

A SHELA STONE MYSTERY—BOOK 4

SILENT

HOUSE

BLAKE PIERCE

# SILENT HOUSE

(A Sheila Stone Suspense Thriller—  
Book Four)

BLAKE PIERCE

## **Blake Pierce**

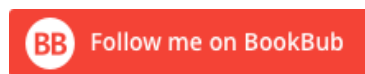
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EPILOGUE





# PROLOGUE

Erin's heart pounded in her chest as she sprinted through the empty park, her breath coming in shallow gasps. The cold night air burned her lungs, but she couldn't afford to slow down. With each step, she cast panicked glances over her shoulder, convinced that someone was following her. She cursed herself for leaving her phone in her friend's purse—she'd never felt so vulnerable and alone.

The park was shrouded in darkness, illuminated only by the faint glow of distant streetlights. Shadows danced across the damp grass, playing tricks on Erin's frazzled mind. Tall trees loomed overhead, their gnarled branches reaching out like twisted arms, ready to snatch her up. The once-familiar playground now took on a sinister quality, with the swings swaying gently in the breeze, their chains creaking eerily.

*This can't be happening*, she thought, her eyes scanning the landscape for any sign of movement.

A sudden gust of wind sent leaves skittering across the path in front of her, making her jump. She stumbled but quickly regained her footing, pushing herself to run faster. The bench where she'd spent countless afternoons reading seemed to sneer at her now, mocking her fear.

“Get it together, Erin,” she muttered under her breath, trying to calm her racing thoughts. “You're just scaring yourself.”

As much as she wanted to believe it was all in her head, however, she knew better. Earlier in the evening, she had gone to the bar with some friends to celebrate her new job at a local law firm. After years of hard work and determination, she'd finally landed a position as a paralegal. Her first day on the job had gone smoothly, aside from the normal first-day nerves. She was excited about this new chapter in her life, and her friends were eager to share in her enthusiasm. A sense of accomplishment and pride had filled her heart, making the celebration feel well-deserved.

As the night wore on and her friends began to disperse, however, Erin found herself alone at the bar. That's when she noticed him—a man with a scruffy beard and piercing eyes that seemed to bore into her very soul. He wolf-whistled at her from across the room, drawing the attention of other patrons. She could feel her cheeks burning with embarrassment and anger. How dare he make her feel so uncomfortable?

“Hey, sweetheart!” the man called out to her. “Looking awfully lonely over there all by yourself. Need some company?”

Erin ignored him, hoping he would lose interest and move on to someone else. But as she left the bar, she noticed him following her. At first, she tried to rationalize his behavior. Maybe he was just trying to scare her, or maybe it was just a coincidence that they were both walking in the same direction. But as the man continued to follow her, his predatory grin never wavering, Erin knew she'd better take this creep seriously.

Now, as she sped through the park, her legs aching and lungs burning, all she could think about was escaping this nightmare. Every shadow that crossed her path seemed to morph into the outline of the man who had been stalking her, fueling her fear even more.

*Please, let me get out of this alive,* she thought, desperately praying for the strength to keep running. *I just want to go home.*

Seeing no sign of him behind her, she decided to slow down. She didn't dare stop completely, but her legs begged for a moment's reprieve. The soft glow of the streetlights illuminated the park around her, casting eerie shadows through the trees and over the benches. A lone swing set creaked softly in the breeze, the rusted chains scraping against the metal frame.

"Maybe I lost him," she whispered to herself, eyeing the empty paths that crisscrossed through the grass. She tried to convince herself that the man was just trying to scare her, that he never intended to follow through on his lustful intentions. But deep down, she knew she couldn't afford to let her guard down. Not until she was safely behind locked doors.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing thoughts. "Okay, Erin, you've got this. Just get home and forget about that creep." She forced herself to take slow, measured steps, scanning her surroundings for any sign of her pursuer. Her fingers itched with the desire to call someone – anyone – for help, but her phone remained trapped in her friend's purse, miles away from her shaking hands.

As she rounded a bend in the path, she glanced over her shoulder one more time. And there he was, the man from the bar, standing under a dim streetlight. He was closer now, close enough that she could see the cruel smirk on his face and the glint of excitement in his eyes.

“Leave me alone!” Erin cried, her panic overwhelming her newfound courage. She broke into a sprint once more, her chest tightening as she pushed her body to its limits.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he said, his voice reverberating through the night. “Don’t you want to have some fun?”

Desperation fueled Erin’s flight, her mind a whirlwind of terror and despair. She ran like her life depended on it—because it very well might have.

Then, as her muscles were beginning to ache with exertion, she spotted the wrought-iron gates of a graveyard up ahead. A cold mist clung to the ground, obscuring the eerie silhouettes of tombstones and gnarled trees. She hesitated for a moment, torn between fear and desperation. But with the sound of her pursuer’s footsteps drawing closer, she made her decision. Darting through the gates, she plunged into the spectral world of the dead, praying that it would be her salvation.

The damp grass whispered against her shoes, her heart pounding in sync with each step. The fog swallowed her whole, reducing her vision to mere inches before her face. Erin shuddered at the chill that seeped into her bones, but she couldn’t stop now—not when the alternative was so much worse.

“Where are you going, sweetheart?” the man’s voice called from behind her, his shape lost in the swirling mists. “You can’t run forever!”

“Please, just leave me alone,” Erin whispered as tears threatened to spill from her eyes. Panic clawed at her chest, leaving her gasping for breath as she stumbled deeper into the graveyard.

A large tombstone loomed out of the fog, its weathered surface etched with the names of the long-dead. Erin crouched behind it, her body shaking uncontrollably. She pressed her hands against her mouth, desperate to stifle the sobs that bubbled up in her throat.

“Come on, don’t be shy!” the man said, his tone dripping with malice. “I just want to get to know you.”

Erin’s mind raced, searching for any way out of this nightmare. Maybe if she stayed hidden, he would grow bored and leave. Or maybe he would find her, and she would be forced to face him, alone and defenseless. The fear was a living thing, gnawing at her insides and rendering her incapable of coherent thought.

She tried to steady her breathing, fearing that any sound might give away her hiding spot. Her mind raced with possibilities, desperately seeking some kind of reassurance.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” the man sang mockingly.

Erin pressed her trembling hands against her mouth, willing herself not to cry out. She prayed silently, begging for

salvation from this nightmare. The wind sighed through the trees above, rustling the leaves and creating eerie shadows that danced across the ground. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly as Erin waited, her body tense with anticipation.

Gradually, the graveyard grew quiet. No more taunts filled the air—there was only the occasional distant howl of the wind. Cautiously, Erin dared to hope that the man had given up his pursuit.

“Please let him be gone,” she whispered to herself, her voice shaky with fear.

She heard footsteps pass by her hiding place, and she held her breath, frozen in terror. The footsteps faded, growing more distant, and Erin slowly released her grip on her own hands, trying to force her fingers to stop shaking. With agonizing slowness, she crept forward, her eyes straining to see through the misty haze.

The road was barely visible in the gloom, but there, making his way down the middle of it, was the man. He seemed to have given up his search, walking away from her with a casual swagger. Relief washed over Erin like a tidal wave, leaving her weak-kneed and gasping for breath.

She’d lost him. For now, at least, she was safe.

“Thank you,” she whispered, tears of gratitude streaming down her face. But the danger was not yet over—she still needed to get home and avoid crossing paths with the man again.

Backing away from the road, Erin's thoughts raced as she tried to plan the safest route home. The concern for her roommate weighed heavily on her mind, as she would undoubtedly be worried by now.

"Kenzie's probably pacing the apartment like a madwoman," she muttered to herself, feeling a pang of guilt for breaking her promise to be home sooner.

As she took another backward step, reluctant to turn her gaze away from the man lest he vanish before she laid eyes on him again, her head collided with something solid. Startled, Erin reached up and felt what seemed like a tree branch, but the texture was off—it felt like leather. She turned around, curiosity mingling with a faint sense of dread, and found herself staring at a shoe.

"Wh-what the hell?" she stammered, her eyes following the shoe to the leg, the body, and finally the gruesome sight of the body hanging lifelessly from the tree towering above her, a noose around the young man's throat.

She was still in shock, desperately trying to process this, when the wind picked up and the tree began to shift. The body swayed...and so did three other shapes, all of them swinging in unison.

Then Erin finally found her voice as she screamed for all she was worth.





# CHAPTER ONE

The cold steel of the security checkpoint bars sent shivers down Sheila's spine as she stepped into the entrance of Blackridge Penitentiary. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, a mix of anxiety and anticipation coursing through her veins. The sterile smell of the prison hung in the air, reminding her just how far she was from the familiar comfort of her apartment downtown.

Sheila couldn't shake the image of Rayland Bax from her mind—his mugshot staring back at her from the countless articles she had researched about him. This man, currently locked away for armed robbery, might be the key to unlocking the truth about her mother's murder. The thought terrified her as much as it excited her, but she knew she had to find answers. Henrietta Stone deserved justice.

"Next," called one of the security guards in a gruff voice, snapping Sheila's attention back to the present. She approached the X-ray machine, placing her belongings in a plastic bin as the guards eyed her with disinterest. They had seen countless visitors come and go, and apparently she was no different in their eyes.

The hum of the X-ray machine filled the air as Sheila's bag and jacket disappeared behind a heavy curtain. She glanced around, observing the other equipment scattered throughout the room. There were metal detectors, pat-down stations where

guards examined visitors for contraband, and even a drug-sniffing dog sitting obediently by its handler.

“Arms out, please,” instructed a guard, waving a handheld metal detector over Sheila’s body. She complied, trying to keep her anxiety in check as the device beeped and whirred around her. She needed to keep her composure if she was going to face Rayland Bax and get the information she needed.

The security guards at Blackridge Penitentiary were an intimidating bunch—tall, broad-shouldered, and clad in dark uniforms. Their faces remained stoic as they scrutinized each visitor, ensuring that no threats made their way into the maximum-security facility. As one of the guards inspected Sheila’s belongings, he suddenly paused and held up a small pocket knife.

“Miss, you can’t bring this inside,” he said gruffly, his voice betraying a hint of annoyance.

Sheila’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize... This is my first time visiting a prison, you see.” She stopped, hoping for a bit of understanding.

The guard raised an eyebrow but said nothing, tossing the knife into a nearby bin designated for confiscated items. Sheila felt her face growing even warmer under his gaze.

Trying to salvage the situation, she attempted to make conversation. “You know, I just started training to be a police officer a few weeks ago,” she said, her voice wavering slightly. “So, I guess you could say I’m still learning the ropes.”

The guards exchanged unimpressed glances, remaining silent and focused on their duties. It was clear that they had little interest in engaging with Sheila or hearing about her aspirations. She swallowed hard, feeling increasingly isolated within the cold, sterile walls of the penitentiary.

*Tough crowd*, she thought. *I just hope Rayland is a bit more talkative.*

Her footsteps were loud in the empty corridor, making her feel even more alone than she already was. She couldn't help but wish her dad could be there with her. He'd always been her rock, and his presence would've provided her with a sense of comfort that she desperately needed at that moment.

Unfortunately, he was recovering from knee surgery, leaving Sheila to face this daunting task on her own. She knew she had to rely on her own wits, strength, and determination—qualities she'd honed throughout her years as an Olympic kickboxer.

Sheila soon found herself inside the visiting room. Its stark, barren walls were painted a dull gray, devoid of any warmth or welcoming atmosphere. The prison guards had taken care to remove anything that might be used as a weapon, leaving nothing but a few bolted-down chairs and tables scattered around the room.

Taking a seat at one of these tables, Sheila exhaled slowly, trying to calm her nerves. She looked around the room, doing her best to memorize every detail in case it proved useful later. Meanwhile, she went over the questions she planned to ask Rayland Bax, wondering if he held the key to solving her mother's murder.

“Did you know my mother, Henrietta Stone?” she whispered under her breath, practicing her opening line. “Were you involved in her death?”

No, that was too abrupt—she couldn’t just ambush him with a question like that and expect him to stick around to talk. She had to coax the answers out of him, find something he wanted, and dangle it in front of him like a carrot. But what could she offer?

Her heart skipped a beat as the door behind her opened with a heavy groan. The same guard who had led her to the visiting room entered, his face unreadable. “Miss Stone, you need to come with me,” he said gruffly, gesturing toward the door.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Sheila asked, her confusion evident. “I thought I was supposed to meet Rayland Bax.”

“Change of plans. Just follow me,” he insisted, offering no further explanation.

With a mixture of curiosity and reluctance, Sheila rose from her seat and followed the guard through the maze-like corridors of Blackridge Penitentiary. Her mind raced with questions and concerns, but she didn’t dare voice them out loud. What could have possibly changed? Was Rayland refusing to see her? Or was there something more sinister at play?

As they arrived at the warden’s office, Sheila couldn’t help but notice the contrast between this room and the rest of the prison. It was well-furnished, with plush carpeting and polished wooden furniture. A small collection of books lined

one wall, while an array of framed certificates hung above the warden's desk.

“Wait here,” the guard ordered, leaving Sheila alone in the room.

The warden, a middle-aged man with a neatly trimmed beard, appeared to be on the phone, engaged in a jovial conversation with someone who sounded like an old friend. Laughter filled the room as he exchanged pleasantries, completely oblivious to Sheila's presence.

“Absolutely, we'll catch up soon!” the warden exclaimed, still chuckling. “Give my regards to your family!”

As Sheila stood there, she felt her impatience growing. She had been so close to getting the answers she sought, and now she found herself stuck in the warden's office with no idea why. She clenched her fists, trying to maintain her composure and focus on the task at hand.

The warden hung up the phone, his laughter dissipating as he finally acknowledged Sheila's presence. He was a tall man with graying hair that looked like it had once been dark and thick. His eyes were cold, almost icy, set above a thin-lipped mouth and a square jaw that gave him an air of authority.

“My name is Owen Abbott,” he said, offering a smile utterly devoid of warmth. “I'm the...head honcho, you might say, here at Blackridge.”

“Sheila Stone. Nice to meet you.”

“I understand you're here to see Rayland Bax.” He cocked his head, studying her as if she were an exotic insect. “What is

your business with him?”

Sheila hesitated for a moment, trying to gauge the warden’s intentions. “I have some questions for him,” she replied carefully, not wanting to reveal too much.

“Questions?” Abbott raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. “About what?”

“I believe he might have been involved in my mother’s murder,” Sheila admitted, her voice wavering slightly as she spoke the words out loud. It felt as though a heavy weight had just settled on her chest, one that only grew heavier with each passing moment.

The warden studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. Sheila couldn’t help but feel exposed under his gaze, like a small animal caught in a predator’s sights. She shifted uncomfortably, suddenly feeling very aware of her vulnerability in this unfamiliar and dangerous environment.

“Your mother’s murder?” he repeated slowly, as if testing the words. “That’s quite the accusation. What makes you think Rayland Bax has anything to do with it?”

“His car was seen leaving my parents’ house.”

“Interesting,” the warden mused, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers. “But it doesn’t necessarily mean he was involved, does it? It could be nothing more than a coincidence.”

“It’s not definitive proof, no,” Sheila conceded, her tone firm. “But it’s certainly very suspicious. Either way, I need to

speak with him. It's the only way I can get closure and move on from my mother's death."

The warden's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized Sheila, making her feel like a specimen under a microscope. He leaned forward in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight.

"Tell me, Miss Stone, have you ever been to a prison before?" he asked.

Sheila shook her head, her eyes never leaving his. "No, I haven't."

"Blackridge Penitentiary is not like any other place," Abbott said, his voice low and foreboding. "It houses some of the most dangerous criminals in this state. Trust me when I say that there are things that go on here that you can't even begin to imagine."

Despite the chill running down her spine, Sheila refused to let the warden's words intimidate her. She had spent countless hours training her body and mind to handle difficult situations. This was just another challenge she had to overcome.

"I can handle myself," she insisted, her jaw set with determination. "I've faced adversity my entire life, and I won't back down now, not when I'm so close to finding out the truth about my mother's murder."

"Adversity?" The warden scoffed, leaning back in his chair once more. "I assure you, you've never faced anything as dangerous as the animals here. People get hurt in places like this, especially if they don't know what they're doing. Just



because you've started going to the academy doesn't make you ready for Blackridge."

Sheila's cheeks burned with embarrassment. She shouldn't have mentioned her training to the guard.

"You rookies," Abbott said condescendingly, raising an eyebrow. "Let me tell you something: Joining the force doesn't automatically make you an expert in handling dangerous criminals. You'll need a lot of field experience before you're ready to sit down with someone like Rayland Bax. I'm saying that for your own good, mind."

Sheila clenched her fists, trying to keep her anger in check. She knew she had a lot to learn, but she also knew that time was of the essence. Every day that passed without answers about her mother's death was another day of unbearable uncertainty.

"Look," she said, forcing herself to remain calm, "I've come too far to turn back now. I just need to ask Rayland a few questions. That's all."

The warden's expression darkened, his patience wearing thin. "You listen here, Ms. Stone. You're not going to talk to Rayland Bax now—or ever. He's off-limits."

"Off-limits?" Sheila's brow furrowed, her confusion turning to suspicion. "Why? What are you trying to hide?"

"Nothing," the warden replied sharply. "But you're not entitled to know the reasons behind my decisions. This is a prison, not a playground, and I have to protect its security and that of the inmates."

“I thought this was about my inexperience? Now it’s about his ‘security’? Do you think I’m going to try to kill him, get revenge for what he might have done?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Now that you mention it, though...”

Sheila couldn’t hold herself in check any longer. “Listen, warden, this is about my mother. My *mother*. Tell me, what would you do if your mother was murdered and you were denied the chance to speak with the only man who might know something about it? How would you feel? Would you tuck your tail between your legs and run off?”

Abbott sighed and rubbed wearily at his face. “I’d help you if I could, okay? But my hands are tied. I don’t make the rules.”

She stared at him, puzzled. “What rules are you talking about? Last I checked, it wasn’t against the law for me to talk with a prisoner.”

He leaned back and raised his hands as if to say he couldn’t do anything about it.

Sheila shook her head, unable to believe this. “So you’re not even going to give me a reason? You expect me to be okay with that?”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “I told you, it’s out of my hands. Understand?”

She blinked at him, uncomprehending. Before she could ask a follow-up question, however, he cleared his throat and

raised his voice. “Barry?” he called. “Would you please see Miss Stone out?”

“Right away,” Barry said, stepping into the room. Evidently, he’d been standing within earshot the whole time.

“This is absurd,” Sheila said, glaring at the warden. Barry placed a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off. “One way or another,” she told Abbott, “I’m going to talk to Rayland Bax.”

The warden shook his head, as if to indicate she was a lost cause. “Good luck doing so without my blessing, Miss Stone.”

Biting back the sharp retort that came to her lips, Sheila turned and followed the guard down the sterile hallway, her thoughts racing. Why was the warden so intent on keeping her away from Rayland? Was he corrupt or simply worried about what she might learn during their conversation?

And why had he repeatedly told her that it was out of his hands?

As Sheila stepped outside into the bright sunlight, she took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. The fresh air was a welcome reprieve from the suffocating tension that had filled the warden’s office moments before.

She was reaching for the car keys in her pocket when her phone buzzed, announcing an incoming call. Seeing Natalie’s name on the screen, Sheila hesitated for a moment before answering.

“Hey, Nat,” she said, forcing cheerfulness into her voice. She didn’t want her sister to know just how shaken she was by

the confrontation with the warden.

“Hey, Sheila,” Natalie replied, her voice sounding troubled, lacking her usual confidence.

“Are you okay?” Sheila asked, her worry evident in her tone.

“I’ll be fine. Just a little under the weather lately,” Natalie assured her, though the lack of conviction in her voice did little to ease Sheila’s fears. “Listen, I called because there’s a new case that I think you can help with. I’ve arranged for you to work as a CI while you finish your police training.”

“What’s the case about?” Sheila asked, her gaze stealing to the imposing walls of Blackridge, her mind still on the conversation she’d been unable to have with Rayland Bax.

Natalie’s next words, however, pulled her back into the moment. “Brace yourself,” Natalie warned, her voice taking on a serious tone. “This one’s bad. We’ve got four victims, all hanged. And the worst part is…” There was a somber pause.

“They’re all family.”



## CHAPTER TWO

Sheila's knuckles rapped against the wooden door of Natalie's office, her heart thudding in rhythm with the sharp sound. She knew she was walking into a case involving four homicides, and it sent a shiver down her spine. It felt overwhelming, but Sheila was determined to rise to the challenge.

As she waited for an answer, Sheila thought about the rigorous training she'd gone through over the past few weeks. The long hours spent at the firing range honing her accuracy, the grueling self-defense classes, and the intense crash course in criminal investigations had all been exhausting yet invigorating. Thanks to her sister's influence, she was on track to join the force officially as part of their fast-track program. Despite her initial reservations, Sheila found herself growing more accustomed to the idea of being a full-time law enforcement officer.

She had previously thought that her background as a kickboxer had taught her all the self-defense skills she needed, but she'd quickly learned that she would need a new skill set for the type of streetfighting law enforcement sometimes required. Unlike kickboxing, this kind of fighting wasn't about technique or form, but about survival. Sheila had learned how to use her surroundings to her advantage, how to strike quickly and efficiently, and how to incapacitate her opponent as quickly as possible.

Now she felt ready for anything—physically, anyway. The emotional toll of working a case involving the murder of an entire family was another matter.

The door to Natalie’s office remained closed, despite her knocking, so she took a moment to survey the chaotic scene unfolding in the sheriff’s department. Phones rang incessantly while deputies scurried back and forth, clutching coffee cups and stacks of paperwork. The energy in the room was palpable; it was certainly not a place for the faint-hearted. She imagined what it would be like to don the uniform and truly be a part of this world.

“Hey, Sheila,” a voice said, snapping her back to reality. She turned to see Finn walking toward her, his deputy uniform crisp and clean. He had an easy swagger, probably something he had picked up during his days as a fighter pilot, but there was a hint of concern in his eyes.

“Looking for your sister?” he asked.

Sheila nodded. “Something about a murder investigation?”

Finn slipped his hands into his pockets and sighed. “Well, she’s not here, I’m afraid.”

“Really?” Sheila asked, surprised. “Where is she, then?”

Finn ran a hand through his disheveled hair, appearing somewhat flustered. “She told me she was feeling under the weather and needed some sick time. She didn’t mention anything to you?”

“No, she didn’t,” Sheila replied, frowning her brow. This wasn’t like Natalie at all. Her sister was tough as nails and

hardly ever took a day off. Something felt off, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Finn's phone buzzed and he pulled it out. "Sorry, just let me send a quick text..." He trailed off, his fingers typing away in a flurry.

"Everything alright?" Sheila asked, noting the tension in his posture.

"Uh, yeah," Finn said, pocketing his phone and offering an apologetic smile. "It's just that things don't run as smoothly when Natalie isn't around. I'm technically in charge of this investigation now, but I had been planning on her being here to help guide us through it. Then she changed plans at the last minute."

"Sounds like we're both feeling a little lost without her," Sheila admitted, her mind racing with worry for her sister. What could have caused Natalie to suddenly take sick leave like this? She hadn't sounded ill.

"Come on," Finn said, motioning for her to follow him. "We should head to the crime scene and get started. Maybe Natalie will join us later."

"Alright," Sheila agreed, following him out of the sheriff's department. As they walked, she couldn't help but ask, "Has Natalie been acting strange lately? Anything out of the ordinary?"

Finn seemed to consider her question for a moment before answering, "She's been a little down, I guess. But otherwise, she's been normal."



Sheila furrowed her brow, still not sure whether to read into things or not. Was there more going on with Natalie, or was it just her imagination?

They reached Finn's car, and Sheila slid into the passenger seat, her thoughts consumed by Natalie as they pulled out of the parking lot.

Driving through the small town of Coldwater, Utah, the quaint familiarity of the place was apparent in every detail. The streets were lined with modest, well-kept homes, each with its own tiny yard that showcased the care and attention of its occupants. The main street boasted a handful of local businesses – a diner, a hardware store, a small grocery market – all proudly displaying their hand-painted signs and welcoming smiles from the owners.

The sun cast a warm, golden glow over the town, illuminating the vibrant colors of the surrounding mountains. From afar, Sheila could see the shimmer of the Great Salt Lake, a reminder of the natural beauty that surrounded this seemingly peaceful community.

Yet within this picturesque town, darkness lurked, and Sheila felt a chill run down her spine despite the warmth of the day. She knew that beneath the surface of even the most idyllic places, secrets and danger often hid in plain sight.

As Finn navigated the streets, Sheila tried to focus on the upcoming investigation, pushing her concern for Natalie to the back of her mind. She reminded herself that she was here to learn, to grow, and to prove herself capable of handling

whatever challenges lay ahead. Natalie could take care of herself.

“Four homicides,” Finn said suddenly, breaking the silence between them. “That’s what we’re dealing with.”

Sheila took a slow breath and, with an effort, turned her mind back to the investigation. “All one family, right?” she asked.

Finn nodded grimly. “The Hubbards. Two parents, two teenage kids. They were all found hanging in the cemetery near their house.”

“Damn,” Sheila whispered, her hand instinctively going to cover her mouth in shock. The image of four lifeless bodies swinging from the branches of a tree in a graveyard made her shudder involuntarily. “What kind of monster would do something like that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Finn replied, his voice tight with anger. “But I’ll tell you this much—we’re not going to rest until we find the person responsible and make sure they pay for what they’ve done.”

“What do we know about the family?” Sheila asked.

“Well, you might be interested to know that they moved back here to Coldwater just a few months ago. They were in Seattle before that.”

“Why’d they move back?”

“The husband, Roy Hubbard, works for a tech company that recently opened a branch in Salt Lake City. They wanted

to be closer to family and have a more affordable cost of living.”

Sheila nodded, taking in the information. “Do we have any leads?”

“Nothing concrete yet, but we do have a couple of witnesses who saw some suspicious activity in the area the night before the bodies were found. We’re also looking into the family’s background, trying to see if there’s any connection to someone who might have wanted to harm them.”

“You said they moved back here,” Sheila said. “They have a history in Coldwater, then?”

Finn nodded. “Yeah, Roy’s family has been in the area for generations. They used to run a cattle ranch outside of town. As far as I know, there hasn’t been any bad blood or anything like that, but we’re still looking into it.”

“Who are the rest of the family? What are their names?”

“The mom’s name was Jane. Taught math at a nearby high school. Kids were Max and Lily. Good grades, popular in school, active in extracurricular activities. Nothing that makes them stand out as targets for a murderer.”

Sheila’s mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions as they drove, her heart aching for the family that had been so brutally ripped apart. She knew she needed to stay focused and clear-headed if she was going to be of any help with this case, but every time she thought about those four bodies hanging

lifelessly in the graveyard, she felt a cold shiver run down her spine.

“The bodies have been taken down,” Finn continued, as if reading her mind, “so you won’t have to see them like that, but the crime scene is still pretty much untouched.”

“Thank God,” Sheila whispered, relief washing over her at the thought of not having to see the gruesome sight of the Hubbards hanging from a tree in the graveyard.

The car fell silent as they continued driving, the passing scenery a stark contrast to the heavy atmosphere inside the vehicle. Quaint, well-kept houses lined the streets, their front yards filled with colorful flowers and neatly trimmed hedges. Children played on sidewalks while their parents watched from porches, sipping iced tea. It was a picture-perfect small-town scene, marred only by the knowledge of the horror that had occurred within its boundaries.

Sheila’s thoughts kept circling back to Natalie, who had been so uncharacteristically absent from this case. She glanced at her phone, biting her lip in worry before finally deciding to try calling her sister.

*Come on, Nat, she thought. Pick up.*

The call rang and rang, but there was no answer. Frowning, she hung up and quickly typed out a text message instead.

*Hey Nat, just checking in on you. Everything okay? Call me when you can. Love you.*

She hit send and stared at her phone for a moment, willing it to buzz with a response. When none came, she sighed and

tucked the device back into her pocket, her concern growing with each passing minute.

“Everything alright?” Finn asked, his eyes briefly flickering to Sheila before returning to the road.

“Yeah,” she lied, forcing a smile. “Just checking on my sister. You know how it is.”

Finn nodded, though Sheila could tell he didn’t quite believe her. But she couldn’t bring herself to voice her growing fears, not when they were already dealing with the weight of a quadruple homicide on their shoulders. For now, she would have to put her concern for Natalie aside and focus on the task at hand—finding justice for the Hubbard family.

A few moments later, the crime scene came into view, a small graveyard nestled between rolling hills and the dense foliage of Coldwater’s countryside. Despite its peaceful surroundings, an eerie chill settled over Sheila as she took in the yellow police tape cordoning off the area. Her heart began to pound in her chest as she mentally prepared herself for whatever was in store.

“Ready?” Finn asked, his voice low and steady.

Sheila swallowed hard, nodding. “As I’ll ever be.”

Finn pulled the car over and parked it, both of them stepping out onto the gravel road that led to the cemetery. The crunch of stones underfoot seemed unnaturally loud in the silence that enveloped them. With each step, Sheila braced herself, uncertain what to expect.

