheekbones standing out, flecked with sea spray.

He had an eager energy about him—as he so often did.

Sometimes, she envied Ethan Morgan’s unending reserves of rocket fuel.

Now, as the boat docked, Rachel and Ethan both stepped off onto the wooden boards of the jetty.

The scent of water lingered on the air, along with the odor of damp maple planks.

She quickly forgot the coast guard rocking on their boat behind her, and—if only briefly—even forgot the three reasons they were here to begin with.

Instead, she turned to acknowledge the breathtaking panorama of Galveston Island. Rachel’s eyes narrowed as she took in the landscape before her, the sun reflecting off the crystalline waves as they crashed against the shore. The salty sea air filled her nostrils, invigorating her senses with a sense of raw, untamed beauty.

“Wow,” Ethan murmured beside her, his own gaze fixed on the rolling dunes and swaying beach grasses that stretched along the coastline. “It’s hard to believe that something awful could happen in a place like this.”

“We don’t know anything awful *has* happened yet,” Rachel replied quickly. “Until we find a body, we’re not going to assume the worst.”

As much as she tried to focus on the natural splendor surrounding them, the dark cloud of the investigation loomed ever-present in her mind.

Ahead of them, two men were standing at the edge of the dock, both of them wearing pristine, white uniforms with golden collars, marking them as employees of the resort.

Behind the men, the resort almost seemed to blend into its natural surroundings—which was partially the reason Rachel hadn’t spotted it to begin with. But now, as she turned to acknowledge the multi-level structure, she was confronted by a spectacle of glass, wood, and ornamentation in the form of frills and stained glass that reflected the vibrant sunlight.

A parking lot was tastefully hidden by a copse of trees, but she could just make out the glimmer and glint of light reflecting off the metal vehicles.

The two men were both striding towards the rangers now. Each of the resort employees had a nametag. One of the men, named Carl, was tall and lean, with a face just a bit too thin to be considered *handsome*. The other man was also tall, but more thickset. He wasn’t fat, nor was he muscled—just... large. Like a lumberjack, or perhaps lumber itself. This man’s name was evidently Enrique.

Carl and Enrique came to a stop a few paces away from the Rangers.

“Greetings,” Enrique said, speaking in a faint accent. His olive complexion and wide smile suggested Hispanic descent, but native was possible. Rachel frowned again as she remembered Graywolf’s warning. A native girl missing on the resort...

Things often got complicated in such situations.

Now, though, she nodded at Enrique, and she extended a hand in greeting. “Ranger Blackwood. This is my partner, Ranger Morgan.”

“Good to meet you both. I’m—”

“Carl?” Ethan cut in. “Lucky guess.”

The employee just smiled patiently. He turned to Rachel. “I was told to help you in any way I could.”

“Told by who?” she said. “I didn’t realize we were in contact with anyone directly associated with the resort.”

Again, this received a patient smile, and this time, he turned his attention to Ethan. “I can show you their rooms, if you like?”

“Is that where they went missing?” Rachel said.

“No. The three women were all witnessed heading to the beach at the times of their disappearances,” he said, speaking matter-of-factly, but adding a little grimace to let the two rangers know just how distasteful he found the whole business. Was it performative? Or genuine.

Rachel felt as if one didn’t necessarily rule out the other. She considered their options for a moment. The rooms would always be there. Cops would be positioned outside the rooms, crime scene tape cordoning it off. Express commands would’ve been given to preserve the crime scenes.

But the waves, the wind, the wildlife... these things could wash away clues and tracks and scents... Besides, Rachel was an outdoorswoman.

She said, “Show us the beach where they went missing.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Rachel and Ethan stood on the long stretch of beach. The white sands extended before them; the two hotel employees stood a ways behind them, watching from where Rachel had told them to wait.

She didn't have time for resort lackeys.

Besides, the more boots, the more likely footprints would be trampled over.

On top of it, they were both mouth-breathers. It was like standing in an elevator with a vacuum cleaner to her ears.

Now, having left them behind, Rachel's senses were honed in on the closed beach.

A few signs, stretched across sawhorses stationed along the paths leading from the resort, all declared *Beach Closed: Police Order*.

"So... where do we start?" Ethan said, scanning the ground and stooping to one knee.

He reached out, touching his fingers against prints in the sand. He had a pensive, thoughtful look to his eyes.

"That's a hog print," she said quietly.

He quickly jerked his hand back from the indentation he'd been touching, cleared his throat and straightened, as if he were simply stretching.

"This way," she said simply, nodding along the beach. "Too many tracks here."

He fell into step behind her, and the two of them continued away from the resort employees until the watchful lackeys were just a distant memory obscured by the treeline along the cliff ridge.

Waves crashed against the shoreline with a rhythmic, soothing pulse as Rachel and Ethan began their search along the shores of Galveston Island. The salty sea breeze tugged at Rachel's hair while seagulls cawed overhead, contrasting sharply with the dark undertone of their mission. They walked

side by side along the beach, footprints sinking into the wet sand behind them.

“Nice day for a walk,” Ethan remarked, trying to lighten the mood. He glanced at Rachel, who remained stoic and focused, her eyes scanning the surroundings with an intensity that made him hesitate.

Rachel barely acknowledged his comment, her mind occupied with the task at hand. Growing up, she had learned to appreciate the beauty of nature but also respect its ability to hide secrets. She knew that it could be both a refuge and a prison, depending on one’s perspective.

“Look,” she said suddenly, pointing toward the road that ran parallel to the beach.

She noticed a faint trail where two people appeared to have recently left the pavement. Focusing on the area, she observed the slight disturbance in the vegetation and the subtle imprint of footsteps on the soft earth.

“Good eye,” Ethan complimented with genuine admiration.

“Come on,” she urged, leading the way toward the trail. “Let’s see where it takes us.” As they followed the faint path, the sounds of the ocean began to fade, replaced by an eerie silence that seemed to envelop them.

Rachel bent down, her fingers splaying over the sandy ground as she examined the prints before them. The indentations were shallow, barely visible to the untrained eye, but Rachel’s senses detected their presence as clearly as if they had been inked in black. “It looks like one of them was heavier than the other,” she murmured, tracing a fingertip along the deeper set of imprints. “And they were in a hurry; there’s a scuffle of sand here where someone stumbled.”

Rising to her feet, she motioned for Ethan to continue alongside her as they pursued the path left by their mysterious quarry.

The trail snaked its way toward the cliff face, the ocean’s whispers growing ever fainter as they ventured further from

the beach. The scent of salt and seaweed gave way to the earthy aroma of damp soil and moss. As they rounded a bend, Rachel's hand shot out, catching Ethan's arm. "Careful," she said.

He stumbled to a stop, and then let out a faint breath.

He hadn't spotted the drop-off, as the tree cover blended in with the forest floor.

But two paces ahead of Ethan, the ground gave away sharply, forming the lip of a cliff that sloped down to the sea.

"Shit. Thanks," Ethan said quickly, taking a hurried step back. "How do we get down?"

Rachel glanced around, her eyes seeking a trail.

But there was none.

She frowned.

There, set in the side of a rocky outcrop that looked to lead *down* to the beach again, through the cliff face, she spotted a rusted metal door embedded into the side of the wall, a shadowy staircase carved into the rock beyond it.

"Look at that," she breathed, approaching the door. Her hand hovered over the handle, hesitating for a moment before she attempted to turn it. It didn't budge. "Damn, it's locked."

"Maybe there's another way in," Ethan suggested, scanning the area for any possible alternatives. Rachel shook her head, her eyes narrowing as she considered their options.

"Unlikely. This is the only access I can see."

"What about going over?"

She looked at the barbed wire topping the fence. She frowned. It looked more like the sort of thing found at a construction site rather than a resort.

"Door looks new," she said.

"Think it's a private beach?"

Rachel just shrugged, standing with her hands on her hips, facing the locked gate.

The salty sea breeze whipped through Rachel's hair as she surveyed their surroundings, their isolation growing more apparent with each passing moment. Through the trees, she could still glimpse the white sand of the beach. Sand and seaweed stretched endlessly along the beach, painting a desolate picture of the landscape. The rhythmic crashing of the waves masked any sounds that could betray the presence of another human being, further heightening the eerie sense of solitude.

Rachel turned her attention back to the sheer cliff face on either side of the locked gate and fence; her keen eyes scanned every inch for any possible way down. She searched for handholds or footholds, any sign of a hidden path they might have missed. But the rock face was smooth and unyielding, offering no assistance in their quest to uncover its secrets.

"Maybe there's a key nearby," Ethan suggested, trying to keep hope alive.

"Maybe," Rachel replied, her voice tinged with doubt. Her mind raced with possibilities, but none seemed plausible.

The sun cast an eerie orange glow that danced across the cliff's edge and reflected off the crashing waves below. Rachel's keen senses picked up on every nuance of the landscape – the rustle of wind through the grass, the distant cry of a seagull, and the subtle scent of salt carried on the breeze.

"Wait," Rachel said suddenly, her eyes locked on a spot further down the beach. She crouched, immediately drawing Ethan's attention.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

"Over there." She pointed toward a barely visible object among the sand, partially hidden by the shifting dunes. "Do you see that?"

Ethan squinted, trying to discern what had caught Rachel's eye. "It looks like a stick," he replied hesitantly.

Rachel shook her head, her brow furrowed in concentration. “No, I don’t think so,” she insisted, her voice wavering with uncertainty. “Look closer,” Rachel urged, her voice barely above a whisper.

As Ethan leaned in, his eyes widened with shock as realization dawned on him.

“Jesus, you’re right. That’s a hand!” Then he winced and muttered, “Sorry.”

“Lord’s name?” she guessed.

“It’s a thing.”

She patted him on the arm in a consoling manner.

But her attention returned to the hand. The fingers lay curled against the sand, their pallor contrasting sharply with the sun-baked landscape.

Rachel tilted the brim of her hat, which shielded her eyes. “We need to get down there and see what that is.”

She kicked at the gate blocking their path in frustration, sending a spray of sand into the air. Her eyes scanned the area, searching for an alternate route to the beach below.

“Might need to go get a key,” Ethan said hesitantly.

She sighed but knew he was right.

She gave a crisp, firm nod, then said, “Fine. Stupid gate.”

“Noted.”

“Don’t be clever.”

He hesitated, opened his mouth, closed it.

But before he could think of a witty comeback, she was already moving, brushing past him and marching steadily back to the resort to fetch a damn key.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Rachel stepped out of the chauffeured ATV, her eyes immediately scanning the area which had proven impassible a half hour before. Now, though, with their guide, they made quick progress from the ATV towards the locked metal gate blocking the entrance down the sheer bluff.

Ethan followed closely behind, his eyes darting around as he too assessed their surroundings.

“Right this way,” the assistant resort manager gestured, guiding them down a narrow sandy path that led to the beach. The man had sandy hair and thick forearms, which contrasted with his round midsection.

As they approached the shoreline, Rachel couldn't help but be captivated by the beauty of the landscape, despite the dark reason for their presence. The waves crashed against the shore with a thunderous force, their white foam glistening as it retreated back into the ocean. The salty scent of the sea filled the air and mingled with the earthy aroma of seaweed that had washed ashore.

“This is where you saw her?” the resort manager said quietly, his voice barely audible above the roar of the waves.

“Not sure it's a her, but yeah, just down there,” Rachel said. She frowned again, peering over the edge of the bluff. She could still see the upraised jutting hand which Ethan had taken for driftwood. But even now, she felt confident she was right.

Rachel felt an eerie shiver run down her spine, a stark contrast to the warmth of the sun that beat down on her face. She glanced over at Ethan, who seemed equally affected by the atmosphere. The beach appeared forgotten by time, the surrounding dunes and vegetation reclaiming the land from civilization.

The resort manager pulled a jangling set of keys from his shirt as he approached the gate at the top of the rock-hewn stairway. Wearing a perpetually furrowed brow, he looked around nervously as he led Rachel and Ethan further down the

beach. His eyes darted from one side to another as though expecting danger to emerge from the dunes at any moment. He wore a crisp white shirt, its sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing an intricate tattoo of a compass rose on his forearm.

The door to the steps opened with a clanking sound.

Rachel said, “A lot of effort to keep people off some beach.”

“Gate was open yesterday,” he replied quickly, “But construction crews said some copper was missing.”

“Construction?”

“Yeah. Mhmm. Foundation will be visible in a minute.” He took the stairs two at a time ahead of them, panting faintly now as he worked his way down the incline.

Rachel and Ethan followed behind. The uneven stone steps gouged into the cliff face were a comfortable terrain for Rachel—it felt more natural to her than paved roads and lacquered resort floors.

As they continued down the slope of stairs, the sight of the arm was hidden by the thick foliage closer to the ground. This gave her a moment in which she was able to glance off in the opposite direction.

And now, further down the cliff, an opening in the trees allowed Rachel’s eyes to draw to a cluster of construction equipment in the distance. The skeletal frame of a building loomed over the otherwise untouched landscape like an unwelcome intruder. She turned to the manager, her curiosity piqued.

“Construction.”

“Like I said,” he replied, still breathing heavily as he paused on the stairs—seemingly grateful for the excuse to take a breather.

“What sort of construction?” she asked, gesturing toward the build site.

“Ah, that,” he said, glancing at the foundation—it was currently little more than cinderblock and rebar that had been

tastefully positioned against a beach shore. “They’re building a new casino. It’s been quite the talk of the island. Supposed to be illegal in Texas, but an exception is being made for Galveston, to see if we can drum up some new business. A trial run, as it were. Some folks are excited about the potential for more tourists and the money they’ll bring, but others... well, they’re not too keen on the idea of turning our little paradise into Vegas.”

Rachel took in the sight, her mind racing with thoughts about how the development might be connected to the disappearances.

“Interesting,” she mused aloud, her gaze lingering on the construction site. “When did the construction begin?”

“About a month ago,” the manager replied. “It’s been moving pretty fast.”

“I see...”

They had reached the base of the stairs now, and as they moved through the ground cover, under the trees, towards the clearing Rachel had spotted from above, she shot Enrique a sidelong glance. “What do you know about the three missing women?”

He blanched at the question; stammered, coughed, then said. “Excuse me?”

She hesitated now, pausing to look at him, one foot pressing against a moss-covered log. “You nervous, Enrique?”

“After a question like that? Yes.”

She grinned. “Fair point.” Her smile vanished as quickly as it had come. She offered her smile only rarely, and often only on special occasions.

He shot her a sidelong glance. “Did you... know them?”

She hesitated, then frowned. “Because I’m native?”

“I wasn’t trying to imply anything... just you know. Two of the missing women were also..”

“Native?”

He bobbed his head.

She turned to frown at him. “I thought only one of the women was?”

He gave a quick shake of her head. Then, he rattled off, “Sophia Jones. Ella Winder. Aspen Blueriver.”

“You keeping track of the case?”

“Obviously. He frowned. All of us at the Galveston resort are deeply concerned for the missing women, and are willing to help the authorities in any way—”

“Spare me the PR chatter. Aspen is native. She was the first to go missing.”

“That’s right, but Ms. Winder is also.”

“I see. And Sophia?”

“No connection that I’ve heard of.” He shrugged. “But I don’t have the same resources as you.”

She nodded distractedly, her gaze finding the foundation to the casino once more.

“Interesting,” she murmured, more to herself than anyone else. “Thank you, Enrique.”

And then they emerged from the clearing, stepping out from under the trees.

Rachel’s eyes instantly found the hand pushing out of the sand.

She didn’t blame Ethan for initially thinking it was driftwood—there was certainly a lifeless quality to the thing.

But the form was unmistakably human.

Enrique evidently spotted it, too, as he gasped, holding a hand to his lips. His tattoo on his forearm rippled as the muscles in his arm bulged.

She gave him a sidelong glance, but then crouched next to the hand jutting from the sand.

The hand was small and delicate—if such a word could be used for a corpse—its long fingers slightly curled inwards as if

it had been trying to grasp something. The nails were well-manicured, with a hint of pink nail polish still clinging to the tips. On the wrist was a thin silver bracelet, its engraving partially obscured by sand but still visible enough to make out the words ‘*Love*’. Rachel felt her throat tighten at the sight.

“Well shit,” Ethan muttered under his breath.

Rachel stood up slowly and turned to Enrique. “I need you to get a crew of diggers out here,” she said firmly.

“Diggers?”

“Yeah. You said there’s a construction crew that works down here, right? How do they get their equipment down the bluff?”

“Boat,” he stammered. “They come in by boat.”

“Well, get them out here. Pronto.”

Enrique nodded without hesitation and stepped away, already reaching for his phone. Rachel watched him go, then returned her gaze to the hand sticking out from the sand. Whoever this woman was, they would soon know her fate - and hopefully that of Sophia Jones, Ella Winder and Aspen Blueriver too.

## CHAPTER SIX

The waves crashed against the jagged rocks on the desolate beach, as if trying to warn Rachel and Ethan of the gruesome scene unfolding before them. The salty ocean breeze tossed their hair wildly while they stood observing the digging crew and coroner at work. The isolated location was only accessible by a narrow, treacherous path that twisted around cliffs and boulders.

Rachel could feel the weight of the victim's bracelet in her hand, its simple engraving "Love" contrasting the horror that had led to its discovery.

The digging crew worked with silent efficiency, their shovels biting into the damp sand, each scoop creating a growing mound beside the shallow grave. They moved with practiced precision, sweat rolling down their foreheads under the relentless sun. Rachel could sense the tension in the air, thick and suffocating like the humid sea breeze.

As the workers revealed more of the buried figure, Rachel turned her attention to the bracelet clenched tightly in her hand. She ran her fingers over the smooth metal, feeling the coldness of it seep into her skin. Flipping it over, she noticed an inscription on the inside: EW.

"What is that?" Ethan said, noting her attention.

Her fingers traced the etching.

"Ella Winder. Looks like we've got our first victim," she said.

Ethan stared at the inscription a moment, then muttered a curse under his breath. His eyes then locked on the exposed remains.

Rachel's heart clenched at the sight of Ella Winder's body, now fully unearthed from her sandy grave. The woman's olive skin was marred with raw scrapes and bruises, evidence of her desperate struggle to escape the suffocating sands that had enveloped her.

"Ranger Blackwood!" A voice called to them.

Rachel turned to note the coroner standing near the body, waving at them with a white-gloved hand.

The man had silver curled hair, and his chin almost seemed a part of his neck. He had smiling eyes, but his lips were turned in a frown.

“Ranger, look.” The coroner’s voice pulled her attention away from the gruesome tableau. He pointed to a heavy boulder near the site, its surface smeared with dirt and flecks of dried blood. “This was placed on top of her chest, pinning her down.”

“Deliberately?” Ethan asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Almost certainly,” the coroner confirmed. “The weight would have made it impossible for her to rise, even if she’d somehow managed to dig herself out.”

The realization hit Rachel like a sledgehammer, her jaw clenching with rage. This monster had trapped Ella beneath the earth, left her to die a slow and agonizing death, taunting her with the illusion of freedom. This wasn’t just about killing; it was about control, inflicting pain and fear.

“How would someone have dragged a boulder that size over the sand?” Rachel said.

The coroner hesitated, then shook his head. His eyes were on the body, though, and as he leaned in, he said, “Something else.”

“Oh goody,” Ethan muttered under his breath.

“What is it?”

“See these marks? I believe our victim was buried alive.”

Rachel stared at the man. “Alive? You’re sure.”

“Nearly certain.”

Rachel glanced at the boulder now. She tried not focus on the horror of the information, preferring to scan the beach, her eyes roving away from the diggers.

“How did they move that boulder?”

No answer came as Ethan and the coroner both considered it.

Rachel turned, glancing along the shore. A boulder that size wouldn't have been moved by hand. But there were no paths for a truck to come down the cliff...

A boat? Then the boat might've had a vehicle on board...

She began scanning the coast.

"Rachel?" Ethan said.

But she didn't reply, too focused to distract herself.

The salty ocean breeze whipped through Rachel's hair as she walked along the desolate stretch of beach, her eyes scanning the sand for any clues that could lead her to Ella Winder's killer.

Ethan fell into step behind her, and then with his lanky stride, moved ahead, also scanning the ground.

She nodded, grateful. He asked a lot of questions, but when talking had to stop, and doing had to start, he was a good "doer."

The sun cast a golden glow on the water, reflecting the light in a shimmering dance that momentarily distracted her from her search.

"Rachel!" Ethan called out, his voice carrying across the wind. She turned to see him waving at her from further down the beach, his figure silhouetted against the setting sun.

"Did you find something?" she asked as she approached, her heart quickening with anticipation.

"Look," he said, pointing to a set of tire tread marks imprinted in the damp sand. They led from the water's edge, suggesting a clear path of transportation. Rachel knelt down to examine them more closely, her fingertips tracing the grooves left in the earth.

"Let's get a photograph and make a mold of these treads," Rachel said, her voice steady and determined. "The sooner we can link them to a vehicle, the better."



The waves lapped at the shore, a steady rhythm that echoed in Rachel's mind as she studied the tire marks before her. The sand was damp, darkened by the receding tide, creating a canvas for the bold strokes of the truck's treads. She crouched down, fingers tracing the deep grooves, and tried to imagine the scene that had unfolded mere hours before.

"Whoever did this," she mused aloud, "knew what they were doing." Her eyes flickered up to meet Ethan's. "Think about it—a truck heavy enough to transport something without raising suspicion. And then there's the remote location..."

"Right," Ethan nodded, following her train of thought. "If our theory is correct, and the victims were brought here by boat, then we're dealing with someone who not only has access to a boat capable of carrying a truck, but also knows how to navigate the worker schedules on the construction site."

Rachel chewed on her lip, considering the implications. It wasn't just a matter of logistics; it spoke to a level of planning and cunning. In order to pull off such a feat, their killer would need to be intimately familiar with the local geography.

Ethan was already pulling out his phone to snap a few pictures of the tracks. "Once we have the mold, we can start cross-referencing it with vehicle databases. Hopefully that'll lead us to our suspect."

As they set to work, Rachel found herself drawn back to the tire prints, their stark lines a symbol of the cold, calculated cruelty that had led them to this desolate beach.

As she studied the ground, though, the air was torn apart by a cacophony of raised voices, anger and frustration rippling through the stillness. Rachel exchanged a glance with Ethan.

Without a word, they abandoned their task and hurried towards the commotion, sand scattering before them.

As they rounded a curve of the coastline, the source of the disturbance came into view: a group of construction workers, their faces flushed and contorted with outrage, were locked in a heated dispute with a cluster of deputies, who seemed to be

struggling to maintain control of the situation. The verbal battle raged with the fury of the ocean waves crashing against the shore, the tension between the two sides palpable as the wind whipped at their clothes.

“Listen, we’re just trying to do our job here!” one of the workers shouted, his voice hoarse. “We didn’t ask for any of this mess!”

“Your casino build is stirring up a lot of trouble around here,” a deputy retorted, his tone icy. “You can’t expect us to turn a blind eye.”

One of the construction workers was gripping a hammer. One of the deputies was reaching for his gun.

She wasn’t sure what had prompted all of this, but she knew the diggers who’d been sent were also the crew who worked on the casino build.

As the deputy growled at the man with the hammer, a couple of his buddies stepped forward.

But the four other construction workers—all of them sun-stained and burly—stepped in to intervene.

“Enough!” Rachel barked, moving forward to put herself between the arguing factions.

Eyes turned to her. The gun in the deputy’s hand was quickly holstered.

The workers and deputies fell silent, their gazes shifting to Rachel as she continued, her voice firm but measured. “We’re all on the same side here. I mean... what the hell?”

She wasn’t the speech-giving type. And this seemed appropriate given the circumstances.

“Bastard told me we have to shut down for a week,” the construction worker said. And judging by the way he carried himself, Rachel suspected he was the foreman.

The deputy just shook his head. “Not my fault. This is a body.”

“It ain’t anywhere near us,” snapped the foreman. He waved a hand to the build-site. “Gotta be a half mile away.”

“Quarter mile max,” shot back the deputy. “And how do we know you assholes aren’t the cause of all this, anyway?”

Ethan moved to stand beside her, his presence a solid, reassuring force as he echoed her sentiment.

For a moment, it seemed as though their arrival had quelled the storm; the workers and deputies exchanged uneasy glances, the anger in their eyes fading to a simmer.

Rachel stepped forward, her eyes locked onto the red-faced construction worker who seemed on the verge of throwing a punch. The tension in the air was palpable, and she could feel the weight of their collective anger bearing down upon her.

“I’ll try to get you your build site up and running as soon as possible,” she said. “But this *is* a crime scene.”

The construction worker glared at her, his fists clenched at his sides. She held his gaze, her own brown eyes steady and unyielding. There wasn’t a challenge in her gaze, nor anger. Just inevitability.

As he frowned at her, he seemed to deflate, his shoulders slumping.

But as he did, one of the other workers snapped. “We’re paid hourly. How the hell am I supposed to afford rent? These resort bastards keep sabotaging us. They’re the ones who killed her.”

“We don’t work for the resort,” snapped the deputy.

“Like hell you don’t—asshole. Your uncle owns the damn place.”

The deputy scowled, and then suddenly, there was a yell.

Out of nowhere, one of the workers stepped in, fist cocked, and he took a shot at the nearest cop.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun blazed in the sky, casting a golden light down onto the poolside. Laughter blended with the sound of splashing water as bathers dove in and out, cooling off from the oppressive heat. Families and friends lounged on chairs, soaking up the rays while children chased each other around, squealing in delight. The air was filled with the scents of sunscreen and chlorine, creating a sense of nostalgia that permeated the atmosphere.

Amidst the cacophony of summer revelry stood a man, his wide-eyed curiosity and friendly demeanor immediately setting him apart from the others. His eyes sparkled with a childlike innocence as he took in the bustling scene before him. It seemed as though everything fascinated him – the way sunlight danced upon the water’s surface, the intricate patterns left behind by footprints in the damp concrete, and the laughter that echoed through the air.

The man appeared to be in his early thirties, his dark hair slightly tousled from the gentle breeze that swept across the pool area. He wore a simple pair of swim shorts and a plain white T-shirt. His gaze flitted from one group to another, drawn by the excitement and joy that radiated from each interaction. He drank it all in, as if trying to absorb the very essence of what made this day so special.

As the man moved among the crowd, his smile grew wider, and his enthusiasm became contagious. People couldn’t help but return his warm greetings and genuine interest in their conversations. He liked pools. Liked smiles. He liked a lot of things.

They were drawn to him like moths to a flame, captivated by his magnetic presence and the air of playfulness that enveloped him. He waved happily, eagerly, with an energy that belied his age.

In a world where people often hid behind masks and walls, there was something almost magical about the man’s ability to connect with others, to see the world through their eyes, and to share in their joys and sorrows.

Yet, beneath the surface of his carefree demeanor, there was a subtle undercurrent of loneliness – a quiet longing for something more. It was as if he were searching for a missing piece that would make him whole, his eyes scanning the crowd with the hope that it might be found among the throng of smiling faces.