“The woman who found the bodies was fleeing from a stalker,” Finn said, “so there’s some contamination to the scene. But if we can isolate the footprints, rule out the ones we know aren’t relevant...” He paused, his eyes grave. “We might just be able to find the killer’s.”



## CHAPTER THREE

“Why would the killer choose this particular place to leave the bodies?” Sheila wondered aloud.

She was standing at the edge of the graveyard, hands on her hips, studying the scene before her. The early morning air was chilly, and a soft fog swirled around the headstones, giving the place an eerie atmosphere.

“Maybe because it’s close to where the Hubbards lived,” Finn suggested, his breath visible in the cold air. He looked around, taking in the somber setting, his face etched with concern.

“Convenient, maybe,” Sheila replied, “but wouldn’t it have been even more convenient to just leave the bodies wherever he attacked them?” She shook her head, her mind working through every detail, trying to piece together the puzzle that lay before her.

The graveyard itself was old, tucked away behind a small, weather-beaten church. The grass was unkempt, growing tall and wild around the worn gravestones, some of which tilted precariously, as if they might topple over at any moment. A rusting wrought iron fence enclosed the space, its gate creaking softly in the breeze.

Police officers moved methodically through the area, their faces grim and focused. Some were bent down, examining the ground for any evidence that might help shed light on this



gruesome crime. Others stood guard, ensuring no one disturbed the scene or came too close. The yellow crime scene tape fluttered in the wind, cordoning off the central portion of the graveyard where the bodies had been found.

Spectators gathered at a distance, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the macabre scene. Hushed whispers and gasps punctuated the quiet morning air as people tried to make sense of the horror that had unfolded in their small town. Many clutched each other for support, fear and disbelief etched on their faces.

As Sheila and Finn continued toward the oak at the center of the graveyard, they were approached by a burly officer. The man had a thick build and a face weathered by years of outdoor work. His closely cropped hair was shot through with silver, giving him an air of authority. He extended a hand in greeting, his grip strong and firm.

“Patrick MacDonald,” he introduced himself, his voice deep and gravelly. “I’m in charge of the crime scene here.”

“Nice to meet you, Officer MacDonald,” Sheila said as Finn nodded.

MacDonald gestured around them. “We’ve done our best to preserve the scene and keep the public back. But I have to say” – he shook his head in disgust – “this is one of the worst things I’ve seen in my entire career.”

“All the more reason to catch whoever did this,” Finn said.

MacDonald looked over their shoulders, as if searching for someone. “Isn’t Sheriff Stone supposed to be here?”

Sheila and Finn shared a glance.

“She’s tied up at the moment,” Finn said. “But I’ll be in touch with her. Why don’t you show us to the crime scene?”

“Of course,” MacDonald said.

Sheila studied her surroundings as MacDonald led her and Finn deeper into the graveyard. The morning mist hung low over the ground, shrouding the area in an eerie gloom. It seemed to mute the colors of the surrounding foliage, casting everything in a wash of gray.

At the center of the graveyard stood a massive oak tree, its gnarled limbs reaching out like the fingers of a skeletal hand. Its trunk, twisted and ancient, bore witness to centuries of life and death that had unfolded in this quiet corner of Coldwater. From its lowest branches, the four nooses still dangled ominously, swaying gently in the breeze.

“Lord have mercy,” Finn muttered under his breath, his eyes fixed on the chilling sight.

“Indeed,” MacDonald agreed, his expression grim. He crossed his arms over his chest, staring at the tree with a mixture of anger and despair.

Sheila studied the scene, her eyes tracing the pattern of the nooses swaying gently above them. She felt a shiver run down her spine at the thought of the horror that had occurred here just hours before. Turning to MacDonald, she asked, “Who found the bodies?”

“Erin Claxton,” MacDonald replied, his voice heavy. “Young woman on her way home from a bar. She was being

stalked by some creep who'd harassed her at the bar earlier, so she cut through the graveyard hoping to lose him."

"Has anyone looked into this man?" Sheila asked.

"Actually," Finn said, "a few officers are trying to track him down as we speak. But it doesn't sound like he's involved in the murders, if you ask me."

"Really? Why not?"

"We already ran his record," MacDonald said. "He's a real creep, that one, but no criminal record and no reason to suspect him in this."

"We'll definitely keep him on our radar," Finn continued, "but I think we're dealing with a different kind of monster here."

Sheila mulled over Finn's words, her mind racing as she tried to piece together the puzzle. Her gaze returned to the oak tree, its twisted limbs a stark reminder of the evil that had been unleashed in this once sacred place.

MacDonald gave a curt nod, his eyes reflecting the strain of dealing with such a gruesome crime scene. "I'll be around if you need anything," he said, excusing himself.

Sheila's gaze swept over the graveyard, her mind working furiously as she tried to piece together what had happened here. The damp earth clung to her shoes, and the scent of freshly turned soil filled her nostrils. She knew she needed to find any clues that might help them understand the killer's motives and methods.

Finn's phone rang, piercing the quiet air of the cemetery. He stepped away to take the call, leaving Sheila to her thoughts.

The gravestones lay scattered haphazardly throughout the graveyard, some leaning at odd angles, others sinking into the ground as if being swallowed up by the very earth they commemorated. Lichen-covered headstones stood like ancient sentinels, their inscriptions worn away by years of wind and rain.

As Sheila approached the tree where the Hubbards had been found, she noticed that the gravestones nearest to it were not only faded but also the oldest ones in the graveyard. Their dates were barely discernible, dating back to the early 1800s. The names engraved on them were almost illegible, but she could make out the faint etchings of families who had been laid to rest generations ago.

“Could there be a connection?” she muttered under her breath, her fingertips tracing the weathered surface of one of the stones. The thought nagged at her like an itch she couldn't quite reach. Was the killer trying to send a message, or was this simply a macabre coincidence?

Sheila glanced around, searching for any other strange details that might offer insight into the twisted mind behind these murders. Each time her eyes fell on the oak tree, she shuddered, imagining the way the branches may have groaned under the weight of the lifeless bodies.

Finn pocketed his phone and walked back to Sheila, the morning sun casting long shadows across the graveyard. Birds

sang their morning songs, oblivious to the grim scene that had played out mere hours before. “Find anything?” he asked, scanning the area with a practiced eye.

“Maybe,” Sheila said, nodding toward the ancient gravestones surrounding the oak tree. “These are the oldest ones in the graveyard. I’m not sure if it’s significant, but it caught my attention.”

“Good catch,” Finn replied, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “I just got off the phone with the coroner. He’s ready to show us his report. We should head over there.”

“Alright,” she agreed, her gaze lingering on the worn-out inscriptions as they prepared to leave. But something else caught her eye—bits of bark strewn around the base of the oak tree. She stepped back, looking up at the branches above. In several places, the bark had been worn away, revealing the lighter wood underneath.

“Wait, Finn. Look at this.” She pointed at the damaged bark. “I think the killer tied the ropes around the victims’ throats, threw the ropes over these branches, and hauled them up one by one.”

“Whoever did this must be good with ropes,” Finn said, his eyes scanning the worn branches above. “I mean, look at those knots. The nooses are simple slipknots, but the way he tied the ropes around the tree to hold the victims in the air...he clearly knew what he was doing.”

Sheila nodded, her brow furrowed in thought. “What type of person would have that kind of experience with knots?”

“Someone with a background in sailing, maybe?” Finn suggested, his voice tinged with uncertainty. “Or a rock climber? Hell, I don’t know.”

As they pondered the possibilities, Sheila’s gaze drifted back to the tree, her focus now on the height and breadth of its branches. A new realization dawned on her. “Finn, there’s something else. If the killer managed to haul the bodies up like that, he must be incredibly strong physically. He’d have to be in great shape.”

“Good point,” Finn agreed, rubbing his chin. “But strength alone isn’t enough. Patience, precision...this guy’s got it all. We’re not dealing with your average psycho here.”

“He planned this out,” Sheila said softly. “Killing four people—that’s no easy task, never mind displaying their bodies like this. Whoever this guy is, he’s very methodical.”

They exchanged uneasy glances, grappling with the somber reality. “Considering the pattern,” Sheila continued, choosing her words carefully, “we might want to consider the possibility of further attacks on new arrivals to the town—and maybe even other members of Roy’s family.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Sheila's senses were on high alert as she and Finn stepped through the sliding doors of Coldwater General Hospital. As they made their way down the long corridor toward the morgue, the walls seemed to close in around her, suffocating her with memories of visiting Natalie after she had been shot.

She recalled the beeping of the heart monitor, the unnerving stillness of her sister's body as she lay in the hospital bed, tubes and wires snaking from her motionless form. It was a sight that haunted her dreams, and now it threatened to resurface as they approached the morgue.

The hospital itself was a labyrinth of twisting hallways, cold linoleum floors, and flickering fluorescent lights. The further they ventured, the more unsettling the environment became. It felt to her as if they were stepping into the belly of the beast, a space where hope and warmth were foreign concepts.

"Worried about seeing the bodies?" Finn asked, surprising her. Even though she'd been thinking about her sister, it was true that she was uneasy about seeing the bodies as well.

She took a shaky breath. "Is it that obvious?"

"It's common, yeah. We all go through it."

"It's not that I haven't seen a dead body before—I've seen a few now. But the thought of seeing an entire family – two of them teenagers, no less—" She broke off, shaking her head.



The weight of the situation settled on her shoulders, dragging her down with every step they took.

“Death...” Finn began, his voice quiet as they continued down the narrow corridor, “it’s a part of our job, and it never gets any easier. But over time, you learn to protect yourself from it. To deaden certain feelings.”

Sheila glanced at him, taking in the solemn look on his face. In that moment, she could see the weight of every case he’d ever worked bearing down on him. She didn’t like the idea of numbing herself to the pain, though. To her, it felt like giving up.

“I think it’s important for us to feel everything,” she said softly, her eyes fixed on the door at the end of the hallway. “To identify with the victims, to understand their fear, their pain... We need to carry that with us so we never forget why we’re doing this.”

Finn nodded, acknowledging her perspective. “That’s one way of looking at it. It’s just...hard sometimes, you know? It’s easy to get lost in that darkness if you don’t keep it at a distance.”

Sheila was thinking of what to say when they reached the door to the morgue. They pushed it open and entered a cold, sterile room with gleaming stainless steel surfaces reflecting the harsh overhead lighting. A faint, unmistakable scent of decay hung in the air, a constant reminder of the room’s grim purpose.

On four gurneys, side by side, lay the lifeless bodies of the Hubbard family. Roy and Jane, still dressed in their

nightclothes, stared sightlessly upwards, while the teenage siblings, Max and Lily, were in casual attire. Their faces, once full of life, now held an eerie calmness that sent shivers down Sheila's spine.

"Damn," she whispered, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. "It's just...so wrong. They should be at home right now, laughing, arguing...living."

Finn reached out to touch her shoulder, offering what comfort he could. "We'll find who did this, Sheila. We'll make sure they don't hurt anyone else."

As if on cue, Dr. Jin Zihao left a set of X-rays pinned up on a lightbox and approached them. He was a tall man with neatly combed black hair streaked with silver, and sharp, intelligent eyes that seemed to miss nothing. His white lab coat made a gentle swishing sound as he moved.

"Miss Stone, Deputy Mercer," Dr. Zihao said, a hint of warmth in his otherwise professional tone. "Glad you could get here so soon. I've been making some headway with the autopsies."

Sheila glanced at the bodies on the gurneys, feeling queasy at the thought of what the coroner had done to learn more about their deaths. She swallowed her discomfort, knowing it was a necessary part of the investigation.

Dr. Zihao adjusted his glasses. "I've completed the external examination and just started with the internal procedures. It's a challenging case, but I'm confident we'll uncover some valuable information."

Sheila watched Dr. Zihao's practiced movements and wondered how he could detach himself from the emotional aspect of his work. To spend your days cutting open lifeless bodies, searching for clues to their untimely deaths...it was not a job she envied.

Was Finn right, then, that the only way to do this job was to keep emotion at a distance? Or was there a healthier way to cope?

"What have you found so far?" Finn asked.

"Based on their attire," Dr. Zihao said, gesturing toward the bodies, "it appears they were attacked at night." He picked up a clipboard from a nearby table, referring to his notes. "The lividity patterns and rigor mortis indicate that they all succumbed to their deaths around the same time."

As Sheila listened, she imagined the terror the Hubbards must have felt during those final moments, huddled together, powerless against their attacker.

"Was asphyxiation the cause of death?" she asked.

Dr. Zihao nodded. "Yes, it was. The petechial hemorrhages in their eyes and the congestion in their faces are consistent with strangulation."

"Any defensive wounds?" Finn asked.

"Mr. Hubbard has multiple bruises and abrasions on his arms, which suggest that maybe he tried to fend off the attacker," Dr. Zihao answered solemnly. He then turned to Lily's gurney, pointing out the small cuts on her neck. "These marks suggest a knife was pressed against her throat."

Sheila felt a chill run down her spine. She pictured Roy fighting off the attacker until the killer managed to grab Lily, threatening her life. “Maybe that’s how the killer got them to go willingly to the graveyard,” she mused aloud. “By keeping a knife to Lily’s throat the whole way.”

Finn’s expression darkened, and he nodded. “It would make sense. A ruthless way to control the family.”

“You may also find it interesting to learn that all four victims were restrained,” the doctor continued. He pointed to faint ligature marks on the victims’ wrists and ankles. “See these? They were bound tightly, which would have made it nearly impossible for them to fight back or escape.”

He reached for an evidence bag on a nearby table, holding it up for Sheila and Finn to see. The bag contained several strips of cloth, frayed at the edges. “It appears that the killer attacked the Hubbards in their home, tore an old sheet into strips, and used it to bind them before marching them to the graveyard.”

Sheila’s heart clenched at the thought of the family’s ordeal—captured, bound, and led to their deaths. She glanced at Finn, who seemed equally disturbed by this new information.

“Any idea why the killer would go through so much trouble?” Sheila asked. “Killing them in such a specific way?”

Finn rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Seems like there’s some kind of twisted message behind it. Or maybe the killer wanted to exert absolute control over the family, make them feel utterly powerless before they died.”

As they spoke, Dr. Zihao interjected, his tone clinical. “There is something else you should know. The victims’ pockets were empty. No wallets, no jewelry, nothing. The parents’ wedding bands were gone, as well.”

Sheila frowned, trying to process this latest piece of information. If robbery had been the motive, why go through the elaborate process of asphyxiating the family and leaving their bodies in a graveyard?

“Perhaps it was a message,” Sheila said, her mind racing with possibilities. “A way to strip them of their identities, reduce them to nothing but helpless victims.”

“Could be,” Finn agreed, his eyes narrowing. “But we won’t know for sure until we find the bastard who did this.”

Dr. Zihao glanced at the clock on the wall, a subtle reminder that time was pressing on. “I have a few more tests to run on the samples I’ve collected,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “If you need any further information, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

“Thank you for your help, Dr. Zihao,” Sheila said, appreciating the effort he’d put into examining the Hubbards.

“Of course,” he replied. “We all want justice for this family.”

As Sheila and Finn left the morgue, Finn said, “We should check out the Hubbards’ house next. Maybe we’ll find something there that’ll shed light on why they were targeted.”

Sheila nodded, her mind already racing with questions about the case. “I think that’s a good idea. If we want to

understand the killer's obsession with the Hubbards, we might as well go to the place where the crime began. A crime like this wouldn't be easy to pull off, which makes me wonder how long he was keeping an eye on the Hubbards—and whether anyone in the area might have seen the killer hanging about.”



## CHAPTER FIVE

The man leaned back on the park bench, his fingers gripping the binoculars with a bloodthirsty intensity as he watched the hawk tear into the helpless rabbit. The piteous cries of the dying creature barely registered in his mind; instead, he marveled at the predator's ruthless efficiency, its talons ripping away flesh with practiced ease. It was almost poetic, the way power asserted itself over weakness.

"Survival of the fittest," he murmured, an approving smile playing at the corners of his lips.

The distant murmur of voices eventually pulled the man's attention from the grisly scene. He swiveled the binoculars toward the commotion, his eyes narrowing as they settled on the graveyard across the road. Yellow caution tape fluttered in the wind, creating a barrier between the curious onlookers and the frenzied activity within. Police officers swarmed the area, their faces etched with grim determination as they worked alongside forensic experts who carefully combed through the evidence.

News vans were parked haphazardly along the edge of the graveyard, reporters jostling for position as they prepared to broadcast the latest developments to a captivated audience.

*Must be quite the event,* the man thought, feeling the irresistible pull of intrigue tug at him. *A whole family*



*murdered at once. I wonder what they make of the graveyard and the nooses.*

He longed to get closer, to immerse himself in the chaos and see first-hand the fruits of his labor. But he knew better than to take that risk.

“Patience,” he reminded himself, tightening his grip on the binoculars. “Soon enough.”

The sense of danger, however, only heightened the thrill, driving him to push the boundaries of his own cautious nature. He felt alive, invigorated by the knowledge that he was playing a high-stakes game with life and death as the prizes.

It wouldn't hurt to get a little closer, would it? Maybe join the crowd gathered at the caution tape? It wasn't as if the police would be able to identify him just by looking at him.

“Ever seen a black rosy-finch?” a voice asked, shattering the man's focus like fragile glass.

He lowered his binoculars to see an old man with a cane in front of him, dressed in khaki cargo pants and a faded green windbreaker. His thinning gray hair was swept back from a weathered face that crinkled with enthusiasm as he spoke. He seemed pitifully weak and feeble—a stark contrast to the powerful grace of the hawk that had held the man's attention moments ago.

“Uh, no,” the man replied tersely, trying to mask his disdain for the intrusion. “Not yet.”

“Ah, well, they're quite the sight!” the old man said, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “Not that you're likely to see

them around here.” He chuckled.

The old man gestured at the birdwatcher’s guide lying on the bench beside the man. “If you don’t mind me asking, what species are you hoping to spot today?”

The man with the binoculars glanced down at the book, its spine uncracked and pages pristine. He hadn’t bothered to open it; he only needed it as a prop to blend in while observing the aftermath of his gruesome handiwork across the street.

“Um, I’m not sure,” he admitted, forcing a sheepish grin. “I’m new to bird watching and just trying to learn as I go.”

“Ah, I see! I remember those days.” The old man’s face softened as he leaned against his cane, looking lost in memories. “You know, I started bird watching back when I was just a lad. It’s been a lifelong passion of mine. Since then, I’ve seen some remarkable birds—the elusive ivory-billed woodpecker, the vibrant resplendent quetzal, even the enigmatic snowy owl.”

The man grudgingly listened, each word from the old man feeling like a needle pricking at his patience. His gaze flickered between the man’s wrinkled face and the graveyard beyond, aching to return his attention to the crime scene. But he knew he couldn’t risk being anything but polite; arousing suspicion was not an option, not here.

“That reminds me,” the old man continued, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he recalled an incident from years ago. “There was this one time I was out looking for a black rosy-finch, and I spotted one right at the top of a tall fir tree.”

He laughed, his voice shaking with age and mirth. “Well, I was so excited that I didn’t notice I’d backed myself up into a thicket of blackberry bushes! The more I struggled to get free, the more entangled I became.”

The man clenched his jaw, feeling his last shred of patience snap. The old man’s laughter grated on his nerves, and he could no longer bear listening to the endless chatter. He interrupted just as the story neared its punchline, his voice cold and firm.

“Look, I came here for some quiet time, not to listen to stories from a stranger. I’m sure you have plenty of interesting tales, but I’d rather be left alone, if you don’t mind.”

The old man’s laughter died abruptly, replaced by a hurt look in his pale blue eyes. He studied the other man for a moment, as if searching for any hint of remorse or kindness beneath the harsh exterior.

“Wasn’t trying to bother you,” the old man said, sounding a bit offended. He seemed to study the man more closely than he had before, his eyes narrowing as if he suspected something wasn’t quite right.

“Bird watching, eh?” he murmured. “And what inspired you to give it a try, pray tell?”

The man’s face flushed with a mixture of guilt and anger. He could sense the old man becoming suspicious of him, and he knew he had to come up with some sort of explanation for why he was in the park. He tried to keep his voice calm as he replied.

“Well...I had some free time and wanted to try something new.” He forced himself to look away from the old man’s gaze, pretending to be preoccupied by scanning the trees for birds. “I figured it would give me an opportunity to get out into nature more often.”

“A nature lover, are you? So it wouldn’t have anything to do with the graveyard, would it?”

At the mention of the graveyard, the man’s pulse quickened. All it would take was for this old to shout to the police across the road, and they would come running. Even if the man was able to talk himself out of the situation (there certainly was no proof he’d been involved in the murders), they would see him—and that could cause problems later on.

No, he needed to deal with this before anyone else got involved.

*I wish I could just hit him over the head with these binoculars, he thought. If only we were alone...*

Such a desperate plan, though, would only make things worse. Aside from the nearby police officers, there were a number of joggers and dog walkers in the park, all potential witnesses to his crime. The man forced a smile, hoping his face didn’t betray his inner turmoil.

“Of course not,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I just thought it would be a nice place to relax and enjoy the wildlife.”

The old man nodded slowly, still looking skeptical. The man with the binoculars could feel his heart pounding in his

chest, wondering if he should make a run for it or try to talk his way out of it. Suddenly, the old man's face lit up with a clever, self-satisfied smile.

“You know what? I have a friend across the street, Patrick Gibbons. *Officer* Patrick Gibbons. He's quite a bird enthusiast himself. I should introduce the two of you!”

The man stared back, his mouth going dry. Was this old fart serious? Did he really know one of the police officers at the graveyard, or was he just pulling the man's chain?

The man tensed, ready to spring. It was starting to look like he might have no choice except to run.

“Come on,” the old man said, a triumphant smile on his face as he gestured. “Don't be shy. Who knows what you two might have in common?”

The man started to rise—not to follow the old man, but to bolt in the opposite direction. Just then, however, an old woman's voice reached them.

“Harold!” She sounded concerned, her tone laced with worry. “We have to hurry if we're going to be home when Stacy brings the boys over!”

“Okay, dear!” the old man, Harold replied automatically, still staring at the man. His smile began to fade, and at the same time, the man felt a surge of relief.

*Thank God for nagging wives,* the man thought.

The old man turned to go. After only a few steps, however, he turned back, scowling as he pointed a finger at the man. “You're a real creep, you know that?” he said. “I don't know

what your deal is, but if I ever see you here again, I'm calling the cops. Got it?"

The man stared back, saying nothing. Harold's wife called again, and Harold, like an obedient dog, shook his head in disgust and moved away.

The man watched with relief as Harold retreated, joining an equally elderly woman who looped her arm through his. They walked slowly, their steps measured and cautious, until they disappeared around a bend in the park's path.

Finally, alone, the man let out a deep breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the solitude that enveloped him like a comforting blanket. The quiet rustle of leaves above him, the distant murmur of the graveyard activity—these were the sounds he craved, not the prattle of strangers.

He loved the silence, the way it seeped into his bones, calming the storm within him. It was in these moments of peace that he felt truly at ease, unburdened by the expectations of others. Alone, he was free to be himself, to indulge in his darkest desires without fear of judgment or retribution.

With the old couple gone, the man raised the binoculars to his eyes once more, focusing on the flurry of activity in the graveyard. From this distance, he could see the reporters huddling together like vultures, their cameras pointed at the police officers as they worked diligently to unearth any clues that might lead them to the killer.

"I should've recorded the whole thing," the man mused, his eyes scanning the scene. The thought intrigued him—the

idea of capturing the terror that had filled the Hubbard family's eyes as they'd realized their fate, the desperation with which they'd pleaded for mercy. It would have been a beautiful, macabre masterpiece, one that he could watch over and over again, savoring each moment like a fine wine.

But then he shook his head, dismissing the notion. As much as he craved the idea of immortalizing his work, he suspected that figuring out how to record the incident would have detracted from the experience, sacrificing the excitement of a moment that could never truly be relived, even if he watched it again through the eyes of a camera a thousand times.

The man was still thinking about this when he spotted a reporter making a beeline for the park, microphone in hand and a determined expression on her face. She was no doubt looking to interview anyone nearby who might have information about the grisly discovery across the street. It was time for him to make his exit.

Rising from the bench, the man slid the binoculars back into their case and tucked it under his arm. As he began to walk away, his hand found its way to his pocket, where it closed around a worn leather wallet. He retrieved it, flipping it open with practiced ease to reveal the driver's license nestled within.

"Roy Hubbard," he read aloud, his voice barely above a whisper. A grim smile twisted his lips as he stared down at the man's photograph, recalling the way he had begged for his life before the man had snuffed it out. In that moment, the man felt

a surge of satisfaction roil through him like a tidal wave, the knowledge that he had brought justice to those who deserved it.

“Got what was coming to you,” he muttered, snapping the wallet shut and tucking it back into his pocket.

As he made his way out of the park, the man was warmed by the assurance deep in his gut that this wasn't the end. No, this was only the beginning. He smiled in anticipation of what was to come, letting out a low chuckle as he imagined all the other Roy Hubbards out there who were just waiting for him to find them.

It was time to sharpen his knives and start hunting again.





## CHAPTER SIX

Sheila leaned forward in the passenger seat of Finn Mercer's car, staring intently at the small house through the windshield.

*The killer could have parked right here, she thought, watching the Hubbards from a distance without them even knowing it. There aren't even any neighbors around to notice a strange vehicle.*

The house itself was a simple structure, with straight lines and a rectangular shape that made it look like it could have come right off an assembly line. The paint was fresh, the yard immaculate, but there wasn't a single flower or decoration to be seen. It looked like something out of a catalog rather than a place where people actually lived.

"Looks more like a model home than a real one, doesn't it?" she asked, trying to shake off her unease. "Like it's just waiting for someone to move in and make it their own."

Finn nodded, his gaze following hers. "That's because the Hubbards only moved in a few months ago. They didn't have much time to personalize it."

"I wonder why the killer chose this family."

"Maybe he didn't. Maybe he chose the house. It's isolated, set back from the road."

“Near a graveyard, too,” Sheila said, following his line of thinking. “That might have been important to him.”

Finn nodded, and they both fell silent, staring at the house.

“Alright,” Finn said, unbuckling his seat belt. “Let’s take a closer look.”

Sheila stepped out into an afternoon that was calm and quiet. As they approached the house, Sheila studied the building more carefully. Pale yellow siding gleamed in the sunlight. The windows were framed by simple white curtains, and Sheila couldn’t help but think how those curtains must have once given the Hubbards a false sense of privacy. She imagined the killer lurking in the shadows, peering through the windows as he plotted his vicious crime.

“Look at that latticework,” she said, pointing to the side of the house where wooden slats crisscrossed their way up toward the roof. “Seems like a perfect place for someone to climb.”

Finn studied it briefly, nodding. “Yeah, could be. Let’s see if we can find any signs of disturbance.”

They reached the front door, which Finn tried cautiously. It was unlocked, and he glanced over at Sheila uneasily before pushing it open. They stepped inside, the silence of the house enveloping them like a cold shroud.

The living room was sparsely furnished, with a beige sofa and matching armchair positioned around a small coffee table. But what caught Sheila’s attention were the cardboard boxes

stacked against one wall, some opened and half-emptied, others still sealed shut.

“Looks like they hadn’t finished unpacking,” she observed, noting the labels scrawled across the boxes in black marker: “Kitchen” on one, “Master Bedroom” on another, and “Lily’s Room” and “Max’s Room” on others.

“Such a shame,” Finn said quietly. “Just moved in, just starting to get used to the routines of a different house, a different part of the country. They had so much life to live.”

Sheila picked up one of the smaller boxes labeled “Photos” and gingerly set it back down. Her heart ached for the Hubbards and their interrupted lives.

Suddenly, Finn’s nose twitched. “Do you smell that?”

Sheila sniffed the air and detected the faint aroma of roast beef. They exchanged a glance before cautiously following the scent into the dining room. The table was set for four, complete with plates of half-eaten food. A large bowl of salad sat in the middle, surrounded by smaller dishes of vegetables and potatoes. The room itself was dominated by the rectangular wooden table, its surface marred by scratches and water rings. An ornate chandelier hung above.

“Looks like they were just in the middle of dinner,” Sheila said, her voice tinged with sadness. It seemed a bit odd that Mr. and Mrs. Hubbard would have been in their pajamas already, but every family had their own ways of doing things.

Finn nodded, his gaze sweeping the room. “This must be where the killer confronted the family.” He pointed at several

chairs that had been knocked over, their legs sticking up in the air like broken limbs. The floor beneath them bore scuff marks and scratches, further evidence of a violent struggle.

“Look at this,” he continued, gesturing toward a crumpled sheet on the floor nearby. Several strips had been torn from it, their edges frayed. “This must be what the killer used to bind the victims.”

Sheila shivered at the thought, her mind racing as she tried to imagine the terror the Hubbards must have experienced. She was a big believer in taking self-defense classes, but she knew that no amount of preparation could guarantee safety in the face of pure evil.

Her gaze fell upon the sliding glass window that led into the backyard, and a chilling thought crossed her mind. “What if the killer watched the family through this window before attacking?”

“Could be,” Finn mused, following her line of sight. “Let’s check it out.”

As Sheila reached for the door handle, Finn stopped her with a firm hand on her arm. “Hold on, we don’t want to disturb any evidence.” He quickly put on a pair of gloves and carefully slid the door open.

Stepping out into the backyard, they were met with nothing but a few hundred yards of grass rippling off toward a ring of trees. There were no decorations, no outdoor furniture. In fact, it seemed as though the yard had been barely touched since the Hubbards moved in.

“Doesn’t look like they used this space much,” Sheila said. Turning around, she noticed an overhead light. It was on.

“If this light was on last night,” she said, “then I can’t imagine the killer stood at the door as he watched the family. He was probably hiding somewhere. But where?”

Finn stood beside her, his eyes scrutinizing every inch of the empty backyard. “There aren’t many options. Maybe behind that bush, or up in one of those trees?” He sighed. “It doesn’t do much good to speculate at this point. Let’s head back inside and see if we missed anything.”

Finn turned toward the house. But Sheila couldn’t tear her eyes away from the edge of the treeline, where a rickety wooden structure seemed to call out to her.

“Wait, Finn—what’s that over there?” she asked, pointing at the tall elm tree upon which an old tree house perched precariously.

“Ah, I didn’t notice that before,” Finn admitted, his eyes narrowing as he studied the structure. “Must be from the previous tenants.”

Together, they approached the tree house. The wooden ladder leading up to it was weathered and covered in moss, but something about it caught Sheila’s attention.

“Look at this,” she said, examining a series of fresh scuff marks on the lower rungs of the ladder. “Someone’s been up there recently.”

“Could be that Max or Lily poked around up here recently,” Finn said, but there was a hint of uncertainty in his

tone.

“Look at the size of the marks,” Sheila said. “Those have got to be...what...size ten shoes? Max’s feet aren’t that big, and neither are Lily’s.”

“So their dad came up here. Maybe he was just curious, wanted to see if he could do anything with the place.”

“Maybe,” Sheila murmured, unconvinced. She felt a strange connection with the victims, an overwhelming need to uncover the truth and bring their killer to justice. And right now, her instincts were screaming at her that this tree house held some answers.

Pulling out his phone, Finn took pictures of the rungs. It didn’t look like there was much chance of getting shoe impressions from the rungs, but there was no harm in documenting the evidence.

“I’m going to head up there and take a look around,” Sheila said when he’d finished. “Just to see if there are any recent signs of activity.”

“Be careful,” Finn warned, watching her ascent with a mix of concern and admiration. Sheila might not have had his years of police experience, but she was fearless.

Sheila hoisted herself up, her toned muscles easily propelling her into the tree house. Its cramped interior was dim, lit only by a few slivers of sunlight that managed to sneak through the gaps between the wooden planks. The walls were adorned with faded posters of rock bands and superheroes,

remnants of a childhood long gone. A thick layer of dust coated everything, disturbed only by her entrance.

“Find anything?” Finn asked from below, his voice muffled by the tree house’s insulating confines.

“Nothing much,” Sheila replied, wiping the dust from her hands onto her jeans. Her eyes scanned the small space, eventually landing on a cracked window that offered an unobstructed view of the Hubbard residence. “But there’s this window... I can see the whole house from here. It’s possible the killer watched them from this spot.”

“Interesting theory, but we still need something solid,” Finn said, sounding restless. “Let’s head back inside and keep searching.”

“One minute,” Sheila said, taking one last look at the tree house’s interior before preparing to leave.

*Maybe Finn was right, she thought, growing discouraged. Maybe Roy came up here, took a look around, and left. There’s certainly no sign of—*

Just then, her keen eyes caught a glimpse of something carved into one of the boards in the corner of the room. It was a crude, child-like drawing of the four members of the Hubbard family gathered together around a tree surrounded by gravestones.

And there were nooses around their necks.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

“I just can’t believe he’s dead,” Eddie said. “Roy was such a good guy. Who would want to do this to him and his family?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Sheila said, saddened to have to deliver such terrible news to Eddie, who had worked with Roy at TechWave, a Seattle-based company whose staff had increased tenfold since Roy joined its ranks fifteen years earlier. Sheila was hoping Eddie might be able to provide insight into Roy’s life, perhaps helping her understand why someone had singled out Roy and his family.

In the silence that followed, Sheila’s eyes wandered over the small study, taking in the organized chaos of Roy Hubbard’s workspace. Books on computer programming and software development lined the shelves, while scattered papers and sticky notes covered the wooden desk. The pungent smell of coffee lingered in the air, a testament to the countless late nights spent working here. The room felt strangely intimate, as if Sheila was trespassing into a private sanctuary.

“Tell me about Techwave,” she said to Eddie, hoping to glean any useful information from their time in Seattle. “What did you two do there?”

“Well,” Eddie began, his voice steady despite the shock of the news, “we were both software engineers. Roy was brilliant; he had this uncanny ability to find solutions to

complex problems. It was no surprise when he was promoted to team lead.”

“If his job was going so well, why’d he choose to move back here to Utah? Wouldn’t it be easier to stay near the company’s brick-and-mortar location?”

“In theory, yes,” Eddie said. “But Roy always talked about how much he missed Utah, especially after having kids. He wanted them to grow up surrounded by their extended family, you know? Plus, the cost of living in Seattle was getting out of hand. I remember him saying that he didn’t want to raise his kids in such an expensive city.”

Sheila could understand Roy’s reasoning; her own upbringing in Coldwater had instilled in her a strong sense of community and family values.

“So eventually,” Eddie went on, “he had a talk with the bosses and convinced them to let him work remotely. They didn’t love the idea at first, but given how much he’d contributed to the company...” His pause was the verbal equivalent of a shrug.

“Did Roy have any problems with anyone at work? Any conflicts or disagreements we should know about?”

“Absolutely not,” Eddie replied firmly. “I can say without a doubt that Roy was one of the most well-liked people at TechWave. He was incredibly hardworking and humble, always willing to lend a helping hand to anyone who needed it. He was the kind of person who would stay late to help a colleague, even if it meant sacrificing his own personal time.”

Sheila's heart sank at Eddie's words. It seemed that with every new piece of information they gathered, the motive behind the Hubbard family's murder only grew more elusive. The frustration was beginning to gnaw at her, but she knew that letting emotions cloud her judgment would be a mistake. She had to remain focused and vigilant.

"Did you ever meet Roy's family, Eddie?" she asked, her voice betraying the faintest hint of desperation.

"Yeah, I did," Eddie replied, a sudden warmth entering his tone. "We had a company picnic last summer, and Roy brought his family along. He even brought a stereo and played a CD from his old high school band—the Black Jesters, I think they were called." He chuckled. "They were terrible."

Sheila said nothing, waiting for Eddie to get back to the subject.

"Anyway," Eddie continued, "his family was wonderful. Jane was so kind, always making sure everyone was having a good time. And the kids, Max and Lily, they were just full of life, laughing and playing with the other children."

A heavy silence settled between them as the weight of what had been lost pressed down on both their hearts. Eddie's devastation was palpable, even over the phone.

"I just can't imagine why anyone would want to hurt them," he murmured, the words barely audible. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Thank you, Eddie," Sheila said softly. "I appreciate your help. If you think of anything else, please let us know."

“Of course,” Eddie agreed, his voice breaking slightly.  
“Take care.”

As she hung up, Sheila turned to Finn, who was studying a wall of the small study intently, his brow furrowed in concentration. He must’ve just finished his call.

“Did you learn anything?” she asked.

Finn shook his head, frustration evident in the tight set of his jaw. “Not much. Everyone I talked to seemed to genuinely care for the Hubbards. I couldn’t find a single person who’d have a motive to target them.”

Sheila sighed, rubbing her temples as if to ward off an impending headache. “I came to the same conclusion. It’s like we’ve hit a dead end.”

Finn nodded, his gaze still fixed on the wall, and Sheila could see the gears turning in his mind, searching for any shred of evidence they might have missed. The room itself seemed to mock them with its normalcy—Roy Hubbard’s small study was a testament to his quiet, unassuming life, filled with neatly arranged books and soft lamplight.

But why was Finn staring at the wall so...intently?

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

Finn pointed at a vent near the floor. “I’m thinking we need to open that vent.”

She looked at the vent. It looked like a regular HVAC vent for circulating air throughout the house. Nothing suspicious about that.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “And why exactly would we do that?”

“Because,” he said, pulling out a pocket knife with practiced ease, “the scratches on the floor of the vent suggest something has been dragged across it back and forth. And also because I just like poking around.”

He winked at her and, crouching down, used the blade to turn the screws holding the vent cover in place. There was a quiet determination in his movements, honed from years of combat experience.

As the last screw fell away, Finn carefully lifted the vent cover. Within the dark recesses of the vent, an unexpected glint caught their attention.

“Is that...a safe?” Sheila asked, surprise evident in her voice.

“Looks like it,” Finn said, pulling on a pair of gloves before reaching into the vent. With a gentle tug, he pulled a small safe from the shadows. The metal box was unassuming, its dull gray surface marred only by the faintest layer of dust. It was clear that no one had tampered with it for quite some time.

“Interesting,” Finn mused, studying the safe. “If robbery was part of the reason for the murder of the Hubbards, the thief apparently didn’t know where to look.”

“Or they didn’t have the time to search thoroughly,” Sheila added, feeling a flicker of hope that this discovery might lead them closer to the truth.

Sheila watched Finn's brow furrow in concentration as he scanned the paper notes on Roy's desk, searching for any hint of the combination to the lock. For her own part, however, she wasn't particularly optimistic they'd find much of use from the safe – she was growing increasingly skeptical that robbery had been one of the killer's motives – and she couldn't shake the feeling that they were overlooking something crucial.

“Let me know if you figure it out,” she said. “I'm going to take another look around outside, make sure we didn't miss anything.”

Finn nodded without glancing up, his attention on the desk.

With a determined stride, Sheila headed outside. The sun beat down mercilessly upon her as she walked, casting sharp, angular shadows across the yard. The flower garden seemed to beckon her with its vibrant hues. It wouldn't surprise her if the killer had visited the house several times, studying it from the tree house or even creeping closer, drawn by some perverse fascination.

Her eyes darted back and forth as she searched for footprints in the flower bed. Each colorful petal and blade of grass seemed to taunt her, offering no clues to the identity of the monster who had taken the Hubbards' lives.

“Damn it,” she muttered under her breath, feeling the weight of desperation bearing down on her.

“I didn't find the combination,” Finn called out as he stepped onto the porch, his voice tinged with disappointment. “But I think we should take that beer can to the lab, see if there's any DNA on it.”

Sheila was about to agree when something caught her eye—a small card trapped in one of the bushes. Her heart skipped a beat as she reached out and carefully extracted it, feeling a sudden surge of hope. It was a business card for a fumigator.

She held it up for Finn to see. “What are the chances the killer accidentally left this behind?”





## CHAPTER EIGHT

Sheila clutched the business card in her hand as she pulled into the parking lot of Aegis Exterminators, Finn Mercer riding shotgun. The sun cast a warm glow over the small, worn building, hinting at the day's potential.

*It makes sense that the killer could be an exterminator,* she thought. Someone in that line of work would certainly have an excuse to enter homes, only to return later with sinister intentions.

Was that how the killer had come into contact with the Hubbards? He'd serviced their home and determined they would make easy victims?

"Doesn't look like much," Finn said, scanning the modest exterior of Aegis Exterminators. Weeds sprouted through cracks in the pavement, and a faded sign swung gently in the breeze, the company's logo peeling at the edges. It was mid-morning, and though the sky was clear, there was a crispness to the air that reminded Sheila of autumn mornings spent training for kickboxing competitions. Coldwater had always been a small town, and even a business like this seemed to struggle against obscurity.

Finn glanced over at her, his eyes serious but kind. "You ready for this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." She opened her door and stepped out. The day was quiet, and Sheila heard nothing but the

distant rumble of a stereo as she and Finn approached the building.

The door creaked as Sheila and Finn entered the small office, its dim lighting casting shadows on the walls adorned with framed certificates and faded pest control posters. The musty scent of paper and chemicals clung to the air, making Sheila wrinkle her nose in distaste. This place felt like it had secrets hidden beneath its worn veneer.

“May I help you?” a voice asked, breaking their concentration. A woman sat behind a cluttered desk, her graying hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her eyes, sharp and calculating, seemed to size them up instantly. She wore a simple white blouse and black skirt, her hands folded neatly on the desk in front of her. A nameplate on her computer identified her as Esther Woodrow.

“Hello,” Sheila said, stepping forward confidently. “My name is Sheila Stone, and this is Officer Finn Mercer. We’re investigating a case, and we found this business card at the scene.” She handed Esther the card she’d picked up at the Hubbards’ house. “We need to know who was assigned to fumigate their home.”

Esther took the card carefully, her eyes scanning the information printed on it. “A case?” she asked. “What kind of case?”

“A very serious kind,” Finn said. “I’m afraid we can’t go into detail just now.”

Esther looked up at the pair, her expression unreadable. “I see,” she murmured, her fingers tapping lightly against the

card. “Give me a moment, please.”

As Esther turned to her computer and began typing, Sheila couldn't help but study the room further. It screamed of a company clinging to a past long gone, struggling to keep up with the times. A pang of sadness struck her—how many small businesses had met their end in this unforgiving world?

“Ms. Stone,” Esther's voice cut through Sheila's thoughts, pulling her attention back to the present. “I'm afraid I don't have any records of an appointment for the Hubbards. Are you sure they used our services?”

Sheila exchanged a quick glance with Finn before answering. “We found the card at their house.”

“That doesn't mean anyone was there. It's possible someone picked up the card elsewhere – maybe at a gas station or a grocery store – and dropped it there.”

Sheila felt a twinge of disappointment. Had they hit a dead end already? “Is there any way to check if someone from your company was at their house?”

Esther shook her head. “Our records only show scheduled appointments, not unscheduled ones. I'm sorry I can't be of more help.”

“Can you check whether any of your employees were in the area of a certain property last night? Do you have employee logs?”

Esther hesitated, her fingers hovering above the keyboard. “Look, I appreciate you're just trying to do your job,” she began slowly, “but we have a policy of not sharing client

details unless it's absolutely necessary. Some people are embarrassed about needing our services, and we try to respect their privacy.”

Sheila clenched her jaw in frustration, but before she could respond, Finn stepped in.

“Ms. Woodrow,” he said firmly, “this isn't a typical inquiry. A family was murdered, and we believe the person responsible may have been in their home under the guise of your company's services. You can help us catch their killer.”

Esther's eyes widened in shock, her face paling as the gravity of the situation sank in. “Oh my God, I...I had no idea. I'm so sorry.” She looked down at her hands, trembling slightly on the keyboard.

“Please, Ms. Woodrow,” Finn continued, his voice softer now, “we don't have much time. Can you give us any information on who might've been there?”

Swallowing hard, Esther nodded, her fingers resuming their dance across the keys. “Yes, of course. I'll see what I can find.”

As she typed, Sheila felt a flicker of hope ignite within her—a hope that they were finally getting closer to solving this case. But she also knew that with each passing minute, the stakes grew higher; the murderer could be watching them even now, waiting for an opportunity to strike again.

Esther's fingers paused above her keyboard, her eyes scanning the screen for any relevant information. Sheila leaned in closer, her heart pounding in anticipation. The office was

small and cramped, the hum of the air conditioner doing little to dispel the rising tension.

“Nobody was scheduled to fumigate the Hubbards’ house,” Esther finally said. “It’s possible someone went there to provide a quote but forgot to make a note of it, though.”

Sheila clenched her fists, frustration bubbling inside her. “How many employees work in that part of town?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Three,” Esther replied, her expression somber.

“Tell me about them.”

“Okay, well...Mr. Isaacson has been in Hawaii for the last week on vacation,” Esther said, glancing back at her computer screen. “So I think we can rule him out. If you’re talking about last night, I can personally vouch for Mr. Tremblay—he was here at the office late last night. He was helping me with the company’s taxes.”

“Who’s the third employee?” Finn asked.

“Mr. Dempster,” Esther murmured, her fingers hovering over the keys as if hesitant to provide further information.

“Dell is his first name.”

Sheila could feel a cold shiver run down her spine at the mention of the name. “Where can we find him?” she asked.

Esther hesitated, her fingers laced together in front of her. “I don’t think I’m allowed to give out that kind of information,” she replied uneasily.

Sheila could sense the fear and conflict within Esther, and she knew she had to find a way to break through it. “Listen, Esther,” she said, “people’s lives are at stake. We need to find him before he hurts anyone else. If he’s innocent, he has nothing to worry about.”

Esther bit her lip, her eyes flicking between Finn and Sheila. “Alright,” she conceded quietly. “Dell was recently suspended for suspected theft. A few customers reported items missing.” She paused, lowering her voice. “And since he already has a criminal record for shoplifting...” She shrugged. “The owner, Mr. Kyeshiro, wanted to give Dell a second chance, but when he learned that Dell might have slipped back into his old ways...he had no choice but to suspend him.”

“Where can we find Dell?” Sheila asked, her mind racing with the implications of this new information. An exterminator with a criminal past, possibly connected to the Hubbards’ murder—it was enough to send a chill down her spine.

“His favorite bar,” Esther said, her voice still low as she glanced nervously around the small office. “The Rusty Anchor. He’s probably there right now, drowning his sorrows. He always goes there when things go wrong, no matter how early it is.”

“Thank you, Esther,” Finn said, nodding at her with gratitude. “You might have just saved someone’s life today.”

Sheila and Finn turned away. Sheila’s hand was on the door handle, ready to leave the small office and head to the Rusty Anchor, when Esther called out to them. “Wait,” she

said, her voice wavering with concern. “Before you go, I need to warn you about something.”

Sheila turned back to face Esther, her eyes narrowing as she braced for whatever information she had to offer.

“Be careful around Dell,” Esther cautioned. “When he found out he was suspended, he...well, he didn’t take it well. He got very angry—broke some things, nearly hurt someone in the process.” She swallowed hard, her gaze flitting between Finn and Sheila. “If he’s drinking, which he probably is, he’ll be even more dangerous—and unpredictable.”





## CHAPTER NINE

The sun cast a glaring light onto the rundown bar as Sheila and Finn pulled up in their unmarked car.

“We don’t even know what he looks like,” Sheila said.  
“How are we going to recognize him?”

The bar in front of them was a squat, brick building with faded paint and a neon sign that flickered like a dying firefly. The parking lot consisted of cracked asphalt and weeds poking through the crevices, mostly empty due to the early afternoon hour. Sheila scanned the few vehicles parked there – a rusted pickup truck, a motorcycle, and an older sedan – wondering which one belonged to Dell.

“Here you go,” Finn said, turning his phone to show Sheila a picture of Dell Dempster. The man had a scruffy beard, sunken eyes, and a thin-lipped smirk that made Sheila’s skin crawl. His greasy hair hung limply against his forehead, and she couldn’t help but think that this was a face she wouldn’t forget.

“Found it on social media,” Finn explained, still focused on the picture. “It’s the most recent one I could find.” He seemed restless, his fingers tapping rapidly on the phone screen.

“Alright, got it,” Sheila said, committing Dell’s features to memory. She glanced at Finn, who continued to fidget with his

phone even after putting it away. His jaw was clenched, and he kept stealing glances at the entrance of the bar.

“Something wrong?” she asked, concerned.

Finn shook his head, forcing himself to look relaxed. “No, everything’s fine.”

Sheila wasn’t convinced but decided not to push him. Instead, she turned her attention back to the task at hand. Whatever was bothering Finn, they needed to find Dell Dempster first.

With Dell’s face etched into her mind, they exited the car and approached the bar. Inside, they would question the suspect and hopefully find a lead in the Hubbard family murder case.

“Ready?” she asked Finn, who seemed even more on edge than before.

“Sure,” he replied, though his voice lacked conviction.

As Sheila reached for the door handle, Finn hesitated, his hand hovering above his sidearm. She looked at him, eyebrows raised, waiting for an explanation.

“Look, I made a promise to myself not to go into a bar again,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

“Why?” Sheila asked. Even as she asked the question, however, she knew the answer was obvious. There was only one reason a man like Finn would make a decision like that.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It’s complicated, okay? It’s...not easy to talk about. Suffice it to

say that I try to stay away from places where the liquor is flowing freely.”

Sheila knew better than to push him further. She could sense the pain he was trying to hide, and it wasn't her place to pry. Instead, she said, “You really don't have to do this, you know. I can handle Dell alone.”

“No,” Finn insisted, his jaw clenched. “I'm not letting you face a dangerous suspect by yourself. I can do this.”

“Alright,” Sheila said, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Just focus on why we're here. We'll get in, talk to Dell, and get out. Okay?”

He nodded. “Okay.”

As they stepped through the door, the atmosphere inside the bar enveloped them. The smell of stale smoke hung in the air, mingling with the scent of beer-soaked wood. A few patrons slumped over their drinks, their faces barely visible under the dim lights. A jukebox in the corner played a slow country tune, giving the room a melancholy feel.

Finn's eyes darted around the room, avoiding the rows of liquor bottles that lined the shelves behind the counter. He swallowed hard, his breathing shallow. Sheila could see the strain in his posture but also the steely determination not to give in to temptation.

“Hey there,” the bartender called out, a forced smile on his face as his gaze lingered on Finn's crisp uniform. “What can I get you two?”

“Nothing for me,” Finn replied a bit too quickly, glancing away.

The bartender raised his hands in mock surrender. “Fair enough. No drinking on the job, am I right?” He chuckled a little too forcefully.

“Thanks,” Sheila said. “We’re actually just looking for someone.” She glanced around the room, her gaze seeking out the man from the picture on Finn’s phone.

“Best of luck to you,” the bartender said with a tight smile, turning his attention back to wiping down the counter.

Sheila scanned the dimly lit bar, taking in the motley assortment of patrons nursing their drinks in the early afternoon. A flicker of movement near the back caught her attention, and she spotted a group of men huddled around a corner table. There, at the center of the raucous laughter, sat a man who matched the image of Dell Dempster from Finn’s phone. His unkempt beard and greasy hair framed a flushed face, his eyes glazed over with intoxication.

The men surrounding him were a mix of rough-looking characters—some sporting tattoos that snaked up their arms, others with scruffy beards and worn clothing. It was evident that this wasn’t their first round of drinks, given the collection of empty glasses scattered across the table and the boisterous atmosphere they’d created.

“Looks like we found our guy,” Sheila whispered to Finn as she subtly gestured toward the table. Finn nodded, casting a wary glance at the group before steeling himself for the confrontation.

As they made their way toward Dell, it became apparent that he was in the middle of slurring out a joke, his words barely coherent. “So, this guy walks into a bar with a set of jumper cables around his neck...” His friends chuckled, anticipating the punchline even as Dell struggled to deliver it.

Finn interrupted before Dell could finish, causing the laughter to die down and all eyes to turn toward them. “Excuse me, are you Dell Dempster?”

Dell squinted at Finn and Sheila, a puzzled expression on his face. “Yeah, I’m Dell. Who’re you? What do you want?” He took a swig from his beer, not bothering to hide his irritation at being interrupted. “I’m just having a drink with my friends here, not harming anybody.”

Finn’s gaze darted between Dell and the empty glasses strewn about the table. “Seems like you’re having more than just ‘a drink,’ don’t you think?” he remarked, his tone dripping with disdain.

Sheila could see the tension in Finn’s posture and knew that being surrounded by so much alcohol was taking its toll on him. She also knew they needed to keep their focus on Dell and get the information they came for before things spiraled out of control.

“Look, we’re not here to cause any trouble,” she said, attempting to placate Dell. “We just need to ask you a few questions, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Dell ignored her, however, and stood up, swaying slightly as he drunkenly told Finn, “Listen, buddy, I have the right to

drink as much as I damn well please. It's none of your business."

Finn's eyes narrowed, but he didn't back down. "What's got you drinking so much? Guilty conscience?"

One of Dell's buddies, a burly man with a scruffy beard, took offense at Finn's words. He got up from his seat and shoved Finn hard in the chest. "You can't come in here and harass us for no reason!" he snarled.

Finn stumbled backward but quickly regained his balance, shoving the man back with equal force. "Back off," he growled, his eyes flashing with anger.

At that moment, Dell and his other friends rose from their seats and attacked Finn and Sheila. Sheila's instincts kicked in as she ducked, narrowly avoiding a glass bottle swung at her head by another one of Dell's friends. She delivered a swift punch to the man's gut, followed by an uppercut to his chin. He staggered back, surprise etched on his face, before she landed a final roundhouse kick to the side of his head. He crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Sheila's eyes darted from the fallen man to Dell, who was taking advantage of Finn's momentary distraction to land several punches on him. One of Dell's buddies had a firm grip on Finn from behind, making it impossible for him to defend himself effectively.

"Enough!" Sheila shouted, her voice filled with authority and determination. She charged at Dell. As she reached the drunken perpetrator, she threw a powerful right hook that

connected with Dell's jaw, snapping his head back and causing him to stumble.

Finn used the opportunity to drive his elbow into the gut of the man holding him, forcing the air out of his lungs and loosening his grip. He spun around, delivering a solid punch to the man's face and sending him reeling backward.

In the meantime, Sheila continued her relentless assault on Dell. She landed a swift knee to his midsection, causing him to double over in pain. With Dell hunched over, Sheila executed a perfect roundhouse kick aimed at his temple. Her foot connected with a resounding thud, and Dell crumpled to the ground, dazed.

Finn, having subdued his attacker, joined Sheila as they stood above the barely conscious Dell. Their chests heaved with exertion, adrenaline coursing through them both.

"Alright, Dell," Sheila panted, kneeling down next to him. "You're under arrest." She pulled out a pair of handcuffs and began to secure them around Dell's wrists.

"Wait, what?" Dell slurred, his eyes struggling to focus on Sheila. "I never even met the Hubbards!"

Finn's voice was cold and unyielding. "We never mentioned the Hubbards. So what makes you think they're the reason we're here?"





## CHAPTER TEN

Sheila handed Finn an ice pack, which he pressed to his bruised jaw with a wince. “You okay?” she asked, her voice laced with concern.

“Fine,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “Looks like you bruised your knuckles pretty badly.”

She shrugged. “Better bruised knuckles than a bruised face.”

They were in the sheriff’s department break room, a cramped space filled with the aroma of stale coffee and the hum of an ancient vending machine. A few mismatched chairs circled a small, worn table where officers took their breaks or ate quick meals between shifts. The overhead fluorescent lights cast an unflattering glow over everything, accentuating the tiredness on Finn’s face.

As Sheila studied Finn, she couldn’t help but worry for him. She hadn’t realized he had a drinking problem, and now she found herself wondering how the incident at the bar had affected him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked cautiously, unsure how to broach the subject. “What happened at the bar, I mean?”

He shook his head, avoiding her gaze. “We need to focus on the investigation,” he said. “Dell’s waiting for us.”

Sheila knew Finn was deflecting, but she didn't want to push him too far. Instead, she nodded and followed him out of the break room, hoping that at some point he would trust her enough to open up about his demons.

As they entered the interview room, the first thing that struck Sheila was the pungent smell of alcohol lingering in the air. The small, windowless room was sparsely furnished, with a metal table bolted to the floor and three uncomfortable-looking chairs. One wall was dominated by a large mirror, behind which she knew officers could observe the questioning.

Dell sat slumped in one of the chairs, his unkempt hair hanging over his bloodshot eyes. His face bore several superficial injuries, a mixture of scratches and bruises from the bar fight, and he seemed to be nursing the after-effects of too much alcohol. Despite his disheveled appearance, there was something pitiable about him that tugged at Sheila's heart.

Finn leaned against the wall, arms crossed, as he stared coldly at Dell. The tension was palpable, and Sheila could sense Finn's simmering anger beneath his calm facade. She decided it would be best if she took the lead in the questioning.

Pulling out the business card for Aegis Exterminators, the company Dell worked for, Sheila placed it on the table in front of him. She watched as his bleary eyes struggled to focus on the card. "Do you recognize this?" she asked.

"Of course," Dell slurred, gesturing vaguely at the card. "It's my company."

"Right," Sheila said, nodding. "We found this outside the Hubbard family's house." She paused for a moment, letting the

information sink in. “I’d ask if you know who we’re talking about, but you already mentioned the Hubbards back at the bar. Tell me, how did you know we were going to ask you about them?”

The dim lighting in the interview room cast a shadow over Dell’s bruised face, making him look even more haggard and beaten than he already was. Sheila could see him wince as he shifted in his chair, nursing the various scrapes and cuts that littered his body. The stifling air was heavy with the smell of alcohol, an unpleasant reminder of their earlier encounter at the bar.

“Murders like this,” Dell said with a dismissive wave of his hand, “they’re all over the news. I figured you’d come looking for me sooner or later.” His words were slurred, but there was a sharpness to them that caught Sheila’s attention.

“Why would we question you about them?” Sheila asked.

Dell hesitated, then finally muttered, “Because I was at their house.”

Sheila leaned forward, intrigued. “When?”

“A week ago,” Dell replied after a moment’s thought, his eyes darting around the room nervously.

“What were you doing there?”