And so, the man continued to weave his way through the crowd, his laughter ringing out like a beacon in the warm summer air, drawing others into his orbit and captivating them. Little did they know that behind those wide-eyed gazes and friendly smiles, a deeper story was waiting to unfold.

“*So pretty,*” he thought, his heart swelling with admiration for the simple joy that radiated from those around him.

As he continued to watch, his attention was drawn to a group of children playing near the shallow end of the pool. Their energy was infectious, the sound of their laughter like music to his ears. Feeling a magnetic pull towards their playfulness, the man approached them with a grin that matched their own.

“Hiya!” he called out, waving a hand in greeting.

The children exchanged excited glances before nodding in unison. They had seen him the day before, juggling on the beach, and then again the day before that, making faces in the dining hall.

In a way, they were friends... weren't they?

He nodded to himself.

Yes. Friends.

“I guess so!” one of them chirped, tossing a brightly-colored beach ball towards the man. With the grace of an experienced athlete, he caught the ball and immediately tossed it back, initiating a lively game of catch.

As they played, the man reveled in the shared joy of their laughter and the exhilaration of their splashing. It was as if, in this moment, he could forget the loneliness that so often gnawed at the edges of his existence. There was something

undeniably magical about the camaraderie that flourished between them, fueled by the simplest of games.

A sudden shift in the atmosphere caught the man's attention, tearing him away from the game. He noticed a woman standing at the edge of the pool, her eyes wide with alarm as they darted between him and the group of children. Clutching a brightly patterned towel in her hands, she called out to two of the young ones, urgency woven into the fabric of her voice.

"Grace! Joshua! Come here, right now!" Her voice was laced with concern, her gaze never leaving the man.

The young girl and boy exchanged confused glances before obediently swimming toward their mother, who hastily wrapped them in the towel. The man couldn't help but observe the way her knuckles turned white from gripping the fabric so tightly. As she ushered her children away from the pool, the other kids hesitated, their laughter dying down like a record player slowly grinding to a halt.

"Wait, what's wrong?" the man asked, his brow furrowing with uncertainty. He could feel his emotions rising... could feel his fear reacting to the rejection. "Did I do something?"

But there was no response; the woman continued to hurry her children away, her eyes briefly meeting his with a piercing mixture of fear and suspicion. The connection was fleeting, yet it left a chill running down the man's spine that the warm sun could not dispel.

"Mommy, why are we leaving?" Grace whined, glancing over her shoulder at the man.

"Shh, it's okay, sweetheart," the woman whispered, her voice barely audible to the man. "We're just going somewhere a little quieter."

As he watched them go, the man felt an unfamiliar weight settling on his chest. His once-bright smile dimmed, replaced by a look of confusion and disappointment. What had he done to cause such a reaction? Hadn't they been having fun? A

sense of melancholy crept into the corners of his mind, casting shadows over the vibrant colors of the poolside scene.

But that woman was a *bad* woman.

He nodded to himself, glancing down at the small picture cupped in his hand. He looked from it to the woman.

Yes... A very *bad* woman. That's what they'd told him, wasn't it? Mhmm. Yes, yes... She wasn't nice. But... maybe they were wrong this time. Maybe she wasn't so bad... He didn't like having to do things to such bad people.

He hesitated for a moment, feeling the sun's warmth on his skin and listening to the pool's gentle splashes. The world around him seemed to be urging him to stay, to forget about the woman and her children, but something inside him refused to let it go. With one last glance at the joyous scene he was leaving behind, the man stepped away from the pool, following the retreating figure of the woman with a mix of determination and trepidation.

The man's frown deepened, like a thin scar on his otherwise innocent face. He stared after the woman, her hurried departure echoing loudly in his mind. The once cheerful atmosphere around him now felt tainted, as if an unseen cloud had rolled in and cast a shadow over the joy he had experienced just moments ago.

He followed her at a measured pace, careful not to draw attention to himself. His heart pounded in his chest, each beat driving him toward the truth he so desperately sought. Wading through the vibrant sea of bathers was like navigating an intricate dance of laughter, splashing water, and sun-soaked bodies.

"Be discreet. Blend in," he whispered to himself, his mind racing with thoughts and questions. What could have caused such a sudden change in the woman's demeanor? Was there something about him that had frightened her? Or was it merely a misunderstanding?

As he trailed her, he focused on their surroundings, allowing the vivid hues of beach towels, the scent of

sunscreen, and the rhythmic sound of splashing water to paint a backdrop for the unfolding scene. Though the world around him buzzed with life, his attention remained solely on the woman and her children.

“Hey, mister, wanna play?” A child’s voice broke into his thoughts, pulling his gaze away from the woman for a moment. He glanced down at a young boy holding a water gun, his bright, innocent eyes filled with excitement.

“Ah, not now,” he replied softly, forcing a smile onto his face. “Maybe later, alright?”

“Alright!” The boy shouted gleefully before running off to rejoin his friends, his laughter echoing through the air.

Turning back to the woman, he realized she had moved further away during his brief distraction. His pulse quickened as he picked up his pace, weaving through the crowd with renewed determination. He could feel the thrum of curiosity and confusion coursing through his veins, driving him to seek answers.

“Please,” he thought, taking a deep breath. He needed to know what he’d done wrong. He almost forgot about the picture of the woman. The reason he’d been sent to speak with her...

With each step closer to the woman, the truth seemed to move further away, remaining shrouded in mystery.

And now...

He could feel it niggling at his mind.

A rising anger.

Frustration mounting, and his chest tightening.

As she walked farther from the bustling pool area, her children close behind, the man followed, careful to maintain a safe distance. He ducked behind trees and bushes, feeling like a hunter stalking his prey. But unlike a predator, he wasn’t driven by hunger or malice – only an insatiable curiosity... and that same rising anger.

He’d always had a temper.



He paused by a vending machine, stepping behind an alcove. The woman had paused as well, glancing back.

But she didn't see him now.

He waited.

Now, they were outside the bathrooms, under an overhanging terrace of concrete, creating shadows that still lingered with the scent of chlorine from the pool.

The man remained behind the wall, the vending machine glowing off his face, his breath coming in shallow pants as he observed his quarry.

"Mommy, why did we leave the pool?" asked one of the children, her voice quivering with confusion.

"Shh, it's okay," the woman replied, her tone tense but gentle. "We just need to talk somewhere quiet, that's all."

Though obscured by the foliage, the man strained to hear the conversation that unfolded. Every word added another piece to the puzzle, fueling his determination to understand.

"Are we in trouble?" the other child piped up, his eyes wide with worry.

"No, sweetie, you're not in trouble. I just... I need you both to promise me something." The woman's gaze darted around nervously, searching for potential threats. "Promise me that whenever we're in public, you won't talk to strangers. Especially men."

The man's brow furrowed at her words, feeling a sting of hurt that he couldn't quite comprehend. He had only wanted to share in their joy, and yet now he found himself cast as a villain in her eyes. But why?

"Promise, Mommy," the children chorused, their voices tinged with uncertainty.

"Good." The woman hugged them close, a fierce protectiveness radiating from her embrace. "I love you both so much. I just want to keep you safe."

He waited now, having gone still...

Safe...

She wanted them safe.

He wanted safety, too.

He scowled.

She thought he was dangerous.

She thought he was *bad*.

Now his temper really was rising. His expression twisted into a scowl, and a darkness came over his thoughts.

A darkness he'd grown familiar with... one that, if he really tried, he almost didn't notice.

He clenched his fists, and there was something distinctly *less* innocent now as he followed after the woman and her children.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Rachel watched in horror as a powerful fist slammed into a deputy's jaw, the impact reverberating through the air amidst the cacophony of shouts and curses. The construction worker who threw the punch glared fiercely at the officer, his eyes burning with rage as he lunged forward for another attack. In an instant, what had been a tense standoff between the construction workers and law enforcement on the casino build site exploded into a chaotic brawl.

Rachel Blackwood watched in shock as burly men clad in hard hats and reflective vests grappled with deputies dressed in their brown uniforms and wide-brimmed hats. The scene was like a turbulent storm, wild and uncontrollable, with the crashing waves of human bodies clashing against each other.

"Damn it!" Rachel muttered under her breath, her deep brown eyes narrowing as she assessed the situation. The animosity surrounding the casino project had reached boiling point, and the locals' opposition had finally erupted in violence.

As fists flew and bodies collided, the construction workers fought with the ferocity of cornered animals, their desperation fueled by months of harassment and threats aimed at stopping the build. On the other side, the deputies were equally determined to maintain order and protect the interests of those who supported the island.

"Stay close, Ethan," Rachel warned her partner, her voice strained but steady. Her heart pounded in rhythm with the frantic shouts and the thud of fists connecting with flesh. Amidst the dust and sweat, she took a deep breath and found her voice.

"Enough!" Rachel bellowed, her commanding tone cutting through the cacophony like a knife. She stood tall, shoulders squared, her Stetson hat casting a shadow that seemed to embody her authority. The brawlers hesitated for a moment, their attention pulled towards the Texas Ranger as if drawn by a magnet.

“Y’all need to stop this nonsense right now!” she continued, her words laced with the grit earned from years spent navigating the wilds of Texas. “This isn’t solving anything!”

Ethan moved deftly through the melee, pulling apart two men locked in a violent embrace. His face was set in a grimace.

The scent of blood mixed with the salt-laden air of Galveston Island, creating a pungent reminder of the high stakes driving this conflict. Rachel swallowed hard, feeling the weight of responsibility settle upon her shoulders like an iron yoke.

An uneasy air extended between the two groups of men.

The deputy who’d been punched was glowering at the offending construction worker.

But the foreman glared right back, puffing out a barrel chest as if daring the deputy to say something. He massaged his knuckles as if oiling a pistol.

Rachel could feel the simmering beneath the surface.

“Everyone, back off!” Rachel commanded, her voice carrying an unspoken promise of retribution for defiance. She added, “I don’t answer to any of you guys. I’ll haul each of you off—don’t test me.”

Eyes darted to her. Tempers seemed to deflate a little in the face of the threat.

Or perhaps it was because some outsider was telling them what to do. And a new source of annoyance was distracting them.

Whatever the case, to her relief, the crowd gradually began to disperse, the brawlers separating with a mixture of shame and lingering resentment.

The chaos had dwindled to a tense silence as the remaining construction workers surveyed the aftermath of their brawl. Rachel scanned the scene, her eyes taking in each bruised face and bloodied knuckle before settling on a group huddled

together near a damaged crane. Their worn boots left imprints in the sand, and the saltwater breeze tugged at their grease-streaked clothing.

The deputies were now standing by the boat, wearing looks of retribution.

She didn't doubt this wasn't over.

She shook her head, her eyes moving to the foreman who was standing by the the damaged crane.

She approached slowly, trudging along the shore. He'd been the one to throw the punch—he'd started it.

If anyone's emotions were riled up enough to potentially speak with an outsider—where others might be more closed-lipped—it was him.

As she approached, Ethan behind her, the workers' eyes narrowed with suspicion for the woman who had quelled their fury.

“You in charge here?” Rachel asked, her voice steady and authoritative. The workers by the foreman exchanged glances, their shoulders tense like coiled springs ready to unleash their pent-up frustrations. Finally, the burly, barrel-chested man with a drooping moustache stepped forward, his face lined with years of sun and labor.

“Name's Hank,” he grunted, rubbing a swelling bruise beneath his eye. “What do you want?”

“Answers,” Rachel replied, her gaze unwavering. “You punched a cop.”

“He had it coming.”

“So you admit it.”

“Nah. Don't admit shit. Who are you?”

“Ranger Blackwood,” she said simply.

“Ranger, huh?”

She nodded. “So what's got you so pissed at the cops?”

“It’s what’s got them pissed at us,” the worker retorted. “We’ve got a damn job to do, and they keep butting in. First it’s missing equipment, then stolen copper wire. Now this damn body, and closing down the workspace? I’ve got men who gotta eat. Pay child support. It’s bullshit.”

He was getting agitated again, but Rachel kept her cool. “Copper stolen?”

“Yeah. It’s why we got permission to put in that damn gate.”

He waved a hand up towards the cliff.

Rachel frowned. “So this is all over a stalled construction?”

Hank sighed, his breath heavy with the weight of the situation. He gestured to his fellow workers, each bearing the marks of their recent clash. “We’re just trying to do our jobs, but ever since this project started, there’s been nothing but harassment and threats. The locals don’t want this casino built, and they’re not afraid to let us know it. And the damn cops are in on it!” he added, shouting towards where the deputies lingered, watching menacingly.

Rachel’s brow furrowed, her mind racing with questions. “Has anyone been hurt before today?”

“Nothing this bad, but yeah, there’ve been a few scrapes and bruises,” Hank admitted, his voice thick with resentment. “But we can handle ourselves. We’re not gonna be pushed around by a bunch of assholes in badges.”

Rachel considered this, glancing towards where the body had been unearthed, then towards the construction site.

She felt a flicker of a frown.

What if someone was going to even greater lengths than copper theft and vandalism...

What if the body here, and the missing women, had to do with the casino?

The sun beat down on the construction site, casting long shadows across the sandy terrain of Galveston Island. Seagulls

cawed overhead as waves crashed in the distance, creating a symphony of nature that belied the tension hanging in the air.

“Alright,” Rachel said, her expression shrewd, “Who do you think is trying to delay the build?”

Hank glanced around at his fellow workers, who shifted uneasily where they stood. “We don’t know their names, but there’s been talk of a group that’s dead set against this casino going up.”

“Any idea why?” Rachel asked, her eyes studying each worker carefully, gauging their reactions.

“Could be a lot of things,” one of the other workers chimed in, wiping sweat from his brow. “Some folks ain’t happy about more tourists coming in. Others are worried about the impact on the environment. And then there’s those who just want to keep the island’s old secrets buried.”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed, the mention of secrets pricking at her ears like the whispers of ghosts from her past. She knew all too well how secrets could fester beneath the surface, waiting for the right moment to claw their way back into the light.

“Have any of these people approached you directly?” Ethan interjected, standing tall beside Rachel, arms crossed over his chest.

“Mostly it’s just been threats left at the site, or shouted from passing cars,” Hank replied, his voice low and weary. “But we’ve caught sight of a few of them lurking around after dark. Can’t say for sure if they’re just watching us or if they’re planning something.”

Rachel studied the construction workers, taking in the dirt-streaked faces and calloused hands that spoke of long hours and hard work. The sun glinted off their tools like tiny sparks as they wiped sweat from their brows, creating a stark contrast against the idyllic beach backdrop. She could feel the tension hanging heavy in the air around them, the lingering scent of salt and sweat mixed with an undercurrent of frustration.

“Listen,” Rachel said, her voice steady and insistent, “if you have any idea who’s behind these threats, or if there’s anyone specific we should be looking into, now’s the time to tell us.”

The workers exchanged glances, hesitating for a moment before one of them, a man with a thick beard and a hard-set jaw, stepped forward. “It ain’t no secret that some folks around here don’t want this casino built. There’s a local group, conservationists they call themselves, always making noise about preserving the island’s history and nature.”

“Any names?” Rachel asked, her deep brown eyes locked onto his, unyielding.

“Amos Longshadow,” the worker replied, swallowing hard. “He’s a native man, leads the group. They’re all pretty vocal about their opposition, but he’s got the loudest voice.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice firm but not unkind. “I need to speak with him. Do you know where I can find him?”

“His group usually meets at a bar down by the docks,” another worker chimed in. “In the tourist district. Can’t miss it.”

“Appreciate it,” Rachel nodded, her mind already spinning with the possibilities.

Ethan raised an eyebrow, casting a sidelong glance at Rachel. She caught the flicker of curiosity in his eyes, mirroring her own. A conservationist group led by a native man - it was a connection that couldn’t be ignored given the heritage of two of the missing women.

“Thank you,” Rachel said, nodding to the worker. “We’ll look into it.”

As she and Ethan turned away from the construction site, the waves crashing against the shore provided a rhythmic pulse. Amos Longshadow and his group could be the key to understanding the force behind the casino build’s resistance.

She approached the deputies by the boats, wincing as she drew nearer.



The last thing she needed was to get into a pissing contest with a bunch of pissed off local law enforcement.

But as she got closer, she could see that the deputies looked just as uneasy as the construction workers. They shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, their eyes darting around the construction site as if they were searching for something.

“What’s going on?” Rachel asked, her voice low.

One of the deputies, a tall man with a weathered face, cleared his throat. “Nothing to worry about, Ranger...”

“We’ll, consider me worried.”

She faced the man.

He frowned, but she didn’t look away.

He shrugged. “Just... We got a call about the body an hour ago.”

“I know. I called you.”

He shook his head. “Nah. Not you. Before.”

She hesitated. “Wait... someone else knew about the body here? Who?”

“Anonymous. Said there was something buried out here that we needed to see.”

She frowned at the deputy, and realized now as the cops murmured to each other, that they were all grudgingly starting to wonder the same thing. She also knew how often she would be stonewalled by locals. They didn’t take the rangers nearly as seriously in some places. It was just another obstacle on the job.

Rachel’s mind raced. An anonymous tip about a body just happened to coincide with the construction site being shut down. It was starting to sound like more than just a coincidence.

“Did you find anything else?” she asked, her eyes narrowing as she studied the deputies’ faces.

The deputies exchanged glances before shaking their heads. “No, ma’am,” the tall deputy replied.

She shook her head in frustration, turning away from the deputies and towards Ethan. “We need to figure out who’s been trying to stop the build.”

Ethan nodded, his eyes serious. “Agreed. Let’s go talk to this Amos Longshadow and see what he knows.”

Rachel nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps. She couldn’t shake the feeling that they were running out of time.

## CHAPTER NINE

The salty sea breeze whipped through Rachel's hair as she and Ethan approached the bar near the docks. Sea birds screeched overhead, their cries melding with the distant murmur of waves crashing against the shore. The dilapidated building before them seemed to have been forgotten by time, its once-bright paint now peeling and faded, the wooden boards creaking beneath their feet.

"Looks like the sort of place where secrets are kept," Ethan commented, his voice tinged with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. Rachel nodded in agreement, her eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of danger. The weight of her concealed weapon provided an odd sense of comfort, reminding her that she was not entirely defenseless.

As they entered the dimly lit bar, the smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke assaulted their senses. The few patrons present barely acknowledged their arrival, their gazes fixed on the amber liquid swirling in their glasses. In one corner, a jukebox played a lonely tune, further adding to the somber atmosphere.

Rachel approached the bartender, a burly man with tattoos snaking up his arms and a permanent scowl etched onto his face. He eyed her warily but said nothing, his silence a clear indication that he was not particularly interested in helping them. Undeterred, Rachel leaned in closer, her voice low and persuasive.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey yourself." He eyed her white hat with something of a doubtful expression.

She ignored it. "We're looking for someone. A Mr. Longshadow. We've heard he frequents this place from time to time."

"No one by that name," the bartender shrugged.

"You sure?"

"Pretty damn."

She frowned. “Amos Longshadow...” She paused, allowing the name to sink in. “We’re willing to make it worth your while if you could point us in the right direction.”

Ethan watched from a distance, his brow furrowed in concern.

The bartender’s eyes flicked to the money Rachel had discreetly placed on the counter, his scowl momentarily replaced by a calculating expression. After a tense moment, he grunted and nodded in the direction of a door at the back of the establishment. “You didn’t hear this from me,” he muttered, pocketing the bills with practiced ease.

“Thank you,” Rachel replied, her smile tight and professional.

He cleared his throat, and paused.

She’d been in the middle of turning to face Ethan, but at the man’s expression, she frowned. “What is it?”

He wrinkled his nose. “I mean...” He clicked his tongue.

The bartender cast a wary glance around the room before leaning in closer to Rachel, his voice barely above a whisper. “Alright, listen. There’s a meeting happening right now in the basement. I don’t know what it’s about, but you need to keep quiet and stay out of sight.”

Rachel pointed towards a door at the back of the bar. “That way?”

“Mhmm. Steer clear if you know what’s good for—”

Before he could even finish the word “you,” Rachel was already striding towards the forbidden door.

She heard the man grumble behind her, but ignored him, walking in step with Ethan.

The two of them pushed the door open simultaneously, revealing an old, worn set of wooden stairs.

Rachel and Ethan exchanged a brief nod before stepping into the dimly lit space, their senses immediately assaulted by the musty odor of damp wood and mold. As they descended

the creaking steps, the sound of muffled voices grew louder, causing a shiver of anticipation to run down Rachel's spine.

As they reached the basement floor, Rachel took a moment to absorb the scene before her: shadows flickering on the walls from the dim light of bare bulbs, the air heavy and oppressive as it pressed down on them like a physical weight. The muffled voices now resolved into distinct murmurs, each one telling its own secret story, weaving together into a tapestry of whispers that seemed to echo through the very foundations of the building itself.

The basement opened up to reveal a congregation of sorts, shadows dancing against the damp stone walls. At the front of the room, a man with a commanding presence stood on a makeshift stage, his voice booming and resonant as it carried through the air. Mr. Longshadow, Rachel surmised.

“Mother Nature has gifted us this island, and it is our duty – no, our privilege – to protect her from those who would seek to desecrate her beauty,” Longshadow proclaimed, his hands punctuating the air with urgency. The words swirled around them.

Rachel's gaze flickered over the faces in the crowd, noting the college-aged kids who sat enraptured by Longshadow's speech. Their eyes shone, filled with admiration and unshakable conviction. It was clear that they had willingly committed themselves to Longshadow's cause, whatever it may be.

“From the lapping waves along the shore to the sweet sighs of the wind through the trees, this island provides sanctuary for countless lives,” Longshadow continued, his voice rich and impassioned. “We must stand together, united against those who seek only to consume and destroy.”

“Let us not forget the sacred bond we share with this land, for it is our responsibility to honor and respect it,” Longshadow urged, his voice rising to a fever pitch. The room seemed to vibrate with the energy of his conviction, a palpable force.

Ethan was holding up his phone, and then glanced at Rachel, giving a curt nod.

This was their man.

With a nod, she signaled for him to follow her lead.

“Longshadow!” Rachel called out, her voice slicing through the meeting’s fervor like a knife through the fog-shrouded night.

The room fell silent, the rapturous glow in the students’ eyes flickering like the guttering flame of a candle caught in a sudden draft. Longshadow’s passionate speech came to an abrupt halt, his eyes narrowing as they locked onto Rachel’s.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his voice tight with suspicion, the spell he had woven over the crowd beginning to fray at the edges.

Rachel and Ethan moved towards him now.

He licked his lips nervously, then cursed and bolted.

“Longshadow!” Rachel shouted as she brushed by a couple of audience members with dreadlocks and dreamy smiles.

“Rachel, go!” Ethan urged, the urgency in his voice propelling her forward.

Longshadow weaved through the gathered spectators like a shadow, his lanky frame slipping past startled attendees. He shoved a young man aside, toppling him onto one of the rickety wooden chairs that groaned under the sudden weight before giving way with a loud crash.

Amos took a hallway to his right, moving away from the stairs that had led into the basement.

Clutching her sidearm, Rachel sprinted after him, her footsteps echoing through the narrow, dimly lit corridor. The dank smell of mildew clung to the air, mixing with the faint scent of saltwater that seeped in from the docks outside. Her heart pounded in her chest with each step, adrenaline surging through her veins like wildfire.

“Stop, Longshadow!” she yelled, but it only seemed to spur him on.

He didn’t respond. Instead, he scrambled towards an old, weather-beaten window at the end of the hall, its glass panes cracked like spiderwebs. He unlatched the thing in one fluid motion, as if he’d done this maneuver before. With the agility of a desperate man, he maneuvered through the narrow opening, his wiry body disappearing into the night.

Ethan reached the window at the same time as Rachel. In his energetic pursuit, he flung himself at the frame, trying to pull himself bodily through.

“Damn it,” Ethan muttered, trying to squeeze his broad shoulders through the window. But his larger frame betrayed him.

“Shit!” he yelled.

“Move!” Rachel said, and he stepped back, allowing her access. She didn’t pause to commiserate, already shimmying up the glass; Ethan could only watch as Rachel slipped through the gap with ease, leaving him behind. “Be careful!” he shouted it.

But she barely heard him, as she was already scanning the alley beyond for any sign of Amos Longshadow.

She was only jogging now, heading towards the docks—the only direction the alley provided egress.

As her footsteps slowed, her attention zeroed in. She scanned the docks ahead, along the side of the old, dilapidated bar.

She crept forward, her gun at the ready, her senses on high alert. The sound of the water lapping against the dock was the only thing that broke the eerie silence of the night.

“Where are you?” Rachel whispered to herself, scanning her surroundings. The moonlight cast eerie shadows on the landscape, turning twisted branches into monstrous figures that seemed to reach for her.

She paused, going still. It was an old hunter's technique. To cease one's own motion to allow the motion in the distance to draw one's attention.

She caught a glimpse of movement near an abandoned shed further down the alley. Her heart leaped with hope.

The night air was thick with salt and moisture from the ocean. The wind carried the scent of seaweed and brine, while the sound of waves crashing against the shore played in harmony with Rachel's ragged breaths. The alley twisted and turned, casting shadows that seemed to come alive, dancing in the dim moonlight. Rachel's every muscle tensed, adrenaline coursing through her veins like wildfire.

She remained still, motionless—her mind conjuring up memories of a hunt in the mountains where she'd been hired by the state to take out a mountain lion.

But if Amos Longshadow was involved in the business back at the construction site, then her current quarry was far more cunning than any feline predator.

Suddenly, she caught sight of a fleeting figure up ahead, disappearing around a corner, as if they'd just emerged from the shed, taking the opportunity to flee. Rachel quickened her pace, her boots pounding against the damp cobblestone in pursuit. As she rounded the corner, she spotted Longshadow stumbling over a pile of discarded crates.

Like the wind, she closed the distance between them, her footsteps echoing off the brick walls of the alleyway.

In one swift, calculated move, Rachel tackled Longshadow to the ground, her arms wrapping around his torso. The impact sent a jolt of pain through her body, but she held on tightly, refusing to let him go.

Longshadow snarled, struggling beneath her grip, but she held him firmly in place.

Rachel's fingers curled around a pair of cold, steel handcuffs at her belt as Longshadow writhed beneath her, his breaths coming out in ragged gasps as he struggled against her iron grip.



“Let me go!” he hissed through gritted teeth, his voice muffled beneath her chest.

“Stop moving,” Rachel responded coolly, her body pressing down on him with unwavering resolve. Her jet-black braid hung loosely over her shoulder as beads gleamed under the dim glow of a flickering streetlight. She deftly snapped the handcuffs around Longshadow’s wrists, the metal clicking into place.

He tried to buck her off, but she pulled him up by the cuffs, his arms twisting. He yelped and cursed some more.