“Roy Hubbard called me,” Dell explained, rubbing the back of his neck. “Said they had a termite problem. Real bad one, too—they were eating through the floorboards in the kitchen. He wanted me to spray the whole place down with termite killer before it got any worse.”

Sheila glanced over at Finn, who remained silent, his arms crossed firmly over his chest. Turning her gaze back to Dell, she asked, “And did you?”

Dell shook his head. “No, I didn’t. Never got the chance to.”

Sheila leaned in closer, her eyes focused on Dell’s every movement. “What are you talking about?”

Dell rubbed his bruised wrist nervously. “I did a walkthrough to see the extent of the infestation. Then, after a left—well, that was when things got interesting.”

Sheila studied him, waiting.

“Okay, so I was leaving the house, right?” Dell began, clearing his throat as he recalled the events. “I got into my car, started it up...and that’s when I heard something moving in the back seat.”

Sheila watched as Finn uncrossed his arms, intrigued by Dell’s story. She could tell that he, too, sensed there was more to this than met the eye.

“Go on,” she said.

“Before I knew it, there was a knife pressed against my throat,” Dell continued, swallowing hard. “The guy told me not to turn around, and I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. I thought I was done for, you know? Like, I was about to be murdered or something.”

“Must’ve been terrifying,” Sheila said, studying him carefully. He seemed to be genuinely upset at the recollection—either that, or he was an exceptional liar.

“Terrifying doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he admitted, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “But then something weird happened.”

“Weirder than having a knife to your throat?” Finn asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Way weirder,” Dell said. “The guy tossed a stack of bills onto my lap, just like that.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis. “Asked me if I knew what it was for.”

“Did you?” Sheila asked, her heart racing at the implications of Dell’s story.

“Course not. So he told me. Said he wanted me to tell him about the layout of the Hubbards’ house. And I did, ‘cause what else was I gonna do with a knife at my throat?”

“And then?” Finn asked, a note of skepticism in his voice.

“Then he said he wanted me to rob the Hubbards,” Dell explained, his voice barely above a whisper. “And if I did it, he’d pay me double the money on my lap. I agreed – I would’ve been an idiot not to – and he just...let me go.”

Sheila leaned forward, her eyes locked on Dell’s. “So, did you go through with the robbery?”

Dell shifted uncomfortably in his chair, avoiding Sheila’s gaze. “No, I didn’t,” he mumbled. “I went to the house the next night, looked around a bit, and then...I chickened out and left. And I haven’t heard from that guy since.”

Finn studied Dell for any sign of deceit. “Why didn’t you report any of this to the police?” he asked, his voice stern.

“Because,” Dell hesitated, swallowing hard. “I was afraid they’d make me give up the money if I told them what happened.”

Sheila frowned, but she couldn’t deny there was a certain logic to Dell’s reasoning. She decided to change the subject. “Where were you last night, Dell?”

“Last night?” He paused, thinking. “I was at my cousin’s birthday party. It was over at his place, a few blocks from here.”

“Anyone who can vouch for your whereabouts?” Finn asked, still skeptical.

“Of course!” Dell replied defensively. “My whole family was there—my cousins, my aunt, my uncle. Even some neighbors dropped by. You can ask any of them. They all saw me there.”

“Did you leave the party at any point during the night?”

“Only once,” Dell admitted. “I stepped out to grab some ice from the corner store. My cousin ran out of it, and we needed more for the drinks. But I wasn’t gone more than twenty minutes, tops.”

“Can anyone confirm that?” Sheila asked, her tone softer than Finn’s but no less probing.

“Yeah, uh, the cashier at the store probably remembers me. I’m a regular there. And my cousin—he noticed when I got back with the ice.”

Finn uncrossed his arms and exchanged a glance with Sheila. It sounded like a solid alibi—assuming it held up, of

course. They'd have to look into it.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Dell,” Sheila said, trying to keep her voice steady and calm, even as her heart raced with the implications of everything Dell had just told them. She stood up from her chair and motioned for Finn to follow her out of the interview room.

“Can we talk for a minute?” she asked him once they were alone in the hallway, the door closed behind them. She leaned against the wall.

“Seems like Dell's innocent,” Finn said, his brow furrowed in thought. “Assuming his alibi isn't just a load of crap. The more interesting piece is that it appears the killer may have used him to case the Hubbards' house.”

Sheila could feel her stomach twisting into knots as she considered what that meant. The killer had been calculating, using someone else to gather information before launching a carefully planned attack on the family. It made her feel sick to think about it—the cold, brutal efficiency of it all. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, her nails biting into her palms.

“Whoever did this,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper, “they knew exactly what they were doing.”

“Right,” Finn nodded, his face grim. “I should call Natalie, fill her in on what we've learned.”

“Let me do it,” Sheila said, her concern for her sister rising to the surface. “I need to check up on her anyway.”

“Sure thing. I'll get the numbers of Dell's witnesses, see if they can substantiate his alibi. See you in a few.” He re-



entered the interview room, closing the door behind him.

Left alone in the dimly lit hallway, Sheila pulled out her phone and dialed Natalie's number, her fingers shaking slightly as she did so. The phone rang and rang.

"Come on, Nat," she whispered, willing her sister to answer. But the call went to voicemail, and Sheila felt a cold dread wash over her. Something was wrong—she could feel it in her bones.

"Call me back when you can, Natalie," she said into her phone before hanging up, her voice strained with worry.

She paced the hallway, her mind racing with concern for Natalie. Why hadn't she come into work today? Why wasn't she answering her phone? She knew her sister was fiercely independent, especially since the injury that had left her in a wheelchair, but this seemed out of character even for her.

"Maybe she really is just sick," Sheila muttered to herself, trying to quell the rising tide of panic within her. But something felt off, and she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to Natalie's silence than simple illness.

Her phone buzzed in her hand, and Sheila's heart skipped a beat as she saw a text from Natalie.

*Sorry, not feeling like myself right now. Talk later.*

The brief, vague message did little to ease Sheila's worry—if anything, it only made her more concerned.

*Hey, don't worry about it, Sheila typed back, her fingers flying across the screen. Just rest up and take care of yourself, okay?*

She hesitated for a moment, then added, *I'll come check on you after I'm done here.*

Sheila stared at the screen, waiting for a response from Natalie. None came, however.

*Something's wrong, Sheila thought. This isn't like her. Even when she's sick, she's more communicative than this.*

But what, she wondered, could be wrong?



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sheila's heart raced as she pulled up to Natalie's house, her sister's vague text gnawing at her insides.

"Come on, Nat," she muttered under her breath as she got out of the car and approached the front door. "Don't do this to me."

She knocked on the door, the sound loud in the otherwise quiet neighborhood. There was no response. Trying to keep her mounting worry at bay, Sheila called Natalie's phone. It rang and rang, but Natalie didn't pick up.

"Damn it, Natalie," Sheila whispered, her voice heavy with concern. She tried the door handle, but it wouldn't budge. Her eyes scanned the perimeter of the house, desperately seeking an alternative entrance. A small window caught her attention, partly ajar, as if inviting her in.

"Here goes nothing," she said, taking a deep breath before climbing the side of the house. Her years of kickboxing training had made her body strong, flexible, and capable of handling unexpected challenges. She silently thanked her past self for all those grueling hours spent in the gym.

She carefully descended from the window and into the house, her feet touching down on the cold hardwood floor. The moment she looked around, her brows furrowed in confusion. Natalie's living room was a chaotic mess. Empty takeout boxes and crumpled clothing dotted the floor, and dirty dishes

towered over the sink. This wasn't like her sister at all—Natalie was known for her tidiness, almost to the point of obsession.

“Nat?” Sheila called. There was no response, only the distant hum of the refrigerator in the background. She stepped deeper into the house, her worry intensifying as she maneuvered around the clutter.

“Where are you, Natalie?” she whispered, unable to shake the feeling that something was very wrong.

Sheila frantically searched the entire house, from the kitchen to the bedrooms to the bathrooms. Everywhere she looked, she found more evidence that something was off—food left half-eaten in the fridge, Natalie's favorite dress thrown haphazardly on a chair, the bed unmade. But try as she might, Sheila couldn't find Natalie anywhere in the house.

Time seemed to stand still as Sheila searched frantically for her sister. This isn't like her at all, she kept thinking over and over, as if it were some new idea. If she was going to go somewhere, she'd tell someone—and she wouldn't leave her house like this. It's like...like she just abandoned the place.

“Come on, Natalie,” she muttered, searching the bedroom for the third or fourth time. She was in denial, not wanting to face the troubling reality that her sister had disappeared without a trace. There had to be some logical explanation, some clue that would lead her to Natalie.

But as she searched, each room feeling emptier than the last, her hopes began to fade. The evidence all pointed to one conclusion: Natalie was gone.

Just as this realization was settling in, her phone rang. She pulled it out, feeling a spark of hope.

“Natalie?” she asked hurriedly. “Is that you?”

“No,” her father said slowly, “it’s me.”

Sheila’s heart sank.

“I wanted to ask if you got a chance to go to Blackridge Penitentiary like we talked about,” her father continued. “To visit Rayland Bax, I mean.”

Sheila’s grip on her phone tightened. “Yes, I did. But the warden wouldn’t let me speak with him. Listen—”

“Really?” Gabriel sounded as surprised as she had been. “Did he say why?”

“No,” she admitted, anxious to wrap up the subject so they could talk about Natalie. “He didn’t give me a reason.”

“Strange,” her father mused, the concern evident in his rough voice. “There has to be a reason.”

“Dad, I actually didn’t call to talk about that. I wanted to ask about Natalie. Have you seen or spoken with her lately?”

“No, not recently. Why? What’s going on?”

She hesitated, unsure where to begin. “She didn’t come into work today, and she hasn’t been answering my calls.”

“She’s probably under the weather. Maybe he has that stomach bug that’s going around.”

“That’s just it,” Sheila said, growing more animated. “I’m at her house, and she’s not here. I have no idea where she is,

Dad.”

As she spoke, she could hear her father’s breathing grow heavier over the line, a sure sign that he was just as worried as she was.

“Listen,” he said finally, “I’m on my way to Star’s house right now—her father’s been drinking and she needs somewhere to stay.”

Star—Sheila felt a pang of worry at the mention of the name. Star was a fourteen-year-old girl Sheila’s father had taken under his wing, often driving her to his gym so she could escape the chaos of her home life. Sheila didn’t know Star well, but she cared about her nonetheless and didn’t want to ask for anything that could jeopardize the girl’s safety.

“But if you think it’s an emergency,” Gabriel added, the words hanging in the air.

Sheila hesitated, weighing her options. She glanced around the unkempt living room once more, trying to imagine what might have caused Natalie to leave it in such disarray. It was true—keeping a tidy home must be difficult when confined to a wheelchair.

Was it possible Sheila was making a mountain out of a molehill?

“Go take care of Star, Dad,” she said, her voice softer. “I’ll keep looking for Natalie. I’m probably just worrying too much.” She didn’t really believe this, but she wanted to ease her dad’s mind.

“Alright,” her father said, though the concern hadn’t left his voice. “But call me if you find her, okay?”

“Will do,” Sheila said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Take care of Star. She needs someone to look out for her right now.”

“We all do, from time to time. Talk to you later, sweetheart.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Sheila pocketed her phone and rubbed her temples, feeling the weight of uncertainty pressing down on her. She couldn’t shake the gnawing worry that something was off with Natalie. With a sigh, she turned away from the messy interior of the house and stepped outside into the fading daylight.

As she walked toward her car, the cool breeze brushed against her face, carrying the scent of damp earth and distant rain. She knew she should focus on the case at hand, but her mind kept drifting back to Natalie and Star. She hoped they were both okay.

Just as she reached her car, her phone rang, its shrill tone startling her. Her heart raced momentarily, hoping it was Natalie finally calling back. But when she glanced at the screen, she saw Finn’s name displayed instead.

“Hey, Finn. What did you find?” she asked, trying to suppress her disappointment.

“Looks like Dell’s alibi checks out,” Finn replied, his voice heavy with frustration. “He’s innocent. I’ve made a number of



calls, and there's nothing to suggest he had anything to do with the murders."

Sheila took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus on the case rather than her sister's mysterious behavior. An old memory resurfaced, something Roy's friend Eddie had mentioned about a company picnic. According to Eddie, Roy had brought along a CD from his old high school band.

"I just remembered something," she said. "Before the Hubbards moved away, Roy was in a band called the Black Jesters. Can you look into the other members? Maybe there's a connection there."

"Black Jesters, huh?" Finn mused, tapping away at his computer. "Alright, give me a moment."

Sheila gazed at Natalie's house as she waited, the worry for her sister gnawing at her insides. Her eyes scanned the windows, half-expecting Natalie to appear from some room Sheila had forgotten to check, but the house remained silent and empty.

"Okay, I've got something," Finn said. Sheila could hear the faint hum of his computer in the background. "I came across this old fan blog—the 'Jesters Chronicle.' It was created by one of the members' sisters, apparently. Anyway, according to this, there were four members in the band in total, including Roy. I looked them up individually, and it appears that most of them are out of state now, except for one—Cameron Fintner."

"Who is this Cameron Fintner?" Sheila asked, her heart pounding in anticipation.

“He’s a police officer in a nearby town,” Finn said.

“According to the last entry in this blog, it appears the band had a pretty big falling out, and there were a lot of hard feelings when they split up.”

“Could Cameron have held a grudge against Roy all these years?” Sheila wondered aloud, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“What do you say we go ask him?”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

The man lay on his belly beneath the prickly bushes, cracking open peanuts and tossing them into his mouth one by one. The saltiness of the nuts lingered on his tongue as he watched the family inside the house through the large bay window.

He couldn't help but feel a wave of bitterness wash over him as he watched them, the two adults and three teenage children, digging into a feast of takeout food. Silently, he wished that they would choke on their meal.

The night sky above was ink-black, pierced only by flickering stars that seemed to mock the man's envy. The house before him was an impressive structure of brick and glass, its facade exuding wealth and privilege. Warm light spilled from the windows, casting a golden glow on the manicured lawn. Inside, Bob Warren, his wife Macy, and their three teenagers – Josh, Isabelle, and the youngest, Tim – laughed and chatted animatedly, oblivious to the seething figure outside.

“Must be nice,” the man muttered under his breath as he crushed another peanut shell between his fingers. It wasn't fair that they got to enjoy a real meal together in the comfort of their expensive home while he had to lie in the dirt, snacking on peanuts like some pathetic rodent. *Soon*, he told himself, *they'll get what's coming to them.*

He watched with annoyance as Bob playfully stole a piece of chicken from his wife's plate, earning him a swat and a round of laughter from the children. The scene of familial warmth and joy only added fuel to the fire burning within the man.

Unable to study the happy family any longer, the man fumbled in his small backpack, his fingers closing around his phone. He pulled it out and tapped the screen, illuminating the blueprint of the Warren house he had painstakingly acquired over weeks of planning. Information on the security code was scribbled in the bottom corner, a testament to the hours spent observing the family and their habits.

"I sure earned my keep this time," he muttered, recalling the weeks of stakeouts and tedious research that had led to his acquiring the blueprints and learning the code. He'd posed as a salesman to get inside the house once, memorizing the layout while pretending to sell cleaning products. And it had taken him days to track down a former employee of the security company who, for a price, provided information on the system and potential weaknesses. The whole process had been time-consuming, risky, and frustrating, but the man knew it would all be worth it in the end.

As he studied the blueprint, the man's mind drifted back to his attempt at infiltrating the Hubbards' home. He'd tried to get an exterminator named Dell to break into the house for him, thinking that having someone else's DNA there would throw off any investigation. But Dell had backed out at the last minute, leaving the man to pick up the pieces.

“Stupid bastard,” the man grumbled, simmering with anger. “I should’ve known better than to rely on anyone else.”

This time, the man had decided he wouldn’t be dependent on another person. He’d simply have to be extra cautious not to leave any evidence behind. No hairs, no fibers, nothing that could be traced back to him.

“Alright, just you and me now,” he whispered to himself, steeling his resolve as he pocketed his phone. “No one else to screw this up.”

Inside the house, Bob made popcorn while his wife loaded the dishwasher. The three kids were gathered around the flat-screen TV, scrolling through streaming options for a movie to watch.

“Hey, Dad, what do you think about this one?” Josh called out, pointing at an action-filled title on the screen. Bob glanced over, nodding his approval as he tossed a soiled napkin into the trash can.

“Looks good, son,” he said, returning to his task with a smile. To the man’s bitter eyes, they looked like the perfect family—too perfect. They must have felt utterly safe in their cocoon of love and comfort, surrounded by the invisible shield of their state-of-the-art security system. But the man knew better.

And soon enough, so would they.

As the family settled onto the plush couch, popcorn bowls in hand, the man decided the time had come to act. He hoisted

his backpack onto his shoulders and crawled out from beneath the bushes, moving toward the house with purpose.

His anger and anticipation mounted with each step, heart pounding as he crept across the manicured lawn. Sticking to the shadows, the man moved silently—like a predator stalking its prey. He couldn't risk alerting them to his presence; he needed the element of surprise to pull off his grim plan.

*Can't wait to see the looks on their faces,* he thought to himself, unable to suppress the cold grin that spread across his face. *They'll know true fear then.*

He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath to steady himself. This was it, the culmination of weeks of planning, the point of no return. He pulled his hat down low over his forehead, ensuring his face would be obscured from any prying eyes.

“Time to show these bastards what they've got coming,” he muttered, his voice barely a whisper as he stepped out of the shadows and approached the house.

His heart pounded in his chest as he inched closer to the side of the house, careful not to disturb any of the manicured plants adorning it. He could hear the Warrens' laughter from inside, their merriment almost enough to make him sick. It was a carefree, boisterous sound—one that only served to fuel his anger.

*Laugh now,* he thought bitterly, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. *You won't be laughing when I'm through with you.* The sound of their joy felt like an insult, a mockery of his own life.

He crouched beside a window, his breaths shallow and measured. Through the glass, the flickering light of the television illuminated the perfect family tableau. The parents were cuddled together on the couch while their children sprawled across the floor, giggling at the antics on screen. To the man, it was a scene that reeked of complacency and privilege.

“Time to put an end to this little charade,” he muttered to himself, his voice low and venomous. With renewed determination, he slunk along the exterior wall of the house, each step deliberate and silent.

At last, he reached the back door and quickly unzipped his backpack. His fingers closed around the cold metal of the lockpicking kit, which he had practiced with for only a few hours, watching online tutorials late into the night. He knew this part of his plan was risky, but there was no turning back now.

He inserted the tension wrench into the keyhole, applying gentle pressure as he inserted the pick above it. The door’s lock was a standard pin tumbler, and the man knew that finding the right angle to lift the pins would require patience and finesse. Sweat beaded on his brow as he methodically worked, trying to remember the guidance he had seen in those videos. Gradually, he felt each pin click into place, the tension wrench twisting slightly as he went.

*Almost there*, he thought, his breath hitching with anticipation. Just then, the sound of footsteps approaching from inside the house made him freeze. The man’s heart raced



as he pressed himself against the wall, praying that whoever it was wouldn't notice the door being tampered with.

*Please, just keep walking,* he silently pleaded as the footsteps grew louder, his fingers still gripping the tools in the lock. He couldn't afford any mistakes now. Not when he was so close to enacting his revenge on the Warrens and showing them just how fragile their perfect world truly was.

The footsteps gradually faded into the distance, and the man let out a shaky breath. His fingers were trembling as he gave the tension wrench one final turn. The lock clicked open, and a victorious grin spread across his face. But this was no time for celebration—not yet. It was time to ensure that the Warren family would never laugh so carelessly again.

Reaching into his backpack, the man pulled out a gun, feeling its cold metal against his palm. He had relied on a knife during his previous attempt, but the way Roy Hubbard had nearly thwarted his plans had taught him that he needed something more intimidating to keep the family in check. A gun would do just that—make them think twice before trying anything funny.

The man took a deep breath, gripping the gun tightly. He could still hear their laughter reverberating through the house, each peal of joy another dagger to his heart. His anger simmered beneath the surface, threatening to boil over.

“Think you're safe, Warrens?” he whispered under his breath, his voice laced with bitterness. “You won't be laughing for long.”

With the gun clenched firmly in his hand, the man slowly cracked the door open and slipped inside the house, careful not to make any noise. The hallway was dimly lit, casting eerie shadows on the walls, and he could hear the muffled sounds of the movie playing in the living room. Just a short distance away, a life of privilege and comfort continued, blissfully unaware of the darkness that had just entered their home.

He hurried to the alarm system, entered the code, and disarmed it. Then, relaxing, he began to make his way to the living room.

It was time to introduce himself.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The break room's harsh fluorescent light flickered above, casting a cold glow on the linoleum floor. Sheila leaned against the vending machine, its hum filling the silence between questions. Finn stood nearby, arms crossed and observing.

"Tell me, Cameron," she began, her voice steady despite her growing exhaustion from the lateness of the hour. "How did you know Roy Hubbard?"

Cameron Fintner smiled wistfully, his blue eyes distant as if peering into the past. "We were in a band together at Mildred Heights—the Black Jesters, we called ourselves. I was the drummer, and Roy played bass. Man, those were the days." He chuckled, running a hand through his short-cropped hair. His smile revealed a boyishness that stood in sharp contrast to his tough cop exterior.

The break room buzzed with activity as officers and staff members took advantage of the brief respite from their duties. The space was cramped, filled with mismatched tables and chairs, a coffee machine that had seen better days, and a vending machine that seemed to hold a grudge against everyone who used it. The walls were adorned with faded posters detailing safety protocols and various commendations. In one corner, an old television set droned on, its flickering images casting eerie shadows across the room.

Sheila studied Cameron carefully, trying to gauge his sincerity. He seemed friendly, open even, with an easygoing demeanor that made her want to trust him instinctively. He had a square jaw and broad shoulders, a testament to years of physical training. Despite the uniform, though, he didn't seem like a typical cop—there was something about him that felt almost artistic, a spark of creativity hidden beneath the surface.

“What kind of music did you guys play?” she asked, curious to learn more about this connection between Roy and Cameron.

“Mostly punk rock and grunge,” Cameron replied, his voice laced with nostalgia. “We'd jam all night in Roy's garage, just letting our emotions flow through the music. It was raw, it was real.” He sighed. “I miss those sessions sometimes.”

As Sheila listened, she couldn't help but wonder how someone like Cameron ended up working as a police officer, trading in his drumsticks for a badge and gun. People changed, she knew that, but there was something about the way he spoke of the past that made her think the transition hadn't been an easy one.

“Why did the band break up?” Finn asked. “I read somewhere that there was some bad blood because of it.”

Cameron chuckled, shaking his head. “Bad blood? Let me guess, you read about it on that cheesy old blog, the Jesters Chronicle?”

Sheila and Finn waited, watching Cameron.

He sighed, dropping the smile. “Sure, there was a bit of a division at first—some of us wanted to keep the band together while others were ready to move on. But we all reconciled eventually. Nobody held a grudge against anyone.”

“Really?” Finn asked skeptically, leaning back in his chair. “No lingering resentment? No hurt feelings?”

Cameron shrugged, a faint smile playing on his lips. “Life’s too short for grudges, man. Besides, we were young and stupid, full of big dreams and unrealistic expectations. We all just needed to grow up, you know?”

“Tell me, Cameron,” Sheila began, her voice low and steady as she leaned against the table, “did you keep in touch with Roy after high school?”

Cameron paused for a moment, his eyes reflecting a distant memory. “We talked once or twice over the years,” he admitted. “Always bringing up the idea of getting the band back together for a night, but it never happened.” His expression turned somber, the weight of Roy’s death and that of his family members settling heavily upon his shoulders. “I just wish we had one more chance, you know?”

Sheila nodded, sensing the raw emotion behind Cameron’s words. She took a deep breath, inhaling the bitter scent of stale coffee and old linoleum that permeated the room. It grounded her, reminding her of the importance of the task at hand. “What can you tell me about him?” she asked. “What was he like?”

“Roy was a stand-up guy,” Cameron said without hesitation. “A loyal friend, always there for you when you

needed him. He was athletic, too—played football and ran track in school. And he met Jane, his wife, at the high school.” Cameron’s face softened at the mention of Jane, his voice taking on a nostalgic tone. “They were great together. You could tell they were meant to be. Everyone knew they’d end up married.”

As Cameron spoke, Sheila could see the genuine affection he held for Roy and his family. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for the man who had lost someone so dear to him. But she also knew that, in this line of work, emotions could be a double-edged sword—they could either propel you forward or drag you down into a dark abyss from which there was no escape.

Finn leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he contemplated Cameron’s words. “Did Roy have any enemies? Anyone who might’ve wanted to hurt him or his family?”

At first, Cameron shook his head, but then he hesitated, biting his lower lip. “Actually,” he began cautiously, “There was this one girl back in high school, an ex-girlfriend of Roy’s. Lisa Cartwright—she was a homecoming queen. They broke up, and on graduation day, she made a big scene, accusing Roy of abusing her.”

“What kind of abuse?” Finn asked.

Cameron frowned, looking genuinely puzzled. “I never got the full story, to be honest. It was so long ago, and most folks didn’t pay it much mind. Roy denied everything, of course, and there wasn’t any evidence to back up her claims.”

Sheila watched Cameron carefully, trying to gauge his sincerity. “So, what happened after that?”

“Nothing really,” Cameron replied, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret. “Everyone just kind of chalked the matter up to Lisa being...well...Lisa. Between you and me, I always thought she was a bit...unstable. Dramatic, you know? It’s possible she made the whole thing up just for attention. But like I said, I haven’t kept up with her, so I don’t know where she is or what she’s doing now.”

As he spoke, Sheila couldn’t help but remember her own experiences in high school—the petty rivalries, the desperate need for validation. Could Lisa Cartwright still hold a grudge against Roy Hubbard all these years later? And if so, would she go so far as to murder his entire family?

Cameron glanced at the wall clock and sighed. “My break’s over. I need to get back to work.”

“Thanks for your time, Cameron,” Sheila said, offering a warm smile as she shook his hand.

Finn nodded in agreement. “We appreciate it.”

As Cameron left the break room, the door swung shut behind him with a quiet click, leaving Sheila and Finn alone amid the hum of vending machine and the faint smell of burnt coffee. They exchanged a glance, assessing each other’s thoughts.

“What do you think about this ex-girlfriend, Lisa Cartwright?” Sheila asked, her brow furrowed.



Finn leaned back against the counter, arms crossed.  
“Seems odd that someone would hold onto a grievance for so many years, but people can be unpredictable.”

“True,” Sheila said. “Maybe Roy’s decision to move back to the area rekindled the old grievance. Either way, we should find her and see what we can learn.”

“Agreed.”

Sheila pulled out her phone, tapping the screen as she searched for Lisa Cartwright’s name in the hope of finding an address. As she scrolled through the results, her eyes caught on an article written almost twenty years earlier. The headline made her heart drop: ‘Local Woman Found Dead in Apparent Suicide’. She clicked on the article, scanning the text for more information.

“Listen to this,” she said, her voice somber. “A few years after dropping out of high school, Lisa Cartwright committed suicide by overdosing on prescription medication. Her friends described her as troubled and distant, but they never expected her to take her own life.”

“Damn,” Finn muttered, running a hand through his hair.  
“That’s tragic.”

Sheila continued reading, her eyes widening as she found a quote from Lisa’s father, Albert. ‘As far as I’m concerned, someone did this to her. She wouldn’t have done such a thing, not if she hadn’t gone through such terrible suffering. And the person who did it is going to pay the price—I’ll make sure of it.’



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As Finn's car tires crunched over the gravel driveway, the headlights illuminated an old farmhouse nestled in a desolate landscape. Sheila squinted at her phone, reading the article about Lisa Cartwright's suicide.

"Do you think Albert Cartwright could be talking about Roy Hubbard when he says someone hurt Lisa?" she asked.

Finn shifted the car into park and turned off the engine. The night swallowed them in darkness, the only sound being their breathing and the distant hooting of an owl. "It's the obvious explanation," he said. "A grieving father, steeped in bitterness for the past twenty years, and the man who he blames for his daughter's death shows up in town again?" He shook his head sadly. "Sounds like motive to me."

The farmhouse belonging to Albert loomed before them, its weathered façade a testament to years of neglect. Paint peeled from the siding, revealing the bare wood beneath. A few windows were cracked or broken, while others were boarded up entirely. It was late at night, and the area around the house was eerily quiet, save for the wind whispering through the tall grass that surrounded the property. The whole scene seemed frozen in time, like a faded photograph from a forgotten past.

"Come on," Finn said, opening the car door and stepping out into the cold night air. Sheila followed suit, tucking her

phone into her pocket and pulling her coat tighter around herself.

Sheila's eyes darted to the left, taking in the sight of an old garage that stood nearby. Its wooden frame was weather-beaten and warped from years of exposure to the harsh elements. The faded green paint flaked away, clinging to the rustic hinges and handles. Shadows crept along the walls, cast by the dim moonlight that spilled through the partly open door.

*I wonder what's in there*, Sheila thought, making a mental note of the building.