“Let’s have a chat,” she said firmly. And she gave him another little pushback in the direction of their parked car.

## CHAPTER TEN

The interrogation room was cold and sterile, the harsh fluorescent light overhead casting an unforgiving glare on Amos Longshadow's face. Rachel could feel Ethan's presence beside her, a steady reassurance as they faced the belligerent and confrontational man before them.

"Sit down, Mr. Longshadow," Rachel commanded, her voice carrying a sense of authority that she had come to rely on in situations like these.

Amos sneered at her but complied, dropping heavily into the metal chair opposite them. As he leaned forward, Rachel took in his features more closely. Time had not been kind to Amos Longshadow; his skin resembled a wrinkled, leather map, each crease and line telling its own story.

His dark eyes were like two pieces of flint, hard and unyielding, while his unkempt beard seemed to sprout wildly from his face. The man exuded a ruggedness that spoke of years spent working the land, his hands large, roughened by labor, and calloused from countless hours spent wielding tools and tending to the earth. It was clear that Amos was intimately connected to the island and its terrain – and it was this connection that had brought him into conflict with others.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Ethan said, his voice calm and measured despite the tension in the room.

Rachel glanced down at her phone—the screen had lit up. She frowned; very few people had her work number.

It was Lily.

She stared at the message from her childhood best friend—the two of them had been thick as thieves for years, and the bond was still strong, but now, Rachel remembered their earlier texts.

*Shit.* She'd mentioned they'd meet up in the evening.

It was now evening.

"*Where you at?*" Lily messaged.

Rachel hesitated, then gave a quick reply. “*Sorry. Case Galvestone.*”

Ethan was now talking to Longshadow, but Rachel was only half listening. She watched as her screen brightened again. “*K. Coming to you.*”

She blinked in surprise. Her leather-wearing, biker friend wasn’t the sort to let something as inconsequential as an ocean deprive her of a meeting with an old friend. Besides... *I need to talk to you...* The first message from Lily earlier in the morning had hinted at more than just touching base. She could feel Ethan glancing at her, and she quickly flipped her phone over, concealing the screen, then looked up.

“Mr. Longshadow,” Rachel began, her gaze unwavering as she locked eyes with the man before her.

“That’s my name,” he retorted.

“Don’t wear it out,” Ethan added, chortling at the worn-out joke.

Rachel didn’t flinch. She kept her eyes locked with Amos’. “Why’d you run?”

“Exercise,” he replied. “You? Don’t look like you get much. Face starting to look mighty pale, there, white girl.”

She shook her head, refusing to be derailed. “We understand that you’ve been very vocal about your opposition to the new casino development on the island. Can you explain why?”

Amos’s eyes flashed with a sudden fire, his hands gripping the edge of the table as though bracing for some unseen impact. “That damn casino will ruin everything,” he spat, the contempt in his voice evident. “The air, the water, the land – it’ll all be polluted by greed and corruption.”

“Isn’t progress inevitable, Mr. Longshadow?” Ethan interjected, an eyebrow arched. It was an instigating question, and Rachel could tell Ethan knew it. But Amos fell for the goading query.

“Progress?” Amos scoffed, his face twisting into a bitter scowl. “What you call progress, I call destruction. The island was never meant to bear the weight of such a monstrosity. It’ll tear apart the very fabric of our lives, shattering the delicate balance between man and nature.”

Rachel studied him intently, noting the way his chest heaved with each impassioned word. There was no doubt that he felt a deep connection to the land and its wellbeing. But was it enough to drive him to violence?

“Mr. Longshadow,” she said, her voice steady and firm, “we’d like to talk to you about Ella Winder. Did you have any personal connection to her?”

For a moment, Amos’s fiery demeanor seemed to falter, his brow furrowing as if trying to place the name.

“Ella?” he finally murmured, his voice rough and low. “I knew her – not well, but I knew her. She came to a few of my meetings, spoke out against the casino just like the rest of us.”

“Did you ever spend time with her outside of those meetings?” Ethan asked, leaning forward slightly, his eyes never leaving Amos’s face.

“Can’t say I did,” Amos replied, his gaze flicking away for a brief moment as if recalling some distant memory. “Had enough on my hands with the fight against that wretched casino.”

Rachel exchanged a glance with Ethan, wondering if this man – so deeply entrenched in his love for the island and its people – could be capable of harming one of his own.

Rachel studied Amos’s expression, searching for any sign of deception. The lines on his face seemed to deepen, as if etched by years of battling the elements and fighting for a cause he held dear.

“You seem to have a good memory,” she said, her voice low and measured. “You recognized Ella’s name right away.”

Amos shrugged, the corners of his mouth twitching in what might have been a smile. “Maybe it’s you who has a

good memory, Ranger,” he replied cryptically, his eyes locked onto hers.

“I... does that make sense?” Ethan muttered. He glanced at Rachel. “I don’t think that makes sense.”

Rachel just grunted and shook her head.

“Regardless, let’s focus on the matter at hand,” Ethan interjected, his tone firm yet calm. “Ella Winder was found dead earlier this morning. We’re investigating the possibility that her death is connected to the other missing women from the island.”

The room seemed to shrink as the weight of the words settled upon them, the air growing heavy with unspoken thoughts. Rachel watched as Amos’s eyes widened in genuine shock, his weathered hands gripping the edge of the table.

“Dead?” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “No... I had no idea. I wouldn’t hurt one of my own, Ranger. You have to believe me.”

His gaze bore into hers with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine.

“Amos,” she said, her voice softening just slightly, “we’re not accusing you of anything. We’re simply trying to piece together what happened. We know you opposed the casino.”

“Look elsewhere,” he replied, his voice hardening once more. “I’ve spent my life fighting for this island and its people. I would never betray them like that.”

The tension in the room hung thick and palpable, like the oppressive heat of a summer afternoon in Texas.

She took a deep breath and tried to steady herself, remembering her aunt Sarah’s words from long ago: “When you’re lost in the wilderness, it’s the calm mind that finds the way.”

“Amos,” Rachel said, forcing her voice to remain steady, “we need to talk about Sophia Jones and Aspen Blueriver. Do you know anything about them?”

“Can’t say I do,” Amos replied gruffly, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized Rachel’s face, as if trying to gauge her intentions.

“Let me refresh your memory,” Rachel said, pulling out two photographs from her jacket pocket. She placed them on the table with the same precision with which she’d once set up her hunting rifle, preparing to take aim at her target. The first picture showed Sophia, her dark hair framing a face full of life, her eyes bright and curious. The second image featured Aspen, her pale skin contrasting against the vibrant colors of the island flora behind her.

“Seen ‘em around,” Amos mumbled, glancing at the images before quickly averting his gaze.

“Did they come to your meetings too?”

“Maybe,” he said reluctantly, his jaw setting stubbornly. “A lot of people come to my meetings. Hard to keep track of everyone.”

“Try,” Rachel insisted, her voice firm but not unkind. She knew the importance of staying focused on her goal, like an arrow flying true to its target.

“Alright,” Amos sighed, his gaze shifting back to Rachel’s unwavering brown eyes. “I remember the white girl.”

“Sophia?”

“Mhmm.”

“She came to one of your meetings.”

“Yes. With Javier.”

“Who’s Javier?” Rachel said, and she heard Ethan scribbling down the name on a pad of paper.

“Don’t know him well. He was quiet, older than most who come to my meetings. He seemed... I don’t know, distant, like he wasn’t really there.”

“Anything else?” Ethan chimed in, his voice a low rumble that matched the distant thunder outside the interrogation room.

Amos shook his head, his eyes drifting back to the photographs on the table. “That’s all I can remember.”

Rachel leaned forward, her fingers drumming on the cold metallic table. “Do you know anything else about him? Where he’s from, what he does for a living?”

Amos rubbed his rough chin in thought, his eyes narrowing as he attempted to recall any further details. “I don’t,” he admitted finally, his voice tinged with regret. “He didn’t say much at the meeting. Just listened. He was like a shadow – there one moment and gone the next.” The stark fluorescent lights above flickered momentarily, casting an eerie glow over the room.

“Can anyone verify that?” Ethan asked, hoping for some concrete information to help them move forward in their investigation.

“I don’t know,” Amos replied, shaking his head. “The meetings are open to anyone, but people rarely pay attention to each other. They come to listen and learn, not to socialize.”

“Alright, let’s talk about Ella Winder again,” Rachel said, shifting gears. “You recognized her name earlier. Can you give us an alibi for the night she disappeared?”

Amos scoffed, the corners of his weathered lips curling into a bitter smile. “My alibi?” he questioned, his tone dripping with disdain. “I don’t know *when* she disappeared.”

Rachel nodded. “Account for the last seven days.”

He shrugged. “Easy. I was on a speaking tour on the mainland last week. I gave lectures on conservation and our sacred connection to the land. You can find the videos online if you’re interested.”

“Speaking tour?” Ethan raised an eyebrow skeptically, prompting Amos to pull out his phone and slide it across the table. The screen displayed a series of video thumbnails, each featuring Amos standing before a captivated audience, his arms animatedly gesturing as he spoke.

Rachel and Ethan exchanged glances as they scanned the dates and locations of the lectures. It was a solid alibi – if

Amos was telling the truth. Rachel could feel the frustration boiling within her, threatening to spill over like a pot left unattended on the stove.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” she finally said, her voice steady despite the tumultuous thoughts swirling in her mind. “We’ll be in touch if we have any more questions.”

“Please do,” Amos replied curtly, his eyes locked on hers as if in a challenge. “Does that mean I’m free to go?”

“Javier,” Rachel said quickly. “Why did he stand out to you?”

“He was with her. The white girl. That’s why.” A pause, then a sigh. “Javier is... a strange type. He’s been around, but there are stories... About how he treats women. He’s thirty, but often seen with teenagers or women in their early twenties.”

Rachel hesitated. “Strange how?”

Amos leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “He’s just... off. Something about him doesn’t sit right with me. But I can’t put my finger on it.”

Ethan scribbled down notes furiously, while Rachel tried to keep a neutral expression on her face. She knew that they needed to investigate this Javier further.

She got to her feet and moved towards the door. “We’re going to check your alibi,” she said.

“Then can I go?”

“Why’d you run?” she said.

He frowned at her. Shrugged. “Why does the wind flee the waves? I don’t talk to cops. Never have. I can tell you where he squats, though. Javier.”

“Alright.”

Rachel listened as the address was provided, then she regained her feet.

The door clicked shut behind them, leaving Rachel and Ethan in the sterile confines of the hall outside the



interrogation room. A tense silence settled over them like a damp, oppressive fog.

“Guess Longshadow is off the list,” Ethan muttered, pacing the hall, his fingers drumming a restless rhythm against his thigh.

Rachel nodded absently, her eyes following Ethan’s agitated movements. She could sense that he was just as frustrated as she was – they were no closer to uncovering the truth than when they’d started.

“Damn it,” she breathed, clenching her fists tightly at her sides. “We’re going to find these women, Ethan. We have to.”

Ethan stopped pacing and met her gaze, the fire in his eyes mirrored by the resolute determination etched on his face. “We will, Rachel,” he said quietly.

“I want to check his alibi.”

“Yeah. For sure. What about this Javier joker?”

Rachel frowned, then nodded. “If he was seen with our most recent disappearance, then maybe he saw something.”

“Or maybe he’s involved?”

Rachel sighed, checking her watch. It was nearly eight pm. It was getting late.

But a killer was still out there, and they didn’t have time to waste.

She said, “Let’s go find this guy and see if he can point us in the right direction.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The moon painted its eerie glow upon the waves, casting flickering shadows onto the sand as Rachel and Ethan pulled up to the old Victorian house on Galveston Island. The car's headlights illuminated the crumbling facade of the once-grand mansion as they came to a stop on the gravel drive. It was late, far later than most would venture to this desolate part of the island, but time was of the essence in their search for Sophia.

"Do you feel it too?" Ethan asked softly, his voice betraying a hint of unease.

"Feel what?" Rachel replied.

"The air feels... heavy," he said, glancing at the towering oaks that surrounded the property like ancient sentinels.

Rachel nodded, her grip on the steering wheel tightening. "I'm not superstitious."

"Not even a little seditious?"

She rolled her eyes, pushing out of the car.

The crunch of gravel underfoot broke the silence that clung to the air like a shroud. The house loomed before them, an imposing figure against the dark sky—its weathered wooden exterior imbued with the rich history of Galveston Island. The Victorian architectural details spoke of a bygone era, when grand balls and lavish parties filled the opulent rooms within. But now, it stood as a haunting reminder of the 1900 Hurricane that had decimated much of the island, leaving the once-vibrant city forever changed.

The salty sea breeze tugged at Rachel's hair and carried with it the scent of seaweed and distant memories of laughter and music, as if the ghosts of the past were beckoning her to join them in their eternal dance. She shook off the feeling and focused instead on the task at hand.

"Let's go," she said, her voice firm and resolute. Together, they approached the house, its grandeur and history a backdrop to the mystery that awaited them within its walls.

As they ascended the worn stone steps, Rachel couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that they were being watched. Her instincts flared, prompting her to scan their surroundings. In the faint glow of the moonlight, she spotted a small camera perched on one of the house's ornate eaves. The lens followed their movements, filling her with an overwhelming sense of unease.

"Look," she murmured, her breath forming a cloud in the chilly night air, as she gestured toward the camera. Ethan nodded, his brow furrowing in concern.

"Someone knows we're here," he replied quietly. "We need to be on our guard."

With renewed caution, they approached the heavy wooden door, its intricate carvings standing testament to the skillful craftsmanship of a long-forgotten era. As Rachel raised her hand to knock, the door creaked open, revealing a handsome man with dark features and a disarming smile.

It was Javier Gutierrez. She recognized him from his photos.

But he looked... like he was at home. Rather than the squatter they'd been told would be living inside the mansion on the bluff.

Javier was smiling easily at them, his warm gaze darting from Rachel to Ethan and back. He wore a slightly puzzled look.

"Can I help you?" he said.

"Are you Mr. Gutierrez?" Ethan replied.

The man shrugged one shoulder. "Some say so."

Rachel hesitated. He was technically squatting in the property, but he seemed friendly—open even.

One often caught more flies with honey.

Besides, all they had him on, currently, was being seen with Sophia before she disappeared.

Rachels's gaze didn't waver as she took in his appearance. His deep-set eyes held a hint of mystery, accentuated by the shadows cast by the flickering candlelight from within the house. She could see why Sophia might have been drawn to him. Yet, she knew better than to let his charm disarm her.

"Come in. Come in! Please, call me Javier," he insisted, stepping back to allow them to enter. Their footsteps echoed through the high-ceilinged foyer, the sound mingling with the distant crash of waves against the shore.

Javier noticed the direction of Rachel's gaze.

"Ah, yes," Javier agreed, his eyes lighting up with genuine enthusiasm. "There's something truly captivating about the raw power and beauty of the sea, don't you think? It's both humbling and inspiring."

"Javier," she began, her voice steady and determined, "we have some questions we'd like to ask you about Sophia Jones."

"Oh... yes... cops, yes? You have the look. Come, come. Somewhere more comfortable."

It was as if he wasn't phased in the least by the line of questioning.

Rachel and Ethan both shared quizzical looks, but followed all the same.

Javier led them further inside, and Rachel's eyes roved around the immaculate interior. The polished wooden floors gleamed beneath their feet, and rich tapestries adorned the walls, depicting scenes of Galveston Island's history in exquisite detail. Antique furniture paired seamlessly with modern amenities, giving the impression that the house had evolved gracefully over time.

"Please, have a seat," Javier gestured towards a plush velvet sofa situated before a roaring fireplace. A warm glow bathed the room, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Despite the late hour, the house seemed alive, humming with a quiet energy.

Rachel exchanged a glance with Ethan, who nodded subtly, his expression unreadable. They took their seats, but Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that unseen eyes were still watching them.

"Would you like some coffee?" Javier offered, expertly pouring rich, dark liquid into delicate china cups.

Where had those come from?

He might not have owned the place, but he'd certainly made it a home for himself.

"Thank you," Ethan replied, cradling the cup in his hands.

"Javier," Rachel began as she accepted her own cup, "we're here because we're trying to find Sophia Jones. We were told she was last seen with you."

"Ah, yes, Sophia." Javier's voice held no trace of concern as he settled into an armchair across from them. "A lovely girl, quite enchanting. But I'm afraid I can't help you much. We spent an evening together, and then she went on her way."

"Are you certain that's all there is to it?" Rachel pressed, her gaze unwavering. "You didn't see her again after that night?"

"Detective, I assure you, our encounter was brief and pleasant. I haven't seen her since." Javier's tone remained light, his smile never faltering.

Rachel studied Javier's face, searching for any hint of deception. Beneath the surface charm, she sensed something concealed—an undercurrent of unease that rippled just out of reach.

"Javier," Rachel said, her voice steady and calm, "you mentioned that you spent an evening with Sophia. Where did you go?"

"Ah, well," Javier hesitated for a fraction of a second. "We went to a little bar down by the pier. A cozy place—good music, great atmosphere."

"We heard about that... You sat through a lecture, yes?"

“I can’t recall. Sophia chose the venue.”

Rachel nodded slowly. “And afterwards you didn’t see her?”

“No.”

“What about morning?”

“We didn’t spend the night together.”

“You were seen leaving together.”

He hesitated. “Y-yes...” A falter.

“So you *did* spend the night?” Rachel pressed her advantage.

“No!” he protested. “We just...” He frowned now, crossing his arms. “What’s this all about anyway?”

“Sophia’s gone missing,” Rachel said.

“How horrible!” he exclaimed, his eyes widening, a hand fluttering to his lips.

“You didn’t know?” Rachel said, making no effort to conceal her surprise.

“Know? Of course not. We just saw each other that one night.”

“I thought you said you went home with her.”

“No... No, I didn’t say that.”

Now, he looked flustered.

Rachel leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Javier’s face. “Javier, we need to know everything you did with Sophia on the night she disappeared. Every detail is important.”

Javier shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he stammered.

Rachel’s patience was wearing thin. “Javier, we have reason to believe that you’re not telling us the whole truth. If you’re hiding something, I suggest you come clean now.”

Javier looked down at his coffee cup, his expression grim. “Fine,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Sophia and I... we did spend the night together. But it was consensual, I swear. And in the morning, she was gone. I don’t know where she went.”

“Javier, did Sophia say anything to you about where she was going?”

Javier shook his head. “No, she didn’t. She just... left.”

Ethan chimed in now. “Do you have any thoughts about the build site for the casino?”

Javier’s eyes darted to Ethan. “W-what?”

Another chink in the armor. Rachel frowned, but why? He looked frightened now.

“Did you visit the location recently?” she said.

It was a fishing expedition, but sometimes, one just had to know how to use the right bait.

“Who said it?” he demanded. “They’re lying.”

He was protesting too much.

“So you did visit the build site? Was Sophia with you at the time?”

“No—whichever told you that is lying!” he snarled.

Rachel leaned in now. No more time for playing nice.

“You’re the one who’s lying. I just can’t tell about what.”

“Get out of my house!” he snapped. His smile was now gone.

“It isn’t your house,” she replied.

The room seemed to grow darker, the air heavier, as Javier’s facade shattered. His face contorted with rage, and his once-charming features twisted into something monstrous. In an instant, he was on his feet, his breaths coming in ragged snarls.

“Listen here, you meddling witch,” he spat, his words a venomous hiss. “You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

Ethan tensed beside her, ready to leap into action. But Rachel remained outwardly calm, her mind racing with the adrenaline that surged through her veins.

“Tell us where Sophia is, Javier,” she demanded, her voice as sharp as obsidian.

Javier sneered, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. Then, in a blur of motion, he lunged at Rachel, brandishing a gleaming knife that seemed to materialize out of thin air.

One moment, he'd been motionless, the next, he'd struck. Like a poison snake curled in tall grass.

Rachel's instincts kicked in, and time slowed around her.

Her body moved with the efficiency and grace of a predator, sidestepping Javier's lunge and grabbing his wrist. She could feel the cold steel of the blade mere inches from her face, but with a twist of her arm, she wrenched the weapon from Javier's grasp, its cruel edge glinting in the dim light as it clattered to the floor.

“Where is Sophia?” she growled through gritted teeth as she stared into the feral eyes of the man she'd cornered.

He gasped for breath, his face contorted in pain and fear.

“Let me go!” he snarled, but his voice held none of the charm and confidence from earlier. It was a plea, raw and animalistic.

“Tell me where Sophia is,” Rachel repeated, tightening her hold on his arm, forcing it to bend at an unnatural angle. She could feel the bones grinding together, threatening to snap under the pressure of her grip. She held herself back, just enough not to break him completely.

“Alright,” Javier spat, the word escaping his lips like a curse. “I'll tell you.” His eyes darted from side to side, searching for any way to escape the situation he'd found himself in. But there was nothing, nowhere to run, and he knew it. The truth was his only recourse, his last-ditch attempt at survival.



“Please...” he whispered, the fight leaving him, replaced by a growing sense of resignation. “Just let me go.”

Rachel stared down at him, her expression stony and unyielding. She saw the fear in his eyes, but she also knew that this man was still dangerous. And she couldn't afford to let her guard down.

“Tell me where Sophia is,” Rachel said one last time, her voice unwavering. “And I'll think about letting you go.”

Javier's gaze met hers, and for a moment, the two of them were locked in a silent battle of wills. But it was clear who held the power here, and as Rachel continued to stare him down, his snarling expression lost some of its edge.

The sudden transformation of Javier from the charming, handsome man who had greeted them at the door to this sneering, feral beast was both jarring and telling. The danger he posed now was as palpable as the tension in the air, his dark eyes blazing with fury and desperation.

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest as she held him down, hyperaware of every movement and muscle twitch coming from the man beneath her. She could feel the sweat beading on her brow, the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Every instinct screamed at her to remain vigilant, to be prepared for any sudden attack from Javier.

“Talk,” Rachel commanded, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart.

Javier's breaths came in ragged gasps, but his resolve seemed to waver in the face of Rachel's determination. His lips parted, but no words emerged, only a guttural growl that sent a shiver down Rachel's spine.

“Where is Sophia?” Ethan interjected, his tone firm and authoritative. He stood by, ready to assist if needed, but his eyes never left Javier's face.

He just shook his head.

“You killed her, didn't you?” Rachel said.

He scowled.

“Like you killed the others.”

He blinked, as if slapped. “W-what others?”

She frowned. And then she reached out. Before he could protest, she plucked his phone from his pocket.

“Password,” she demanded.

“Go to hell.”

“Password, *now!*” she said. Reaching down with the same hand holding the phone to pick up the knife he’d dropped.

They didn’t have time for these games.

He blinked in surprise, staring at her, then at the knife. He let out a faint, stammering sound, and fear crept into his eyes.

“Shit! Alright, God dammit! She’s here. She’s fine—she’s here! It was all consensual! Really!”

“She’s here? Where?”

“Rachel!” Ethan called out suddenly, his voice carrying a note that sent a shiver down Rachel’s spine.

She looked over to see where her partner was pointing. And there, she noticed it.

She inwardly kicked herself for missing it initially.

But a lock was on the *inside* of the basement door.

She stared at the bolt, and the chain.

And then she shoved off the now cuffed Javier and hurried over to the door. “Watch him!” she snapped.

Her irritation was directed towards Javier, but the directive was issued to Ethan.

Morgan didn’t balk; he just nodded dutifully. She felt a flash of gratitude, even in this strange moment. Ethan was pretty low maintenance and often seemed capable of weathering her rougher edges.

She reached the door, shot the lock twice, and kicked it in.

She stared into the ark basement, down a set of concrete slab steps.

And then, from below, she heard a faint shout.

“Help, *please!*”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Rachel's heart leaped, and she rushed down the steps.

The basement was small and cramped, and she quickly noticed a cage in the corner.

Inside it, huddled against a cold, gray wall was Sophia. Her wrists were chained to the cement, her clothes dirty and torn. She looked up at Rachel with an expression of shock and fear.

"It's okay," Rachel said softly as she stepped forward. "We're here to help you."

Sophia let out a faint breath, and her eyes held a spark of... *hope*. She'd hung onto it. He hadn't broken her.

Rachel felt a flash of extreme gratitude.

She yanked open the cage door, snatched a key that was dangling on the wall, but before she could enter, there was a sound behind her.

Suddenly, Sophia's eyes widened. "Watch out!" she gasped.

Rachel spun around just in time to see a sleek, dark shape hurtling towards her.

A dog.

No... too big.

A damn wolf, and it was lunging at her neck.

Rachel did the only thing she could think of. She stepped back into the cage with Sophia and slammed the door.

The snarling wolf crashed into the metal bars of the cage, its hot breath mingling with the fear in Rachel's throat. She stood in front of the young woman, still chained, shielding her from the vicious animal.

The wolf circled the cage, its eyes fixed on Rachel, its growls morphing into a haunting howl. Rachel could feel the cage rattle under the weight of its attacks, but it held steady. For now, at least.

Sophia pressed against Rachel's leg, from where Sophia still sat hunched on the ground, her body trembling. Rachel could feel her own heart pounding in her chest, the adrenaline coursing through her veins as she tried to think of a way out of this situation.

Where the hell had the bastard found a wolf?

It was Texas, after all. One could find all sorts of things.

But now, she met the glare of the wolf, locking eyes.

Conventional advice was to never look an animal in the eyes—it would only rile it up.

But now, she wanted it riled.

It flung itself at the cage again. And this time, her hand shout out, holding onto a length of the chain dangling from the wall.

She grabbed the wolf's ear, even as its muzzle grazed her arm. Sharp fangs were visible, flashing past her skin.

She tugged at the ear, and the beast whimpered. She pulled hard enough to press it against the cage and then looped the chain over it, through the bars, even as it kicked and struggled.

The thing was malnourished—weak. Angry and hungry.

But it wasn't strong. Clearly, Javier didn't take very good care of his pets.

She reminded herself to give him a good kick "by accident" when taking him to the car.

But now, moving fast, and using the length of loose chain—which looked as if it might have once been wrapped around Sophia's neck—she lassoed the beast against the metal bars, almost like tying a fish to a grill. It howled and snapped and snarled, but in its anger, it didn't seem to realize what she was doing.

And then, as she secured the beast to the bars, the chain wrapped around its abdomen, and against two of the cage bars, she then shoved the door open again.

The wolf went with it.

Now, the wolf was caught on the door.

The chain rattled and shook. Its teeth flashed, and its growls tore through the space.

She let out a faint sigh, though. It was all bark, now—it couldn't reach them.

She turned back around, snatching the key off the wall, bracing the door frame with her foot, so the cage would keep the wolf pinned against the wall.

After a bit more struggle, the wolf seemed to realize it was trapped.

It growled some more.

“Sit!” Rachel commanded.

it didn't. But eventually, it did fall onto its belly, placing its muzzle on its paws, its bright, yellow eyes watching them both.