As they approached the farmhouse's front door, Sheila hesitated for a moment before knocking firmly. She instinctively tensed her muscles, prepared for whatever might come next.

The door creaked open, revealing a man in his sixties. His features were worn and haggard, with deep lines etched into his face. A pair of tired, bloodshot eyes peered out from under a mop of unkempt gray hair, while a rough beard covered his chin and neck. He wore an old flannel shirt, frayed at the edges, and a pair of faded jeans stained with grease and dirt.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his voice gruff and wary. Beside him, a large dog growled lowly, its hackles raised. The man held onto the dog's collar with one hand, preventing it from lunging at Finn and Sheila.

"Hi, are you Albert Cartwright?" Sheila asked, trying to keep her voice steady despite the rising tension she felt within her.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Albert replied, still looking puzzled by their presence. “What do you want?”

“It’s about your daughter Lisa,” Sheila said carefully, watching the man’s expression for any hint of what he might be thinking.

“Lisa?” The old man’s eyes seemed to soften. “What about her?”

“I think it would be better if we talked inside,” Finn said.

Albert stared at them a moment longer, looking undecided. Then, tightening his grip on the dog’s collar, he stepped back to let them in.

The interior of the old farmhouse was rustic, with shadows clinging to the worn wallpaper and faded family portraits hanging on the walls. A threadbare couch faced an ancient television set, and stacks of newspapers and magazines formed a precarious tower in one corner. The smell of dust and stale air filled their nostrils as they stepped farther into the living room. It was clear that Albert lived alone, the lack of any personal touches or warmth evident in every nook and cranny.

“Please, have a seat,” Albert said, motioning to the couch as he pulled up a wooden chair for himself. He settled in, the dog resting obediently at his feet, its dark eyes still fixed on the strangers in their midst.

“Thank you,” Sheila said, glancing around the room before taking a seat on the couch, Finn joining her. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for what might be an uncomfortable

conversation. “As I mentioned earlier, we’d like to talk to you about your daughter Lisa.”

“Alright,” Albert replied hesitantly, his fingers absently stroking the dog’s head. “What about her?”

Finn leaned forward, his voice steady and calm. “We’re investigating the deaths of the Hubbard family, and we believe there may be a connection between them and your daughter.”

Albert’s body stiffened, his eyes narrowing slightly. “That’s a terrible shame, what happened to those folks. But I don’t see what it has to do with my daughter.”

Sheila watched him carefully, her instincts telling her that he was hiding something. Still, she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. She tried to keep her tone gentle, knowing that discussing Lisa would be painful for Albert. “We understand that this is difficult for you, Mr. Cartwright, but we need your help. Any information you can give us about Lisa’s relationship with Roy Hubbard might be crucial.”

“Lisa...and Roy?” Albert repeated, his voice betraying a hint of bitterness. “It’s been years since they were in high school together. Why would that matter now?”

“Can you tell us about Lisa’s relationship with Roy back when they were in high school?” Sheila asked, sidestepping the question.

Albert’s hand moved to stroke the dog by his side, but his fingers clenched around its fur as he began to speak. “Roy was...not good for my Lisa. He was controlling, always trying to dictate her every move. Abusive, too.”

“How did you react to that, Mr. Cartwright?” Finn asked, stoic as ever.

“It’s all water under the bridge now,” Albert said, waving a dismissive hand. “It’s been so long since those days; I hardly remember the details anymore.” His gaze drifted away from them, focusing on something unseen in the distance.

Sheila didn’t buy it. There was something off about the way Albert spoke, as if he were repressing a storm of emotions beneath the surface. But she held her tongue, knowing that pressing him further might only make him more resistant to their questioning.

Finn leaned forward, undeterred by Albert’s evasions. “How did you feel when you learned that Roy Hubbard, the man who drove your daughter to commit suicide, had moved back into the area?”

Albert’s eyes flicked away from Finn, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I’m tired,” he mumbled, avoiding the question. “It’s late, and I need to head to bed.” The weariness in his voice didn’t quite match the tension in his posture, but it was clear he wasn’t up for any more talking.

“Of course,” Sheila said, standing up and offering Albert a tight smile. “We appreciate your time, and we’re sorry to have kept you up.”

“Thank you,” Albert replied, his tone curt as he showed them to the door.

As they stepped outside, the chill night air brushed against their faces, and Finn turned to Sheila. “We should come back

in the morning. Maybe he'll be more willing to talk then."

Sheila nodded absently, not really listening to him. Her gaze was drawn to the open garage door nearby, curiosity tugging at her thoughts. What could be inside? Why had Albert been so cagey about Lisa and Roy?

"Hey, Sheila? Are you okay?" Finn asked, concern etched on his face.

"I'll meet you at the car," she said, her curiosity getting the better of her. "I'll be there in a minute."

He looked at her questioningly, but she waved him away.

As she headed toward the garage, she could feel her heart pounding in her chest, her instincts as an athlete and fighter telling her there was something important waiting for her inside.

As she approached the entrance, she carefully peeked into the dimly lit space. Tools of various shapes and sizes were scattered all over the place, some hanging on the walls while others were strewn haphazardly across a workbench. Amidst the clutter, several projects seemed to be in progress: a half-assembled engine block, woodworking equipment covered in sawdust, and an old bicycle with its chain hanging loose.

Her gaze darted around the room, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Then, her eyes locked onto something that sent a shiver down her spine. A pile of rope lay coiled in one corner, frayed ends dangling loosely. It looked eerily similar to the rope used to hang the Hubbards. Next to it, an old hunting



knife glinted menacingly under the faint light, its blade stained with what might have been rust.

Or blood.

“What the hell are you doing?” a voice behind her yelled, causing her to jump. She turned around to see Albert glaring at her from the porch, his face contorted with anger, a shotgun in his hand. The dog growled beside him, teeth bared and hackles raised.

“Drop the weapon, Albert,” Sheila said calmly, her voice steady despite the fear gnawing at her insides.

“Like hell I will! First, you come here dredging up my daughter’s suicide, and now you’re breaking into my garage? I’ve had enough!”

Sheila’s heart pounded in her chest as she watched the veins bulging in Albert’s neck, his face flushed with rage. She could feel the tension crackling in the air, the electricity of danger humming around them.

*He’s going to shoot me, she thought, numb with shock.  
He’s really going to do it.*

“Albert, please,” she said, her eyes locked on the shotgun’s barrel. “We don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“You should have left me alone!” Albert roared, his finger trembling dangerously close to pulling the trigger. Sheila held her breath, her mind racing for a solution, for any way to defuse the situation and save both their lives.

“I understand that you’re upset,” she said, trying a gentler approach. “But we’re just doing our job. We need to find out

who killed the Hubbards, and your daughter's connection to Roy Hubbard is important.”

“Don't you dare use my daughter's name in the same sentence as that...that bastard!” he said, raising the shotgun and sighting down the length of the barrel as his finger caressed the trigger.

Just then, Finn emerged from the shadows along the porch, taking Albert by surprise. He lunged forward and shoved the gun aside just as Albert reflexively squeezed the trigger. The deafening blast tore through the still night air, leaving a gaping hole in the farmhouse wall where it had narrowly missed Sheila.

With lightning-fast reflexes honed by years of combat experience, Finn wrestled the shotgun from Albert's grasp and pinned the older man to the ground, his knee pressing into Albert's back. The dog barked, but didn't seem inclined to interfere.

“Albert Cartwright, you're under arrest,” Finn said.

“Arrest me if you want,” Albert said, his eyes bright with hate. “You can lock me in a cell and throw away the key for all I care. Roy Hubbard got what he deserved, and I won't be sorry for what happened to him!”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sheila's gaze locked onto the man behind the one-way mirror, her eyes narrowed as she sized up Albert Cartwright. The fluorescent light above cast a pale glow on his weathered face, highlighting his unkempt beard and piercing eyes. His hands clenched into fists on the table, knuckles turning white.

He looked like a man capable of violence, but was he capable of murdering an entire family in cold blood?

"Hey, you okay?" Finn Mercer's voice startled her, causing her to jump. Her heart raced as she turned to see him holding two cups of coffee.

"Jeez, Finn, you scared me," she said, trying to catch her breath. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry about that," Finn replied with a hint of concern. He held out one of the cups to her. "Thought you could use this."

"Thanks." She sipped the hot liquid gratefully, feeling it warm her insides and provide a sense of much-needed comfort.

Finn studied her face for a moment before asking again, "You sure you're alright? You've been through a lot today."

Sheila knew he was referring to the incident at Albert's farmhouse when the old man had nearly shot her for looking inside his garage. It had certainly upset her, but she wasn't about to let fear dictate her life. Not now, not ever.

“Maybe your stoicism is rubbing off on me,” she said with a forced smile, attempting to lighten the mood. “I’m a little shaken up, but I’ll be okay. Can’t let fear get in the way of solving this case, right?”

He nodded, saying nothing as his gaze turned back toward Albert.

“Thank you, by the way,” she said. “For saving my life.”

He shrugged, as if it were of no great consequence. “Just doing my job, Sheila. You would have done the same for me.”

Sheila smiled again, grateful for Finn’s unwavering support. That was one of the things she appreciated most about him—his dependability. She always knew he had her back.

“Well,” he said, interrupting her thoughts, “I think we’ve left him stewing in there long enough. What do you say we go see what he has to say for himself?”

Sheila nodded and followed Finn out of the room. As they entered the interview room, Albert looked up and glared at them. Sheila could see the veins bulging in his fists, clenched tightly together like a coiled snake ready to strike.

“Where’s my damn dog?” he demanded, his voice like gravel. “Titus ain’t used to bein’ alone. Someone better be takin’ care of him.”

“Your dog is being taken care of, Mr. Cartwright,” Sheila reassured him, her tone firm yet gentle. Despite her own fears, she understood that Albert’s concern for his dog was genuine. She knew that Titus was probably the only living thing that Albert had any real connection with.

“Listen, Albert,” Finn said, cutting straight to the chase. “You’ve got more serious problems than your dog getting lonely right now.” He slid a folder across the table, opening it to reveal photos of the rope and the rusty knife found in his garage. “Care to explain why we found these items in your possession?”

Albert scoffed, rolling his eyes as if Finn’s question was beneath him. “You think I’m the first farmer in the world to have some rope and an old knife? Hell, every farmer within a hundred miles probably has similar stuff lyin’ around.”

“True,” Finn said, leaning in closer, his eyes locked on Albert’s. “But not every farmer within a hundred miles has a motive for killing the Hubbard family.”

Albert’s jaw tightened, and Sheila could see the battle raging within him. “Look,” he said, his voice strained. “I use that rope for all sorts of things—tying down tarps, hanging clothes to dry, you name it. And the knife? It’s just an old one I use for cutting baling twine. There ain’t nothin’ sinister about ‘em.”

“If you’ve got nothing to hide,” Finn said, unrelenting, “why’d you pull a shotgun on us?”

“Y’all were trespassing!” Albert cried, his face red and veins bulging in his neck. “I got a right to protect my property from strangers snooping around.”

“Protect your property? Or cover up a crime?”

“Enough!” Albert slammed his fist down on the table, rattling the metal cuffs that bound him. “I’m tired of being

treated like a damn criminal! My rights have been violated, and I won't stand for it!"

Sheila watched as Albert's anger boiled over, his words coming faster and more forceful. "It's people like you," he said, pointing a finger at Finn, "government lackeys who think they can trample all over honest citizens' lives. That's what's wrong with this country!"

Sheila could feel the tension in the room reaching a breaking point, and she knew she had to steer the conversation away from the precipice.

"Let's shift gears," she said, speaking up before Finn had a chance to answer Albert's accusation. Finn gave her a long look, but she stared back, willing him to trust her to take the lead. After a few moments, he nodded and stepped back, sighing.

"Tell me," Sheila said to Albert, "why is it that, when we were arresting you, you said you 'wouldn't be sorry' for what happened to Roy Hubbard?"

Albert's eyes flickered to Sheila, and for a moment, his rage seemed to subside, replaced by a deep, burning pain. "Roy's a monster," he growled, his voice low and heavy with sorrow. "His abuse drove Lisa, my sweet daughter, to take her own life. He deserved to pay for what he did."

"Was that your plan, then?" Finn asked, as if unable to keep himself completely out of the conversation. "To make him pay with his life—him and his family, too?"

“No!” Albert’s eyes welled up with unshed tears. “I never wanted any harm to come to them. They were innocent in all this. I just... I wanted Roy to hurt like Lisa did. Like we all did.”

Sheila studied Albert’s face, the lines of grief and anger etched into his features. She could see the raw emotion, the pain that tore at him, but she sensed no malice toward the rest of the Hubbard family. For an instant, Sheila imagined herself in his shoes, grappling with the weight of such a loss, and she couldn’t help but feel a flicker of sympathy.

“So when you heard Roy had moved back into town,” she said, “how did that make you feel?”

“Angry,” Albert admitted, a scowl forming on his weathered face. “The man destroyed my daughter’s life and waltzed back into town like nothing happened. It made my blood boil.”

“Angry enough to kill him?” Finn asked.

“Listen,” Albert snapped, his hands clenching into fists. “I’m not gonna lie—I thought about confronting him. I wanted him to know what he did to Lisa and our family. But I could never hurt innocent people. Jane, Max, Lily...they were all just caught up in Roy’s mess.”

Sheila watched Albert closely. He was a man driven by anger, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that he wouldn’t have taken it as far as murder. She needed more information, though, before she could draw any conclusions.



“Albert,” she began, her tone calm and measured, “where were you last night?”

“Working on my truck,” he replied, his voice steadier now. “I’ve been having trouble with the engine, so I was out in the garage fixing it. My neighbor, Jerry, came over for a while to help me out. We were there until past midnight.”

Finn raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical of Albert’s alibi. “We’ll look into that,” he said.

Sheila, however, found herself believing Albert’s story. As she looked into Albert’s eyes, filled with pain and sorrow, she couldn’t reconcile the image of him as a cold-blooded murderer.

“Okay, Albert,” she said finally, rising and retreating to the door. “Thank you for your time.” As her hand tightened around the doorknob, the cold metal pressing against her skin, she added, “We’ll check your alibi and get back to you.”

“Wait,” Albert called, desperation lacing his voice. “How long am I gonna be stuck in here?”

Sheila glanced over her shoulder, taking in the old man’s haggard appearance. “That depends on what we find out during our investigation.”

“Look, I’m sorry for aiming that shotgun at you earlier,” he said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I didn’t mean any harm. Please don’t press charges.”

Sheila considered his words carefully. “I think you need help, Mr. Cartwright, and I mean that in the kindest way

possible. Whatever happens, I'm going to do my best to make sure you get the support you need."

He stared at her, looking puzzled by her meaning. Deciding she'd said enough, Sheila stepped out into the hallway.

The door clicked shut, leaving Sheila and Finn alone in the sterile corridor. She could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears as she studied her partner, searching for any hint of his thoughts.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"Albert's a dangerous, crazy old man," Finn replied bluntly, his eyes narrowing. "He's capable of anything."

"Maybe," Sheila said, her brow furrowing as she considered the evidence. "But I don't think he'd be capable of murdering the rest of Roy's family, not as carefully as the killer did. And I'm not sure he'd have the physical strength to haul the bodies up that tree."

Finn let out a slow, measured breath, the air whistling between his teeth. He absently fingered the compass necklace around his neck. "It's true that Albert doesn't seem like the most likely suspect," he admitted. "But we can't afford to rule him out just yet."

He leaned against the cool cinderblock wall of the hallway, his brow furrowed in thought. "Let's take a breather," he suggested, his voice betraying the weariness that had settled into his bones. "Then we can go back in and ask Albert

another round of questions. We'll crack him, one way or the other. If he's innocent—"

Before he could finish the sentence, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

"Excuse me," Finn muttered, stepping away from Sheila to answer the call. His face grew increasingly pale as he listened, concern etching deep lines into his forehead. "We'll be there right away," he said urgently, snapping the phone shut with a decisive click.

Sheila watched Finn's reaction, her heart pounding in her chest, anticipating something terrible. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Another family, murdered," Finn replied grimly, his jaw clenched tight. "Bodies found in a graveyard. We need to get over there now. And given how fresh they are, I'd say it seems pretty darn unlikely Albert Cartwright is our guy."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The moon hung low in the sky, casting eerie shadows across the cemetery as Finn's car rolled to a stop. Dread gnawed at Sheila, her stomach twisting into knots at the prospect of what they were about to find. She clenched her fists, resting them on her lap.

"Hey," Finn said softly, giving her a reassuring look. "You'll get through this. And remember, take a break if you need to."

Sheila nodded, swallowing hard. As much as she wanted to be strong, the thought of another family brutally murdered weighed heavily on her mind.

They stepped out of the car into the chilly night air. The hectic scene before them was a macabre ballet of activity. Uniformed officers scurried about, setting up a perimeter with yellow police tape flapping wildly in the wind. Harsh work lights were being set up by a burly officer, illuminating the crime scene in an unforgiving glow.

"Shit," Sheila whispered, her breath visible in the cold. She watched as forensic technicians photographed the area, their faces grim behind their masks.

Finn glanced at her, concern etching his features. "Focus on the task at hand, Sheila. We're here to find answers and bring justice to these families, okay?"

Sheila took a deep breath, steeling herself for the horrors that awaited her. Her thoughts shifted to the Hubbard family, their lives cut short so violently. She couldn't shake the feeling that every second counted, that the killer was still out there, ready to strike again.

“Right,” she replied, her voice firm. “Let's do this.”

A heavysset man in uniform approached them. His dark hair was peppered with gray, and his eyes held years of experience and an air of authority.

“Deputy Mercer,” he said, extending his hand. “I'm Officer Edgar Sheffield.”

“Nice to meet you, Officer Sheffield,” Finn said as they shook hands. “This is Sheila Stone. She's working with me as a consultant.”

“And training to join the force,” Sheila added.

“Can you fill us in on what happened?” Finn asked Sheffield.

“Sure,” Edgar began. “A single mother was out walking her dog when it slipped off its leash and bolted. The woman chased after it and found her dog digging at a fresh grave. When she got closer, she...” He paused, pressing his lips tightly together as if unsure how to say what came next.

“Go on,” Finn said. “We can handle it.”

“She saw a human hand sticking out of the soil. Then it hit her—why wasn't the body in a casket? She called the police, and we found five fresh graves altogether. This all happened less than an hour ago.”

Sheila cursed silently, her stomach twisting into knots.

“Have the bodies been exhumed yet?” Finn asked.

“The coroner’s overseeing the process right now,” Edgar replied, pointing toward a group of people carrying shovels.

Sheila watched them, her heart pounding, feeling sick at the thought of what was happening just a short distance away.

“Have you identified the family?” Finn asked.

Edgar nodded solemnly. “They’re the Warrens. Bob and Macy are the parents, and they have three teenage children—Josh, Isabelle, and Tim. Bob had an affluent job as a lawyer in town, and Macy’s family, the Dobsons, were well-respected pillars of the community.” Finn’s brow furrowed at the mention of the Dobson name, as if a memory was trying to surface.

“Can you show us the crime scene?” Sheila asked, her throat tightening with anxiety.

“Of course,” Edgar replied, leading them farther into the cemetery.

The moon cast eerie shadows over the tombstones as they walked, the wind rustling through the trees above them. Sheila could feel the dread creeping up her spine, but she pushed it down, focusing on the task at hand. The graveyard seemed to stretch on forever.

“Here we are,” Edgar said quietly as they reached the center of the graveyard.

Sheila's breath caught in her throat when she saw the five bodies laid out before her. The exhumed corpses were pale and lifeless, their faces contorted with fear and pain. It was clear that their final moments had been filled with terror. Even though she had tried to prepare herself for this sight, seeing the victims up close was incredibly unsettling.

Dr. Jin Zihao was meticulously cleaning one of the bodies with a soft-bristled brush, gently removing dirt from the lifeless skin as if he were preserving a delicate artifact. The tall man's silver-streaked black hair glistened under the work lights, and his sharp, intelligent eyes remained focused on his task.

"Dr. Zihao," Finn called out as they approached, causing the coroner to pause and rise slowly, revealing the full extent of his height. He looked at them with a somber expression.

"Deputy Mercer, Ms. Stone," he said, nodding in their direction.

"Have you been able to determine anything so far?" Finn asked.

"From what I can tell, all the victims were shot," Dr. Zihao explained. He gestured at several patches of blood in the grass nearby. "The blood spatter suggests that they were killed here in the graveyard. Additionally, it seems their valuables have been taken, much like with the Hubbards."

Sheila clenched her fists, anger bubbling up inside her at the thought of this ruthless killer. *How many more families must suffer before we catch this monster?* she wondered, her determination growing stronger.



“Did you notice any signs of a struggle or the use of restraints?” she asked, hoping for some clue that might help them understand the killer’s methods.

Dr. Zihao shook his head. “No, I haven’t discovered any evidence of either so far. Then again, it’s not unlikely that the very reason the killer used the gun was to avoid the necessity of restraints. Staring down the barrel of a gun can be quite intimidating, I imagine.”

*Tell me about it*, Sheila thought, recalling how Albert Cartwright had nearly shot her.

Finn surveyed the crime scene, his brow furrowed in thought. “That’s not the only advantage in bringing the gun. A bullet is a much more convenient execution method than a noose.”

Sheila stared at the lifeless bodies, her heart aching for the Warren family. “Maybe after Roy Hubbard fought back, the killer didn’t want to take any chances.”

“Which also means we can track to identify the weapon he used,” Finn pointed out, trying to stay optimistic.

Sheila shook her head, her gaze determined. “We can’t wait that long. There has to be something here we can use.”

As they stood there, Dr. Zihao cleared his throat. “Deputy Mercer, could you help me turn this body over? I need to examine the other side.”

“Of course, doctor,” Finn replied, moving to assist the coroner.

Left alone for a moment, Sheila glanced at her phone and decided to try reaching Natalie again. She walked away from the grim scene, her steps heavy as she dialed the number. The call rang and rang, but once more, her sister didn't answer. Sheila's worry grew with each unanswered ring, tightening like a vice around her chest.

"Come on, Nat, pick up," she whispered, pacing back and forth. When the call finally went to voicemail, Sheila hung up without leaving a message, her concern deepening. *What if something's happened to her?* she thought, her mind racing through worst-case scenarios.

She took a deep breath, trying to quiet the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. *I can't lose focus now*, she reminded herself. *The best way to protect Natalie and everyone else is to catch this killer.*

With renewed determination, she returned to the crime scene, her eyes scanning the area for anything that might help them understand the murderer's motives. The weight of responsibility settled on her shoulders, pushing her to keep moving forward, no matter how much the grisly sight disturbed her.

A buzzing vibration pulled her attention from her fruitless search. She glanced down at her phone, hoping Natalie might be returning her call, but instead she saw a message from her father. The words on the screen did little to quell her growing anxiety, but they did provide a momentary distraction.

*Come by the gym sometime, Sheila*, the text read. *Star could use some practice with you. I think it'd be good for both*

*of you.*

For a brief moment, Sheila allowed herself to picture the scene: her father coaching as she and Star circled each other, hands raised in a protective stance, ready to strike. The thought brought a fleeting smile to her lips. She quickly tapped out a response. *I'd be happy to, Dad. It's been too long.*

She hit send and slipped the phone back into her pocket, her thoughts immediately returning to her sister's safety. *I need to focus*, she reminded herself, squaring her shoulders as she scanned the graveyard once more.

As she walked, her eyes caught something peculiar etched into the bark of a nearby tree. It was crude and jagged: names carved in a haphazard manner, each one crossed out with a violent slash. Beneath the names of the Warren family were the words, "ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY." The writing was so poor that the E in 'ONE' looked more like a large 3.

"What the hell?" Sheila muttered under her breath, her pulse quickening. She stepped closer, fingers tracing over the scratched letters.

"Find something?" Finn called out, noticing her sudden interest in the tree.

"Look at this," she said, motioning him over.

Finn approached, his footsteps crunching on the fallen leaves. The air hung heavy with the scent of freshly turned earth and the hint of approaching rain.

"Check this out," Sheila whispered, pointing at the message carved into the tree. Her heart raced as she watched

Finn's brow furrow while he studied the crude writing.

"ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY," he murmured, his voice tight with anger. "This killer's got a sick sense of humor."

"Maybe it's not just humor," Sheila added, her mind spinning as she tried to make connections. "Maybe it's a clue about their motive or even their identity."

"Could be," Finn conceded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "But we need more evidence to tie it all together."

"Right," Sheila agreed, frustration mounting in her chest. She knew they were so close to something significant, yet still grasped at straws.

As they stood there, contemplating the meaning behind the eerie message, Finn suddenly snapped his fingers. "Macy Dobson," he exclaimed, his eyes widening. "I knew I recognized that name. I dated her younger sister back in high school."

"Really?" Sheila asked, raising an eyebrow. "What school did you go to?"

"Mildred Heights," Finn replied, a nostalgic smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Sheila's stomach dropped. "Mildred Heights? That's where Roy Hubbard went to school as well."

Finn's smile vanished, replaced by an expression of disbelief. "You're kidding. What are the chances?"

"Maybe it's not a coincidence," Sheila mused, her mind racing with possibilities. "Maybe there's a connection between

the victims that we aren't seeing.”

“Wait,” Finn said, thinking back to his high school days. “If I remember correctly, Macy’s family also moved out of state, just like the Hubbards did.”

“Seems like we’ve figured out how the killer is choosing his victims,” Sheila said. “And maybe, just maybe, we can use that information to figure out who’s next, because if we can do that—”

“Then we can catch him in the act,” Finn finished for her.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The man pulled over to the shoulder of the road beside a river, his hands shaking on the wheel. He closed his eyes and tried to calm his racing heart, taking in deep, ragged breaths.

*Take it easy, he told himself. Nobody's following you. Just breathe.*

He opened his eyes, fumbled with the glovebox, and pulled out a bottle of painkillers. The label read 'OxyContin,' a narcotic he had stolen from Roy Hubbard's medicine cabinet during his murder spree. The man popped the cap off and swallowed several pills dry, wincing at their bitter taste.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath. "Get a grip."

It was late at night, and the road was deserted. The only sounds were the crickets' chorus and the gentle gurgle of the river nearby. The man got out of the car, stretching his cramped legs and listening to the crickets' song of the night. He reached back into the vehicle and grabbed the paper bag sitting on the passenger seat. Clutching it tight to his chest, he stepped back out onto the gravelly shoulder.

"Okay, just gotta get rid of this, and everything will be fine," he told himself, trying to mask the fear gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

The night air was cool, but beads of sweat trickled down the man's forehead as he held onto the bag that contained damning evidence of his recent crimes. The memory of the

Warren family flashed before his eyes, and he shook his head violently, trying to push them out of his mind.

“Focus. You’re almost done,” he whispered to himself, steeling his resolve.

Just as he began to breathe a little easier, the sudden roar of an engine shattered the silence. A semi-truck rushed by, stirring up a gust of wind that whipped his face and sent his heart racing again. He flinched, gripping the paper bag tighter as he watched the taillights of the truck fade into the distance.

“Stupid truck,” he grumbled, forcing himself to take several deep breaths. “You’re alone, so stop worrying. The police don’t know where you are. You were careful. The dead can’t talk.”

With renewed determination, he approached the guardrail above the river. The water below churned ominously, its dark surface reflecting the moonlight in a shimmering dance. It was both mesmerizing and sinister, a fitting resting place for his secrets.

Reaching into the bag, the man pulled out a gun—the weapon that had silenced the Warrens once and for all. His fingers traced its cold metal contours, and he couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret at having to part with it. He remembered breaking into that small pawn shop a week before, the thrill of sneaking past the sleeping owner to snatch the gun from its display case. It had been a thing of beauty in his hands, a symbol of power he had craved.

“Damn it,” he muttered, staring at the gun one last time. “You served me well, but I can’t risk getting caught because of



you.”

With a final, reluctant sigh, he hurled the weapon into the churning waters below.

The man watched as the ripples swallowed the gun, feeling a void where it had been in his hand. He peered into the bag, hesitating for a moment before taking inventory of the remaining items. A Rolex wristwatch gleamed amongst the bunch, its gold and silver links reflecting the moonlight. Beside it lay a pair of delicate gold earrings etched with intricate designs and two wedding bands—one smooth and plain, the other adorned with tiny diamonds.

“Damn shame,” he muttered, running a finger over the watch’s cold, smooth surface. “I could’ve sold these for a pretty penny—or kept them for myself.” The thought of parting with such valuable trophies gnawed at him. They were symbols of his conquests, affirmations of his power. Yet he knew that if they were ever discovered, it would be his undoing.

“Think,” he whispered to himself, his eyes darting between the precious trinkets and the river below. His heart hammered against his chest, urging him to make a decision before it was too late.

“Maybe I don’t have to throw them away,” he mused, recalling how he had masterfully hidden the items stolen from the Hubbards. “No one found those, did they? And no one will find these either.”

His mind raced as he envisioned the perfect hiding spot, one so clever and discreet that even the most skilled

investigator would overlook it. “I can do this,” he reassured himself, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “I’m too smart for them. They’ll never catch me.”