Breathing heavily, slick with sweat across her brow, she approached Sophia again.

“Ms. Jones?”

The head bobbed.

“Sophia Jones?”

Another bob.

“Thank God. I'm Ranger Blackwood. We're here to get you to safety.”

Sophia let out a faint whimper, nodding, her head hanging. She seemed timid, though. Withdrawing briefly from Rachel as the ranger fit the key into the slot and twisted.

The chains fell away from Sophia's wrists, and she clutched at her arms, rubbing at the red marks that the metal had left behind. Rachel moved closer, placing a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder.

“It's okay,” she repeated. “We're going to get you out of here.”

Sophia nodded again, her eyes still wide with fear. Rachel could see the trauma etched on her face, the way her body seemed to tremble with every breath.

“We need to get you checked out,” Rachel said, looking around the small, dimly-lit basement. “Are you hurt? Do you need medical attention?”

Sophia shook her head, her eyes darting to the wolf that was still snarling and growling in the corner.

“Is that thing going to attack us again?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“No,” Rachel said, her tone firm. “It’s not going to hurt you. It’s tied up.”

She moved closer to the wolf, watching it carefully. It was still growling, still snapping its jaws, but it couldn’t reach them. Rachel knew that it was dangerous, that it could kill them both if given the chance. But for now, it was trapped.

She turned back to Sophia, taking her by the arm. “Let’s go,” she said, leading her towards the stairs. “We need to get you out of here.”

They climbed the steps, and as they emerged into the living room again, Javier was face down on the carpet, Ethan standing over him.

Rachel frowned at the fallen man. He was clearly a monster... but the killer? They’d have to find out.

Rachel was so distracted, in that moment, she didn’t notice the faint tug at her waist.

Suddenly, she heard a stammering sound.

She looked sharply over, and froze.

Her gun was now in Sophia’s hands. Sophia pointed the weapon directly at Javier.

“You were going to kill me,” she whispered.

Rachel noticed blood stains and cuts on Sophia’s head.

Javier was still eating carpet, but he looked up at these words, panic in his eyes.

“You were going to kill me,” Sophia repeated, her voice shaking.

“Look... I’m sorry!” he called out. “I got... got carried away!”

“Sophia,” Rachel said slowly. “Don’t do anything rash. We need to speak with him. There are other women in danger.”

But Sophia didn’t seem to even hear Rachel’s words, as if they were coming from down a long tunnel.

“You’re a freak,” Sophia whispered. And again, Rachel saw that spark of strength in the young woman’s eyes.

Rachel stared at Sophia. Part of her wondered if she ought to step in front of the gun—it was the thing to do, wasn’t it?

To stop the execution of a prisoner.

She moved then, allowing duty to guide her steps, though her emotions weren’t in it.

Javier was blubbing on the carpet now. Begging, pleading—the big bad wolf had transformed into a mewling babe.

“Sophia,” Rachel said softly, reaching out to push the gun down.

But Sophia wasn’t as exhausted or frail as she’d seemed in the basement.

As Rachel stepped in, so did the young woman. She shoved the ranger.

Rachel stumbled back.

“Bastard!” Sophia yelled.

And there were two gunshots.

As Rachel regained her footing. Javier let out a sound like a deflating balloon.

The gunshots continued. *Crack. Crack. Crack-crack-crack.*



Five more bullets slammed into Javier's already lifeless corpse, small bursts of blood staining his carpet.

Ethan was on Sophia a second later. He was none-too-gentle in disarming the girl.

But she didn't resist, and instead fell to the ground, weeping deeply and wrapping her arms around her knees.

Her shoulders shook horribly as Ethan quickly dumped the magazine on the gun and tossed it over his shoulder.

Rachel snatched it before it hit the ground, frowning to herself.

She'd allowed her weapon to go missing—it was the epitome of unprofessionalism.

But a small part of her subconscious wondered if she'd done so intentionally...

Had she heard Sophia sneaking up?

Had she ignored the sound of footsteps?

Had she wanted Javier to get what was coming to him? It was the way of the wild... But no. No, she hadn't.

She let out a long, defeated sigh, now, holstering her weapon, and turning to stare at where Sophia knelt on the ground, weeping horribly, and clutching at Ethan's legs as if they were mooring posts.

He just stood awkwardly over her, cuffs in hand, a question on his face.

Rachel gave a faint shake of her head.

What were the cuffs for? Sophia was no threat to anyone else.

And neither was Javier.

But now... she turned back, staring at the bloody mess. He wasn't going to be much of a witness, either.

Two of the missing women had been found.

One alive.

One dead.

Where was the third?

And was Javier the one who'd taken her?

It was all so troubling.

In the distance, Rachel heard the sound of rapidly approaching sirens coming in response to the gunshots.

"Shit," she said.

"Shit," Ethan replied.

The two of them shared a long, exhausted look.

Rachel's phone buzzed. She checked. It was Lilly.

"Here," the message read.

Rachel stared at the screen, rubbing at her eyes.

"I got the paperwork," Ethan said quietly.

Rachel looked at him.

"Really, I'll do it," he said.

She blinked in surprise, hesitated. Then said, "You sure?"

He flashed a thumbs up and a quick nod.

Rachel felt a surge of gratitude, and approached Sophia. The girl was still blubbering, but Rachel helped her slowly to her feet.

The girl didn't like Rachel's touch—she froze up—so Rachel let go.

"Am I going to prison?" Sophia whimpered.

Rachel glanced back at Javier. Ethan did too.

"I'll put in a good word for you," Ethan said. "But you shouldn't have done that."

"Nonsense," Rachel replied. "He was reaching for a weapon. So I had to put him down."

Ethan stared at her.

Rachel stared back, a note of defiance in her gaze.

This, she decided, was perhaps the greatest difference between the two of them.

Ethan played by the rules—a gentle soul who wanted to help. But he did it within the provided parameters.

Rachel, though...

She sighed.

She'd be damned if she saw Sophia spend another day in a cage. It wasn't a good thing that Javier was now dead.

But it would've been worse if Sophia ended up behind bars because of it.

"You sure?" Ethan said, his voice low.

Rachel just nodded once.

Sophia was trembling, but now, she leaned against Rachel, as if seeking solace and support.

Rachel gave her a small side hug, though it was a stiff motion—she wasn't all that acclimated to comfort.

As the sirens drew nearer, Ethan and Rachel moved to the door.

"I'm not going to lie for you," Ethan said.

Rachel nodded. "Can you avoid talking altogether?"

He looked at her.

She looked back over Sophia's hunched form. "I'm not gonna ask much, Ethan. Don't lie. But you put her behind bars, we're going to have a problem."

"What sort of problem?"

Rachel shrugged. Then, instead of threatening him, she just said, "You'll do the right thing."

Secretly, she doubted that *either* of them knew exactly what this was.

But she also knew Ethan could be trusted; he'd proven it enough at this point.

She let out a weary sigh, leading Sophia to the curb, to wait for the approaching ambulance to arrive.

And as she stood on the curb, her phone buzzed again. And again.

And again.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The dimly lit bar on Galveston Island hummed with activity, the sound of laughter and clinking glasses filling the air. An old neon sign flickered over the entrance, casting a warm, orange glow over the worn wooden floor. The smell of alcohol and sweat hung heavy in the room, mingling with the distant notes of a blues song playing on a jukebox somewhere in the corner. Shadows danced on the walls as patrons moved about, their conversations subdued enough to create an almost soothing atmosphere.

Rachel hesitated for a moment at the entrance, taking it all in. She stepped inside, feeling the weight of the evening fall from her. For a moment, she forgot about everything – Ethan backing her report or, at least, not contradicting it and Sophia being taken to the hospital instead of a holding cell. It was a small victory, but it provided some relief.

As she scanned the room, Rachel's eyes were drawn to a figure by the pool table. Amidst the rowdy bikers, their tattoos snaking up their arms and leather jackets creaking with every movement, stood Lily, her childhood best friend. Her calm presence seemed almost out of place among the raucous crowd, yet she held herself with grace as she lined up her shot and sent the cue ball gliding across the green felt surface.

Lily's free-spirited nature had always been a source of both support and tension in their friendship; while Rachel admired her ability to live life on her own terms, she found herself worrying about the unpredictable path her friend often chose. As she watched Lily now, effortlessly weaving between the bikers as they congratulated her on her winning shot, it was evident that little had changed in the time since they'd last seen each other.

Rachel's eyes followed Lily, and as she approached the bar, their gazes met. In that instant, all distance between them seemed to vanish, replaced by a warm, familiar connection that had never truly faded.

A smirk tugged at the corners of Rachel's mouth as she watched Lily, her laughter bubbling up and intertwining with

the biker's boisterous guffaws. The warm glow of the neon lights reflected off the polished wood of the bar, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across Lily's face as she leaned in to share a joke with the rough-looking men surrounding her. It was a testament to her carefree spirit that she could so easily charm even the most intimidating of characters.

The scent of whiskey and beer hung heavy in the air, mingling with the low hum of conversation and the occasional burst of laughter. Rachel could feel herself being pulled into the atmosphere like a moth to a flame, drawn by the magnetism of the moment.

Taking a deep breath, she navigated her way through the dimly lit room, brushing past bodies clad in leather and denim. With each step, the anticipation built within her chest, the familiar flutter of excitement that accompanied every reunion with her childhood friend.

As Rachel approached, Lily looked up, her eyes widening in delight. Their smiles stretched across their faces like sunbeams breaking through storm clouds, banishing any lingering shadows that clung to their hearts.

"Rachel!" Lily exclaimed, throwing her arms around her friend in a tight embrace. "I can't believe you're here!"

"Neither can I," Rachel murmured into her shoulder, inhaling the familiar scent of patchouli and sandalwood that clung to Lily's skin. She allowed herself this moment of vulnerability, of closeness, letting the weight of her worries slip away as they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms.

As they finally pulled apart, Rachel studied Lily's face - the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, the delicate curve of her cheekbones, the mischievous glint that never seemed to fade from her gaze. It was as if time had stopped, and they were once again those carefree children who had spent endless summers exploring the wilds together.

"Come on," Lily urged, grabbing Rachel's hand and leading her back toward the pool table. "You have to meet some of these guys; they're a hoot."

Despite the apprehension that gnawed at the edges of her mind from the case, Rachel couldn't help but lose herself in the moment, embracing the laughter and camaraderie that flowed through the bar like a tidal wave. She knew that the world outside - with its dangers, secrets, and heartaches - still waited for her, but for now, she allowed herself this brief respite in the company of her oldest friend.

The laughter and clinking of glasses seemed to crescendo as Lily introduced Rachel to the group of bikers, who welcomed her with friendly grins and hearty handshakes. The scent of alcohol and cigarettes mingled with the dimly lit atmosphere, casting elongated shadows against the worn wood of the bar. In the background, an old jukebox played a forgotten rock ballad, adding another layer to the symphony of sounds.

“Alright, everyone,” Lily announced, raising her voice above the din. “Drinks are on me tonight! Let's toast to old friendships and new beginnings!”

Lily sauntered over to the bar, leaving Rachel momentarily surrounded by the boisterous group. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of her friend effortlessly commanding the attention and admiration of these rough-looking men.

“Two shots of tequila, please,” Lily called out to the bartender, winking at Rachel as she sidled up beside her. “For old times' sake.”

“Old times?” Rachel echoed, accepting the shot glass with a wry grin. “You mean like that summer we drank too much and ended up sleeping on the beach?”

“Exactly,” Lily laughed, clinking her glass against Rachel's before downing the fiery liquid in one swift motion. Rachel followed suit, relishing the familiar burn as it slid down her throat.

As they continued to reminisce, Rachel found herself slipping into a comfortable rhythm with Lily, as if the years apart had never happened. Their shared history came alive once more, etched in the lines of their faces and the depths of their memories. But beneath the warmth of their conversation,

Rachel couldn't shake a nagging sense of unease that simmered just below the surface.

"Hey, Lil," she began hesitantly, swirling the remnants of her drink in its glass. "You never did tell me why you wanted to meet up tonight. Is everything okay?"

Lily's smile faltered for a moment, her eyes clouding with uncertainty before she quickly recovered. "Oh, you know me," she chuckled, waving away Rachel's concern. "Just passing through and thought I'd see my favorite cop."

"Come on, Lily," Rachel pressed gently, her brow furrowing as she searched her friend's face for the truth. "We've known each other too long for that kind of deflection. What's really going on?"

Lily hesitated, her fingers playing absently with the frayed edge of a coaster. She had strong features—handsome rather than pretty. And she dressed like one of the bikers, but carried herself like a banker, with poise and confidence. She glanced at the rowdy bikers, then back to Rachel, her decision seemingly made. Taking a deep breath, she leaned in closer, her voice barely audible above the din.

"Alright," she whispered, her eyes solemn. "I'll tell you. But not here. Let's find somewhere quieter."

Rachel nodded, her curiosity piqued and her heart heavy with concern. Whatever had brought Lily back into her life, she knew it was serious - and she couldn't help but worry about what lay ahead for them both.

As they settled in a booth in the back, Rachel watched her friend.

Rachel had only taken a sip from her drink. The rest she'd left back on the bar. One sip—it was like with desert. A bit was all she needed.

Too far down the path of drinking, and bad things happened.

"Alright, Rachel," Lily finally conceded with a sheepish grin. "There is something I wanted to talk to you about." She took another sip of her drink, her eyes darting around the bar



as if seeking an escape from the conversation she was about to initiate.

“Go on,” Rachel prompted gently, her gaze steady and unwavering. She leaned in closer, her senses attuned to the subtle changes in her friend’s demeanor - the way Lily’s fingers tapped nervously against her glass, how her laughter seemed a little too forced.

“Okay, so... don’t laugh, but...” Lily hesitated, her cheeks flushing under the dim yellow glow of the bar’s hanging lights. “I’ve been talking to this guy online, and I think there might be something there.”

“An online relationship?” Rachel asked, her eyebrows arching in surprise. This was unexpected, but not entirely out of character for her free-spirited friend. She’d thought maybe Lily was going to ask her to help hide a body. This was a welcome relief. “How long have you been talking?”

“Almost three months now,” Lily admitted, her voice barely audible above the raucous laughter and clinking glasses that filled the air. “And before you say anything, I know it’s not ideal. But he’s amazing, Rachel. He’s kind and funny, and we have so much in common. I just... I want to make sure he’s the real deal, you know?”

“I see.” Rachel leaned back.

“I mean... you can look into people, right? Check them out. That sort of thing...” Lily leaned in, flashing that sweet smile that worked its charms so very often.

Rachel hesitated, her mind racing as she weighed her options. On one hand, helping Lily with a background check would mean using department resources for personal matters – something she knew was frowned upon. But on the other hand, she couldn’t bear the thought of her friend being hurt or deceived, especially after everything they’d been through together.

“Listen, Lily,” Rachel began cautiously. “You know how much you mean to me, right? And I want you to be happy and

safe, more than anything. But I can't promise anything, alright?"

The bar's dim lighting cast eerie shadows on the walls, and the faint scent of stale beer and cigarette smoke lingered in the air.

"Rachel, come on," Lily teased, wrapping her arm around Rachel's shoulder. "You're not honestly going to sit there and tell me you can't do a teensy-weensy little background check? I don't wanna end up kidnapped and kept in some perv's basement, ya know."

Rachel hesitated at this strangely timed comment... Kidnapped in someone's basement.

She frowned at Lily. Had she heard? In the past, her friend had often kept a police scanner around just to know when the cops were getting too close.

The strange phrasing tugged at Rachel... did she want to see Lily in a basement? Like Sophia?

Shit... when framed that way, there wasn't really a choice.

For a moment, her mind raced through the implications and potential consequences of her actions. Then she sighed, her resolve crumbling like a sandcastle before the relentless tide.

"Alright, fine," she conceded, trying to sound more annoyed than she actually felt. "I'll see what I can do. But only because I don't want you getting hurt, okay?"

"Thank you!" Lily squealed, planting a kiss on Rachel's cheek. "You're the best!"

As Lily celebrated with a little impromptu dance by their booth, keeping time with the music, Rachel's thoughts drifted.

Rachel couldn't help but contemplate the darker side of humanity. She thought about Javier, now dead— a man who had seemed to relish inflicting pain and suffering on others. And yet, he wasn't the only monster lurking in the shadows; it seemed as though evil had many faces, each one more terrifying than the last.

Her gaze drifted to a group of rough-looking bikers by the bar, their laughter raucous and vulgar, their tattoos telling stories of violence and loss. Some of them were wounded souls. Others just liked the ink and the leathers. Some of them were likely excellent fathers. But still others were possibly bastards at home.

But for those that *were* twisted... evil came in flavors too. How did one differentiate between a pervert and a killer, she wondered. Was there even a difference, or were they all just shades of the same twisted soul?

“Hey, Earth to Rachel,” Lily chided, snapping her fingers in front of her friend’s face. “You still with me?”

“Sorry,” Rachel mumbled, shaking off her dark thoughts as she forced a smile onto her lips. “Just got lost in my head for a second.”

“Must be a scary place in there,” Lily joked, but there was a hint of concern in her eyes that Rachel couldn’t ignore.

She returned a quick smile. But Rachel’s mind continued to wander. Javier was a pervert... But that didn’t mean he was a killer.

Sophia was alive when they’d found her.

So, was it a coincidence he’d been seen near the bar where the conservationist movement had met? What if she was barking up the wrong tree?

She hesitated, tilting the brim of her hat, watching her friend as Lily danced again, all too aware that a few of the bikers were watching her curves with extreme interest.

Rachel slumped back in her seat, her eyes hooded in shadow.

Javier was dead. There was no possibility of speaking with him now...

But she’d been operating under the assumption that if he was *one* type of evil, a pervert, that meant he was *another* type.

But there was no proof of him being a murderer.

Which meant, if she was wrong about him, then the real killer was still out there...

Rachel frowned as this troubling thought occurred to her. She tried to flash a quick smile at her childhood friend, but her mind was elsewhere, and even as the night fell complete, visible in the darkness spread like tar across the windows, Rachel feared that something else was out there.

Just as dark, lurking in the shadows.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The sun had long disappeared from the horizon, leaving the world to be enveloped in a veil of darkness. Shadows crept across the rows of houses, as if they were sinister hands reaching out for anyone who dared venture into the night. A chilling wind whispered through the trees, their limbs swaying and creaking under the weight of invisible forces. It was a night where fear lurked behind every corner, waiting to pounce upon unsuspecting prey.

Under the gnarled limbs of an ancient oak tree, a man sat inside his car, watching the scene unfold before him. The dim glow of the streetlights barely illuminated his pale face, revealing a pair of piercing eyes that seemed to hold a tempest of emotions. His thoughts danced around like children on a playground, giddy with excitement one moment, then trembling with anxiety in the next. He fidgeted with the steering wheel, his grip tightening and loosening in an erratic rhythm.

“Pretty lights,” he mumbled to himself, staring at the flickering porch light of a nearby house. “So pretty.”

In the distance, the distinct hum of an approaching vehicle broke through the stillness of the night. A minivan rolled into view, its headlights cutting through the darkness like twin beams. The man’s focus shifted, his eyes narrowing in anticipation as the van pulled up in front of a modest two-story house. The engine sputtered to a halt, and the driver’s door creaked open.

Out of the car stepped a woman, her raven hair cascading down her shoulders like a waterfall of ink. She wore a weary expression, the lines around her eyes hinting at the weight of the world that she carried upon her shoulders. As she moved towards the back of the van, her footsteps were cautious, deliberate.

“Come on, little ones,” she called out gently, her voice tinged with exhaustion but still warm and comforting. “Time to go inside.”

The man's gaze followed the woman as she opened the van's rear door, revealing two young children nestled in their car seats. Their faces were a mixture of sleepiness and curiosity, their eyes wide and innocent as they gazed upon the world around them. The woman began unhooking their seatbelts, her movements quick and efficient even in her fatigued state.

She seemed... less alert than she had at the pool. When she'd been scared of him.

"Mommy's got you," she whispered soothingly as she lifted each child from their seat, cradling them close to her chest. "Let's get you to bed."

As the woman carried her precious cargo towards the front door of the house, the man watched from the shadows with bated breath, his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

"Please be nice," he whispered to himself, his fingers drumming an erratic beat against the steering wheel. "Please, please be nice."

The man's eyes were locked on the woman as she placed the last of her children inside the house. His breath fogged up the car window, the eerie atmosphere outside seeping into his bones. The night was an orchestra of crickets and owls, accompanied by the whispering of the wind through the trees – a symphony that held him captive.

"Please be nice," he muttered again, his fingers tracing the curve of the steering wheel like a child attempting to draw a perfect circle.

As if on cue, the woman reappeared from within the house, her slender silhouette illuminated by the dim porch light. She approached the van once more, this time reaching for the trunk. The rustling of plastic bags filled the air as she began unloading grocery items. The man couldn't help but admire the way she balanced efficiency with grace, the way she moved like a dancer in a world of chaos.

"Okay... okay..." the man whispered to himself, mustering all the courage he could gather. He stepped out of

his car, the autumn leaves crunching beneath his feet as he moved towards the woman.

“Good evening!” he called out, forcing a smile onto his face. His voice wavered slightly, betraying his nervousness.

The woman glanced over her shoulder and spotted the approaching man.

The wind picked up, rustling the leaves that surrounded them both. The woman squinted, her eyes narrowing as she took a closer look at the man’s face. Recognition flashed across her features, and she suddenly went as white as a sheet.

“Y-you...” she stammered, taking a step back in horror. The grocery bags fell from her grasp, their contents spilling onto the ground like a cascade of fear-stricken memories.

“Wait, no, please!” the man pleaded, his hands raised in a gesture of surrender. His heart raced with confusion and frustration – why was she so afraid of him? “I just wanted to help...”

“Stay away from me!” she hissed, her voice trembling with panic. She retreated further, trying to put as much distance between herself and the man as possible.

He stared at her, his mind a whirlwind of emotions. He’d only wanted her to be nice to him; he couldn’t understand what he’d done wrong. The moon cast eerie shadows upon the scene, accentuating the twisted branches of the trees that seemed to reach out towards them, as if attempting to ensnare them within their gnarled embrace.

“Please, I-I don’t want any trouble,” the man stammered, desperation seeping into his voice like poison. “I just wanted to talk, maybe make a friend. That’s all.”

“Leave me alone!” she cried, her voice echoing through the desolate landscape. Tears welled in her eyes as she fumbled for her keys, desperate to escape the man in front of her.

“Can’t you see I’m not a threat?” the man implored, his eyes pleading for understanding. “All I ever wanted was for people to be kind to me.”

“Stop!” she shouted, finally unlocking the car door and throwing herself inside. Her hands shook as she fumbled with her seatbelt.

The man’s shoulders slumped in defeat. All he’d wanted was a chance to connect, but once again, he found himself shunned and rejected. He watched the woman’s panicked actions, his heart heavy with sorrow and frustration. The cold wind bit at his cheeks, taunting him like a cruel reminder of the icy loneliness that seemed to follow him wherever he went.

“Please,” he whispered one last time, though he knew she couldn’t hear him over the roar of the car engine. “Why can’t you just be nice?”

She was still fumbling with her keys in the ignition, looking at him as if he were some sort of monster...

And so anger began to set in. She wasn’t trying to drive away—she was going to use the car to ram into him. She thought she was better than him, didn’t she?

His anger was palpable now. His fury was rising.

Before he even knew what he was doing, he slammed his elbow into the glass, shattering it.

“I just wanted you to be nice!” he shouted.

As the woman’s scream tore through the night, her eyes wild with terror, the man’s desperation reached a boiling point. The cold air seemed to freeze around him, trapping him in a cage of rejection and loneliness. The once gentle rustling of leaves now felt like cruel whispers, mocking his pain.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the car, his grip like iron. She fought him, clawing at his skin and screaming in terror, but he refused to let go. He wasn’t going to be rejected anymore.

She stumbled against him, her cries of fear ringing through the night air. His grip on her arms was firm and unyielding, as if his fingers had been transformed into iron clamps.

“Please,” he begged, looking into her eyes for a glimmer of understanding. But all he saw was fear and hatred in their



depths. “Just be nice.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Morning brought clarity, and Rachel marched to the car where Ethan waited at the curb, watching her from the driver's seat.

She yawned briefly, mildly irritated she'd allowed Lily to talk her into staying out another couple hours. But Lily had always been able to get her to do things she normally might not have.

The night had passed quickly, and her dreams had been fitful. But now, as she slipped back into the front seat, she said, "We need to go back to the casino site."

He glanced at her. "How's that?"

"I don't think Javier is our guy."

Another blink. "Coffee?" he asked, tipping a styrofoam cup to her.

She took it, downed it. Then, I took the second one and down it as well. "Thanks," she said.

"Er... that other one was mine."

She blinked, stared, then felt a flush of embarrassment. She'd been so focused she'd been operating on autopilot. "Shit. Sorry. I can get you another on the way."

Ethan put the car in gear. "So what's back at the casino site?"

"Copper thieves."

"What?"

"People were stealing copper, yeah?"

"Yeah?"

"And so they put up a gate, yeah?"

"Mhmm..."

"But what if there was another entrance?"

He frowned, and the two of them picked up speed as they moved away from the motel.

“So what’s your play?”

“I want to figure out if there’s some other route in or out of that build site.”

“Boat?”

“Besides boat.”

“Why?”

“Because the body was buried there.”

“So... what about Javier?”

Rachel just shook her head. “I don’t think it’s him.”

“Hard to know.”

“Because he’s dead?”

“And because he had a woman chained in his basement.”

Both of them wrinkled their noses at the thought. “How’s she doing by the way?”

“Recovering at the hospital. She’s tough.”

Rachel sighed, massaging the bridge of her nose. “Do you ever wish we could get to them *before* they go through any of this shit?”

He just shrugged.

“I’m glad she shot him,” Rachel said softly.

Ethan didn’t reply.

She looks over at him.

“Vengeance isn’t ours,” Ethan said.

“That a religious thing?”

“Vengeance is mine, says the Lord,” Ethan replied somewhat stiffly. But he relaxed a bit and said, “I kept the report consistent. She’ll be fine.”

They pulled to the trailhead by the resort. And after pulling into the dirt parking lot, they made their way to the gate.

It was open this time.

Rachel left her troubling thoughts behind her, now.

“So,” Ethan said as they took the stone steps two at a time, “why are we back here?”

“Because if the body was buried, that means someone had a good amount of time to do it without being discovered.”

“So they did it at night.”

“Possibly.”

“Why not with a boat?”

“Because—there are cameras facing the water.”

“Wait, really?”

“Three of them.”

“Oh. Well, shit.”

Rachel nodded. “So I want to see if there’s *another* path in here. One we haven’t found.”

They reached the base of the steps, and Rachel immediately spotted an enormous barge moored off the coast.

There were tire tracks, and deep muddy grooves where construction equipment had been off-loaded from the barge.

Rachel and Ethan stood amidst the cacophony of construction. The sounds of heavy machinery echoed in the air, mingling with the faint cries of seagulls that circled overhead. Massive cranes towered above them like steel behemoths, their long arms reaching towards a sky painted in hues of gold and crimson.

“Look at this mess,” Rachel muttered, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the chaos before her.

Rachel approached the chain-link fence surrounding the site, her fingers skimming its cold surface. Her gaze darted from one end to the other, searching for any signs of disturbance or weakness. Ethan followed close behind, his own curiosity now piqued. With each step, her boots crunched audibly on the gravel beneath her feet as she traced the subtle

trail, meticulously studying the ground for any indication of human passage.

There were plenty of tracks, but she was looking specifically for tracks that either came *over* the fence or *through* it.

The tall cliffs behind them would've made passage nearly impossible. So, the trail would also have to lead to a secret tunnel or passageway through the sheer rock.

She knew it was a tenuous link. But the copper thieves had caused the construction of a gate, but that had been *before* the disappearance of Ella Winder.

And if there'd been a gate locked at *night*, then when would the killer have had time to bury the body?

No way by boat, because of the cameras.

Which meant, either the killer buried her during the day—which would've been impossible with the construction crew around—or at night.

So she was looking for a hidden trail.

Ethan watched her work, noting the precision and focus with which she examined their surroundings.

“Wait,” she breathed, coming to an abrupt halt. Her eyes widened as she discovered a small gap beneath the fence, just large enough for someone to crawl through.

The sun cast a fiery glow over the construction site, illuminating the machinery and half-built structures in a warm, orange haze. She noticed a subtle disturbance in the gravel nearby, something most people would easily overlook.

“Look at this,” she murmured, pointing to the slight depression in the ground. Ethan leaned in, his brows furrowing as he struggled to make out what had caught her attention.

“Footprints,” Rachel explained, her voice low and focused. “And not just one set, either. There are several here, overlapping each other.”

Ethan's eyes widened in surprise, his skepticism replaced with growing concern. "So there really could be something going on here."

She tugged at the gap under the fence, her eyes moving towards the base of the cliff.

A sheer rock wall. Nothing more.

She frowned.

Unless her eyes were playing tricks on her.

"Think the trail goes somewhere? Could have just been construction workers. Lunch break, maybe?"

"Mhmm." Her mind raced with possibilities, each more unsettling than the last.

She shrugged, then dropped to the ground, crawling under the fence.

Ethan helped by pulling up the fence, his fingers skimming against her back.

She felt a faint tingle where his hand touched, but pushed through, mud across her fingers and hands.

She dusted herself off, helped Ethan, and then continued along the hidden path, following the faint traces left behind by those who had come before them.

As they ventured deeper into the shadow of the cliff, a sense of unease settled over Rachel like a suffocating blanket. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, though she saw no one. The wind rustled through the tall grass, whispering secrets only it knew.

"Rachel, look." Ethan pointed to a bundle of ropes lying discarded near the edge of the trail. As she approached, her stomach churned at the sight of dark, rusty stains splattered across the frayed fibers. Blood? Or something else?

She breathed, her fingers hovering hesitantly over the stained ropes. "What happened here?"

"Could be anything," Ethan replied, though his voice lacked conviction. "An accident, maybe?"

Rachel's chest tightened as she gripped the bloodstained ropes, feeling the rough texture against her skin. Her pulse quickened, and she looked up to see Ethan's eyes widen in shock.

Ethan took a cautious step forward, his brow furrowing as he studied the stains.

The air around them seemed to grow colder, the scent of saltwater and earth mingling with a faint metallic tang that sent shivers down her spine.

She observed the slightest disturbances in the dirt and grass, noticed broken twigs or trampled vegetation, and pieced together a picture of what had transpired.

"Multiple people came through here," she murmured, crouching down to get a closer look at some footprints. "They were carrying something heavy, dragging it along the ground."

"Like a body?" Ethan asked, his voice hushed.

"Maybe," she replied, glancing around the beach and surrounding dunes. The sun cast long shadows across the sand, the colors painting the sky in shades of orange and purple. It was beautiful, but the serenity of nature only served to heighten the sense of unease that clung to them.

She scanned the cliff face now stretching out ahead of them, only twenty paces away.

There were no paths. No route through.

She sighed. So how had...

Her thoughts trailed off, and she glanced at the rope again.

And then, instead of staring along the *base* of the cliff, she tilted her head and looked *up*.

There, she spotted it.

Ten feet in the air, just out of sight. A small ledge. And on it...

"See that?" she pointed.

Ethan followed her gaze.

More blood stains.

The two of them stared.

“What...” Ethan trailed off. “Shit,” he said. “Think they came down from there?”

Rachel nodded. She bit her lip, then glanced around. She used the rope in her hand to create a sort of lasso and tossed it at a jutting section of rock.

Ethan watched as she managed to hook the lasso. She tugged it a couple of times until it was taut. Then, shooting him a quick glance, she shimmied up, climbing up the rope hand over hand towards the ledge above.

Her hands strained against the rope, and she could feel eyes watching her from the construction workers behind them, peering through the fence.

But she didn't care. Her focus was on the ledge above and the bloodstains that lay upon it.

She pulled herself onto the narrow ledge, her heart racing as she took in the sight before her.

There were more stains, and this time, she could see that they were fresh.

And then, she saw it.

A hand. Dangling over the edge of the cliff, fingers curled in a death grip.

Rachel's stomach clenched, and she approached the hand, her eyes locked on the sight of a woman's body, bloodied and broken, hanging over the side of the cliff.

She couldn't look away, even as her mind screamed.

“Ethan,” she called down, her voice shaking. “Call for backup. We found Aspen Blueriver.”



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aspen Blueriver's lifeless body lay sprawled on the ground.

"Such a waste, poor girl," Ethan said, kneeling beside the body where the two of them were now perched on the jutting cliff ledge.

Rachel noticed the subtle hardness in his eyes and in the setting of his jaw.

Aspen's once-vibrant eyes were now glassy and vacant, staring unblinkingly at the iron-gray sky above. Her once-rosy cheeks were marred by scratches, and blood stained her broken fingernails – remnants of a fierce struggle against an unseen attacker.

Rachel took note of all of this, especially the fingernails.

"Make a note to check the fingers for DNA," she said.

Ethan nodded solemnly, his eyes never leaving Aspen's lifeless form.

As they stood on that windswept ledge, Rachel couldn't help but feel a shiver of foreboding run down her spine.

Rachel crouched beside Aspen Blueriver's body, the cold stone beneath her knees a harsh reminder of the unforgiving land they found themselves in. The wind whipped around them, scattering bits of sand and debris from the nearby construction site. Her eyes traced the contours of Aspen's bruised face, the lines of pain etched into her once-vibrant features.

"Look at her feet," Ethan said quietly, bringing Rachel's attention to the bloodied fingernails. "High heels."

Rachel stared at the strangely placed shoes that seemed so odd in their given surroundings. Rachel also noticed traces of makeup on the dead woman's face.

Maybe even *too* much.

"Think she was on a date?" Rachel said.

Ethan was looking up now. “Look.”

She followed his gaze.

There, set against the back of the rocky wall, hidden by the ledge, was a tunnel entrance.

Rachel whistled softly. “Guess we know how the killer got down there.”

“Multiple footprints,” Ethan reminded her. “Could be *killers*.”

“Or could be more than one person knows about this,” Rachel said. “I can’t tell if the footprints came together. A few of them didn’t—they were beneath the others.”

She stepped away from the body, towards the tunnel now, frowning and the opening maw.

The damp, musty scent of the tunnel enveloped Rachel and Ethan like a musky shroud, the darkness swallowing them whole. The inky blackness seemed alive, pulsating around them, as if it had been waiting for their arrival. A chill swept through them, prickling their skin with goosebumps.

“Guess we can’t rely on our eyes anymore,” Ethan said quietly, his voice echoing off the unseen walls. “Let’s take it slow.”

“Agreed,” Rachel murmured, her heart pounding in her chest. She reached out a hand, feeling the jagged, cold stone that lined the tunnel. As they moved further in, she began to notice the faintest hint of light filtering down from above. It was pale and weak, barely enough to illuminate their surroundings, but it was something.

“Looks like the tunnel is climbing,” Ethan noted, eyeing the incline before them. His breath escaped in white puffs, visible even in the limited light. “Aspen must have been dragged this way.”

Rachel couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sympathy for the dead woman, imagining her desperate struggle against her attacker in this claustrophobic space. It sent a shiver down her

spine, and she clenched her jaw, trying to focus on the task at hand.

“Watch your step,” Ethan warned, gingerly navigating a sharp bend. “There are some loose rocks here.” His voice echoed, bouncing off the walls and amplifying the eerie atmosphere.

She followed his lead, carefully placing her feet on the uneven ground, the weight of their situation pressing down on her. Inside her mind, questions whirled relentlessly. Who had killed Aspen Blueriver? And why?

“Wait,” Ethan whispered, halting abruptly. He crouched down, studying the ground. “There’s blood here.” The dim light reflected off the crimson droplets that stained the rocky floor, a gruesome breadcrumb trail marking Blueriver’s final journey.

“Looks like she put up one hell of a fight,” Rachel said, her voice tinged with admiration. She brushed her fingers against the stone wall, feeling its icy dampness seep into her skin. It was a tangible reminder of the unforgiving nature of their surroundings, an unfeeling witness to the brutality that had occurred within.

With each step they took, the darkness seemed to press in more tightly around them, stifling their breaths and weighing on their souls. The tunnel twisted and turned, its steep incline making their progress slow and arduous. But despite the oppressive atmosphere, Rachel couldn’t deny the strange beauty of this hidden, subterranean world. The way the pale light caressed the jagged rocks, casting eerie shadows that danced along the walls, was almost mesmerizing.

“Rachel,” Ethan whispered, pulling her from her reverie. “Look.”

He pointed at a series of narrow openings lining the tunnel, each shrouded in shadows that seemed to whisper with secrets untold.

As they stepped cautiously through one of the doorways, her eyes took in the sordid scene before her. Discarded

condoms littered the floor, and the unmistakable stench of human sweat and desperation hung heavy in the air. It was clear that this hidden underground warren had been used for illicit purposes.

There were candles set by the nightstand though. And a warning sign on the wall.

*“If you stay when your time is up, you pay double...”*

Rachel stared at the message.

“God, the things these women must have gone through,” Rachel murmured.

“Is there anything on Aspen and Ella about prostitution?” Ethan said, glancing at her.

Rachel just shook her head. “I don’t know. There were some unusual transactions in their accounts. Large sums. They were paid intermittently, though not well when compared to the amount of work.”

“Think they were prostitutes, then?”

“Maybe.” Rachel hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“Could have been trafficking,” Ethan continued.

“Then why pay them?” Rachel shot back.

“Good point... Could still have been, but... maybe with pay?”

“Could be.”

The two of them paused, both frowning at the implications.

Rachel scanned the space, taking photos on her phone. “Need DNA tests of the condoms. The blood under her fingernails. Everything.”

Ethan hesitated, then glanced back to the tunnel. “I already radioed the location of the body...”

“What are you thinking?”

“Wanna see where this tunnel ends?”

Rachel paused, then peered along the dark gullet, eyes skimming the floor as it turned up towards the surface.

She hesitated, looked back.

It didn't feel right leaving Aspen Blueriver laying there.

But she'd already been laying... and it wasn't Aspen, anyway.

Not anymore.

Ethan said that vengeance belonged to the Lord, but in Rachel's experience, vengeance came quicker when dealt by human hands.

So she nodded. "Let's go see where it goes."

The two of them left the tawdry scene, moving quickly, side by side.

They took the stone steps and breathed heavily as they moved. Sweat prickled Rachel's skin, and she could feel her heart pounding in her chest. As they climbed higher, the pale light grew stronger, filtering down from above, and she could see the end of the tunnel in the distance.

Finally, they emerged from the tunnel, blinking in the sudden brightness. They were standing in a small, rocky alcove, surrounded on all sides by towering trees. The sunlight was bright, casting long shadows across the landscape.

Rachel looked around, taking in the scene. There were no footprints to be seen, no signs of life. Just the endless expanse of forest, stretching out before them.

"Where do you think we are?" Ethan asked, his voice low.

Rachel shook her head. "No idea. The killer could have brought her here from anywhere."

They stood there for a moment, scanning the horizon, trying to make sense of the wilderness. But there was nothing.

Rachel paused, frowning.

"Think we're East of the resort?" Ethan said.

"Southwest," she replied.

“Oh.”

She looked one way, then the other. Then, she reached for the lowest branch in a tree.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

She shook her head, already climbing.

“I’m going to get a better view,” Rachel replied, her voice echoing through the forest. She clambered up the tree, her fingers gripping the rough bark as she ascended higher and higher. The leaves rustled beneath her boots, and the air grew cooler as she rose above the treetops.

Finally, she reached a sturdy branch, settling onto it as she surveyed the landscape. The view took her breath away. She could see for miles, the forest stretching out in every direction, the occasional clearing breaking up the sea of green. In the distance, she could make out the glint of water, and beyond that, the faint outline of ridges. There was the resort—she spotted it, blending in with the forest.

But as she looked closer, her heart sank. There was something else in the landscape, something that didn’t belong. A structure perched on the edge of the forest, hidden by the trees. It was a cabin, small and unremarkable, but something about it made Rachel’s stomach drop.

“Ethan,” she called down, her voice tight. “We need to check out that cabin.”

“Which direction?” he called.

She pointed.

“Is that North?”

“East.”

“Oh.”

She rolled her eyes, then began to descend back down the tree.

As she moved, she could feel her breath coming quickly.

She only had a few branches left when there was a sudden loud *crack*.

For a moment, she'd thought it was a branch. But then small bits of wood drifted down, tickling her neck.

She looked up, frowning.

White splinters gouged in the wood. A hole.

A gunshot, her subconscious realized.

A second before there was another loud *crack*, just as her instincts took over and she released her grip on the branch, falling the fifteen remaining feet towards the forest floor.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rachel's breath caught in her throat as she flung herself from the ancient oak, feeling the rough bark scratch her palms. The moment her body hit the damp forest floor, a cacophony of gunshots went silent. Damp leaves clung to her clothes, their earthy scent mingling with scent of fear now lingering on the air.

“Move!” Ethan hissed, grabbing her arm and pulling her behind a dense thicket. His eyes were sharp and focused, the intensity both terrifying and electrifying.

The two of them had gone low to the earth. They exchanged hand signals, indicating that they needed to move quickly and silently through the woods.

The forest seemed to close in around them, an oppressive tapestry of shadows and foliage concealing unseen dangers.

“Two gunmen?” Ethan signed, his fingers moving deftly. Rachel nodded, her heart pounding in her ears as adrenaline coursed through her veins. She could feel every muscle in her body tensing, preparing for whatever lay ahead.

“Stay low,” she signaled back, leading the way as they crawled through the underbrush.

Her attention kept moving in the direction of the gunshots, but she didn't see anyone.

They paused behind a fallen log, their breaths coming in ragged gasps.

The pungent scent of damp earth and decaying leaves filled Rachel's nostrils as she crouched low, her keen eyes surveying the forest floor. A shattered twig, a faint indentation in the moss – each minuscule detail whispered to her, guiding her senses toward the source of the gunshots.

She stared... and there, a portion of the forest with no birds flitting above it.

“Three hundred meters northeast,” she whispered to Ethan, who nodded in understanding. The tension in his jaw matched the knot in her stomach.



With cat-like grace, they moved through the shadowy undergrowth, the rustling leaves and snapping branches drowning out the sound of their own shallow breaths. In these moments, Rachel felt a connection with the land, an unspoken bond between herself and the wild expanse that stretched out before them.

As they crept closer, the forest seemed to hold its breath alongside them, the usual chorus of birdsong replaced by an eerie silence. The weight of unseen eyes bore down upon them, a primal instinct warning them of predators lurking nearby.

“Stay alert,” Rachel signaled, her fingers trembling slightly with the surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins.

A sudden beam of sunlight broke through the dense canopy above, illuminating a small cabin nestled among the trees. Its weathered wood and overgrown foliage spoke of time and neglect, yet the flicker of movement behind the grimy windows betrayed the presence of life within.

“Inside,” Rachel mouthed, her pulse quickening at the sight of armed silhouettes passing before the cracked glass panes. She could feel the heat of Ethan’s body beside her, the shared urgency of their mission tying them together like an invisible thread.

“Four men, maybe more,” he whispered, his eyes never leaving the cabin. “What now?”

Rachel took a moment to gather her thoughts, her mind racing to formulate a plan.

As they approached the cabin, Rachel’s senses sharpened, the world around her narrowing down to the pounding of her heart, the steady rhythm of Ethan’s breaths, and the faintest whispers of danger echoing through the trees.

Someone had taken shots at them. No questions asked—no warnings given.

A bead of sweat trickled down Rachel’s temple, the air thick with humidity and the scent of damp earth. The rustling leaves overhead seemed to hold their breath as she peered

through a tangle of branches at the cabin's weathered exterior. She couldn't shake the feeling that even nature itself was tensing in anticipation, a silent witness to the unfolding drama.

"Get the stuff! We're leaving!" a man barked from inside. His voice was muffled, but the urgency was unmistakable.

The agitated shouts of the armed men resonated through the walls like a discordant symphony, setting Rachel's nerves on edge. She glanced at Ethan, noting the tension etched into his features. He returned her gaze, nodding almost imperceptibly – they had to act, and quickly.

As they surveyed the clearing, Rachel caught sight of something that made her heart skip a beat. Parked in the shadow of an ancient oak tree was a truck, its paint chipped and tires caked in mud. But it wasn't the vehicle that drew her attention – it was the two young women bound and gagged in the truck bed, their wide eyes pleading for help.

"Look," she breathed, her mind racing to comprehend the gravity of the situation.

"Damn," Ethan muttered under his breath, his jaw clenched in anger. "We need to get them out, but first we have to deal with those bastards. They've got a clear line of sight."

"Don't want crossfire."

"Exactly."

Rachel could feel the weight of responsibility settle upon her shoulders, heavier than the gear she carried.

The door to the cabin suddenly banged open.

Two men hastened out, followed by two more—both of them carrying a large crate between them, grunting as they hauled the thing.

The man in the lead had a thick, red beard and hair to match, which was slicked back with gel.

He was glancing around nervously and kept shooting glances in the direction of the trees. He gripped his rifle tightly, as if it were an extension of himself.

The last of the gunmen clambered into their truck, its engine roaring to life and spewing a cloud of smoky exhaust. Leaves fluttered in the wind stirred by the vehicle as it spun around, tires squealing against the compacted soil before disappearing down the rugged trail.

One of the men shoved a girl further into the back of the car.

The road leading from the cabin was a rough, overgrown path. It would take time for the vehicle to pick up speed.

“Shit,” Rachel said. “Go!” She didn’t wait to see if he agreed with this decision, nor if he was following. She bolted.

Within a split second, though, he was coming after her without hesitation or question.

Together, they raced through the dense underbrush, branches whipping against their skin and leaving stinging welts behind. The scent of damp earth and decaying leaves filled the air, mixing with the lingering aroma of exhaust fumes.

Rachel could hear the rumble of the truck getting louder as they closed in on their target. She knew they only had one chance to get those girls out of there before they were lost forever.

As they emerged from the trees, Rachel could see the truck bouncing along the trail ahead of them. The two girls were still visible in the back, huddled together in fear.

The vehicle was moving slowly, having to navigate the rough terrain of the island.

She heard one of the men curse as a tire hit a fallen bough, and he dropped his weapon over the back of the truck bed.

“Leave it!” a voice from the front seat commanded.

The car was picking up speed now, and Rachel’s lungs were fit to burst.

It was then that she realized this wasn’t a race they could win. The truck was going to outpace them, and soon the girls would be gone.

Desperation surged through Rachel, and she knew she had to act now.

And so she stopped on a dime. One moment, sprinting full bore, the next going suddenly still.

Leaves scattered under her feet. Her shoes dug into the mud.

But her weapon was already in her hand.

Not a rifle. Not meant for long distance shots.

Rachel took aim at the car's tires, steadying her breath as best she could despite her racing heart. She felt the adrenaline coursing through her veins as she focused on her target.

The wind blew her hair back.

She tried to slow her heavy breathing as she aimed at the truck. The vehicle was gaining speed, outrunning them with each passing second. Rachel's grip on the gun tightened as she prepared to fire.

She pulled the trigger—the shot ringing out in the night air as it struck one of the tires, sending sparks flying up into the night sky.

She'd hit the rim. Not the rubber.

Shit.

She fired twice more.

And the front tire exploded.

The truck skidded off the path, spinning wildly as it careened towards a nearby tree.

But miraculously, the driver corrected the skid and managed to stay on course.

He kept moving, limping along the road now.

She aimed at the back tire, scowling.

She fired again.

This time, the first shot tore rubber.

There was a loud *pop*, and the vehicle spun out completely this time.

The front of the vehicle struck the trunk of the tree, crumpling like tinfoil. Glass shattered and metal screeched as the truck bent around the tree. The sound of shouts from the vehicle's open windows were cut out by the sudden crash of impact.

Without hesitation, Rachel and Ethan rushed towards the truck. Rachel could hear the groans of the men inside as they tried to free themselves from the wreckage.

As they approached the truck, Rachel could see the two girls in the back, their eyes wide with fear.

One of the women was shaking her head quickly, eyes wide, and trying to point at something on the floor of the truck.

Rachel spotted it briefly; the figure of a man taking cover, staying low.

She didn't have time to react to this threat, though.

The passenger door was flung open, and a hand reached out, trying to find purchase on the breeze.

A harsh voice shouted something.

And then a man pushed up from where he'd fallen in the bed of the truck. he blinked blearily, spotted them, and howled in rage.

"Duck!" Rachel's shouted.

And just in time. A second gunman had jammed his rifle out of the driver's window and opened fire.

Suddenly, a hail of bullets tore through the thicket.

Rachel and Ethan both flung themselves behind an overturned log covered in lichen.

The soft, downy green vegetation rubbed against Rachel's face as she lay there, under a shower of splinters and wooden fragments as bullets pummeled the log.

Rachel pressed her back against the log, gripping her weapon tightly. She could hear Ethan swearing beside her, his own weapon raised and ready.

The gunfire continued for several long seconds before it abruptly ceased. Rachel dared to peek out from behind the log, scanning the clearing for any sign of movement.

It was then that she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye. One of the gunmen was crawling towards them, moving through tall grass like some slithering thing.

She could hear the sound of the women crying in the back of the truck.

Rachel didn't hesitate. She raised her weapon and pulled the trigger, the sound of the shot echoing through the thicket. The man slumped over, his body still.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she turned to Ethan. "We need to get those girls out of here, now."

Ethan hesitated. "I'll cover. Wait... he's about to reload.

She nodded.

The two of them paused briefly, and then there was a faint *click*.

Ethan emerged, peppering the front of the truck with bullets. Rachel bolted, moving around behind the truck, careful to keep the flatbed between her and the front seat so any shooter would have a bad angle.

Another gunman suddenly arose from the back. His own weapon was raised.

She fired twice.

He fell, motionless.

A third gunman cursed at her, screaming. And he had a weapon pressed to the head of one of the sobbing women.

"Don't move!" he screamed. "Don't you move or I'll end her!"

Rachel didn't wait to talk. Didn't hesitate.

As he opened his mouth to spew more vitriol, her gun was already snapping to attention.

She fired once. Over the woman's shoulder, the bullet burying in the man's head.

He stopped screaming and then tottered for a second with a dot painted between his eyes.

He blinked once and then he toppled sideways.

Rachel remained where she was, gun still raised. She shouted, inhaling the scent of the forest and gunfire.

Three down.

Only one remained, and she could just about make out his form in the front of the vehicle.

She waited, watching quietly. And then she called out, "You in the front seat, "Throw your rifle out the window, and stick your hands out. Your three buddies are down. We can get them medical or we can get them bodybags. Your call!"

There was a long, pregnant pause.

Rachel could see the silhouette of the man in the front seat, his hands visible above the dashboard. Slowly, hesitantly, he tossed his rifle out the window and raised his hands in surrender.

Rachel motioned for Ethan to make his way to the front of the truck as she approached the back. She could see the two girls huddled together, their faces streaked with tears.

"It's okay," Rachel said softly as she reached out to help them climb out of the truck. "You're safe now."

The girls stumbled out of the truck, nearly collapsing. Both of them were wearing a lot of makeup, which was streaked from their tears. Both of them were in clothing that smelled of sweat.

"Are you okay?" she said, glancing between them.

They didn't quite meet her gaze. One of the women spat towards the dead man in the back who'd placed a gun against her forehead.

Rachel turned to this woman. “Are you okay?”

But again, she received no answer.

“I’m coming out! Don’t shoot!” A voice called from the front seat.

And then a man emerged. A man she recognized; one of the resort employees who’d greeted them at the dock.

She stared, eyes widening briefly with surprise. “Get on the ground!” she snapped.

The man stared at her, and recognition dawned. He cursed, and looked as if he wanted to turn and run.

“Do it, and we drop you,” she said grimly.

The man still looked like he was considering the options. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but before he could speak, the normally mild-mannered Ranger in Ethan Morgan surged forward. His fist caught the side of the man’s cheek, dropping him to the ground.

A second later, Ethan was on him, cuffs in hand.

Rachel turned to look at the women who were staring with some small satisfaction at the arrest of their captor.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered.

She wasn’t sure if this was true.

She hoped it was.

She shook her head, closing her eyes briefly, and wondering what Lily might say in a situation like this.

Lily always knew what to say.

“Lawyer!” the voice of the final gunman was saying.  
“Lawyer, dammit! Now!”



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Miles Hammond could feel the winds changing, and part of him knew it was almost his time.

He allowed a small smile to curl his thin lips and kept his thoughts in check.

A thick veil of darkness hung heavily in the room, interrupted only by slivers of moonlight that crept through the gaps in the heavy curtains. Shadows danced on the walls, like specters weaving between the antique furniture and ornate tapestries that adorned the space. The air was heavy with a palpable tension, a sense of foreboding that seemed to lurk just out of sight.

The mansion itself, perched high upon the coastal cliffs, provided an unparalleled view of the tempestuous sea beyond. Waves crashed against jagged rocks, their frothy white peaks contrasting sharply with the inky black waters below. Yet, within the confines of this dimly lit chamber, the beauty and majesty of the landscape remained invisible, obscured by the oppressive gloom.

In the center of the room, Victor Hammond lay propped up by a mountain of silken pillows, his once-strong frame now reduced to a mere shadow of its former self. Age had not been kind to him; the ravages of time and illness had left him gaunt and hollow-eyed. His pale, parchment-like skin stretched taut over his prominent cheekbones, while his once-lustrous hair had faded to a dull, lifeless gray.