Cradling the bag of treasures as if it were a newborn child, the man turned on his heels and strode back to his car. He slid into the driver’s seat, stashing the bag beneath it, out of sight but still within reach. The thrill of keeping the items close made him feel invincible, as if daring the world to challenge him.

*Let them try to find me,* he thought, his fingers gripping the wheel with renewed strength. *I’ll always be one step ahead.*

On impulse, he fumbled with the radio dial, his fingertips brushing against the worn grooves as he cycled through a cacophony of static and music. He needed to hear the news to know if they were talking about him yet. Finally, he found the station he was looking for.

“Breaking news,” the reporter’s voice crackled through the car speakers. “The victims of the mass hanging have been identified as Roy Hubbard, his wife Jane, and their teenage children Max and Lily.”

“Ah, the Hubbards,” the man mused, satisfaction creeping into the corners of his mind. “But what about the Warrens?”

“Police are still investigating the gruesome scene and have yet to release any details regarding potential suspects or motives,” the reporter continued.

“Come on,” the man muttered impatiently, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He wanted them to mention the

Warren family too; he craved the recognition, the thrill of hearing people speculate about his actions. He deserved some credit, after all.

“Earlier today, we managed to speak with a neighbor of the Hubbard family,” the reporter said. “Pearl Delaroché became the Hubbards’ neighbor a few months ago after they moved here from Seattle, and she had nothing but kind words to say about them.”

“Roy and Jane were just...wonderful people,” Pearl said, her wavering voice filling the car. “Max and Lily were so well-behaved and polite. Always smiling. They were like the picture-perfect family, you know? It’s just...I can’t wrap my head around it. Who would want to hurt them?”

The man clenched his jaw, the sound of Pearl’s sincerity grating on his nerves. He didn’t want to listen to her gushing about the Hubbards, praising their idyllic existence. With a harsh flick of his wrist, he switched off the radio.

“Enough of that,” he muttered under his breath, his heart hammering in his chest. He couldn’t let Pearl’s words affect him; all that mattered was staying one step ahead, avoiding capture and remaining untouchable.

As the man pulled back onto the road, he found himself consumed with thoughts of his next move: new families to target, new plans to concoct. He had evaded justice thus far, but deep down, he knew that every success brought its own dangers. The game was far from over.

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. The dark road ahead of him seemed to

stretch on forever, and the anger that had bubbled up inside him upon hearing Pearl's words was morphing into something else—a craving for power.

He remembered how he'd felt marching the Warrens to their graves—the way they'd trembled before him, begging for mercy. A grin spread across his face as he thought about how helpless they'd been in those final moments. But they were gone now, and he needed to find a new family, new victims to make him feel alive again.

“Can't wait to see the fear in their eyes,” he muttered to himself, his voice barely audible above the hum of the car's engine. “Just need to find the right ones.”

In the back of his mind, a quieter voice begged him to reconsider, to give it some time before striking again. But the man was beyond listening to reason. He was addicted to the high that came from wielding control over others, from knowing that their lives were in his hands.

“Slow down? No, not this time.” He shook his head, dismissing the thought. “I'm unstoppable.”

With a newfound sense of determination, the man pressed down on the gas pedal, the car speeding down the empty road. His heartbeat quickened, matching the accelerating vehicle. The thrill of the hunt surged through his veins, making him feel invincible.

As he drove deeper into the night, the darkness enveloping him like a shroud, the man sensed that he was on the verge of greatness—that soon, he would reclaim the power he so desperately craved.

And nothing would be able to stop him.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The coffee machine sputtered and hissed as it filled the stained ceramic mug. Finn glanced at Sheila, who was rubbing her temples. “Want another cup?” he asked.

“Hell, no,” she replied, forcing a smile. “I’ll have a heart attack if I drink any more caffeine.”

Finn shrugged and poured himself another steaming cup. “There are worse habits,” he said, taking a sip.

The sheriff’s department break room was a cramped, windowless space with peeling paint and a lingering odor of burnt microwave popcorn. A few mismatched chairs surrounded a small table littered with old yearbooks from Mildred Heights High School. Sheila and Finn had been combing through the yearbooks for hours, searching for any patterns or connections between the victims of the two brutal family murders.

Sheila glanced at Finn, who was pouring himself another cup of coffee. She wondered if his comment about there being worse habits had something to do with the confession he’d made about his drinking problem. Would he open up about it if he asked her? It bothered her not knowing the extent of his struggle or how he was handling it.

There was also the matter of his compass necklace. What was the deal with that? What did it signify? He was full of secrets, it seemed. Sheila didn’t need to know them all, but she

did want to better understand the man she would be partnering with for the foreseeable future.

Finn took a seat at the table and opened a yearbook, his eyes scanning the pages for any possible clues. Sheila hesitated for a moment before deciding to broach the subject of his drinking. As delicately as she could, she said, “Hey, Finn, can I ask you something personal?”

Finn looked up from the yearbook, his expression guarded. “Sure, what’s up?”

Sheila took a deep breath. “You mentioned earlier about there being worse habits than drinking. Is everything okay? Do you need any help?”

Finn’s eyes flickered with surprise before settling into a resigned expression. “I’m fine, Sheila. Just dealing with some personal stuff.”

Sheila leaned forward, her voice soft. “You don’t have to go through it alone, you know. We’re partners. We have each other’s backs.”

Finn let out a humorless chuckle. “Trust me, Sheila, this is something I need to deal with on my own.”

She sat back, wondering what to do. Should she just give him space or push him to open up? It was a tricky situation, and she didn’t want to overstep any boundaries.

But what if he was really struggling? Wouldn’t the kind thing be to keep talking about it?

“Tell me about the necklace, then,” she said, hoping to find a chink in his armor. “You’re always playing with it, so it must



have some significance for you.”

Finn pulled the necklace out and fingered it, his gaze growing thoughtful. “That’s a long story,” he murmured.

“We have time.”

He hesitated, and for a moment Sheila thought he’d change the subject instead. To her surprise, however, he said, “It was in my survival gear back when I was a fighter pilot. That was the best time of my life, back when I was flying.” A nostalgic smile crept across his lips, but it was soon shadowed by a look of pain. “Worst time of my life, too.”

He paused, and Sheila waited, studying him. The last thing she wanted to do was to interrupt his train of thought.

“I was going through a lot at the time,” he said. “My father passed away, and without him—” He shook his head. “Life just wasn’t the same.”

Again he paused, and again Sheila remained silent, her heart aching for him.

“Anyway,” he continued, “me and my buddies had this habit of getting drinks after each successful mission—you know, a way to celebrate being alive.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Pretty soon, though, I was drinking before my flights as well. I knew it was risky as hell, but that’s what being a fighter pilot is—risky.”

“What happened?” Sheila asked gently.

“One day, I took off after having several beers. I thought I was good, and maybe I would’ve been if everything had gone

right, but I had a mechanical failure that day. Instrument panel malfunctioned.”

He let go of the necklace and looked up at her. “Any idea what it’s like to be flying forty-five thousand feet above the ground and suddenly the system you rely on stops working?”

She shook her head. “No idea.”

“It’s terrifying. I didn’t know how much fuel I had, didn’t have any instructions on what to do or how to get back. If I was sober, I wouldn’t have needed the guidance system to hold my hand, but I was anything but sober. Flying that plane the old-fashioned way, without the help of the system—” He shook his head.

“And is that where the compass came in?”

He nodded, then picked the compass up again and kissed it. “My dad always had one on him when he was alive. He was a navigator for the Navy. It was his good luck charm, and I guess it became mine too. It led me to safety, and without it —” He shook his head again. “I would’ve crashed for sure, and considering how inebriated I was, there’s a good chance I would’ve gotten myself killed.”

Sheila felt a pang of sympathy for Finn. He had been through so much, and yet he wore his pain with grace. She wanted to say something comforting, but words failed her.

After a few moments of silence, Finn cleared his throat and returned the compass to his neck. “Sorry, didn’t mean to get all nostalgic on you.”

“It’s okay,” Sheila said. “Thanks for sharing that with me.”

He paused, pursing his lips. “I want you to know, even though it’s still a temptation, it’s been six months since I last had a drink. What I mean to say is...you can count on me, alright? Don’t write me off just because I made some mistakes.”

“I won’t,” Sheila said, feeling a surge of pride for her partner.

He tucked his necklace back into his shirt. “What about you? Ever struggled with anything like that?”

“Not drinking, no, but I’ve had other obsessions.”

“Such as?”

“Kickboxing. I know it’s not the same, but being hyper-focused on your profession to the exclusion of all else can damage your life and relationships, too.”

“Were you really that driven?”

“I was obsessed, spent every waking moment either training or thinking about training.” Her voice held a tinge of sadness as she continued. “In a way, it was destructive for me, too. I lost friendships, missed out on experiences, and when I didn’t win the Olympics, it nearly broke me.”

Finn looked at her with genuine curiosity, his earlier guardedness beginning to fade. “How did you manage to pull yourself out of that?”

“It’s a work in progress. I’m hoping law enforcement will help—give me a sense of purpose, you know, a cause higher than myself.” Sheila offered him a small smile, feeling a connection forming between them.

He nodded, his gaze thoughtful. “This job can be very rewarding. It can be very stressful, too, though, so just make sure you have a healthy outlet for when the shit hits the fan. It’s convenient to see life in black-and-white – this person’s a victim, that person’s a bad guy – but there’s a lot of gray in the world.”

His words sparked a sudden realization. “Wait a second,” Sheila said, her eyes widening.

“What?” he asked.

“Sorry—your words just helped me make a connection about the case. Instead of trying to find the killer, maybe we should look for their next potential victim. We could focus on those who moved away from Mildred Heights and then returned.”

Finn nodded. “That’s a good idea. Shouldn’t be a long list.”

They quickly pulled out their phones and began cross-referencing the names from the yearbooks with online records. Sheila found a local news article that mentioned a recent high school reunion for the class of ‘97, which provided a helpful starting point.

“Check this out,” Finn said, pointing to his phone screen. “Matt Barker moved away after graduation and just came back within the past few months.”

“Interesting,” Sheila replied, making a note of his name. “I’ve got another name: Clive Waiters. He moved away for college, but he’s been back for about a year now.”

While Finn read up on Matt Barker, Sheila delved into Clive Waiters' life. He'd attended a prestigious university on the East Coast but had returned home after struggling with mental health issues.

"Matt seems to have had a pretty stable life until his divorce," Finn said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "He's started up a small business since returning. Fashion clothes, looks like."

"What about his family?"

"A few cousins in the area, but that's about it. He lives with his grandparents—looks like their health has been going downhill."

"Doesn't sound like he fits the profile of the other victims," Sheila murmured. "They were both married with teenage children."

"What about your guy? Any family?"

She shook her head. "Lives alone. Not much of an online presence, either. Looks like he was hospitalized at one point for depression and anxiety."

They both fell silent. Then Sheila had another idea.

"Here's a thought," she said. "What if we look up both of them in the database, see if either one has a criminal record?"

Finn cocked his head at her. "I thought we were looking for victims, not suspects."

"Wouldn't hurt to do both, would it?"

He shrugged and began tapping away at his phone. Sheila joined him, looking over his shoulder.

“Nothing on Barker,” Finn said. “Squeaky clean. Let’s check out your guy.”

As the search results loaded, Sheila’s heartbeat quickened—Clive Waiters did indeed have a criminal record. There were multiple charges of breaking and entering, domestic abuse, and even a stint in prison for arson. Her eyes widened as she read the details of his most recent conviction: trying to burn down an apartment building with a family still inside.

“He barricaded the exits so the tenants couldn’t escape,” Finn said, reading the report about the arson. “The fire department barely managed to get everyone out before the whole place went up in flames.”

“There were children inside, Finn,” Sheila added, aghast.

“Damn,” Finn muttered, his expression darkening. “What kind of monster does something like that?”

Sheila went back to her own phone, trying to find anything she could about Clive. She navigated to the page of a high school paper, the Mildred Heights Chronicle, and searched for Clive’s name.

She got one hit. She opened the article and started reading. The article was about an anti-bullying petition that had been signed by a number of parents, aimed at better training for the teachers and stricter enforcement of consequences for bullying. Halfway down the page was a quote from Clive, who claimed that bullying was a “daily reality” for him.

*The teachers just look the other way, he was quoted as saying. They don't care what happens to us. I get treated like trash by all the so-called cool kids, and I'm sick of it.*

“Finn,” Sheila said, “take a look at this.” She showed him the article. His eyebrows pulled together as he read, and she watched his eyes move back and forth, ping-ponging down the screen.

“He was probably already fantasizing about doing something,” Sheila said.

Finn nodded, his face grave. “And from there, it was only a matter of time before the fantasy became reality.”





## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mildred Heights loomed ominously in the darkness as Sheila knocked on the door, the school's shadow casting an eerie blanket over her and Finn. The wind whipped around them, carrying with it a chill that seemed to seep into their bones.

As she looked around, Sheila wondered if this was where the killer first laid eyes on his victims. She felt her stomach churn at the thought of a list of students from this school targeted for murder, and just how long that list might be.

Clive Waiters' apartment had been empty, and none of his neighbors had had any idea where he might be. They'd put out an APB on Clive, but in the meantime, they'd decided to go to his old school to learn anything they could about him. They'd called the school and, despite the hour, managed to reach a teacher who was working late, and she'd agreed to let them in.

Now, however, Sheila found herself wondering where the teacher might be.

"Why does it have to be so creepy?" Sheila muttered under her breath, her skin prickling with unease as they waited for someone to answer their knock. A few lights were on inside the school, but otherwise the place looked deserted.

"Adds to the charm, doesn't it?" Finn replied, trying to lighten the mood. He adjusted his jacket collar against the chilly night air.

Sheila's eyes scanned the building, searching for any signs of movement. "This place gives me the creeps. I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched."

"Probably just your nerves," Finn said, though his eyes continued to dart around the school grounds as well.

The door finally creaked open, revealing a gray-haired woman who leaned out, peering at them through thick glasses. She had to be Mrs. Brigg, the teacher they had spoken to earlier on the phone. Her lined face and sagging jowls gave her an air of exhaustion, as if she had spent decades battling against the hardships of life.

"Are you the ones who called?" she asked, her voice thin and reedy.

"That's us," Sheila said, offering a reassuring smile. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us, Mrs. Brigg."

"Of course, dear," she said, opening the door wider. "Please, come in."

"I didn't expect anyone to still be here at this hour," Sheila remarked as she and Finn entered the building.

"Ah, well, I've been staying late to catch up on grading," Mrs. Brigg said. "You see, my daughter was in a car accident earlier this week. She's fine now, thank God, but it's been quite the ordeal."

Sheila nodded, her expression softening. "That must have been terrifying. I'm glad she's okay."

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Brigg replied with a tired smile.

As they continued down the hallway, Finn remained silent, his eyes scanning their surroundings. He seemed to be searching for any signs of danger or hidden secrets that might help them uncover the truth about Clive Waiters and the murders.

Finally, they reached Mrs. Brigg's office. The room was small and cluttered, with stacks of papers, textbooks, and school supplies occupying every available surface. A single desk lamp cast a warm glow over the chaos, illuminating the relentless stream of work that faced the weary teacher. It was clear that Mrs. Brigg was dedicated to her job, perhaps even to the point of sacrificing her own well-being.

"Please, have a seat." Mrs. Brigg gestured to two mismatched chairs in front of her desk.

"Thank you," Sheila said, settling into one of the chairs. She glanced at the stack of papers Mrs. Brigg had been grading—English essays, by the looks of it. Alongside the red pen marks, there were thoughtful comments and words of encouragement, evidence of Mrs. Brigg's genuine care for her students.

"Your office is very...cozy," Finn offered diplomatically, taking the other chair and looking around the cramped space.

"Ha! Cozy is one way to put it." Mrs. Brigg chuckled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "But I like to think of it as my little sanctuary. It's where I can make a difference for these kids, even if it's just in the smallest of ways."

Sheila could see that beneath the exhaustion and stress, there was a spark of passion in Mrs. Brigg's eyes—a fierce

determination to help her students succeed, no matter the obstacles they faced. That same drive resonated within Sheila herself, fueling her own relentless pursuit for justice and truth.

“Alright.” Mrs. Brigg sighed, settling into her chair behind the cluttered desk. “You mentioned an investigation on the phone. How can I help?”

Finn leaned forward in his seat, taking a deep breath before he began. “We’re looking for information about a former student named Clive Waiters. He would’ve been here about twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years?” Mrs. Brigg’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “That’s quite a long time. I can’t say I remember every student who’s passed through these halls.”

“Maybe this will help,” Finn said, pulling out a worn photograph of a younger Clive Waiters and handing it to Mrs. Brigg.

As the gray-haired woman studied the picture, her gaze sharpened, and something akin to recognition flickered across her face. “Yes, I do remember him now,” she admitted. “Clive was a quiet boy, kept to himself mostly.”

“Mrs. Brigg, do you recall any incidents involving Clive and other students?” Sheila asked.

For a moment, the older woman hesitated, her eyes clouding with a distant memory. “There was one incident that stands out in particular,” she began slowly. “It happened in the gymnasium during a school assembly. Some of the popular

kids decided to make Clive their target. They cornered him, pushed him around, and took his belongings.”

“Can you describe what happened next?” Finn asked, his fingers tapping lightly on the arm of his chair, betraying his impatience.

“Those kids were merciless,” Mrs. Brigg continued, her voice thick with anger. “They taunted Clive, calling him names, even pouring soda on his head. He tried to fight back, but there were too many of them. The poor boy was humiliated and broken.”

She paused, looking from Finn to Sheila. “Is he in some sort of trouble now?” she asked, concern etched on her face.

“We’re not sure,” Finn replied, his voice carefully neutral. “We just need to ask him some questions and see what he knows.”

Sheila shifted in her chair, her mind racing with questions as she considered the implications of Mrs. Brigg’s story. The gymnasium had been a place where Sheila herself had felt most alive and empowered. For Clive Waiters, though, it must have been a living hell.

Her eyes locked on Mrs. Brigg’s, seeking answers. “Did Clive ever fight back or retaliate against the bullies?”

Mrs. Brigg shook her head, her gray curls bobbing gently. “No, he just kept to himself mostly. You know, we had a program here at Mildred Heights for helping troubled students. I personally worked with many of them, even the janitor’s son, despite the fact that he wasn’t officially enrolled.” She sighed,

her gaze distant. “I tried to get Clive into the program, but his father wouldn’t allow it. He believed that Clive needed to toughen up and learn to deal with things on his own.”

Sheila clenched her fists, frustrated by the thought of a parent standing in the way of their child getting help. She knew better than most the value of support and teamwork, something Clive had been cruelly denied.

“Clive didn’t last much longer after that incident in the gym,” Mrs. Brigg continued, her voice tinged with regret. “He dropped out of school and quickly fell off my radar. I wanted to follow up with him, but there were so many other students who needed help. Still, I feel guilty about not doing more for him.”

“Mrs. Brigg, you’ve done more for your students than most teachers would,” Finn reassured her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You can’t blame yourself for what happened to Clive.”

“Thank you, officer, but I still can’t help feeling responsible,” she said, looking down at her hands folded in her lap.

“Mrs. Brigg,” Sheila said softly, “you did what you could. As a teacher, your job is to guide your students, but ultimately, their paths are their own to choose. Clive’s life took a turn that no one could have predicted.”

Mrs. Brigg looked up at Sheila, tears glistening in her eyes. “I just wish I could’ve helped him more.”

“Your dedication to your students is admirable,” Sheila said, reaching out to grasp Mrs. Brigg’s hand. “But even the best of intentions can’t always change the course of someone’s life. Now, we need to focus on finding Clive and getting answers. Do you have any idea where he might be now? We went to his home, but he wasn’t there.”

Mrs. Brigg frowned in thought, her eyes scanning the office as if searching for an answer. “I’m not sure,” she admitted, shaking her head. “It’s been so many years... But back when he was still a student here, there was a bridge he would sometimes go to when he needed to escape from the other kids. It’s called Hartnell Bridge. I don’t know if he would still go there after all this time, but it’s something, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Brigg,” Sheila said, exchanging a glance with Finn. They would have to check out the bridge as soon as possible.

As they gathered their things and prepared to leave, Mrs. Brigg looked at them with a somber expression. “I always worried about Clive,” she confessed, her voice barely more than a whisper. “He was like a pressure cooker, you know? All that anger and pain boiling inside him... I knew that sooner or later, he was going to explode. I just hoped nobody else would get hurt.”





## CHAPTER TWENTY

Sheila eased off the accelerator as Hartnell Bridge loomed in the distance, its silhouette a dark, hulking shape against the inky night sky.

As they approached the bridge, Sheila spotted another vehicle parked near the entrance—an old, dented pickup truck. The paint had long since faded, and rust clung to the edges of the wheel wells. The windows were fogged up from the cold air, making it impossible to see inside.

Sheila pulled the car to a stop just a few feet away from the truck, headlights illuminating its empty interior.

“Think he’s inside?” she asked.

“If he is,” Finn answered, “I’m guessing he’s been there for a while, given the amount of condensation on the windows.”

Just then, Sheila caught sight of a shadowy figure standing on the bridge, partially obscured by the railings. With only the dim glow of moonlight to guide her, it was difficult to see much beyond the person’s general outline.

“I think I just found him,” she said, pointing as her heart pounded a little faster.

Finn nodded and drew his weapon. He ejected the magazine, checked it, then slammed it home again.

“Stay close,” he said, opening his door. Sheila followed him out a moment later.

The chilling wind whipped around them, causing Sheila to shiver involuntarily. They approached the bridge on foot, Finn’s weapon drawn and ready, their breaths visible in the cold air. Each step felt heavier than the last, the tension thickening like fog, making it difficult for Sheila to breathe.

There was a sudden movement as the figure tossed something small over the bridge.

“Stop!” Sheila shouted, worried that the figure might be disposing of evidence. Her heart pounded in her chest, her mind racing.

“Raise your hands!” Finn ordered, his voice authoritative and unwavering. The man froze, keeping his face turned away from them, his hands buried in his pockets.

The scene was eerily quiet except for the howling wind and the distant sound of water rushing below. Sheila could feel the tight knot of fear in her stomach as she tried to assess the situation. Finn’s grip tightened on his weapon, his body tensed and ready for action.

“Slowly pull your hands out of your pockets,” Finn commanded, his voice stern and unyielding. But the man didn’t respond, only standing there, rigid and uncooperative.

Finn’s jaw clenched in frustration. “I’m gonna need backup on Hartnell Bridge,” he said into his radio.

Sheila watched the stranger closely, trying to gauge his intentions. Taking a cautious step closer, she addressed the

man with a calm, even tone. “Hey, we just want to talk to you. What’s going on?”

For a moment, the wind seemed to carry her words away, leaving only silence in its wake. Then, the man finally turned his head slightly, acknowledging her presence. When the man spoke, his voice was slurred and heavy with the weight of inebriation.

“I just want to be left alone,” he muttered, his words barely audible over the wind.

Sheila’s brow furrowed as she tried to piece together the situation. “What did you throw off the bridge?” she asked.

“Jus’ ...a bottle,” he replied vaguely, swaying slightly on his feet.

“Then why won’t you take your hands out of your pockets?” Sheila continued, her eyes fixed on his concealed hands.

“Hands are cold,” he mumbled, his voice wavering. Sheila wasn’t sure if she could trust his words, but she decided to approach him with caution and empathy rather than force.

As she and Finn slowly closed the distance between them, Sheila kept talking, trying to keep the man calm and engage him in conversation. “It’s freezing out here. Why don’t we go someplace warmer? Maybe get a hot chocolate or something?”

Suddenly, the man’s demeanor changed. He snapped, pulling his hands from his pockets and gripping the edge of the railing with white knuckles. “Don’t come any closer!” he

shouted, panic lacing his voice. “I swear, I’ll jump! I’m not joking!”

Sheila’s heart pounded in her chest. Her instinct to protect and help others kicked into overdrive as she weighed her options and searched for the right words to say. Finn moved a step closer, his weapon still raised and his eyes locked on the distressed man, prepared to intervene if necessary.

“Listen,” Sheila said softly, her voice firm yet reassuring. “We don’t want you to jump. We want to help you. Please, let us do that.”

The man’s body trembled, his grip on the railing tightening as he stared down at the dark water below.

Sheila took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving the man’s face as she tried to keep her voice steady. “Please, tell me what’s going on. Maybe I can help.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he muttered, still clutching the railing. His knuckles were white from the strain.

“Give me a chance to understand.” Sheila kept her gaze locked on his, trying to convey her sincerity. The man remained silent, his eyes flickering with uncertainty.

Finn, sensing an opportunity, shifted forward, ready to spring at the man and tackle him if need be. But Sheila raised a hand, signaling for him to stay where he was. She had a feeling she could convince the man to surrender without resorting to force.

“Listen,” she began, her voice gentle but firm. “We went to your old high school, Mildred Heights, and spoke with Mrs.

Brigg.”

The mention of Mrs. Brigg seemed to catch the man’s attention. He glanced at Sheila, his grip on the railing lessening slightly. “How is she?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“She’s well,” Sheila replied, allowing a small smile to touch her lips. “Still staying late at work to grade papers, though. You know how she is, always putting her students first.”

The man snorted, his tense posture easing a bit. “Yeah, that’s just like Mrs. Brigg,” he said, his voice tinged with a hint of affection.

Taking advantage of this opening, Sheila continued to engage the man in conversation. She knew she had to tread carefully. One wrong word could send him over the edge—literally.

“What happened to make you feel like this is your only option?” she asked softly, her heart heavy with empathy.

The man hesitated, his eyes darting between Sheila and Finn as if debating whether or not to trust them. He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing nervously in the dim moonlight. “I’ve been through some things,” he finally murmured vaguely

“Let us help you,” Sheila said. “Whatever it is, you don’t have to face it alone.”

He said nothing, just stared down into the dark abyss, as if contemplating what it would feel to plunge into its depths.

Sheila hesitated for a moment, gathering her thoughts before she spoke. “I know you were bullied in school,” she said quietly, watching the man’s reaction closely. His eyes narrowed as he looked at her, regarding her with a mix of suspicion and disbelief.

“You don’t know what it was like,” he said, his voice trembling with anger and pain.

“Maybe not. But I’d like to understand. Can you tell me about it?”

The man hesitated, as if torn between a desire to share his torment and the need to keep it hidden. Finally, he began to speak, his voice low and halting. “It was hell,” he whispered, staring into the distance as if reliving the memories. “Every day, they’d find new ways to make me feel worthless. They laughed at me, called me names...it never stopped.”

Sheila listened intently, her heart aching for this broken man standing on the edge of despair. She wanted to reach out and comfort him but knew that doing so might push him away.

“Was Roy Hubbard one of the students who bullied you?” she asked gently, gauging his reaction.

His eyes widened, and he stared at her in shock. “How did you know that?”

“What about Macy Dobson? Did she bully you too?”

He looked even more surprised, if possible, and nodded slowly. “Yeah, she did,” he said, his voice cracking. “How do you know all this?”

Sheila's heart pounded as she prepared to deliver the news. "Roy and Macy are both dead," she said. "They've been murdered."

The man's face paled, his eyes widening in shock. "What?" he stammered, disbelief etched across his face. "Is that why you're here?"

Sheila studied him, saying nothing. The silence stretched, and Waiters began to fidget, looking uncomfortable beneath their stares. Was it because he didn't like being accused of something he hadn't done, or because he had a guilty conscience?

"I didn't touch them," he said, swallowing hard. "I...I was angry with them, but I wouldn't kill anyone. That's not me." He hesitated. "Is this about those messages left in the boys' and girls' bathrooms?"

Sheila exchanged a puzzled glance with Finn. "What messages?" she asked.

Waiters waved a dismissive hand. "I don't remember what they said—someone erased them right away. But one was about Roy Hubbard, I remember hearing that, and I think the one in the girls' bathroom was about Macy.

Sheila studied him, intrigued by this new information. But was he telling the truth or merely trying to throw them off the scent?

"What were you doing in the girls' bathroom?" Finn asked.

Waiters let out a little stutter of a laugh. “Me? Oh, I didn’t go in there—that’s not what I’m saying. I heard about it, okay? The whole school was buzzing with it. This was...hell, quite a few years ago. Again, I don’t remember the exact words of the messages, but the parents were pretty upset about them.”

“And you had nothing to do with these messages?” Finn asked. “You didn’t think it would be fun to, say, play a little prank? Have a little fun at someone else’s expense?”

Waiters shook his head firmly. “Not a chance. I wasn’t even at school that day—I had pink eye. I heard about it a few days later when I got back. I could probably even prove it to you if you wanted—the pink eye, I mean. Had a doctor’s note and everything.”

Finn’s face remained stoic, but he didn’t ask a follow-up question, which suggested to Sheila that he was thinking the same thing she was thinking: Waiters was looking less and less like their guy.

She took a deep breath and asked her next question.

“Where have you been for the past few hours?”

He furrowed his brow, seemingly puzzled by the question.

“Why?”

“Please, just answer the question,” she repeated, her patience wearing thin.

“Fine,” he replied, taking a deep breath. “I was at work until about two hours ago. I’m a short-order cook at a restaurant downtown. After that, I went to a bar, drank alone for a while, then came here.”



His story seemed genuine. Sheila knew that verifying his alibi would be crucial, but for now, there was something about his words, the raw honesty in his voice, that made her believe him.

“Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “My boss, Mr. Thompson, can confirm I was at the restaurant. And at the bar, the bartender should remember me. I talked to him a bit before leaving.”

Sheila studied Waiters’ face, searching for cracks in his story. “Clive,” she said softly, “if you didn’t come here to dispose of evidence, then why are you on this bridge tonight?”

He hesitated, dropping his gaze to the cold, steel railing. “Something terrible happened to me recently. I...I lost someone I cared about.”

“Who? Who did you lose?”

Clive shook his head, tears stinging his eyes. “My sister, Elise. She was everything to me,” he said, his voice breaking. “We were supposed to get together next month, but she was killed in a hit-and-run accident a week ago. She was living up in Alaska, so we didn’t get many chances to see one another.”

Sheila’s heart sank. She could see the pain etched on Clive’s face, the raw anguish of losing someone he loved. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I can’t...I can’t deal with this right now.”

“I understand,” she said. “Can you tell me more about Elise? What was she like?”

Clive took a deep breath, his eyes misty with tears. “She was beautiful, inside and out. Kind, funny, smart...just a wonderful person.”

Sheila’s heart went out to Clive. She could see how much he’d loved Elise and how her death had shattered him.

“Anyway,” he continued, “it all just became too much – remembering her, I mean – so I thought...I thought maybe it would be easier if I wasn’t around anymore. Life is nothing but pain and disappointment.”

Sheila’s heart ached for the broken man before her. She knew the pain of loss and how it could make even the strongest person feel weak and alone. But she also knew that there were other ways to cope, other paths to healing.

“Clive, I understand that things seem unbearable right now, but ending your life isn’t the answer. There are people who care about you, who want to help you through this.” She paused, trying to gauge his reaction. “You don’t have to go through this alone.”

Walters looked at her skeptically, his eyes filled with doubt. “You really think talking to someone will change anything?”

“Sometimes all it takes is sharing your burden with someone else. Give yourself a chance to heal, to find a way forward.” As she spoke, his expression softened, and he seemed to consider her words. Meanwhile, Finn remained tense, ready to act if necessary.

“Okay,” Waiters whispered finally, raising his hands in surrender. “I...I’ll give it a try.”

Finn moved in cautiously, frisking Waiters for any hidden weapons. Finding none, he stepped back, allowing Sheila to take charge once more.

“Thank you for trusting us,” she said. “Now we’re going to have to take you to the station while we look into your alibi. But after that, we’ll get you the help you need.”

Waiters nodded, his face a mix of gratitude and hope. As they led him away from the bridge and toward the car, Sheila felt an odd mixture of relief and uncertainty. They had potentially saved a life tonight, but there was still a murderer on the loose.

And time might be running out for the next family on the killer’s list.



## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Finn snapped his phone shut, a deep frown etched across his face. “Waiters’ alibi checks out,” he said, disappointment lacing his voice. “He couldn’t have murdered the Warrens.”

Sheila wasn’t surprised. Listening to Waiters’ troubled story on the bridge, she’d believed that he had truly gone there intending to harm himself, which didn’t seem like something the killer would do. The killer was all about blaming others for his own problems, not blaming himself.

Nevertheless, she could see that Finn had hoped for a breakthrough, and this news was a setback for both of them.

“We’ll just have to keep looking, then,” she said.

The dimly lit gymnasium loomed around them, shadows playing tricks on their vision as they stood near the center court. They had come back here to the very gym where Waiters had been bullied in order to better visualize what had happened to him, just in case he really was the killer.

Now that his alibi was confirmed, however, Sheila wondered if they were just wasting their time. Had the real killer been here, too? Did he have a story similar to Waiters’?

Or had they simply gone off on a rabbit trail?

The scent of old sweat and polished wood filled the air as Sheila paced across the court. This school had to be significant—it had come up too many times in their investigation for it

not to be. But what was the connection with the killer? Where were they supposed to go from here?

“Hey!” Finn’s voice cut through her thoughts, and she barely had time to react as he tossed a basketball in her direction. Her reflexes kicked in, and she snatched the ball out of the air just before it would have hit her chest.

“What are you doing?” she asked, more surprised by the sudden distraction than annoyed.

“Getting some exercise,” Finn replied with a grin. “Helps clear the mind, ya know? Plus, there’s no harm in having a little fun while we’re here.” He motioned for her to take a shot.

Sheila rolled her eyes but complied, heaving the ball toward the hoop. It bounced off the rim, missing by a mile. She sighed, shaking her head. “I’m a little rusty, okay?”

Finn caught the rebound and swiftly laid the ball in. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve heard it a thousand times.” He winked at her, then grew serious again. “So, what are we missing? Are we sure the school is the connection?”

He passed her the ball again, and she cradled it in her hands, considering his question. “I think the school has to be the connection. It’s the one thing all the victims have in common.”

“Maybe we should go through the list of students again,” Finn suggested, watching her intently.

Sheila took another shot, the ball sailing through the air before bouncing off the backboard. “We’ve already done that,

Finn. We've gone through them all."

As the ball thudded to the ground, Sheila's frustration grew. They were so close to finding the truth, she could feel it. But something was still eluding them, some crucial piece of the puzzle that would finally bring everything together.

Finn backed up to the three-point line, sweat glistening on his forehead. "Maybe we need to think outside the box," he said, dribbling the ball. "What if the killer was one of the teachers?" He launched the ball toward the hoop, and it swished through the net with ease.

As he passed the ball back to Sheila, she caught it, struck by a sudden idea. Her eyes widened, and Finn could see the gears turning in her head. "What's got you so fired up?" he asked.

"Remember what Waiters said about someone writing hateful messages toward both Roy and Macy in the bathrooms?" Sheila's grip on the basketball tightened. "Who would be able to do that?"

Finn shrugged, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "Any of the students could have, I guess."

"Think about it, Finn," Sheila pressed. "It would be difficult for a boy to sneak into the girls' bathroom without being seen, and vice versa." The ball thumped against the floor as she bounced it, her mind racing.

"Difficult, but not impossible," Finn said, watching her intently.

Sheila stopped dribbling and held the ball close to her chest.

“Remember how Mrs. Brigg mentioned a mentorship program for troubled students?” she asked.

“Yes,” Finn said slowly, drawing the word out. “What about it?” Before Sheila could explain, however, Finn finally made the connection. His eyes widened. “The janitor’s son,” he said.

Sheila nodded. “Think about it. The killer also carved a message into one of the trees at the cemetery where the Warrens’ bodies were found. Based on the way the letters were carved, I’d say the killer wasn’t particularly literate—which fits with the janitor’s son being part of such a mentorship program.”

She could tell Finn was hesitating, unsure what to think. Just as Sheila was about to press her case, the gymnasium door creaked open. Mrs. Brigg, her tired eyes peering at them from behind a stack of papers, stepped inside. “How long do you two think you’ll be staying?” she asked, stifling a yawn. “I’m heading home, and I need to lock up.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Brigg,” Sheila said, suddenly feeling guilty for keeping the woman late. “We were just discussing the case.”

“Ah, I see.” Mrs. Brigg shifted the papers in her arms, clearly eager to leave. “Anything I can help with?”

“Actually, yes,” Sheila replied, seizing the opportunity. “What do you remember about the janitor’s son? You



mentioned him earlier when talking about the mentorship program.”

“Ben Burton,” Mrs. Brigg said, her brow furrowing as she recalled the boy. “Some of the other kids used to make fun of his name, calling him ‘BB Boy’ and joking about what a backwards hillbilly he was, due to the fact that he lived out in the country with his father. Of course, they only did it behind his back.”

“Really?” Sheila probed, curious about this new information. “Why would they only do it behind his back?”

Mrs. Brigg’s face took on a serious expression, as if remembering something unpleasant. “Ben could be quite... intimidating,” she admitted. “His eyes could be cold, emotionless. And he had these strange habits that made it hard for him to fit in with the others.”

As Mrs. Brigg spoke, Sheila noticed Finn’s fingers tightening around the basketball, knuckles turning white. She could tell he shared her growing sense of unease.

“Could you give us an example of these habits?” Sheila asked, hoping to gain a better understanding of Ben Burton’s character.

“Ben was fixated on cleanliness,” Mrs. Brigg said, her voice taking on a distant tone. “He would wash his hands obsessively, sometimes for minutes at a time. And he had this habit of staring without blinking, which made the other students incredibly uncomfortable.”

“Sounds like a troubled kid,” Finn muttered, his eyes locked on Sheila as if searching for her thoughts.

“Yes, he was,” Mrs. Brigg agreed, her voice heavy with regret. “We tried to help him, but there’s only so much a mentorship program can do.”

“Did Burton ever act hostile toward any of the other students?” Finn asked.

“Hostile? Not exactly,” the teacher said, hesitating for a moment. “But he was creepy around the girls. He’d follow them sometimes, or just stand there and watch them. It was... obsessive.” She shuddered at the memory.

Sheila couldn’t help but feel a mixture of empathy and unease as she imagined the lonely figure of Ben Burton, hovering on the edges of social circles, unable to bridge the gap between himself and the world.

“Sometimes,” Mrs. Brigg continued, “he’d just be sitting there by himself, fidgeting in his lap. He always seemed to have a piece of rope on hand – sometimes just a spare shoelace – and he’d tie it and untie it endlessly, as if it was the only way he could distract himself.”

At the teacher’s words, Sheila immediately thought of the tree at the graveyard and the elaborate knots tied to it.

“Is Ben still around, Mrs. Brigg?” she asked, suddenly very interested in speaking with him.

“Last I knew, he was still living with his father, Edward,” she replied, her eyes clouding with distaste. “He’s an... unpleasant man.”

“Unpleasant?” Finn asked. “How so?”

“He was fired some years back for selling drugs to the students,” Mrs. Brigg said, her voice heavy with disgust. “And I heard that he’s been involved with some shady characters since then.”

“So, Ben Burton could have been exposed to some dangerous people,” Sheila said, her mind racing. “That would explain the violent behavior.”

Mrs. Brigg sighed. She seemed to be lost in memory, no longer listening. “I did everything I could to help young Ben with his education,” she said, “but he was so far behind, and as soon as the school fired his father, he quit showing up to the program.”

“What was his writing like?” Sheila asked, suddenly alert. “His handwriting, I mean.”

Mrs. Brigg grunted softly. “It was unique, to say the least. I’ll never forget how he formed his capital Es. They looked just like—”

“Threes,” Sheila said.

Mrs. Brigg’s eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“Because I’ve seen his handwriting already,” Sheila said softly. “Carved into a tree.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Ben sat in his car, the dim glow of the dashboard barely illuminating the crumpled piece of paper in his hands. He squinted at the list of names scrawled there, their letters uneven and distorted, as though written by a child who had barely mastered penmanship.

Two names were already crossed out: Roy Hubbard and Macy Warren. Ben's heart raced as he traced his finger down to the next name: Juanita Gomez. A shiver of excitement coursed through him, fueling the anticipation for the night's work.

"Time for you to join them, Juanita," he whispered to himself, a grin stretching across his face.

It was around midnight, and the quiet country road seemed still as death itself. The pale radiance of the moon cast eerie shadows on the ground, and Ben could feel the darkness pressing in from all sides. Across the street stood a house, its windows black and devoid of any light.

*They must have gone to bed,* he thought as he eyed the vehicles parked in the driveway like silent sentinels. He knew they were all home, tucked away in their little world, completely unaware of the danger lurking just outside their door.

As Ben shoved the pad of paper into his pocket, a pang of bitterness tightened his chest. The thought that these people

had happy families – an experience he'd never known – was like a splinter in his mind, impossible to ignore.

He remembered those days at Mildred Heights High School, back when his father, Edward Burton, worked as a janitor. Day after day, young Ben tagged along, helping his dad clean up the messes left behind by careless teenagers. He watched the other kids arrive each morning, dropped off by their smiling, happy parents who seemed to have it all together. Their laughter and carefree chatter echoed through the hallways as they shared stories about family vacations, weekend outings, sleepovers with friends.

“Mom made the best lasagna last night,” one girl bragged, her friends nodding in agreement.

“Can't wait for this weekend! My dad's taking us camping!” a boy exclaimed, high-fiving his friend.

Ben clenched his fists as he mopped the floors, jealousy gnawing at him like a ravenous beast. Why did they deserve happiness while he languished in misery? The unfairness of it all stoked a fire of rage within him, one that smoldered and grew with each passing day.

His own upbringing had been nothing short of a disaster. His mother had abandoned him when he was just a child, leaving him to be raised by a father who was as inept at parenting as he was uninterested. Edward Burton was a man of few words, and even fewer emotions. The only thing he ever taught Ben was how to survive—how to stretch a dollar, how to fix a broken pipe, and how to scrub away the grime of life until the surfaces shined again.

“Damn it, Ben! Can’t you do anything right?” his father would snap if Ben failed to meet his expectations. “You’re as useless as your mother!”

“Maybe if you were half the man she thought you were, she would have stayed,” Ben would retort, his voice shaking with barely suppressed anger.

As Ben listened to the high school kids swap stories about their seemingly perfect lives, he couldn’t help but seethe with envy and anger. Their laughter grated on his ears like nails on a chalkboard, and he would grit his teeth as they prattled on about family vacations, weekend barbecues, and the latest gadgets they had acquired. How unfair it was that they had been given everything he had been denied.

In the dimly lit corners of his mind, he began to entertain dark fantasies about how he could level the playing field. He imagined tampering with the brakes of their shiny new cars or lacing their birthday cakes with poison. It was in these moments that Ben started to write their names down on a piece of paper, a secret list that fueled his obsession.

Years later, when Roy Hubbard returned to town, Ben took it as a sign that fate was nudging him forward. He felt an electric jolt of excitement at the thought that one of them would finally pay for their unearned happiness.

Now, an adult rather than a scrawny high school kid, Ben stepped out of his vehicle, his heart pounding as if trying to escape from his chest. A part of him knew that he should lay low, that the authorities were undoubtedly on high alert after the deaths of Roy and Macy. But he chose to ignore the voice

of caution in the back of his head. It was drowned out by the desperate urgency that surged through him, driving him to continue his deadly quest for what he considered retribution.

“Can’t stop now,” he whispered to himself, adjusting his jacket as the cold air wrapped around him like a shroud. “No turning back.”

He glanced down at the piece of paper clutched in his hand, the list of names written in his familiar, child-like scrawl. Each name represented a life that seemed so much better than his own, and he felt the same burning desire for vengeance that had plagued him since he was a boy. It was a hunger that could only be sated by the destruction of their happiness, one family at a time.

“Juanita Gomez, you’re next,” Ben murmured, his words swallowed up by the darkness as he moved stealthily toward his target, driven by a need to kill that had become an all-consuming part of who he was.

His boots crunched on loose gravel as he glanced down the dark expanse of the country road. In the distance, illuminated by the pale moonlight, was a cemetery. He couldn’t help but smile at the sight of it, feeling a strange sense of comfort in its presence.

To Ben, cemeteries were places of peace and finality, where the dead could rest undisturbed for eternity. Leaving his victims’ bodies there seemed fitting to him; it was as if he was giving them an opportunity to join the ranks of the forgotten and be absolved of their sins against him. “Rest in peace,” he



muttered under his breath, imagining Juanita Gomez's name etched onto a cold gravestone.

As he approached the house, Ben took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of damp earth and freshly cut grass. His senses were heightened by adrenaline, making him acutely aware of every sound, every smell, every shadow that flickered across the landscape. He paused for a moment, listening intently for any signs of life within the house.

“Come on, Ben. Focus,” he whispered to himself, feeling the urgency of his mission gnawing at him like a ravenous beast. He knew he should be more cautious – blend into the darkness, move silently, leave no trace – but his eagerness for revenge clouded his judgment.

Ignoring the voice of reason in his mind, Ben made his way to the back door of the house. The lock was old and worn, offering little resistance as he carefully jimmied it open with a flat-head screwdriver he had brought from his car. As the door creaked open, he winced at the noise, cursing his own impatience.

*Damn it, he thought, can't afford any mistakes.*

Stepping inside, he found himself in a small mudroom. He paused again, his heart pounding in his ears as he strained to hear any sounds of movement from within the house. Satisfied that he hadn't alerted anyone to his presence, he ventured farther inside.

The urgency of his need to kill pulsed through him like an electric current, urging him on and drowning out the whispers of caution that tried to slow him down. He was so close now,

so close to making Juanita Gomez suffer just as he had suffered all those years ago. And nothing would stand in his way.

He stepped out of the mudroom and into the kitchen. Various utensils hung from a rack above the stove, and family photos adorned the walls. The room held an air of warmth and love, a stark contrast to the coldness in Ben's heart.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath, realizing that, in his haste, he had come unprepared. No gun, no knife—not even a piece of rope to work with. But there was no turning back now. He couldn't let his rage subside; he needed to act while the fire of vengeance still burned within him. He'd find something along the way, improvise if needed. After all, it wasn't just about the kill—it was about making them suffer, like he had suffered for so long.

"Focus, Ben," he whispered, steadying himself. "You can do this."

With a newfound determination, he crept toward the staircase that led to the upper floor. His pulse raced as he imagined the terror that awaited Juanita Gomez. He gripped the railing tightly, his knuckles turning white as he started to ascend.

*Nice and slow*, he thought, placing each foot carefully on the steps to avoid any creaks or groans. *You've got all night.*

As he reached the top of the stairs, he found himself in a narrow hallway. The soft glow of a nightlight illuminated the path before him, casting a warm, yellow light on the doors that

lined the corridor. Family portraits smiled down at him from the walls, ignorant of the danger lurking in their midst.

“Which one is hers?” he wondered, scanning the closed doors, trying to decipher which room belonged to his prey.

Suddenly, the sound of a toilet flushing reached his ears. Ben froze in place, his ears straining to pinpoint the source. A door creaked open, and a teenage girl emerged, rubbing her eyes groggily. Her dark hair hung loose around her shoulders, and she wore an oversized t-shirt that swallowed her petite frame.

“Who are you?” she whispered, her voice trembling with fear as she caught sight of Ben. “What do you want?”

Ben lunged toward her, but the girl reacted quickly, dashing into her bedroom and slamming the door shut behind her. He heard the lock click into place just as he reached it, and he pounded on the door furiously.

“Open up!” he yelled, his voice a mixture of rage and desperation. “You can’t hide from me!”

As he frantically searched for a way in, Ben noticed the room across the hallway. It was being renovated, with tools and construction materials scattered about haphazardly. The walls were half-painted, and a ladder leaned against one side. Ben’s eyes fell upon a hammer lying amidst the chaos, and he couldn’t help but smile grimly at the sight.

“Perfect,” he whispered, grabbing the hammer and testing its weight in his hand. It felt solid and powerful—just what he

needed to break down the door and get to the terrified girl hiding within.

“Time’s up,” he muttered under his breath, raising the hammer and taking a step back. “Ready or not, here I come.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Sheila picked her steps carefully as she and Finn approached the remote house shrouded in darkness. The dense forest loomed on either side of the narrow path, casting eerie shadows that seemed to reach for them like skeletal fingers. The only sound was the crunch of leaves underfoot and the distant hoot of an owl.

Sheila's senses were on high alert, adrenaline pumping through her veins. She felt certain that Ben Burton, the janitor's son, had to be the killer. Discovering his identity would be no great prize, however, if he took the lives of another family, which was why she was hoping so desperately that he was here, in his home.

Not out hunting.

"Can't say I'm a fan of the place," Finn muttered, his breath visible in the cold night air.

"Me neither," Sheila said. "It's too quiet."

They stepped onto the creaky porch. Finn raised his fist, rapping urgently on the door. The darkness was suffocating, broken only by the pale moonlight filtering through the overhanging branches. As she waited for a response, Sheila glanced around nervously, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Come on," she whispered under her breath, willing someone to answer.

The door finally creaked open, revealing an old man squinting at them with bleary eyes. His disheveled white hair stood on end, and his wrinkled face was creased with annoyance. He was wearing a faded flannel nightshirt, making it clear he had been sleeping.

“Edward Burton?” Finn asked.

The old man nodded, still glaring at them. “Whaddya want?” he grumbled, voice thick with sleep. “It’s the middle of the damn night.”

“Apologies for the late intrusion,” Sheila said, trying to inject some civility into the conversation. “We need to know if your son Ben is here.”

“Ben?” Edward’s eyebrows furrowed with anger. “What the hell business is it of yours?”

“Your son is a suspect in a murder investigation,” Finn said firmly, staring Edward down. “If you care about what happens to him, you’ll cooperate with us.”

Edward’s eyes widened as he processed Finn’s words. For a moment, his irritation seemed to dissipate, replaced by a flicker of fear. But his face hardened once more, and he stared at them defiantly.

“Fine,” he said, stepping back to let them into the house. “But you better have a damn good reason for accusing my boy of something like that.”

Sheila and Finn followed Edward into the house. Sheila’s eyes scanned the surroundings, taking in the cluttered living

room filled with worn-out furniture and an array of family photographs.

“Ben’s room is this way,” Edward muttered, leading them down a narrow hallway lined with peeling wallpaper. They stopped in front of a faded blue door adorned with stickers from Ben’s high school days—bands he liked, sports teams he supported, and a few crude jokes typical of a teenager’s sense of humor.

“Ben!” Edward called out, banging on the door with a clenched fist. “Open up! You’ve got visitors!”

Silence answered them. Edward turned to Sheila and Finn, his expression a mix of confusion and worry. “He always was a heavy sleeper,” he mumbled, trying the door handle only to find it locked.

“Step aside, Mr. Burton,” Finn said, drawing his gun. Edward started to protest, but before he could get the words out, Finn had already broken open the door with one swift kick.

“What the hell?” Edward demanded. “Who’s going to pay for that?”

Ignoring Edward, Sheila and Finn entered the room, eyes scanning every corner for any sign of Ben. The unmade bed, scattered clothes, and posters of rock bands on the walls gave the room a chaotic feel. However, it was the open window that caught Sheila’s attention.

“Damn it,” she said, hurrying over to the window and peering out. “He’s already gone.”



“What type of vehicle does Ben drive?” Finn asked Edward, who had followed them into the room, his arms crossed.

“Why should I tell you?” he asked.

“Ever heard of obstruction of justice?” Finn asked.

Sheila decided to take a gentler approach. “If you want to clear your son’s name, the best way to do so is to help us find him. The longer this goes on, the worse it looks for him.”

Edward took a deep breath and sighed, looking suddenly worried. “He drives a black pickup. Dodge, I think.”

Finn nodded and stepped away, pulling out his phone. “I’ll have them put out an APB on the vehicle,” he said to Sheila. “There’s also the possibility of tracking his phone.”

As Finn spoke with his colleagues, Sheila began a meticulous search of the room, checking drawers, lifting up piles of clothes, and peering under the bed. She moved with purpose, methodically scanning every inch of the room. Her trained eyes picked up on small details: a stack of unpaid bills on the dresser, the worn edges of a paperback book left open on the nightstand, and a collection of empty beer bottles by the bed. Each told a story, but none brought her closer to discovering where Ben could be.

Edward continued to ramble, his voice tense with disbelief. “This isn’t like him, you know? He just got out of prison, trying to get his life back together. He wouldn’t just disappear without saying something.”

“Focus on the task at hand, Sheila,” she whispered to herself, blocking out Edward’s words. Time was slipping away, and she needed to concentrate. As she examined the room further, her eyes fell upon a small crack in the wall behind the dresser. Intrigued, she carefully pushed the heavy furniture aside, revealing a hidden compartment.

“Got something!” she called out, her voice catching Finn’s attention. She reached into the concealed space, her fingers brushing against a cold, metal object.

“Be careful,” Finn warned, his eyes never leaving her as he continued to work on his phone.

With a final tug, Sheila pulled out a small box from the hiding place. The weight of it in her hands sent a shiver down her spine—she knew that whatever was inside could very well provide them with the answers they so desperately sought.

“I have no idea what that is,” Edward said. Judging by the look on his face, Sheila suspected he was telling the truth.

Sheila lifted the lid of the shoebox, her heart pounding in anticipation. Inside, she found an assortment of items that made her stomach churn—jewelry, wedding bands, watches, and similar items.

As she rifled through the contents, a particular watch caught her eye. It was a meticulously crafted gold piece, with an engraving on the inside: “To RH from JH, with Love.” A cold shiver ran down her spine as realization set in. It must have been a gift from Jane Hubbard to Roy Hubbard.

Which meant Ben had to be the killer.

“Looks like he’s been keeping trophies,” Sheila muttered under her breath, her hands shaking slightly. Her thoughts raced with anger and determination. She couldn’t let this monster escape justice.

“Hey, Sheila!” Finn’s voice interrupted her thoughts, urgency lacing his tone. “Someone spotted Ben’s vehicle a few miles from here. I managed to track his phone, too, but they’re in different locations.”

“Which one do we go after?” Sheila asked.

“We’ll have to split up,” Finn decided, his eyes locked on hers with steely resolve. “I’ll go after the vehicle—you follow the phone.”

“Alright.” Sheila nodded, scanning the room for anything else that might be of use.

She then turned to Edward, who had been watching them in stunned silence. “Do you have a car I can borrow?” she asked.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The moon hung low in the sky, casting an eerie glow on the barren landscape as Sheila drove Edward Burton's beat-up old Camaro down the silent country road, heading toward the address where Ben Burton's phone was located. The gnarled branches of leafless trees reached out like twisted fingers, while the wind howled through the vast expanse of dry, cracked earth.

As Sheila drove, she found her thoughts turning to her sister, wondering where Natalie could be and whether she was alright.

"Come on, Natalie," she muttered under her breath as she dialed her sister's number for what seemed like the hundredth time. But once again, all she got was Natalie's voicemail. She clenched her jaw, frustration mounting alongside her fear.

Lost in thoughts of Natalie and the danger that lay ahead, Sheila didn't notice when her GPS announced the upcoming turn. It wasn't until the robotic voice urged her to make a legal u-turn that she snapped back to the present.

"Damn it!" she said, slamming on the brakes and bringing the car to a shuddering halt in the middle of the road. She shifted into reverse, backed up, and then swung the car onto the correct path. She floored the accelerator, determined not to waste another second. The tires squealed in protest, but the engine roared to life, propelling her forward. The GPS

informed her that the house would be on her right in a few hundred feet.

*Please, let me get there in time, before someone else gets hurt*, she thought desperately, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the steering wheel. The weight of responsibility bore down on her, threatening to crush her beneath its burden. But she refused to give in to the pressure. She had trained her entire life for moments like these—high stakes situations that demanded every ounce of strength, skill, and determination she possessed.

Before long, the GPS notified her that she had reached her destination. As she slowed the Camaro to a stop, she peered through the darkness at the solitary house in front of her. She noticed a vehicle parked haphazardly at the edge of the road—a battered, mud-splattered pickup truck that didn't match the description she had been given for Ben's vehicle.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, her heart pounding in her chest. She couldn't shake the feeling that Ben was somewhere nearby, lurking in the shadows like a predator stalking its prey. As she continued to study the scene, searching for any signs of movement or danger, her phone rang, making her jump.

"Hello?" she answered, her voice shaky.

"Hey, it's Finn," came the familiar voice on the other end of the line. "I followed up on a report about Ben's vehicle, but he wasn't there. I think he abandoned it and got a new one."

Sheila glanced back at the pickup truck, a cold realization dawning on her. "Finn, I'm looking at a truck parked near the

house right now.”

“Which house?”

“The house where Ben’s phone is. I think...I think maybe Ben ditched his vehicle and got a new one. *This* one.”

“Shit,” Finn hissed, his concern palpable even over the phone. “Okay, listen to me, Sheila. You need to wait for backup before you do anything. Do you understand? Don’t go in there alone.”

Sheila said nothing, her gaze fixed on the darkened windows of the house.

“Promise me you won’t confront the killer on your own, no matter what,” Finn said.

“I’ll do my best,” she said.

There was a long pause that suggested Finn wasn’t entirely happy with this answer. “Why don’t we just stay on the phone till I get there?” he suggested, and Sheila realized he was worried she’d go in there on her own.

Sheila’s heart raced as she stared at the darkened house, fear and anticipation clawing at her insides. What if the killer was in there right now, slaughtering another family? The thought made her sick, but she knew she couldn’t act rashly. Finn was right—she needed to wait for backup.

“Worried about me?” she asked.

“Of course I’m worried about you. I’m learning very quickly not to underestimate you, but that doesn’t mean you’re invincible.”

“Don’t worry—I’m not trying to make headlines here.”

Needing something to occupy her restless energy, Sheila got out of the car and approached the parked vehicle. It was an older model truck, its paint faded and chipped. The tires were covered in mud, hinting at recent off-road activity.

As she peered through the window, she noticed the messy interior. Fast food wrappers and empty soda cans littered the floor, a chaotic jumble of maps and clothes strewn across the seats. A duffel bag lay open on the passenger side, revealing a tangled mess of ropes and duct tape. Her gut clenched at the sight, a shiver running down her spine as she thought about the killer’s previous victims.