Miles Hammond, his oldest son, stood at the foot of the bed, his tall, imposing figure dwarfing that of his ailing father. Though they shared the same piercing eyes and strong jawline, there was a coldness to Miles' expression that set him apart from Victor. Clad in an impeccably tailored suit, he exuded an air of confidence and authority, yet beneath the surface, one could detect a flicker of unease, a hint of something darker lurking in the depths of his gaze.

Together, father and son occupied the claustrophobic space, their presence casting a somber pall over the room. As

the wind outside picked up, rattling the windowpanes and moaning through the eaves of the mansion, their shared silence grew more pronounced – a heavy fog that threatened to engulf them both.

Victor's breaths came in shallow, rasping gasps, each one more labored than the last. His chest rose and fell with an unsettling rhythm, like the slow, inexorable march of time itself. The once-proud patriarch now seemed little more than a fragile wraith, tethered to this mortal plane by the thinnest of threads. His fingers, gnarled and twisted like the branches of an ancient tree, clutched weakly at the silken sheets that draped over his wasted form.

"Tell me, Miles," Victor whispered, his voice as thin and brittle as autumn leaves on the verge of crumbling. "Has it been taken care of?"

Miles shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the floorboards creaking beneath him in protest. He looked out the window, where the moonlit landscape stretched out before them like a vast, shimmering tapestry. The sea churned restlessly below, waves crashing against the rocky cliffs with a primal fury that echoed the storm brewing within him.

"Father, I assure you, everything is under control," he replied, his voice smooth as silk and just as deceptive. "Just as we discussed."

"Is it really, though?" Victor pressed, his eyes narrowing into icy slits. "I can't help but feel there's something you're not telling me."

Miles hesitated, caught off guard by his father's perceptiveness. He had always been adept at concealing his inner thoughts, maintaining a façade of calm indifference even in the face of chaos. But now, as he stood before Victor's bed, the relentless tide of doubt threatened to erode his carefully constructed defenses.

"Things have... become more complicated than anticipated," he finally admitted, each word tasting bitter upon his tongue. "But I will see it through to the end, no matter what it takes."

“Complicated?” Victor echoed, a trace of anger flickering through his otherwise impassive expression. “That’s not what I want to hear, Miles. Time is of the essence, and I haven’t got much left.”

“Father, do you not trust me?” Miles asked, his voice laced with a quiet resentment. “I have taken care of everything else, have I not?”

“Trust?” Victor laughed, a hollow sound that echoed through the room like the peal of a distant bell. “Trust is a luxury we can ill afford. Remember, Miles, our family’s legacy rests upon your shoulders. There are those who would see it crumble into dust, and we must be ever vigilant against them.”

“Indeed,” Miles murmured, his eyes drifting once more to the storm-tossed sea outside. As the wind howled its mournful lament, he couldn’t help but wonder at the true cost of preserving their lineage – and whether it was worth the sacrifices they had made along the way.

“Rest now, Father,” he said softly, turning back to face the man who had shaped him into the person he was today – for better or worse. “Leave the darkness to me.”

The shadows in the room seemed to deepen, stretching their tendrils out like fingers grasping at the last vestiges of light. Miles studied his father’s face, the lines and grooves etched into it by time and hardship, a map of their family’s turbulent history. Victor’s eyes, once sharp and calculating, were now clouded with pain and uncertainty. For a moment, Miles could almost see the reflection of his own future in them.

“Father,” Miles began, swallowing hard against the tight knot of emotion constricting his throat, “you’ve taught me everything I know. But you also taught me that power is a double-edged sword. It can protect us, or it can destroy us.”

Victor’s gaze flickered towards Miles, a spark of defiance igniting behind the veil of weakness. “And what are you insinuating, boy?” he rasped, each word labored and strained,

as if they were being dragged from some dark recess within him.

“Only that... perhaps there is another way,” Miles suggested hesitantly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, an uncharacteristic display of nervousness. “A path less treacherous for all of us.”

“Less treacherous?” Victor scoffed, a bitter smile twisting his thin, cracked lips. “You speak as if you were raised by someone else entirely, not a Hammond. Our bloodline was forged in fire and steel, Miles. It’s not a legacy you can simply cast aside like yesterday’s newspaper.”

“Of course not,” Miles acquiesced, his voice thick with the burden of expectation. His father’s words weighed heavily upon him, their family’s past a tangled web he found himself increasingly unable to escape. “But surely, there must be a way to secure our position without so much... well...”

“Ah, my naive son,” Victor whispered, his voice little more than a gust of wind against the storm raging outside. “The world is a cruel place, and it cares not for our petty desires or noble aspirations. Sometimes, the only way to survive is to endure.”

Miles sighed, still standing by the window. “I’ll take care of it.”

“See that you do.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he repeated.

Their father nodded.

Miles then frowned, peering through the window.

“What is it?” Victor demanded, and then he broke into a fit of coughing.

“It would seem,” Miles said softly, “that we have guests.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rachel scanned the horizon as she and Ethan approached the enormous Victorian home of the casino owner.

A creeping sense of dread had filled her.

Purportedly, this was the man who'd funded the trafficking operation, and who'd paid girls to degrade themselves before selling them like cattle.

She'd found evidence of funds in the first two victims' accounts as well. Were they also involved in this?

Was that why the killer was targeting them?

Her dark hair was swept back, and she'd left her hat back in the car.

The two rangers stood before the wrought iron gates that guarded the entrance to the sprawling estate. As they took in the grandeur and opulence of their surroundings, it was clear that this was a world apart from their own. The impeccably manicured lawns sprawled out before them like a lush green carpet, dotted with vibrant flowerbeds that seemed to defy the season's chill. Tall trees lined the far edges of the property, providing a natural barrier against the encroaching wilderness beyond.

"Talk about a palace," Ethan muttered under his breath, his eyes wide with awe.

Rachel, however, remained focused on the task at hand. "Let's not forget why we're here," she reminded him tersely. "We need answers."

As they walked up the cobblestone path towards the majestic mansion, the enormity of the structure became even more apparent. The house itself was built in the classic Victorian style, with ornate gables and turrets reaching for the sky. Delicate, lace-like woodwork adorned the exterior, giving the whole place an air of elegance and sophistication.

"Must've cost a fortune to build this," Ethan commented, his gaze lingering on the intricate details of the facade.

“Which begs the question of how it was funded,” Rachel replied, her voice laced with suspicion. “Let’s just hope we can get some answers from the man himself.”

As they reached the towering front doors, Rachel paused for a moment, her fingers lightly brushing against the cold metal of her badge hidden beneath her jacket. She could feel her heart racing in her chest, but she steeled herself, knowing that she had a job to do.

“Ready?” she asked, looking up at Ethan who nodded in response.

With a deep breath, Rachel reached out and knocked firmly on the door.

Rachel had spotted the cameras lining the path, so it didn’t surprise her when the heavy front door creaked open, revealing two men who looked to be in their early thirties. Both had strong, angular features and dark hair, but there was a striking difference between them. The older one, tall and broad-shouldered, carried himself with an air of authority and confidence, his eyes narrowing as he assessed the two strangers on his doorstep. He wore a sleek charcoal suit, tailored to perfection, that only served to emphasize his formidable presence.

The younger brother, on the other hand, seemed almost like a shadow beside him. He was shorter and leaner, with a nervous energy about him that made him fidget with the cuff of his denim jacket. His gaze flickered between Rachel and Ethan, his jaw set in a tight line as if bracing for a confrontation.

“Can I help you?” the older brother asked, his voice firm yet polite.

“Ranger Rachel Blackwood and this is my partner, Ethan Morgan,” Rachel introduced herself, flashing her badge as she did so. “We’re here to speak with Mr. Hammond.”

“Is our father expecting you?” the younger brother interjected, his tone bordering on hostile.

“Unfortunately not, but it’s a matter of some urgency,” Rachel insisted, her own voice unwavering.

“Father doesn’t take unannounced visits,” the older brother stated flatly, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m afraid we can’t let you see him.”

Rachel assessed the two men. She hadn’t realized they were the sons of Hammond. Both of them were eyeing her with a nervous energy—though it came out differently between them. The younger kept fidgeting, but the elder had a hostile glint to his gaze.

“Look, we don’t want any trouble,” Ethan spoke up. “But we need to discuss the new casino development with your father. There are serious allegations that warrant his attention.”

“Allegations?” the older brother scoffed, his eyes flashing with anger. “Who accuses us of wrongdoing?”

“Your father’s name has been linked to some unsavory activities,” Rachel explained, her voice calm yet firm. “We’re here to give him an opportunity to clear his name before things escalate.”

“Escalate?” the older brother repeated, his gaze narrowing further. “Are you threatening us?”

“Take it however you want,” Ethan replied, his own patience wearing thin. “But if we don’t get answers from your father, we’ll have no choice but to involve the media in the matter. Could shut down the casino build. Maybe indefinitely.”

A silent tension hung between them.

“Fine,” the younger one conceded through gritted teeth. “But if anything happens to Father because of your questioning, I swear—”

“Happen? What do you expect to *happen*?” Ethan asked.

“Nothing will happen,” Rachel interrupted, her tone hard. “We just need information.”

The two brothers exchanged a tense glance, and then, reluctantly, they stepped aside, allowing Rachel and Ethan to enter the grand foyer. The air was thick with tension as they

led the detectives deeper into the mansion, each step bringing them closer to the truth.

“Remember,” the older brother warned, his eyes locked on Rachel’s. “You wanted this.”

Heavy, intricately carved wooden doors creaked open to reveal a dimly lit room where the air was thick with the scent of medicine and age. Shadows danced across the walls from the flickering flames of the ornate sconces, casting an eerie glow upon the frail figure that lay in the massive four-poster bed.

“Father,” the older brother announced, his voice barely above a whisper, “these people are here to talk about the casino.”

The sickly man’s eyes were mere slits beneath his furrowed brow, his once strong face now gaunt and sunken. The room seemed to contract as he exhaled, the sound of his labored breathing echoing off the high ceilings.

Rachel stepped forward, her ever-present hiking boots tapping on the polished marble floor as she approached the bed. She could feel the weight of the brothers’ gaze on her, their distrust palpable.

“Mr. Hammond,” she began, her tone professional.

He looked up, eyeing her, though he let out a deflating sigh and leaned back again, as if even this small motion taxed him.

“You one of the damn rangers?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Heard you were poking around.”

“Yes.”

“Well? What you want?” he snapped. His voice was strained, and yellowing eyes shot an angry glance towards his sons. “Not supposed to have visitors.”

“They said they would shut down the build!” the older brother protested.

“Shut up, Miles!”



Miles Hammond went quiet, though the angry look in his eyes was directed towards Rachel and Ethan.

Rachel paused, then, eyeing the frail man, she decided to just come out and say it. “We’ve received information suggesting your casino is involved in funding sex tourism. We’re here to clear up any misunderstandings before this goes any further.”

The elderly man’s gaze slowly shifted toward Rachel, his eyes narrowing as if attempting to pierce through her very soul. His fingers, thin and trembling, gripped the sheets tightly.

“Such accusations are baseless and vile,” he rasped, his voice strained from disuse. “I’ve lived my life with honor and integrity.”

“Then help us understand,” Rachel said, “why would someone make these allegations?”

“Bastards always find a way,” the old man replied, his gaze drifting away from her, seemingly lost in thought.

“Are you aware of anyone who may have a grudge against you or your business?” Ethan interjected, stepping closer to the bed.

“Enemies are common when successful,” Hammond replied, his voice barely audible.

“One of the women claimed to have seen you there,” she said softly. “One of the victims. She said she saw you. You liked to watch.”

“Saw me? Bullshit!” his voice rose in volume now. And the two brothers looked fearful.

A sudden gust of wind rustled the heavy curtains hanging in the dimly lit room, casting a flickering dance of shadows across the walls. Rachel’s keen gaze settled on the father’s face, her brow furrowing as she took in his expression of shock and disbelief. He looked like a man who had just been told that the world he knew was an illusion.

“Absolutely not!” Victor Hammond cried out, his voice strained with indignation. “I’m building this casino to bring

prosperity to my people, not to promote such vile acts!”

Rachel glanced at the sons standing by their father’s bedside. Their faces remained unchanged, betraying no hint of surprise or outrage at the accusations leveled against them. It was as if they had prepared themselves for this moment, bracing for impact.

“Your sons seem less shocked by these accusations than you are, Mr. Hammond,” Ethan observed, folding his arms across his chest. “Care to explain?”

The two brothers exchanged an uneasy glance before the elder son, Miles, finally spoke up. “We’ve heard rumors, but nothing concrete. We didn’t think it was worth mentioning, especially with our father’s health.”

“Rumors?” Rachel interjected sharply, her eyes narrowing. “And you didn’t think to investigate these rumors or inform your father?”

“Listen,” the younger brother broke in, his voice tense. “We would never do anything to jeopardize our family’s name or our future. You’re clearly just mistaken. The woman you say saw something was lying. Or under the influence.”

As Miles and his younger brother exchanged anxious glances, Rachel’s gaze fixed on the latter. Her keen eyes detected a subtle but unmistakable tremor in his hands, betraying a sense of guilt that belied his words. The light filtering through the window reflected off his high cheekbones and highlighted the beads of sweat forming on his brow, despite the coolness of the room. As the younger brother attempted to maintain an air of innocence, his dark eyes darted around, avoiding Rachel’s penetrating stare.

“What’s your name,” Rachel said abruptly, her voice slicing through the tense atmosphere. “You seem... nervous.”

His eyes snapped back to hers, widening slightly at being addressed so directly. “I-I’m not,” he stammered, the lie only serving to deepen her suspicions.

“Really? Because your body language is telling me otherwise,” she pressed on, never breaking eye contact. “Your

hands are shaking, you're sweating, and you can't even look me in the eye. That doesn't exactly scream 'innocent' to me."

Beside him, Miles shifted uncomfortably, casting a worried glance at his brother before turning to face Rachel as well. "We've already told you," he insisted, trying to maintain a calm facade. "Neither of us had anything to do with these accusations."

The brothers both glanced towards the bed, where their father had propped up and was now watching his sons like a hawk.

Rachel studied them both for a moment longer, weighing her options. She could tell that the Hammond brothers were hiding something, but she had no way of knowing just how deep his involvement went without further questioning. However, she also knew that if she pushed too hard, he might close up completely, leaving her with nothing but her instincts to guide her.

"What's your name?" she repeated.

"M-mine?" the younger one said.

"Victor, don't be a damn fool!" snapped the father.

Victor.

The father *and* son were named Victor.

The trafficked woman hadn't been referring to the elder Hammond, but the younger one.

"Alright," she said finally, making a decision. "Victor junior, I think it's time we had a little chat. Just you and me."

"Absolutely not," he snapped, his voice suddenly firm and defiant. "I want my lawyer present if you're going to interrogate me."

"This isn't a formal interrogation," Rachel assured him, her tone softening slightly in an attempt to put him at ease. "This is simply a conversation between two people trying to get to the truth. But if you'd rather have your lawyer here, that's fine. We'll just have to bring this whole situation to the local police and see what they think about it."

Victor hesitated, his eyes darting between his brother and his father before finally settling on Rachel once more. The threat of involving the local police clearly unsettled him, though whether it was due to a genuine fear of being exposed or simple loyalty to his family, she couldn't be sure.

“Did you do something damn stupid, boy?” the father snapped.

Victor just mumbled.

“Speak up!”

“Fine,” the younger brother muttered reluctantly, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “We can talk.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The room was dimly lit, casting an eerie glow on the worn leather-bound books that lined the walls. The mansion creaked around them like a living, breathing entity. Rachel and Ethan pulled up their seats at the massive oak table in the center of Victor Hammond Jr's office. Shadows danced across the polished surface as they settled, making it feel more like a sacrificial altar than a place of business.

Victor Hammond Jr., a man with dark, haunted eyes, stood near the window. His gaze flicked between them and the door, betraying his nerves. He clenched and unclenched his fist, the gold signet ring on his pinky finger catching the faint light from the chandelier above. A bead of sweat rolled down his sharp temple, despite the chill emanating from the drafty windows.

"Mr. Hammond, we need to ask you some questions," Rachel began, her voice firm. She could sense the fear rolling off him in waves. She'd been in rooms like this before—rooms where people were trying to hide something.

Victor remained tight-lipped, his jaw set firmly. He took a seat across from them, his hands resting on the table, still trembling slightly. Despite the nervous energy radiating from him, he refused to meet their gazes.

"Please, Mr. Hammond," Ethan implored, his voice gentle. "We're only here to find the truth. If you've got nothing to hide, then there's no need to be so...tense." He tried to offer a reassuring smile, but Victor's eyes never left the table.

"Look," Rachel said, leaning forward. "We know about the trafficking, and we understand you're scared. But if you had nothing to do with the murders, then we can help you."

Victor's breath hitched, but he continued to stare at the oak table, as if it held the answers he was too afraid to give. The silence stretched on, broken only by the distant howl of the wind and the creaking of the old wooden floor beneath them.

Rachel studied his face, searching for any sign that he might relent. She saw the flicker of desperation in his dark

eyes, the slight tremble of his lips.

The dim light of the office cast eerie shadows on Victor Hammond Jr's face, emphasizing the hollows beneath his dark eyes as he stared at the oak table. Rachel exchanged a glance with Ethan, who gave a slight nod in agreement. They both sensed the guilt that clung to Victor like the cobwebs in the corners of the room, but they needed something more tangible to tie him to the murders.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the window panes, causing Victor to flinch and Rachel to make her move. She leaned in, her voice low and steady. "Tell us about the murders, Victor. Did you know any of the victims?"

Victor's eyes shot up to meet hers for the first time since they'd entered the room, their depths swirling with fear and something else Rachel couldn't quite decipher. His hands gripped the edge of the table, knuckles whitening under the strain.

"Murders?" he stammered, his gaze darting between Rachel and Ethan. "I...I don't know what you're talking about."

The room seemed to close in around them, the wallpapered walls adorned with paintings of haunting landscapes bearing witness to the interrogation. Rachel studied Victor's expression intently, searching for any sign of recognition or surprise. The tension in the air was almost palpable, a thick fog that hung heavy over the three of them.

Ethan shifted in his seat, his legs scraping against the wooden floor, breaking the silence. "Two women were killed. Two women we believe were trafficked by your organization. We found two more who were being tormented."

Rachel watched as Victor's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, his lips pressed together in a tight line. She could see the thoughts racing behind his eyes, the internal struggle between his desire for self-preservation and the crushing weight of his conscience. It was a delicate balance, and Rachel knew she had to tread carefully if they were to find the truth.

He stammered, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I... I had no idea—”

“Save it,” Ethan interjected sharply, his patience wearing thin.

“You have to understand, I’m just a small part of this operation. You want the big fish, right?” He was still shaking, but speaking quickly now. “So... what if I help you? Give you information, names... anything you need.” He swallowed hard, the words tumbling out of him like pebbles over a cliff’s edge. “In return, all I ask is for your assurance that I’ll be protected. And... perhaps some discretion?”

“Discretion?” Rachel asked skeptically, her eyebrows raised.

“Money,” he explained, his voice heavy with the weight of unspoken promises. “Enough to make sure everyone involved can... forget about my involvement. Just consider it, please.”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed as she processed his words, her mind racing with the implications of what he was offering. But at the same time, a fierce anger ignited within her.

“Victor,” she said coldly, her voice as sharp as the icy rain lashing against the windowpanes. “We are not for sale.”

“Alright!” he cried, raising his hands in surrender. “I get it! You can’t be bought. I was wrong to try. But... please understand, I didn’t kill anyone. I swear!”

He looked genuinely perplexed by the accusations of murder.

The trafficking... he was guilty as sin. That much was obvious.

But the murders?

She felt a niggling doubt worming into her gut, and it robbed her breath.

“Alright, Victor,” she relented, her voice calming ever so slightly. “We’ll entertain the idea that you’re not our killer. But we need something from you. Something that will lead us to the one responsible.”

“Anything,” Victor gasped, relief flooding his features.  
“I’ll do anything to help.”

The wind howled outside, a mournful serenade.

“Were you involved in the trafficking?” she said, the question blunt.

“No!”

“Don’t lie to me!”

“I’m not!”

“You were seen. You were identified.”

“She’s lying!”

“Do you really expect us to believe that?”

“I... I didn’t mean to... it just... the workers. The construction workers refused to do anything... It all just escalated.”

He was babbling now, his face pale, and his eyes wide

A cloud of unease gathered within the dimly lit room, its tendrils unfurling to snake around the hearts of those present. The wind outside rattled against the windows, scratching like skeletal fingers on the glass. Shadows danced in the flickering firelight, casting eerie patterns across Victor Hammond Jr’s tense features.

“Victor,” Rachel began, ignoring all of this waffling, her voice a low hum that quelled the chaos of the storm beyond. “We need to know where you were the last two nights. If you can provide us with an alibi, we’ll be able to rule you out as a suspect.”

Victor swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he struggled to find his words. The oak table between them seemed to creak in anticipation.

“I—” His voice cracked, but he quickly cleared his throat and steadied himself. “I was at the docks both nights, overseeing shipments.”



“Can anyone verify this?” Ethan asked, his piercing gaze never leaving Victor’s face.

“Y-yes, several of my employees can vouch for me,” Victor stammered, pulling a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He unfolded it with trembling hands, revealing a list of names and contact information. “These are the people who were with me. They can confirm my whereabouts.”

“You just happened to have that on you?” she said.

“It’s the work records. I figured I’d need it...”

Rachel studied the document, her eyes narrowing as she committed each name to memory.

“Very well,” she said, folding the paper back up and placing it in her coat pocket. “We’ll follow up on this and speak to these individuals.”

“Thank you,” Victor breathed, a measure of relief returning to his dark eyes.

Relief... not a good sign.

He was relieved at the thought of them checking his alibi.

“You don’t understand,” he moaned. “My dad is a very... demanding man. I had to contribute. Had to help. But I didn’t kill anyone!”

“So you used women for sport? What about Ella Winder?”

“W-what?”

“Do you know the name Ella Winder?”

“Y-yes!” he said suddenly. And then he paled. “She... she worked for us a bit, and then left.”

“You just let her leave?”

“We’re not a prison,” he retorted. “I don’t know what those women are telling you. But they can leave whenever they want!”

“That’s not what it looked like to me,” Ethan said, his voice a growl. “The cages seemed to make that unlikely.”

A small little yelp erupted from Victor's lips. "I... what? Cages? I didn't know."

"I can't say I believe you," Rachel replied.

She was on her feet now, staring down at the man, her shadow cast across the table by the sudden flicker of lightning through the window.

The storm had come quick, and by the rumbling, it sounded as if it were here to stay.

She studied Victor closely. "You're going to answer for what you did to those women."

"I didn't do *anything*!"

"You will answer," she said firmly.

"I thought you said... I thought..."

"Not for the murders," she replied. "If you're not involved."

"I'm not! I'm not!" he yelled.

"So who is?" she demanded.

He stared at her, mouth opening and closing like a landed trout. "I... I don't know."

"Aspen Blueriver. Know her name?"

"I... yes!" Suddenly he paled. "Blueriver and Winder?"

"Yes. Why the reaction? What do those names mean to you?"

"N-nothing."

"Don't lie!"

"Nothing!" He paled. "Lawyer. I need my lawyer. Now!"

Rachel shared a look with Ethan, and he shrugged.

"Suit yourself," Ethan said.

The two of them were now on their feet, moving towards the door. Rachel paused, glancing back at him. "You know

them because you paid them, yes? And somehow they both ended up dead.”

“I didn’t pay them! They quit! That’s it. They were free to leave.”

“And were killed for it?” Rachel said.

He moaned. “I didn’t kill anyone!”

She hated to say it, but she believed him. Not because she thought he had some moral opposition to the thought of murder, but because she didn’t believe his spine would hold up to the task.

No... no, he wasn’t their killer.

But he was guilty as sin.

And somehow, his actions had been involved in the deaths of those two women.

Rachel frowned, shaking her head.

Blueriver and Winder. Both dead. Both involved with payments from Hammond.

And all of it tied to this sordid trafficking business.

There were rings within rings—motives in motives. And all of it was starting to weigh on her.

Rachel pursed her lips tightly, and then stumbled.

“Watch it!” Hammond yelled.

What he didn’t notice was how she pocketed his phone from where he’d left it on the edge of the table.

She shrugged, turning.

“Sorry,” she said and then beat a hasty retreat.

“Lawyer,” he kept muttering. “Now. Lawyer.”

Ethan remained behind, cuffs emerging. “Sir, you’re under arrest.”

“Lawyer!”

Rachel ignored it all. She was too busy stepping out into the hall, hiding the glow of the phone with a hunched form as she studied the screen.

She'd snagged it before he'd had a chance to lock it again.

She began swiping through the phone, her adrenaline pulsing, her eyes fixated on the device, searching for answers.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

“Oopsie! Silly me, I’ve gone and been a bad boy again,” the man chided himself in sing-song tones, a childish giggle bubbling up from his throat. His thoughts danced around, a disjointed mix of juvenile excitement and self-admonishment. “Now, now, it’s all right. We’ll make it better soon, won’t we?”

His foot pressed down harder on the accelerator, the engine roaring in response as the car surged forward with reckless speed. The wind whipped through the open windows, a cacophony of nature’s symphony blending with the mechanical growl of the vehicle. The tires screamed their protest as he careened around a sharp bend, narrowly missing an ancient oak, its gnarled limbs reaching out like a lover’s embrace.

“Ooooh, that was close!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands together gleefully. He imagined the tree as a wise old guardian of the forest, scolding him for his unruly behavior. “Sorry, Mr. Oak, sir. I promise I’ll be more careful next time.”

The car continued to race along the winding road, a narrow strip of asphalt cutting through the verdant wilderness like a scar. Dappled sunlight filtered through the canopy of leaves overhead, casting a kaleidoscope of shadows across the dashboard. The scent of damp earth and wildflowers mingled with the acrid tang of burning rubber as he pushed the car to its limits.

“Can’t dawdle, no siree!” the man muttered, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel. “We’ve got places to be, things to do, fun to be had!”

He felt a surge of urgency, the thrill of the chase pumping adrenaline through his veins. It was a game, he told himself, a glorious, heart-pounding adventure. And just like every other game he’d played before, he intended to emerge the victor.

“Almost there,” he whispered, a wicked grin spreading across his face. The car sped on like a wild beast, its hunger

for speed insatiable, devouring the miles as it raced toward its destination.

“Almost there,” he repeated, the childlike gleam in his eyes belied by the twisted darkness lurking beneath.

The rearview mirror captured a glimpse of the woman in the back seat. Her eyes, wide with terror, flickered frantically as she tried to make sense of her surroundings. Her wrists and ankles were bound tightly together, and the coarse rope bit into her delicate skin. A gag muffled her voice, turning her desperate pleas for help into incoherent whimpers.

“Shh, shh,” the man cooed, his gaze never leaving the road ahead. “Don’t you fret, pretty bird. We’re gonna have so much fun together. Promise.”

He could hear her muffled sobbing, the sounds intertwining with the chorus of birdsong outside. He couldn’t help but smile at the thought of their impending adventure, the myriad adventures awaiting them in the great outdoors.

“See?” he said, pointing out the window at the breathtaking landscape that stretched out before them. “Ain’t it beautiful? Just you, me, and Mother Nature herself. Nobody else around for miles and miles.”

The woman’s breathing grew more ragged, her chest heaving with each panicked breath. She shook her head violently, tears streaming down her cheeks as she tried to communicate her fear and confusion through the stifling gag.

“Aw, don’t cry, darlin’,” the man said softly, his tone almost tender. “I told you we’re gonna have fun. You’ll see. Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

“Hey,” she mumbled through the gag, trying to reason with him. “Please, let me go...I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

“Shh,” he said, wagging his finger at her playfully. “No more tears. We’re almost there.”

His voice held a sing-song quality that set her nerves on edge. The man seemed to view their situation as a game, like he was just a boy playing pretend with his favorite toy.

The woman's wrists burned from the tight ropes cutting into her skin, but she continued to twist and tug, desperate to break free.

“Look at you, strugglin’ so hard,” the man chuckled, his tone dripping with mockery. “But we both know you ain’t goin’ nowhere, sweetheart. Aw, don’t be sad,” the man cooed, his voice lilting like a nursery rhyme. “Once we get there, you’ll see how much fun we’re gonna have. It’ll be like...like a big ol’ game of hide-and-seek, except it’s just us.”

She redoubled her efforts to free herself, her fingers scrabbling at the knots in the ropes, seeking any weakness she could exploit.

The world outside the car window blurred into a dizzying kaleidoscope of colors as the man wove through traffic like a frenzied snake. He hummed an off-key nursery rhyme, his eyes gleaming with delight each time he narrowly avoided a collision.

“Oopsie! Almost got that one,” he giggled, swerving to miss a truck by mere inches.

“Please,” she tried again, her voice weak and muffled by the gag. “Please let me go.”

“Aw, pretty bird,” he said, looking at her through the rearview mirror with a wide grin. “You’re not even trying to have fun. That’s no way to play a game.”

She closed her eyes, focusing on the faint rustle of leaves and distant birdsong filtering through the car’s cracked window. In another life, perhaps she would have found solace in nature’s serenade – but now, it only underscored the cruel irony of her plight. The verdant landscape outside seemed to mock her captivity, taunting her with the freedom that lay just beyond her reach.

“Watch this!” the man cried out suddenly, jerking the wheel hard to the left. The tires screeched and the car swerved violently, nearly hitting a concrete barrier.

“Missed that one too!” he declared triumphantly. “I’m getting good at this game!”

“Stop!” she begged through the gag, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Please, stop!”

The man’s thoughts returned to earlier that day, when he had first spotted the woman by the pool, her laughter ringing like bells in his ears. He imagined her running across emerald grass, her hair streaming out behind her like a golden banner. He couldn’t wait to see her laugh and play again, convinced that she was simply hiding her joy beneath a mask of tears.

“Look at that!” he exclaimed suddenly, pointing to a flock of birds wheeling above them in the reddening skies. “They’re dancing! Just like you’ll dance with me.”

“Please,” she choked out, her eyes wide with terror as she watched the birds disappear into the encroaching darkness. “Please, let me go.”

He shook his head, tsk-tsking softly under his breath. “No, no. You’re my pretty bird now. We’ll play and dance together, just like in the pool.”

“Let me go!” she screamed, her voice muffled and distorted by the gag. “Please!”

“Almost there,” he said again, his voice softening to a whisper. “Our playground awaits.”

As night began to swallow the world whole, the man’s thoughts raced along with the car, anticipation and excitement bubbling within him like a cauldron of molten joy. He couldn’t wait for their game to begin, to show her that there was nothing more thrilling than dancing on the edge of darkness.

“It wasn’t nice,” he said softly. “Not nice at all to chide me by the pool... remember?”

“I’m sorry!” she gasped out, her gag slipping. “I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to!”

But he shook his head. “You did. You did mean too. You thought I was scary.”

She trembled, tears quivering under her eyes.

For a moment, he felt a pang of regret. His longing arose within his chest. He didn’t want it to end like this...



No...

“We played so often,” he whispered, a wistful quality to his voice. “Remember? You and me, in the sand?”

“I don’t know you!”

the gag had slipped down the slope of her chin now.

She wasn’t a very pretty woman. Her face was too long. Her teeth had gaps.

But he didn’t mind; he enjoyed playing with her. That was all that really mattered.

He nodded to himself, releasing a long, pent-up breath.

Yes. It would be fun again, very, very soon.

As they pulled up to a dark and isolated stretch of the beach on the island, he grinned widely, his eyes sparkling with delight. He shut off the engine and turned to her, his fingers twitching with excitement.

“Welcome to our playground, pretty bird,” he said, his voice low and husky. “Let the games begin.”

With a deft motion, he reached over and removed the gag from her mouth, tossing it carelessly onto the floorboard. As he did, she took a deep breath, savoring the cool night air.

“You’re insane,” she said, her voice shaking with fear. “Please, just let me go.”

He chuckled, a low and menacing sound that echoed through the cramped confines of the car. “Oh, my dear,” he said, his eyes gleaming with a mad light. “I’m just getting started.”

He snatched something from the trunk, testing it in his hand. The thing swished back and forth. She stared through the window, clearly confused by what he was holding.

It would all make sense to her soon.

His mind kept moving back and forth between memory and sanity.

It was hard to parse out where the memories began and where the moment subsided.

He took a few deep inhales. And then he reached for the back door. “Time to play!”

She screamed as he reached for her, her shrill screech tearing at the night sky.

And in the distance, thunder rumbled, as if the sky itself was growling in warning.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Rachel sat in her car, hastily scanning through the phone she'd pilfered.

Her face was awash with a blow glue.

Outside the giant Victorian mansion, she watched as Ethan led Victor Jr. into the back of a waiting police car.

More police had arrived on scene, and two black SUVs had also arrived, depositing lawyers out onto the front lawn.

She didn't watch the chaotic, and ever growing, spectacle.

Instead, she studied the contacts in the phone. Most of the messages from the device were of a business nature. A few personal. None incriminating.

She frowned, continuing to search.

Her finger hovered the *Trash* icon on the message folder. She hesitated, then clicked.

One conversation remained in the trash; it hadn't been deleted yet.

She frowned, staring at it.

*Lawsuit is causing headaches...* This message came from someone named "M."

Miles? The older brother.

The reply from Victor's phone read, *Didn't know. Sorry.*

*Sorry doesn't fix it.* Came the reply.

Her heart quickened as she continued scanning the messages.

What lawsuit were they talking about?

Rachel hesitated, and then she pulled open a browser on her own phone, accessing a database that logged recent court filings in the current jurisdiction.

It didn't take long to find it.

Blueriver and Winder were two names listed on a lawsuit against Hammond.

She stared.

Both of them were now dead.

It couldn't be a coincidence.

The two women had been approached, paid, and involved in sex work. Then, when things had gotten dangerous, they'd left and filed a lawsuit.

It wasn't the sort of thing that men like Hammond might overlook, was it?

She could feel her heart racing, and she peered through the windshield towards the front steps where Miles Hammond stood, his dark features forming a scowl as his younger brother was led into the car.

Rachel fidgeted.

Did she approach him about it while he was surrounded by his own lawyers?

She considered this for a moment, then returned her attention to the phone.

On it, she spotted something that stood out.

"Shit," she whispered.

Yesterday, there'd been a hearing. The day before, as well.

At both, Miles' name was listed in attendance.

Which meant he couldn't have been directly involved in the murders...

So who was?

Not the brothers...

But it wasn't a coincidence, was it?

She shivered, returning her attention to the message chain.

The brothers continued to go back and forth. One of the messages read:

“We can’t figure it out on our own—we need help. Show them to Matty.”

Rachel frowned, scrolling through the messages in search of more clues. After a few minutes, she found something else: “Matty will know what to do with these.”

She leaned back. Who the hell was Matty?

She did a quick search on her phone. The article was buried, and it took her a good while to find it. But eventually, it popped up.

There, in a small tagline under a family photo, she spotted Mr. Hammond, Victor, and Miles. All three of them smiling widely. And next to Miles, also smiling, was a young man.

He had spiky hair, and bright, excited eyes. He wore a baseball cap and a large t-shirt with a dinosaur on it.

The heading read *Matty, Miles, Victor, Victor Jr.*

Matty?

She read the article.

A cousin. The Hammonds had a cousin, but...

He didn’t look like a killer.

She wrinkled her nose.

“What the hell,” she whispered. She searched the name Matty Hammond in the DMV.

The search yielded a single result. It had a note next to it in the database.

She stared.

Matty Hammond had been diagnosed with schizophrenia some five years prior and had been deemed a danger to himself and others. He’d been institutionalized in a state facility, where he’d resided for a few years. But he’d been released months ago.

Rachel shivered, her heart racing as she slowly pieced together what had happened.

Had the Hammonds used their cousin as a pawn?

But how?

Where was he now?

He hadn't appeared in any of her searching.

So... she frowned, considering it.

And then she returned her gaze to the lawsuit. Winder. Blueriver. But a third name on it. One she hadn't encountered yet. Jennifer Partridge.

Partridge?

She didn't know that name.

Rachel shifted in the front seat, her knee bumping against the underside of the steering wheel.

If Jennifer was still nearby, that meant she was in danger.

Rachel's eyes widened, and she shot a quick look through the windshield, searching for any sign of Ethan.

But her partner was busy trying to herd Victor Jr. past a flock of prattling lawyers.

Shit.

She felt a cold shiver down her spine, even as the rain began to pour, swept in from over the ocean. The skies were black, and pitchforks of lightning cut through the celestial fog.

Shit. Shit.

"Come on, Ethan!" she muttered under her breath.

She then placed a call. He didn't answer. Likely couldn't hear.

She sent a quick text. *Go to Matty Hammond's place. See if he's there. I'm going to Jennifer Partridge. Potential victim. Stay safe.*

And then she peeled out of the driveway before any of the lawyers could block her path.

Her heartbeat quickened as she sped along the oceanside road, under the cover of the rising downpour.

Rachel's mind raced as she drove towards Jennifer Partridge's last known address. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her, following her. But she couldn't afford to slow down, not with a potential victim's life on the line. She reached for her gun, making sure it was loaded and ready.

The tires squealed against the asphalt as Rachel flew through the night, the rain pelting against her windshield like a million tiny bullets. The thunder roared in the distance, and her eyes kept darting to the thin purple line on her handheld GPS, guiding her to Jennifer's address.

As she approached the designated house, she slowed down, scanning the street for any signs of danger. The rain was coming down harder now, making it difficult to see. She squinted through the windshield, trying to get a clear view of the house.

She spotted a car parked in the driveway; the front door of the car was open.

She parked her own car, grabbing her gun and tucking it into her waistband. She then made her way through the rain towards the house, staying low and keeping to the shadows.

She approached the front door, her heart pounding in her chest. She listened for any sounds from inside but heard nothing. Carefully, she reached out and turned the handle, slowly pushing the door open.

The house was dark and quiet, the only sound the rain pounding against the roof. Rachel entered cautiously, her gun drawn and ready.

And then she froze.

Two sets of eyes were staring at her.

Two children, both of them perched on the bottom step of the stairs, both watching her.

"Mommy?" a little girl's voice said.

"Shh," the boy said. "It's not mommy."

Rachel stared at them both. “Is your mommy here?” she said quickly. Then added, “I’m police.”

The children looked at her, wide-eyed, and clearly scared.

“She’s not here,” said the boy.

“Can you tell me where she is?” Rachel asked, her eyes scanning the room for any signs of Jennifer.

But the children remained silent.

Rachel took a step closer, lowering her gun and hastily holstering it. “It’s okay,” she said. “I just want to help your mommy. Can you tell me where she went?”

The little girl shook her head, her blonde curls bouncing. “We don’t know,” she said.

Rachel’s heart sank. “Okay,” she said. “Can you tell me your names?”

“We’re not supposed to talk to strangers,” the little girl said, and the boy nodded.

Rachel smiled at them, trying to put them at ease. “Okay, that’s very smart,” she said. “Can you tell me if anyone else has been here tonight?”

“No one,” Tommy said.

Rachel frowned. She didn’t know what to do next. She couldn’t leave the children alone, but she couldn’t stay here either.

Not if the mother was missing.

“But someone was outside,” the boy said, nodding.

“I saw him!” the girl said. “He was nice at the pool.”

“The... pool?” Rachel said.

“Yeh. He came home after. he was fun. Mommy didn’t like him.”

Rachel felt her heart skip. She pulled her phone hastily from her pocket, cycling to the picture of Matty Hammond.

“Was this the nice man from the pool?”



Both children leaned in to study the image.

Tommy nodded. “Yeh, that’s him!”

Rachel’s mind raced. Matty Hammond had been here, and he had been with Jennifer Partridge. But where were they now?

“Okay,” she said, her voice stern. “I need you both to stay here, alright? Don’t leave this house for any reason.”

The children nodded, and Rachel quickly made her way back outside, pulling out her phone and dialing Ethan’s number.

“Rachel?” he answered, his voice muffled by the sound of the rain.

“Ethan, listen to me,” Rachel said, her voice urgent. “I need you to get to Jennifer Partridge’s house. Matty Hammond’s been there, and I think he might have taken her.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“The kids said he was there, Ethan,” Rachel said. “We need to find them. But you gotta watch the kids. They’re alone. See if they saw anything else.”

“Okay, I’m on my way,” Ethan said. “But where are you?”

“I’m heading back to the car,” Rachel said. “Gonna check the casino site.”

“Got it,” Ethan said, and the line went dead.

Rachel made her way back to her car, her mind racing as she tried to think of where Matty Hammond could have taken Jennifer. It made sense that she’d be at the casino site. That was where the two other bodies had been found.

She opened the door and climbed inside, shaking the rain from her hair.

She glanced once more to the closed door, wondering if she ought to wait until Ethan showed up.

She hesitated, then frowned.

No... No, there was no time.

Their mother's life was on the line. She reached a decision, nodding to herself and flooring the gas pedal.

She tore out of the driveway, picking up speed as she hastened back in the direction of the casino build site.

Would she arrive too late?

The rain was coming down harder now, the wind whipping her car from side to side as she pushed the accelerator to the floor. Rachel's heart was pounding in her chest as she raced towards the casino, the fear of arriving too late clawing at her mind. She couldn't let Jennifer Partridge become another victim of Matty Hammond, not when she was so close.

Was he even there?

Was she just going to discover another body?

She didn't know much about Matty—didn't even know if he was involved.

But it sure seemed like it.

Like the Hammonds had been using their cousin as a sort of pawn in their sordid game.

This last thought sent a burst of chills down her spine, and she put on an extra burst of speed as the thunder rumbled in the sky.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

It was a night in which murder wasn't just possible, but likely.

The night was a tempest of fury, a cacophony of rain and thunder that beat down upon the earth with relentless force. Sheets of water fell from the sky, the droplets like tiny bullets impacting on every surface, creating a haze through which even the most powerful headlights struggled to penetrate. The storm's wrath was punctuated by the booming voice of thunder, echoing across the landscape as lightning tore jagged paths through the darkness, painting the world in stark monochromatic flashes.

Rachel's car careened down the narrow road, its tires barely gripping the slick, muddy ground beneath her. The windshield wipers fought a losing battle against the onslaught of rain, clearing only enough space for Rachel to glimpse the murky shapes of trees and rocks that loomed out of the darkness. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel, her body taut with tension and urgency.

"Damn it!!" she muttered under her breath, her eyes frantically scanning the treacherous terrain ahead.

With a sudden screech of rubber on wet asphalt, the car skidded to an uncontrolled halt, the rear end fishtailing in the mud before coming to rest at a precarious angle. Rachel's heart hammered in her chest, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps as she tried to calm her racing thoughts.

There, ahead—the bright headlights illuminated the fence.

As the car door swung open, the fury of the storm engulfed her, the rain drenching her instantly and plastering her hair to her face. She squinted into the deluge, trying to make out the fence at the top of the cliff.

Rain lashed against Rachel's face as she sprinted towards the distant silhouette of the gate, her boots splashing through the mud and puddles that threatened to swallow her with every step. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, the air heavy with the scent of earth and ozone.

“Jennifer!” she screamed into the void, but her voice was swallowed by the storm’s fury, an insignificant whisper against its might.

Rachel’s heart hammered in her chest, an unyielding rhythm that matched the relentless drumming of the rain. She could feel the slick mud beneath her feet, the cold wetness seeping through her clothes and chilling her to the bone. But there was no time for discomfort; every second that passed could mean the difference between life and death.

Rachel knew discomfort.

She’d faced it many times before, often under her aunt’s watchful eye. She’d grown up roughing it—her version of a day trip had been a sojourn into the wilderness or mountains.

As she neared the top of the cliff, the iron gate loomed before her like a specter, its blackened frame twisted and bent by untamed weather. Her fingers trembled as they reached for the latch, the cold metal biting into her skin.

“Please, let it be unlocked,” she prayed silently, her thoughts a prayer to a higher power—Ethan would’ve been proud. To her surprise, the gate swung open with a groan, the hinges protesting their sudden movement.

“Unlocked,” Rachel breathed, her eyes widening in disbelief. “Why would it be unlocked?”

The question hung in the air, unanswered, adding an unnerving layer of mystery to the already tense situation.

But, of course, the answer seemed obvious.

Someone was down there...

During the storm.

Rachel pushed the thought aside, knowing she couldn’t afford to dwell on it now. Jennifer’s life was in her hands, and she had no choice but to move forward.

Despite the storm’s relentless assault, Rachel descended the cliffside steps with determined speed. Each step sent a jolt of pain through her legs, but she ignored it, focusing instead on the haunting sound of crashing waves echoing from below.

As she leaped down another two steps, her foot slipped on the slick stone, causing her to gasp and clutch at the rough, moss-covered railing. The weathered wood creaked beneath her grip, steadying her just enough to regain her footing.

The jagged rocks below seemed to loom ever closer, like fanged mouths waiting to devour her whole. But amidst their menacing presence, something drew her attention – a sudden flash of lightning illuminating a figure hunched under a gnarled tree.

“Who’s there?” Rachel called out, her voice wavering despite her best efforts to maintain composure.

The figure didn’t respond, remaining still as if carved from the very rock upon which it sat. Rachel’s pulse quickened, her mind racing with possibilities. Could this be Jennifer?

“Show yourself!” she demanded, her words swallowed by the howling wind and thunderous waves.

But as the darkness closed in again, the figure remained shrouded.

She swallowed any fear, refusing to give it purchase.

Rachel’s boots splashed in the shallow puddles as she closed the distance between herself and the mysterious figure. The rain streamed down her face like tears, her heart pounding in her ears like the rhythm of a tribal drum. Each flash of lightning bathed the world in stark white light, revealing the contours of the landscape around her.

“Hey!” she shouted through the storm, her voice barely audible above the cacophony of nature’s fury. “Are you alright?”

As she approached, the figure under the tree became more discernible, and Rachel’s breath caught in her throat.

A man.

A man with spiky, jet-black hair.

He sat on the rock, soaked to the bone.

It was Matty Hammond, his clothes clinging to his thin frame. He sat huddled against the trunk, arms wrapped tightly around his knees as he trembled with quiet sobs.

“Hello?” he whispered, his voice weak and wavering, like a frightened child.

“Don’t move!” she said, her eyebrows drawing together. Her hand hovered near her weapon, but he didn’t seem to notice or care. “Where’s Jennifer?”

“Jennifer...” he mumbled, his eyes glassy and unfocused. A bolt of lightning tore across the sky, casting eerie shadows over his face. “We were... playing.”

“Playing?” Rachel repeated, her gut tightening. “Matty, where is she? Where’s Jennifer?”

His gaze met hers for a moment, clouded by confusion and fear. Then, with a shuddering sob, he buried his face in his hands, unable to speak any further. Panic clawed at the edges of her thoughts.

He wasn’t acting right... he wasn’t scared, just confused. Almost as if he knew a secret... or a joke he was waiting to tell.

“Please, Matty,” she pleaded, crouching down beside him. “Tell me what happened. Help me find her.”

The wind tore at her clothes and hair, but Rachel’s resolve remained steadfast.

“Jennifer...” Matty whimpered, his voice barely audible over the storm. “I can’t... I don’t know...”

“Focus, Matty,” Rachel urged, her tone firm.

He was acting like a child. Not meeting her gaze, hunched over, shaking his head.

The rain continued to pour, streaming down Matty’s face. His eyes flicked back and forth, as if searching for something in the dark, stormy night.

“Jenny and I... we were playing,” Matty muttered, his voice wavering with a childlike innocence that sent chills

down Rachel's spine. "We were at the beach, and we built sand castles, and..." He trailed off, his eyes distant and unseeing.

"Beach?" Rachel asked cautiously, trying to make sense of his ramblings. "Where? Here?"

He blinked, confusion muddying his tearful eyes. Gazing around, he seemed to see the storm-tossed trees and lightning-illuminated cliff for the first time. "But... but we were," he insisted, his voice breaking. "We were just playing!"

"Where is Jennifer, Matty?" Rachel demanded, her voice firm but laced with desperation. She willed herself to remain calm, to coax the information out of him without pushing too hard.

"Playing," he repeated, giggling softly despite the seriousness of the situation. "She's hiding. You can't find her! It's a game, you see?"

Rachel clenched her fists, fighting against the frustration boiling inside her. She knew Matty wasn't well, but she needed answers. Taking a deep breath, she tried again. "Matty, listen to me. This isn't a game. Jennifer is in danger. You have to tell me where she is."

"Game... danger..." Matty mumbled, his brow furrowing as he struggled to comprehend the urgency in Rachel's words. He glanced around once more, the wind whipping his hair into a tangled mess. "But... but I don't know. We were playing, and then..."

"Then what, Matty?" Rachel asked softly, her heart pounding with fear for her friend.

"Then..." He hesitated, his eyes filling with tears again. "I lost her."

"Lost her?" Rachel's voice trembled as the gravity of the situation hit her like a tidal wave. Her thoughts raced, trying to piece together clues from Matty's fragmented memories.

"Please," she whispered, her voice cracking with frustration. "Help me find her, Matty. She's out here somewhere, and we have to find her before it's too late."

A gust of wind roared through the trees, carrying with it a torrent of rain and the distant boom of thunder.

As Rachel tried to keep her gaze steady on Matty, her eyes caught something out of place. Just a few feet away, a small toy shovel lay half-buried in the mud, its bright red plastic contrasting starkly against the gloom. Beside it, a larger, dirt-caked shovel leaned against the gnarled trunk of a tree. A cold shiver ran down Rachel's spine, and her stomach twisted into knots.

"Where did these come from?" she asked, her voice barely audible above the howling wind.

Matty's eyes followed Rachel's gaze to the shovels, his expression suddenly changing. For a moment, he seemed to be lost in thought, as if trying to recall some long-forgotten memory.

"Mommy and me," he mumbled, his voice cracking. "We used to play... at the beach."

"Play?" Rachel repeated, dreading what might come next.

"Mommy liked the sand," Matty continued, his words slurred and broken. "She'd let me bury her, like hide-and-seek. But then one day... one day, she didn't wake up. The water came and..."

Rachel felt her heart drop like a stone, the implications of Matty's words reverberating through her entire being. Her hands trembled, and she fought to keep her voice steady as she spoke. "Matty, are you saying that you buried Jennifer too? Like your mother?"

Matty stared blankly at the ground, his lower lip quivering. "I... I didn't mean to. It was just a game. I thought she'd be okay."

"Okay," Rachel whispered, her voice thick. "We need to find her right now, Matty. Time is running out."

But he'd clammed up, and was shaking his head violently side to side.



Lightning split the sky, casting a brief but stark illumination across the rain-swept beach. Rachel's gaze darted from the toy shovel to the larger one and then back to Matty's hollow eyes. It was as if an icy hand gripped her heart, constricting it with a terrible understanding.

He wasn't going to be of any help.

She whirled around, straining to see in the rain-slicked gloom.

"Jennifer!" she called out, her voice raw and ragged, but still strong. "Where are you? Jennifer!"

Matty was sobbing again.

She ignored him, facing the coast.

A long stretch of sandy shore extended before her.

No sign of Jennifer.

Only the howl of the wind and crash of waves met her desperate cries.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The cold wind whipped against Rachel's face, a biting reminder that every second counted. Her jaw clenched as she surveyed the desolate stretch of Galveston Island's abandoned coast. Somewhere out here, Jennifer was buried alive, and with each passing moment, the likelihood of finding her breathing grew increasingly slim.

Rachel had spent years honing her skills as a tracker in the wilderness, navigating treacherous terrain with an almost supernatural intuition. Now, she found herself relying on that expertise more than ever – not among the towering pines or dense underbrush, but on a barren stretch of sand and sea.

The landscape was harsh and unforgiving, the ocean thrashing wildly against the shore. It was a place where secrets could be easily swallowed up by the relentless tide, leaving no trace behind.

But Rachel's keen eye caught something that others might have missed: a faint disturbance in the sand, like the ghost of a footprint. Her pulse quickened as she crouched down, examining the impression with the utmost care. It was vague, nearly obliterated by the wind and waves, but she was certain – these were human tracks.

Two sets. One trying to escape the other. A struggle.

"Jennifer," she breathed, her voice barely audible above the roar of the surf. Determination surged through her veins as she followed the trail, her instincts guiding her through the shifting sands.

The ocean roared like a wounded beast, its waves clawing at the shoreline with unrelenting ferocity. Rachel braced herself against the howling wind and driving rain.

The water surged forward, creeping closer and closer to the dunes, and Rachel knew that each wave brought more danger, threatening to wash away any trace of Jennifer's path.

She redoubled her pace, and Rachel's trained eyes narrowed as she focused on the various tracks in the sand. Despite the harsh weather conditions, her attention to detail

remained unwavering. She spotted the subtle differences between Jennifer's panicked footsteps and the heavy indentations left by construction work near the cliffside.

As she followed Jennifer's footprints, the fierce ocean seemed to mirror her own desperation. Towering waves, dark and menacing like a ravenous beast, threatened to consume everything in their path. Salty spray stung Rachel's skin.

The first sign of hope came in the form of a jagged, uneven line stretching across the sand. Rachel's heart leaped as her trained eyes identified dig marks.

She flung herself at the spot, moving with increasing speed. Her fingernails scraped against the gritty sand. With every handful she removed, the sense of urgency intensified, the weight of the responsibility bearing down on her.

As Rachel dug deeper, the damp sand clung to her hands like a second skin, chilling her to the bone. But she couldn't afford to stop, not when Jennifer's life was at stake. Her breaths came heavy and labored, yet she continued to claw at the earth, ignoring the sting of saltwater splashing against her face.

As she dug further, her fingers brushed against something unnatural beneath the sand - fabric? A flicker of hope ignited within her.

"Jennifer... are you there?" Rachel whispered, her voice barely audible above the roaring waves. She strained to hear any response, but only the relentless ocean answered her call.

Then, as if by some divine intervention, Rachel noticed a subtle shift in the sand. Her eyes widened, adrenaline surging through her veins.

"Come on, Jennifer, fight," she urged, her hands working faster now, fueled by the raw determination to save the woman she sought.

The sand gave way beneath her feverish digging, revealing a slender arm clothed in tattered fabric. Rachel's breath hitched at the sight, her heart clenching with both relief and urgency.

With trembling hands, Rachel unearthed more of Jennifer's body, the sand parting like a curtain unveiling a tragic scene. She pulled Jennifer out from her sandy tomb.

Rachel studied Jennifer's ashen face, her eyes closed and lips tinged blue. Panic surged through Rachel's veins as she realized that Jennifer wasn't breathing. Time seemed to slow down in that heart-stopping moment, a cruel reminder of how precious each second was.

She placed her hands on Jennifer's chest, interlocking her fingers, and began performing chest compressions with a steady rhythm.

"Come on, come on," Rachel muttered, her voice a mix of desperation and determination. Her mind raced, trying to recall every detail of the wilderness survival courses she'd taken. As her hands pushed firmly on Jennifer's chest, she silently begged for a sign of life.

"Please don't die on me now."

With each compression, the waves seemed to crash harder against the shore, as if the ocean itself was urging her to keep fighting. The relentless wind whipped at her hair and stung her cheeks, but Rachel didn't falter. She couldn't. Not when Jennifer's life hung in the balance.

"Stay with me, Jennifer! Think of your kids, dammit!"

Rachel didn't know how long she had been performing CPR on Jennifer, but it felt like an eternity. Her muscles ached, her breaths were short and ragged, but she refused to give up.

And then, finally, Jennifer gasped for air, her body convulsing as she coughed up sand and water. Rachel let out a breath she didn't know she was holding, relief washing over her in waves.

Jennifer's body convulsed, and she gasped in frantic puffs, her chest rising and falling with newfound vigor. Sand spewed from her mouth as her eyes fluttered open.

It took her a second, as she gasped and groaned.

“You’re okay,” Rachel said quickly. “I’m with the Rangers. You’re okay.”

Jennifer’s eyes darted around in confusion, trying to make sense of her surroundings. Rachel didn’t blame her - waking up buried alive on a desolate beach was disorienting at best.

“Rangers?” Jennifer rasped, her voice hoarse and weak.

“Yes,” Rachel replied, relief washing over her. “Ranger Blackwood. You’re safe. Okay? Hear me? He can’t hurt you. Your kids are safe. You’re safe now. You’re going to be okay.”

Jennifer nodded weakly, still struggling to catch her breath.

“What happened?” Jennifer asked, her voice barely audible above the howling wind.

With sand-crusting hands, Rachel gripped Jennifer’s trembling shoulders. “We need to get you out of here, off the beach.” She scanned their surroundings, adrenaline pumping through her veins.

“Y-yes,” Jennifer stuttered, still disoriented from her near-death experience.

“Can you walk?” Rachel asked, concern etching lines across her face.

“I think so,” Jennifer replied, pushing herself up with shaky limbs.

As she did, and as Rachel helped to steady the woman, there was a brief pause in the wind.

Or perhaps it was simply Rachel’s subconscious slowing down.

She spotted Jennifer’s widening eyes.

Spotted the sudden shadow fall across their feet.

She heard the snarl. Heard the gasp of breath.

And then she whirled around.

Before she could turn completely, a crushing force slammed into the back of her skull. Pain erupted like a flash of

lightning, searing through her head and blinding her vision. She stumbled, disoriented and reeling from the sudden attack.

“No!” Jennifer’s scream pierced the cacophony of the storm.

As darkness threatened to consume her, Rachel forced herself to remain conscious, gritting her teeth against the agony. She whirled around, the world spinning like a top, desperately trying to identify her assailant.

She glimpsed Matty standing there, his lips twisting into a snarl.

“You ruined my game!” he screamed.

He was holding the shovel he’d struck her with.

Rachel tried to raise an arm to fend off another blow, but this time he went for her stomach.

The shovel slammed into her gut, and Jennifer screamed once more, retreating now, running for her life.

*Good.* Rachel thought. No sense endangering her too.

It was as if the pain were delayed. Perhaps from being struck in the skull by a metal tool.

But after a brief pause, the agony shot through her stomach.

She realized she was doubled over, gasping at the ground.

“You ruined my fun!” Matty screamed. The man was in his thirties, but he sounded like a petulant, pouting child.

He swung the shovel again.

She’d been in the middle of drawing her gun. This time, she blocked the blow with her upraised arm, but her weapon went careening into the ocean.

Shit.

She flung herself to the side as the larger man sliced at her neck as if his shovel were an axe.

She stepped back, and he called her, forcing her deeper and deeper into the water.

The churning surf thrashed around her ankles. She tried to dart right, but he cut her off.

She went left, but he blocked her this way as well. Each time he moved, the water would froth around his ankles.

“You ruined it! You’re so mean!” he screamed. “So mean! Bad girl! Bad!”

He swung at her head again, but this time she’d been expecting it.

She caught the shovel, and instead of trying to disarm him, she yanked him towards her.

Now both of them were in the dark water—waist deep.

The cold liquid seemed to jar Matty, and his eyes widened with temporary fear.

She was already flinging herself at him, though.

She crashed into his midsection.

But he was surprisingly sturdy, and shoved her back.

The waves lapped around them as they fought.

She felt the cold water seeping through her clothes, weighing her down.

Rachel held tight to the shovel, and with each wave that crashed against them, she pushed Matty further away from shore.

He tried to break free of her grasp, but Rachel had a firm grip on him. He thrashed and kicked, but with every passing moment, he was getting more and more exhausted.

Rachel saw her chance and seized it. With one final surge of strength, she yanked the shovel from his hands and threw it far out into the ocean, where it disappeared beneath the waves.

Matty was swimming now, thrashing back, gasping for air as Rachel waded after him, the water now nearly up to her neck.

As she closed in on him, Rachel spotted a large rock protruding from the water between them.

He hadn't noticed it.

It was deep in the sand, so she couldn't lift it, but as leverage?

Perhaps...

Without hesitation, she lunged for the rock and grabbed onto it with both hands. She used all her strength to propel herself forward, slamming her shoulder into his chest. The force knocked him backwards.

He continued reeling back, stepping onto a sandbar.

She followed fast.

He stumbled onto the shore, and then she was on him, tackling him to the ground.

"Stay down!" she yelled. "Don't move!"

He was sobbing uncontrollably. Protesting. "You ruined everything! You ruined it!"

She twisted one of his arms behind his back, feeling a flash of sympathy for the man.

But she pictured the bodies of Ella Wilder, Aspen Blueriver...

She pictured Jennifer's features emerging from the sand.

And she cuffed him, there on the beach, within spitting distance of the unfinished construction site.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The air reverberated with the staccato burst of gunshots, their echoes bouncing off the walls. Rachel's eyes narrowed as she stared down the sights of her weapon, her body taut with concentration. The smell of burnt gunpowder filled her nostrils, grounding her in the moment. She exhaled slowly, her index finger applying just the right amount of pressure to the trigger.

Two sharp cracks split the air in quick succession, the sound waves dancing away like ripples on water. Her mind was an impenetrable fortress, every ounce of her focus directed at the targets before her. The metal casing of the spent cartridges clattered to the floor, their hollow cries drowned out by the cacophony of the shooting range.

“Two bullseyes,” Ethan's voice cut through the noise, admiration lacing his words. “You're one hell of a shot, Rachel.”

She spared him a brief glance, a hint of a smile flickering across her lips. She knew she didn't need the praise; the evidence spoke for itself. The two holes punched through the center of the paper targets were testament enough.

She smirked, hitting the red button that caused the cut-out target to whirl towards her on metal t-tracks.

Rachel's grip on the pistol tightened, the familiar contours of its handle melding with her hand like an extension of her own body. She let her gaze return to the target, its concentric circles beckoning her to unleash another round of swift retribution.

She shot twice more at the moving target.

Bullseyes again.

She smiled brightly, a rare expression on her normally stoic face.

“Your turn,” she said, lowering her weapon and stepping back from the firing line to give Ethan his chance in the

spotlight. She watched him closely, wondering if he would be able to match her.

“Alright,” he replied with a grin, stepping up to the line and lifting his own gun. “Let’s see if I can keep up.”

“You know how it is – practice makes perfect.” She frowned, wrinkling her nose. “Not that I’m saying I’m... or even close to...” she trailed off. The way of words was more Ethan’s domain. “It’s fine...” she finished lamely.

“Speaking of which,” Ethan interjected, lining up his sights and firing off a series of shots that clustered neatly around the bullseye, “I wanted to thank you again for your lead on the case. You really went above and beyond.”

“Anytime,” Rachel murmured. “All that matters is that those kids got their mom back.”

“True,” Ethan agreed, ejecting his own casings as he prepared to reload. “But it wouldn’t have happened without you.”

She gave him a small smile, feeling the weight of responsibility settle on her shoulders like a familiar cloak.

The gunshots rang out with a staccato rhythm, reverberating through the shooting range like an insistent heartbeat. Smoke drifted lazily through the air, catching the afternoon sunlight and casting a hazy glow around Ethan as he fired off another round.

“Hey, I forgot to mention; we got the results back from the lab,” Ethan said, lowering his gun and turning to face her. “It’s confirmed: Matty’s blood and DNA match the samples we found at the crime scene. Tire treads too. There’s no doubt now that he’s our guy.”

Rachel paused for a moment, her finger hovering over the trigger as she absorbed this information. A multitude of emotions flickered across her face - relief, triumph, but also something deeper, more contemplative. She lowered her weapon, her gaze drifting to the distant horizon where the sun cast its golden rays through the large window.

“His family... they really did a number on him, didn't they?” she mused, her voice barely audible above the wind rustling through the leaves of nearby trees. “Matty never had a chance to be anything other than what they made him.”

Ethan nodded solemnly, understanding the weight of her words. “Yeah, it's a damn shame. But at least we can bring them to justice now. That's something, right?”

“Something,” Rachel echoed, her eyes distant as she stared out at the gray concrete back wall of the indoor range. Her heart ached for the young man who had been so irrevocably damaged by those who should have protected him, nurtured him. Instead, they had twisted and manipulated him until he was nothing more than a shadow of his former self, a puppet dancing on the strings of their cruelty and greed.

They'd used his mental health...

Then again...

Ethan sighed. “Matty was almost as much of a victim as the people he hurt. Who knows what he could have been if he'd gotten treatment instead of his family exploiting his illness.”

“Just because someone struggles mentally... doesn't mean they're a good person.”

“How's that?”

She shrugged. “Just... a thought. I wonder if he would've been evil, even if he'd been healthy.”

“Maybe. Hard to know. Reason of insanity is a plea, though.”

“Yeah... you're right.” She sighed. “Parts of him... I think we're just lost. He seemed sad and scared.”

She trailed off, hand still gripping her gun.

And yet, despite the darkness and despair that seemed to cling to this case like a shroud, there was still hope.

Jennifer had lived. Her children would have a mother.

As someone who'd grown up without such a luxury, Rachel knew how much this meant.

The sun dipped low, casting long shadows that stretched across the shooting range like slender fingers reaching out to embrace the approaching night.

"Y'know," Ethan said, breaking her reverie, "there's still Jennifer's lawsuit against the Hammonds. Are you going to help her?"

Rachel nodded, determination flashing in her eyes. "Of course. Those people need to be held accountable for what they've done. And if helping Jennifer secure a better future for her family is part of that, then I'm all in."

"Good," Ethan replied, but there was something off in his tone. He glanced around nervously before turning back to face her, his eyes searching hers as if looking for something he couldn't quite name. "Hey, uh... Can I ask you something personal?"

"Sure," Rachel said cautiously, noting his sudden shift in demeanor. She braced herself for whatever question he might have.

"Is there... is there someone special in your life right now?" He asked hesitantly, his voice betraying a hidden concern.

"Special?" Rachel echoed, taken aback by the unexpected inquiry. She considered her answer carefully, weighing the implications of revealing too much about her private life. "I have people I care about deeply, yes. But I'm not sure what you're getting at, Ethan."

"Nothing, never mind," he mumbled, averting his gaze and fidgeting with his gun. The air between them thickened. Rachel couldn't help but wonder what was driving this sudden interest in her personal life, and why it seemed to unsettle him so.

She watched him curiously, as if he were some buck in the wild, and she was trying to discern his mannerisms.

Ethan nodded, offering a weak smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. The shadows continued their slow crawl across the range, encroaching upon the fading light as if eager to claim the day's final moments for themselves.

"It's just... you kept texting someone. And went off on Galveston to meet with..." He trailed off, as if hoping she might fill in the void.

She just watched him. Amused.

"A friend. Lily. A childhood friend—nothing more."

"Oh... Okay, got it," Ethan said, his expression softening as relief washed over him like a gentle tide. "Sounds good."

"Definitely," Rachel agreed, her eyes meeting his. "Why do you ask?"

"Uh, no reason," Ethan mumbled, his face turning a shade of pink that rivaled the glowing horizon. He quickly busied himself with reloading his gun, the metallic clicks echoing through the air as he fumbled with the ammunition.

Rachel narrowed her eyes, sensing that something was amiss. But she decided not to press further, attributing his odd behavior to the stress of their recent case.

She continued to watch his profile; he really was quite handsome. His sharp features and jaw line

were accentuated by the fading light, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of... curiosity.

As if sensing her gaze, Ethan turned to face her again, his eyes locking with hers in a moment. But he quickly looked away again, as if embarrassed.

They stood there, silent and still, for what felt like an eternity.

Suddenly, her eyebrows shot up. She was quick in the woods and quick on the draw.

But the uptake? Much slower.

Especially where men were concerned.

“Ethan...” she began.

But he spoke in a burst of words. “Hey, I just remembered I have to take care of some paperwork at the office.” He slid the magazine into place with a resolute click. His voice had a forced cheerfulness.

“Are you sure?” Rachel asked, concern furrowing her brow. “You don’t have to go right now. We still have time.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Really.” Ethan insisted, stepping away from his shooting booth. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Alright,” Rachel conceded, watching as he hastily retreated from the range.

Again, she felt her curiosity rising.

He really was a strange one.

Equal parts golden retriever, tumbling all over himself, and fidgety... She couldn’t think of another noun. Was that what it was? Noun?

Shit... words were hard.

She raised her gun and fired three more times.

Bullseyes.

She grinned.

Now *that* was easy.

Rachel’s gaze lingered on the empty space Ethan had occupied just moments ago, her mind churning with unanswered questions. The subtle scent of gunpowder hung in the air, a distinct reminder of their earlier camaraderie now tainted by doubt.

She shook her head, forcing herself to refocus on the task at hand. Determination coursed through her as she shifted her stance and raised her firearm once more. The cold metal against her skin seemed to awaken something within her – a renewed sense of purpose that steeled her resolve.

As Rachel prepared to take another shot, a sudden ringing pierced the stillness of the twilight, jarring her from her

thoughts. Her phone vibrated insistently in her pocket, its shrill tone slicing through the quiet like a knife.

“Hello?” Rachel asked, her voice steady despite the unease that gnawed at her insides.

“Hey, is this Ranger Backwood?”

“That’s right. Who’s this?”

“Sergeant Hays. Do you recall the vandal you brought us a couple days ago?”

She frowned, trying to place the name, but then stiffened. “Right... The looter.”

“Yeah. You brought him in a couple days ago.”

“Mhmm.” Then, as if feeling she needed to explain herself, she said, “He was looting my parents’ old house.”

“Right... well, he says he wants to talk to you.”

She went still.

“He does?”

“He asked for you by name. You got some time?”

“Yes,” she said reflexively. “When?”

“Right now, if you can make it.”

She was already holstering her weapon. “On my way.”

## EPILOGUE

Rachel sat across from Benny Carter in the quiet interrogation room, the sterile walls and harsh fluorescent lighting casting eerie shadows over their faces.

Benny Carter. Jasper Tanenbaum. Reese Martial.

Just a few of the names they'd found associated with the man's fingerprints.

A small-town crook. A thief.

But nothing more.

So how was he involved with her parents?

Rachel's foot shifted rhythmically against the floor.

The hum of the air conditioning was the only sound that permeated the silence, as if to remind them that the world outside this tiny room still existed. Rachel couldn't help but notice Benny's nervous tapping fingers, the rhythm almost hypnotic as they drummed against the cold metal table. She wondered what secrets hid behind his fearful eyes, what twisted path had led him to this moment.

As she studied him, a tall man strode into the room, taking a seat beside Benny. He was dressed immaculately in a tailored suit, his graying hair combed back smoothly. The lawyer introduced himself: "I'm Brennan Simmons, Mr. Carter's attorney." His voice was deep and gravelly, a stark contrast to the soft-spoken demeanor he projected. With a calm yet assertive tone, he continued, "Ranger Blackwood, I believe it would be in everyone's best interest if we were able to strike a deal for my client here."

The words hung heavy in the air, like a storm cloud threatening to break open with rain. Rachel felt the weight of the statement, the importance of the information Benny held.

Rachel's gaze remained fixed on Benny, observing the way his fingers tapped incessantly against the cold table. The somberness of the atmosphere, coupled with the smell of stale coffee that clung to the air, only heightened Rachel's senses.



“Alright,” she said, her voice steady and measured, “let’s hear what you have to say, Benny.”

Benny glanced over at his lawyer, his eyes darting between the man and Rachel like a trapped animal caught between two predators. As the weight of the situation bore down on him, the tapping of his fingers grew more erratic, betraying the turmoil that brewed within him. Finally, he took a deep breath and said, “I want my lawyer to leave.”

“Are you sure about that?” the lawyer, Richard, asked, his brow furrowing in concern. “It’s not advisable for you to speak without legal representation present.”

“Look,” Benny said, his voice quivering with desperation, “I need to tell her stuff– but I can’t do it with you here. Just go.”

Rachel could sense the raw emotion pouring from Benny, his earnestness struck her like a lightning.

“Mr. Carter,” Richard warned, “I must advise against this course of action. Anything you say without me present can be used against you in court. Are you certain this is what you want?”

“Trust me,” Benny replied, his voice barely audible, “this is the only way.”

The lawyer hesitated for a moment, the gravity of the situation reflected in his conflicted expression. But as he looked into Benny’s eyes and saw the determination that lay within them, he knew there was no changing his client’s mind. With a resigned sigh, Richard stood up, adjusting his suit jacket before speaking once more.

“Very well,” he said, pausing at the door to cast one last glance at Benny. “Remember, you have the right to request my presence at any time.”

As the door opened before the lawyer, Rachel found herself alone with Benny.

The soft hum of the fluorescent lights above seemed to underscore the gravity of the moment as Richard, Benny’s lawyer, gave one last pleading glance before reluctantly

exiting the room. The heavy door closed with a resounding thud, as if sealing off the world beyond. Rachel could feel the tension in the air thickening like an approaching storm, and she watched Benny's face closely, trying to read the emotions that flickered across it like a kaleidoscope of fear and regret.

"Alright," Benny said, swallowing nervously. His eyes were wide and vulnerable, locked onto Rachel's in a silent plea for understanding. "I don't want to go to prison."

She leaned forward slightly, her voice gentle yet firm.

"Then tell me everything, Benny. Why were you at that house?"

Outside the window, the fading light cast long shadows across the barren landscape. The wind whispered through the trees, their branches dancing to a mournful melody, as if nature itself held its breath in anticipation of what was to come.

"Okay," Benny began, his voice cracking under the strain of his emotions. He took a deep breath, steeling himself.

Rachel noticed the thin sheen of sweat on Benny's forehead, glistening under the harsh light. She could see the trepidation in his eyes as they darted between her and the door through which his lawyer had just disappeared. Every breath he took seemed like a monumental effort, each exhale an admission of vulnerability.

"Your parents," Benny began, his voice quivering ever so slightly, "they were part of a heist - a big one. But they didn't just participate, Rachel. They double-crossed my crew."

Rachel felt the words hit her like a physical blow, her chest constricting as she tried to process the information.

But the emotions were temporary. Brief.

They were laughable, in fact. She snorted.

"What? That's stupid."

He blinked.

She actually chuckled. “My parents weren’t thieves. They were on *this* side of the table, asshole.”

“No,” he said simply. He shrugged. He seemed so confident that she went quiet, watching him.

“They were thieves. Helped a heist. The biggest one ever.”

“Biggest heist ever?” She snorted.

“You didn’t know?”

“Didn’t know what?”

“About any of it? About what they did on the side?”

“Please,” she scoffed. “My parents weren’t criminals.”

She flung her hands in the air. “I thought you had something useful. Serious. Thanks for wasting my time, asshole.”

She pushed to her feet, moving towards the door.

“Hang on! Wait. I know about your aunt. Sarah! Sarah Blackwood, right? Your dad talked about her often.”

Rachel went still, stiffening. She turned back. “You could’ve found that anywhere.”

He just shrugged.

“Believe me, I wish I was lying,” Benny said, his eyes glistening with sincerity. “But I’m not. They played us, Rachel. They took everything we’d worked for and left us with nothing.”

She found the whole thing laughable. Silly, even.

So why was she still standing in the room?

Why was he? That was the more important question.

Rachel’s breath caught in her throat as Benny’s words hung in the air, a cloud of doubt and disbelief threatening to choke her. The shadows cast by the harsh fluorescent lights above seemed to deepen, swallowing the room in an atmosphere of tension.

“Your parents,” Benny began, his voice low but steady, “They were at our hideout when we returned from the heist. They’d spearheaded our plan. They took everything. Then scrambled. You moved, didn’t you? About that time?”

Rachel hesitated, realizing this was true.

She’d moved a lot—school to school. She’d been told it was because of her dad’s job...

She frowned now.

“Wh-what was stolen?” Rachel stammered, desperate for more information to understand this bewildering situation. Her eyes searched Benny’s face, seeking some semblance of clarity amid the turmoil.

Hell didn’t believe him, did she?

Hell no... so why humor him?

Benny hesitated, his fingers drumming nervously on the table as he considered his response. Outside, the wind howled through the trees, their branches bending and weaving as if attempting to eavesdrop on the conversation unfolding within the interrogation room.

“I can’t say for certain,” Benny replied, his gaze drifting towards the window as if seeking solace in the storm-tossed landscape beyond. “All I know is that it was something incredibly valuable... something that could have changed everything for us.”

The air in the room grew dense, heavy with the weight of his words. Shadows stretched across the floor beneath them, writhing and twisting as if mirroring the turmoil swirling inside Rachel’s mind. She watched Benny closely, noting the sheen of perspiration on his brow and the subtle tremor in his voice as he spoke.

“Look... I wasn’t part of the crew at the time.” Benny’s voice wavered like a leaf caught in the wind, his gaze flitting from one corner of the room to another, avoiding direct eye contact with Rachel. “I did odd jobs. I drove for them that night. They didn’t tell me the whole deal. Just that it was big;

don't know what was stolen, just that it was important enough for your parents to betray us.”

Rachel's knuckles whitened where she gripped her own arm, as if searching for some anchor, her grip tightening as she fought to keep her composure. Through gritted teeth, she demanded, “You need to give me something more concrete, Benny. You're asking me to believe the unbelievable. If you want a deal, if you want immunity, you need to give me something to work with.”

Benny swallowed hard, his throat bobbing like a cork in rough waters.

Rachel studied Benny's face, searching for any hint of deceit or uncertainty. His eyes darted away from her gaze, but she could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest. The room seemed to close in around them, the tension thickening like storm clouds overhead, as Rachel leaned in closer.

“Look, I'm not asking for your life story,” Rachel said, her voice tight and controlled. “I just want to know what we're dealing with here. You say you don't know the specifics, but you must have some idea.”

Benny hesitated, staring at her as if weighing his options. Finally, he licked his lips nervously and spoke in a barely audible whisper. “All I know is that it was worth over a billion dollars. That's it.”

“A billion dollars?” Rachel breathed, feeling an icy chill spread through her veins.

She battled against her own disbelief, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. There would be time for shock and confusion later – for now, she needed answers.

“Please, Ranger,” Benny implored, desperation etched into every line of his face. “I've told you everything I know. I just... I don't want to go to prison. I can't go back there.”

“I don't believe you,” she said simply, crossing her arms.

“Why would I lie?”

“Dunno. You do it for a living, though, don't you?”

He blinked, opened his mouth, closed it again, then frowned.

“Not really.”

“Bullshit.”

He sighed. “We were at your parents’ place looking for the loot. That’s why they’re gone, see? They scrambled again. We were closing in, so they fled.”

“Without me?”

He shrugged.

She realized what she’d said a moment later. She’d only been ten at the time, and the vulnerability in those words *without me* seemed to echo in the small space.

She took a second longer to draw air.

“A billion bucks,” he said. “A lot to leave for. Maybe even a kid. Hell, maybe they told themselves they’d come back for you. Maybe they figured it was a better life for you.”

He shrugged at her.

“Shut up,” she said simply.

He went quiet. Then, he said, “So what about my damn deal?”

She frowned at him, paused, then turned on her heel, pushing out the door.

“Hey! What about my deal!” he shouted after her.

But she didn’t reply.

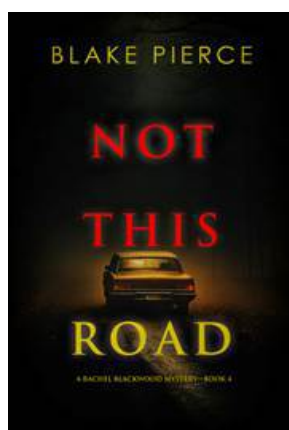
She had to do some digging. It was all bullshit.

A billion dollar heist? A double-cross. Total bullshit.

So why were her hands sweating?

She shook her head, picking up her pace and marching down the dark hallway, tipping her hat out of her eyes as she moved swiftly towards the exit.

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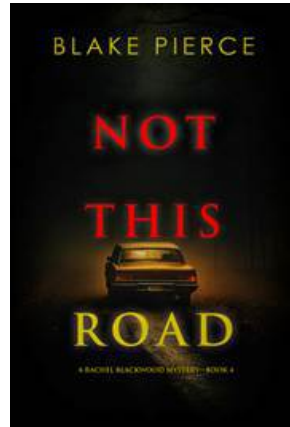
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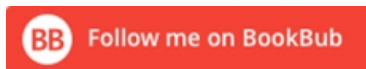
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