“Talk to me, Sheila,” Finn said. “What are you up to? It sounded like you were walking.”

Sheila took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving the truck’s cluttered interior. “Just looking at that vehicle, I told you about.”

A note of warning entered Finn’s voice. “Don’t approach it, Sheila. You hear me? If it’s the killer’s vehicle, he might return and find you there.”

“I’m already here, Finn. Besides, I’m keeping an eye out. I just wanted to see if there was anything that might confirm...” She stopped abruptly as her gaze fell upon a notepad sticking out from the jumble of fast food wrappers and empty soda cans on the floor of the vehicle. Curiosity piqued, she cautiously opened the door, her ears straining for any sound coming from the house. As she reached in and grabbed the notepad, a chill ran down her spine.



“Roy Hubbard” and “Macy Warren” were scrawled across the top of the page, their names crossed out with heavy, angry lines. Sheila’s heart sank as she realized this was likely the killer’s list of targets. More names followed, each one a potential victim waiting to meet the same gruesome fate as the Hubbards and the Warrens.

“You still there?” Finn asked.

“Still here,” she said into the phone, her voice hushed. “I just found something inside the vehicle. It looks like a... a hit list.”

“Shit,” Finn cursed through the line. “How many names are there?”

“Too many,” she replied, her eyes scanning over the list. “Roy Hubbard and Macy Warren are crossed out, but there’s still more.”

“Damn it,” Finn muttered. “I’m on my way, but it’ll be a few minutes. Just stay put, and don’t do anything until I get there, okay?”

Before Sheila could respond, a blood-curdling scream pierced the air, coming from inside the house. Her head snapped up, her instincts kicking in. She didn’t have time to wait for Finn.

“Someone’s in trouble, Finn!” she hissed into the phone, her resolve steeling. “I can’t just stand here!”

“Wait for backup, Sheila!” Finn warned. “You don’t know what you’re walking into.”

“Get here as fast as you can,” she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. “But I have to do something.” With that, she ended the call, her heart pounding in her chest.

As she sprinted toward the house, she was keenly aware of the fact that she was unarmed, as well as the fact that the killer had used a gun on the last family. Despite the potential danger, however, she couldn’t stand idly by while someone might be in mortal peril. Her bravery and willingness to risk her own safety for others surged like a tidal wave, propelling her forward.

“Please let me get there in time,” she whispered, her voice cracking as she neared the house.

As she reached the front door, she became aware of a pounding noise from within, reverberating through the still night air. Without hesitation, she threw open the door and raced inside, following the sound, which seemed to be coming from upstairs.

“Whoever you are, I’m coming!” she shouted, hoping her words would give some semblance of comfort to the potential victim. As she bounded up the stairs, trying to quell the panic rising in her chest.

Her breath caught in her throat as she reached the top of the stairs, her eyes immediately drawn to the frantic scene unfolding before her. A Hispanic woman, sweat beading on her forehead and desperation etched into her features, was desperately restraining her teenage son with both hands. The boy struggled against his mother’s grip, his face contorted with fear and anger.

“Let me go!” he yelled, trying to wrench himself free. “I have to save her!”

Down the hallway, a man was attacking a door with a hammer, the wood splintering under the force of each frenzied blow. His hair was wild and unkempt, his eyes focused solely on the task at hand. He seemed oblivious to everything else around him, including Sheila’s presence.

“Please, call the police!” the teenager implored when he noticed Sheila, his voice strained with panic. “My sister’s in there, and he’s going to kill her!”

It occurred to her that since she wasn’t wearing a uniform, these people didn’t know who she was. “I’m with the police,” she said.

Then, taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for what she had to do. She knew that every second mattered, and she couldn’t afford to hesitate. Channeling her years of kickboxing training and her innate sense of determination, she sprinted down the hallway, her heart pounding in her ears.

“Hey!” she bellowed, trying to catch the man’s attention. When he didn’t respond, she launched herself at him, using her full body weight to tackle him to the ground. The impact sent the hammer clattering across the floor, but Sheila couldn’t allow herself even a moment of relief.

“Get off me!” the man snarled, struggling beneath her. But Sheila refused to let up, knowing that she had to keep him pinned down.

As the man continued to thrash beneath her, Sheila's mind raced with possible ways to subdue him until backup arrived. She couldn't risk letting him go, but she also knew that she couldn't hold him down forever. She slipped an arm around his throat, trying to put him in a chokehold. Just as she was about to do so, however, he drove his elbow hard into ribs, causing the breath to rush out of her lungs.

As Sheila fell back in pain, the man pushed himself off the floor and hurried toward the hammer, which he picked up. Armed again, he stared at her, looking puzzled.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"I'm with the police," she said. "Drop the weapon and put your hands up."

A grim smile tugged at his mouth. "If you're with the police, then where's your gun, huh?"

Before she could respond, he rushed toward her and, with a twisted snarl, aimed a blow at her face. She was unarmed, but her instincts and years of training kicked in. As the hammer whistled through the air, she ducked low, feeling the rush of air above her head. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she kept her focus on the attacker.

As the man lunged at her again, she sidestepped his blow, delivering a swift roundhouse kick to his ribs. The impact made him stagger, but he refused to drop the hammer.

"Give it up!" she shouted, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

The man ignored her and swung the hammer once more. This time, Sheila anticipated his move and caught his wrist in mid-swing, using her other arm to deliver a sharp elbow strike to his temple.

“Drop it!” she said, her voice strained with effort.

Her assailant gritted his teeth, refusing to comply. With a grunt of frustration, Sheila used her grip on his wrist to twist his arm behind his back, forcing him to release the weapon. The hammer clattered to the floor.

The man was stronger than he looked, however, and with a grunt he shoved Sheila away, breaking her grip. Then, perhaps realizing his attempts at overpowering Sheila were futile, his eyes darted toward the damaged door. With a sudden burst of desperation, he threw himself against it, the force sending it flying open. Before Sheila could react, he dashed into the room and grabbed the terrified teenage girl who had been hiding in the corner.

The girl was small and fragile-looking, her dark hair tangled and tear-streaked as she trembled with fear. Her wide brown eyes pleaded for help as the man raised the hammer above her head.

“Stay back!” he barked at Sheila, his voice shaking. “I swear I’ll kill her!”

The situation had escalated far beyond what Sheila had anticipated, but she couldn’t let this man hurt anyone else. She halted in her tracks, trying to find a way to reason with him.

“Hey, just calm down,” she said gently, her heart pounding in her chest. “Let’s talk about this. No one else has to get hurt.”

His response was a wild, frantic shout: “I ain’t going back to jail! I’m leaving this house a free man, or I’m dying here, and if I gotta die, I’m taking as many of you with me as I can!”



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

*He means it, too, Sheila thought, swallowing hard. He'll kill us all if he can.*

Her eyes shifted from the hammer in Ben's hand to the teenage girl Ben had one arm wrapped around as if he was pulling her in for a hug. The girl was terrified, that much was obvious—there was a hollowness in her gaze, a creeping numbness, as if she was already starting to check out. How else, after all, could she deal with the horror she was facing?

*I can't let him hurt her, Sheila thought. No matter what happens to me, I have to make sure she's safe.*

She had no desire to be a martyr, no desire to lose her life to this sociopath. But it would be a far better alternative to living with the knowledge that, because of some mistake or unwillingness on her part, a young, innocent woman had lost her life.

“Ben,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady and calm. “Let the girl go. There doesn't have to be any more violence.”

“No?” he asked, looking a bit calmer than before—calmer, no doubt, because he felt he was gaining control of the situation. That was good. The more confident he felt, the better.

“You think this is going to end without further violence?” he went on, a hint of mockery entering his voice. “You think I'll just surrender and go quietly? Do you take me for a fool?”



Sheila took a deep breath and met Ben's eyes. "I don't think you're a fool, Ben. But I do think you're better than this. You don't have to hurt anyone. Just let the girl go and we can talk about this."

Ben's gaze flickered to the girl, then back to Sheila. "Talk? You want to talk? You think that's going to solve anything?"

"It's a start," Sheila said, inching closer. "We can figure something out. There's always a way out of these things."

Ben's eyes narrowed, and for a moment Sheila thought he was going to lash out. But instead, he let out a deep, guttural laugh that made the hairs on the back of Sheila's neck stand up.

"You really think that, don't you?" he said, shaking his head. "That there's always a way out? That we can just talk and everything will be okay?"

Sheila remained silent, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Well, let me tell you something, sweetheart," Ben said, stepping closer to her. "There's no way out of this. Not for you, not for that girl, not for anyone. The only way out is through me."

Sheila swallowed hard, trying to keep her fear at bay. "What do you want, Ben? Money? A way out of the country? We can help you."

Ben's eyes darted around the room, as if considering her offer. Sheila saw a glimmer of hope in the girl's eyes, and she knew she had to keep pushing.

“We can make this right, Ben. You don’t have to hurt anyone else. Just let the girl go and we’ll work something out.”

For a moment, Sheila thought Ben might actually consider it. But then his expression darkened, and he raised the hammer above his head.

“I’ll tell you what I want,” he said, his voice low and menacing. “I want you to feel the same pain I felt all those years ago. The pain of being an outcast, a reject. And then, when you’re begging for mercy, maybe then I’ll let you go.”

He took a threatening step forward. At the same time, there was a loud commotion in the hallway. They both turned toward the sound just as the door flew open, revealing the girl’s frantic mother and brother. The boy’s face was red with rage, his fists clenched, ready to lunge at Ben. His mother strained to hold him back, pleading with him to stay still.

“Get away from my sister!” the teenage brother roared, struggling against his mother’s grip.

“Back off!” Ben shouted, his face contorting into a snarl. He raised the hammer, positioning it so it hovered dangerously close to the girl’s head. “I swear, I’ll kill her!”

Wasting no time, Sheila seized the opportunity to slam the door shut, muffling the cries of the mother and brother outside. The boy pounded on the door, his voice hysterical. “Let me in! Let my sister go!”

The lock on the door had been busted when Ben shouldered his way in, so instead Sheila grabbed a nearby

chair, shoving it beneath the door knob to keep the door from moving. The door rattled when the teenager struck it, but the chair held firm.

*It's not a perfect solution, but it will do for now. The last thing we need is to escalate the situation.*

Satisfied that nobody else would come rushing in, Sheila turned her attention back on Ben. She studied his tense expression. His eyes were filled with a wild desperation, and it was clear to Sheila that for all Ben's determination to seize control and dictated what happened, he understood in the depths of his mind that he was absolutely not in control. He had never been in control, and it was obvious to Sheila that he would do anything to change that.

*Get him talking. Let him dictate the narrative and get his message out.*

Taking a deep breath, she softened her voice and asked, "Why are you doing this, Ben? There has to be a reason for all of this pain you're causing."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "You've probably had a perfect life—well, a life much better than mine, anyway. You don't know what it's like to walk an inch in my shoes, never mind a mile."

"So tell me what it's like. Explain it to me."

Ben's grip on the hammer faltered momentarily, and his gaze flickered between Sheila and the girl. "You wouldn't understand," he muttered. "Nobody ever does."

"Try me," Sheila said, her heart racing as she calculated how much time they might have before backup arrived. She

decided to take a guess. “Is it about what happened at Mildred Heights?”

Ben snorted. “That sorry excuse for a school. You have any idea what it was like helping my deadbeat father clean up after all those prissy kids? I saw their pretty faces, their loving families, and all I had was *him*—my pathetic excuse for a father who couldn’t even hold down a decent job.” He grunted. “How’s that for fair?”

As Ben spoke, years of bitterness and frustration poured from him, his words laced with pain. Sheila listened intently, searching for a way to connect with him.

“It must have been really difficult for you, feeling like an outsider in your own school,” she said. “Is that why you’ve been targeting these families? Because they had what you wanted?”

“Yes!” Ben snarled, his face contorting with resentment. “They looked down on me, acting like they were so much better than me just because their lives were better. At first, I just wanted to be them. I dreamed about what it would be like and how easy life would be. But then...”

He paused, his jaw clenching. “I grew to hate them. They had it all, and they didn’t even appreciate it. They were just...”

“Entitled?”

“Yes!” His eyes flashed with anger. “Like they’d earned it, when really it was just luck—stupid, blind luck. I didn’t get to choose what family I was born into, and neither did they. But because of some random roll of the dice, they had everything

while I got nothing. They were practically born into happiness, but I was born into misery.”

Sheila nodded, her mind racing as she tried to buy more time. “I can see how that would make you feel angry, Ben. But hurting innocent people won’t change your past or make you feel any better. We can find another way.”

“Like what?” Ben demanded, his grip on the girl tightening. “I surrender? You tell me about all the friends I can make in prison, and how much better I’ll feel for ‘doing the right thing’?”

“Let me help you,” Sheila said, sidestepping his questions. “There’s still time to turn things around. Let the girl go, and we’ll figure this out together.”

Just then, a sudden flash of blue and red light from the window sliced through the tense atmosphere in the bedroom, and Sheila’s heart skipped a beat. Backup had arrived.

Ben, however, did not welcome this change of events the way she did. “Stay away!” he shouted, his voice cracking as he pressed the hammer closer to the terrified girl’s temple. “I swear I’ll kill her if anyone tries to come in!”

Sheila heard the pounding of footsteps on the stairs, followed by someone knocking on the door. She clenched her fists, trying to keep her focus on the situation at hand.

“Sheila! Are you alright?” Finn’s voice came from the other side of the door, filled with concern.

“I’m okay, Finn,” she replied, forcing herself to sound calm despite her racing pulse. “But you need to keep everyone

back. Ben and I are just talking.”

“Let me speak to him,” Finn demanded. Sheila looked at Ben, who shook his head at her.

“He doesn’t want to talk to you right now,” she said to Finn.

“No?” There was a hard edge to his voice. “What does he want then, pray tell?”

“I need you to trust me, Finn,” Sheila said, her voice carrying a sense of urgency she hoped he’d understand. “Can you do that for me? Can you trust me?”

There was a momentary silence before Finn reluctantly agreed, his voice strained with worry. “Alright, Sheila. I’ll trust you. But I’m right here outside the door, okay? Just say the word, and I’ll find a way in.”

“Okay, Finn. Just make sure no one comes in without my say-so. It’s very important.”

Sheila’s gaze locked onto Ben, studying his every move. He paced back and forth like a caged animal, sweat beading on his forehead. His breathing was labored, and the hand holding the hammer trembled ever so slightly. The teenage girl whimpered, her fear palpable in the air.

“Ben,” Sheila began cautiously, “what happens now?”

His jaw clenched, eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape route. “I don’t know, okay?” he snapped, his voice laced with agitation. “This wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

“Then let’s figure it out together,” she said, trying to keep her tone as calm and level as possible. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” he asked, his chest heaving with pent-up fury. “I want to get into my car and leave with the girl. Once I’m sure no one’s following me, I’ll let her go.”

Sheila shook her head. “You know they won’t go for that, Ben. We need a different solution—one where everyone comes out of this alive.”

He shrugged. “You asked what I wanted, and I told you. I’m not leaving here in cuffs, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Sheila’s heart raced as she locked eyes with Ben, his grip on the terrified teenage girl unwavering. The room seemed to close in around them, the tension thick and suffocating.

“Alright,” she said, her voice steady despite the pounding in her chest. “What if you take me instead?”

Ben’s eyes narrowed, suspicion flickering across his face. “What are you talking about?”

“I can convince the police to let you take me,” she replied, trying to project an air of confidence. “Once you’re sure you’ve gotten away, you can release me. Everyone wins.”

“Would you really trust me?” he asked, disbelief and desperation warring in his voice.

Sheila hesitated for a moment before answering. “What choice do I have?”

He considered her words, his grip on the girl loosening just slightly. “You know some kind of martial arts,” he said,

referring to their earlier fight. “How do I know you won’t try something once we’re alone?”

“Simple,” she replied, her mind racing as she formulated a plan. “I’ll handcuff myself. Can’t be that dangerous with my hands cuffed together, right?”

Ben seemed to weigh her proposal, his eyes darting between her and the girl as he tried to decide if it was worth the risk. Finally, he nodded. “Tell the police. But remember, any tricks, and both of you will pay.”

“Understood,” she said, praying that she could pull this off. Her eyes locked with Ben’s, she mustered every ounce of determination she had and shouted to Finn, “Finn, Ben and I are going to leave in his car. Nobody follows us. Once he’s sure we’re not being followed, he’ll let me go.”

“Damn it, Sheila,” Finn’s voice came muffled through the door. “I don’t like this plan.”

“Trust me,” she said, her heart pounding as she silently prayed for Finn to go along with it. “Please. I know what I’m doing.”

A pause lingered in the air, heavy with uncertainty. Finally, Finn’s reluctant voice came through again. “Okay. We’ll pull everyone out of the house.”

Sheila listened to the sound of footsteps retreating down the stairs. She glanced at Ben, who appeared more relaxed than before. The girl, on the other hand, looked more rigid, her posture erect and her eyes intent on Sheila.



*Don't do anything rash*, Sheila wanted to say to her. *I know what I'm doing*. She had the odd sense, however, that the girl wasn't going to sit idly by. But what would she do? And what might the consequences be?

As the last of the police officers left the building, Ben straightened up, his grip on the hammer slightly less rigid.

“Are you satisfied?” Sheila asked him, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“Handcuff yourself,” he ordered, his eyes never leaving hers.

As she complied, snapping the cold metal around her wrists, she knew that any small mistake could cost her life. But for the terrified girl in Ben's clutches, she was willing to take that risk.

“Make them tight,” he demanded, watching her closely. She obeyed, feeling the cuffs dig into her skin.

Looking eager to get moving, Ben took a step toward Sheila, his eyes narrowing as he clutched the hammer. He halted abruptly, raising the weapon in a threatening gesture. “If you try anything,” he said, “I won't hesitate to kill you.”

Sheila swallowed, her throat tight with tension. “I understand.”

As Ben closed the distance between them, the teenage girl seemed to grasp Sheila's unspoken plan. With a burst of desperate energy, she hurled a pillow at Ben's head. The sudden movement caught him off guard, and he spun around, confusion flashing across his face.

Seizing the opportunity, Sheila sprang into action. Despite the handcuffs restricting her movements, she was determined not to let this chance slip through her fingers. She pivoted on one foot and launched herself at Ben, her other leg snapping out like a whip. Her heel slammed into his wrist, sending the hammer skittering across the floor.

The impact sent a shockwave of pain up Sheila's leg, but she didn't let it slow her down. Years of training and competition had taught her to push through the pain when the stakes were high, and this was no exception.

Ben, his face contorted with rage, tried to lunge at Sheila, perhaps hoping to overpower her even without the hammer. But she was already one step ahead, using her powerful legs to keep him at bay. She kicked at his knees, forcing him to stagger back, then aimed another kick at his chest, knocking the wind out of him.

"Damn you!" Ben roared, lunging at Sheila. But she was ready for him. She dodged his attack and countered with a swift knee to his gut, forcing him to double over.

"Give it up, Ben," she said through gritted teeth. "You're done."

"Never!" he said, stubbornly trying to regain his footing. But Sheila wasn't about to let him recover. As he straightened, she delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to the side of his head, the force of the impact making a sickening crunch.

Ben crumpled to the floor like a rag doll, unconscious but still breathing. Sheila stared down at him, her chest heaving with exertion and adrenaline. The nightmare was finally over.

“Is he...dead?” the girl asked hesitantly.

“No,” Sheila replied, trying to catch her breath. “But when he wakes up, the headache he’ll have will make him wish he was.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The cold metal of the handcuffs gave way as Finn unlocked Sheila's restraints. "Thanks," she said, flexing her sore wrists and rubbing them to alleviate the lingering discomfort.

She looked around at the chaotic scene unfolding before her: patrol cars surrounded the house, their blinking red and blue lights casting an eerie glow on the tense faces of the officers; Ben Burton, still unconscious from her well-aimed kick, lay strapped to a gurney as paramedics loaded him into an ambulance; and the family who had been attacked – a terrified mother and her two teenage children – clung to one another, their bodies shaking with relief and shock.

Finn studied her for a moment, his eyes searching her face for any sign of distress. Finally, he asked, voice low and gravelly, "Were you really gonna leave with Ben? Trust him to let you go later?"

Sheila hesitated, considering her response. In truth, she hadn't wanted to put herself in further danger, but the safety of the teenage girl had been her primary concern. "If I had to, yeah," she said. "But I was hoping I could find a way out of it. The important thing was to save the hostages."

"Damn," Finn said, impressed by her selflessness. "You're going to make one hell of a cop, you know that?" The

admiration in his eyes warmed her, and she couldn't help but feel a little proud of what she'd accomplished tonight.

A gust of wind ruffled the leaves of the trees that lined the street, causing their shadows to dance and writhe on the pavement. The mother of the two teenagers approached Sheila and Finn, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She looked from one to the other, her gratitude apparent in every line of her face.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. “You saved us. You saved my children.” She glanced at her son and daughter, who were still clinging to each other, their faces pale and wide-eyed.

“I'm Juanita, by the way,” she said. “These are my children, Magdalena and Carlos.”

Sheila smiled. “I'm Sheila, and this is Officer Finn. We're just doing our job.”

Juanita shook her head firmly. “This wasn't just doing your job. This could have gone a lot differently if you'd been someone else. But you risked your life for us, put your own safety on the line, and for that we owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Sheila's cheeks flushed with a mixture of gratitude and embarrassment. “You're very welcome,” She said. “We're just glad we got here in time.”

The mother hesitated, then asked, “Do you know why he did it? Why he attacked us?”

Sheila exchanged a glance with Finn before responding. “He was...jealous,” she said carefully. “Your family’s happiness was something he couldn’t handle. Ben Burton was too insecure to be able to accept it, so he tried to destroy it by hurting you.”

The woman stared at her, uncomprehending. “He attacked us because we were happy?” Her voice trembled, and she wrapped her arms around herself as if to ward off a chill that had nothing to do with the night air.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Finn said, his expression grim. “Some people can’t stand to see others thriving, so they lash out in the only way they know how.”

The mother shuddered, appalled. “That’s...monstrous,” she murmured. “But why pick us?”

“You went to Mildred Heights High School, didn’t you?”

Juanita frowned. “Yes. How did you know that?”

“He went there, too—well, sort of. He was the janitor’s son, and he helped his dad clean the school. Do you remember him, by any chance?”

Juanita pressed her lips together and thought. Finally, she shook her head. “No, the name’s not familiar. But by the sound of it, he certainly remembered me. I’m just glad he can’t harm my children now.”

“So are we,” Finn said.

Juanita flashed them a weary, grateful smile. “Thanks again, officers. She turned away, seeking solace in her children’s embrace once more.

Sheila turned to Finn. “Would you have really let me leave with Burton?” she asked, remembering the desperate gamble she’d been willing to make.

Finn shook his head. “No, not really.” He rubbed the back of his neck, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “I told you I was getting everyone out of the house, but I actually hid behind a door upstairs, ready to ambush him if he came out of the bedroom.”

“Really?” Sheila felt the warmth of relief and something else wash over her.

“Yeah,” Finn said with a lopsided grin. “I like you too much to let someone else steal you away like that.”

Her heart stuttered at his words, and she looked down, trying to hide the flush that rose in her cheeks. Was he just being playful, or was there a more serious meaning to his words?

An officer approached Juanita and her children and began taking their statements. Sheila watched, her mind wandering. She found herself thinking of her sister again.

“Hey, Finn,” she said, breaking their shared silence. “Do you think Natalie’s okay?”

Finn glanced at her, his eyes filled with concern. “What do you mean?”

“I haven’t been able to reach her all day, and when I checked her house, she wasn’t there. It’s very much unlike her to disappear like this, and I have no idea where she would’ve gone.” Speaking her thoughts aloud made the situation seem



even more frightening, and Sheila felt a knot forming in her stomach.

“She’s probably just taking a mental break,” Finn said. “The accident, being in a wheelchair now—the loss of mobility has hit her hard, you know. She puts on a brave face, but it’s a struggle for her.”

Sheila said nothing. She wasn’t sure what to think.

“Maybe she just needs time and space,” he continued thoughtfully. “It can’t be easy dealing with such a life-changing event.”

Sheila nodded slowly, but she couldn’t help feeling a pang of frustration. She’d been giving her sister plenty of time and space already, but was it so difficult for Natalie to answer a single call? Couldn’t she just send a quick text to say everything was alright?

Didn’t she realize how worried Sheila would be?

Finn checked his watch and took a deep breath. “Look at that—three in the morning. Perfect time for breakfast, don’t you think?” He looked at her expectantly, and she sensed he was trying to make her feel better.

“Are you joking?” she asked incredulously, raising an eyebrow.

“Nope,” he replied with a grin. “I know this great pancake place nearby, and they’re open twenty-four hours a day. Wanna go?”

She hesitated, torn between exhaustion and the desire to spend more time with Finn. Sensing her indecision, he added

gently, “I get it—you must be wiped out. What about Friday night, then?”

A smile tugged at the corners of Sheila’s lips, and she couldn’t help but feel a flutter of excitement in her chest. He was talking about a date—there was no question about it.

“Sure,” she said. “Friday night it is.”

“Great,” Finn said, his own smile widening. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

As they stood there, surrounded by the chaos of the crime scene, Sheila marveled at how easily Finn had managed to bring a sense of normalcy back into her life. For the first time in what felt like forever, she allowed herself to look forward to something other than her ambitions.

The glow of red and blue lights flickered across Finn’s face as he stared at Sheila. “You did a great job tonight, you know,” he said, his voice gentle against the cacophony of police radios and sirens.

“Thank you,” she replied softly, her gaze locked on his. His eyes seemed to hold a world of secrets, and she found herself more drawn to him than ever before. It wasn’t just the adrenaline from their harrowing night—it was the way he cared about her well-being, the way he’d done everything he could to keep her safe, first by urging her not to enter the house alone and then by choosing to stay in the house after the other police officers had left. Her respect for him had grown immensely during this investigation, and she couldn’t wait to work alongside him more often in the future.

“Well,” he said, “I’m going to hit the hay. You need a ride home?”

She hesitated. As much as she would have liked to accept the offer, she didn’t want to come across as too eager. Besides, after everything that had happened over the past few hours, she felt raw and vulnerable, and the last thing she wanted to complicate their working relationship by diving headfirst into a romantic one.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’ll call an Uber. I’m going to sit here for a little while, just absorb everything that’s happened.”

He studied her for a few seconds in thoughtful silence. Then he nodded. “As you wish, Sheila. Well...have a good night.”

“Goodnight, Finn.”

She watched him go, a twinge of regret and longing filling her chest. She was looking forward to seeing Finn again on Friday night. It had been so long since she’d gone on a date, since she’d allowed herself to let her guard down and feel something for someone else, that she didn’t know what to do with the feeling of anticipation.

*Here’s to a new future,* she thought, nodding to herself. *A new life.*



## EPILOGUE

“Seriously, Doug,” Sheila said, her phone pressed tightly against her ear, “I just don’t understand why the warden wouldn’t let me talk to Rayland Bax. There has to be something going on.”

As she spoke, she paced across her bedroom floor, her steely gaze scanning the street outside. The morning sun cast a warm glow on her face, but did little to ease the frustration boiling inside her.

Doug Fallow, an old friend of her father’s, sighed heavily on the other end of the line. Sheila could practically hear him running his hand through what little hair he had left. “I know, Sheila, it doesn’t make any sense. But I was able to get in touch with some folks at Blackridge Penitentiary, and they’re working on finding out what’s going on.”

“I appreciate that, Doug,” Sheila said, clenching her fists as she continued to pace. She felt like a caged animal, desperate for answers and unable to escape the confines of her small apartment. “But I need something concrete. My mom deserves justice, and if Rayland is involved with her murder somehow, I need to know.”

“Of course, kiddo,” Doug replied, his voice softening. “You’ve got every right to want the truth. It’s just...well, it’s complicated.”

“Complicated? What does that mean?”

He sighed again. "I'm really not supposed to be talking about this. You're not even on the force."

"I'm in training to be. Besides, this is about my mother. Can't you bend the rules a little?"

"It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

He chuckled. "I can't really explain that without telling you everything."

"So tell me everything."

"And I thought your father was stubborn," he muttered.

Sheila couldn't take the suspense any longer. "Listen, Doug, I've been waiting ten years to figure out why someone murdered my mother. Ten years. Do you have any idea what that's like? Can you imagine waking up every single day with a pit in your stomach, wondering if justice will ever be served? Wondering if you'll ever get closure?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. Sheila could hear Doug breathing heavily, but he didn't say anything.

"Please, Doug," she said. "I need to know."

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Doug spoke. "Okay, Sheila. Okay. But you have to promise me something."

"Anything."

"You can't tell anyone else about this. Not your colleagues, not your friends, not even your boyfriend."

"I don't have a boyfriend," she said.

“Even better. This is serious, and if it gets out, it could put people in danger.”

Sheila’s heart raced. This was it. Finally, she was going to get some answers. “What about my dad?”

“Your dad’s an exception—the only exception, you understand? Nobody else.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” she said, her voice shaking with anticipation.

“Alright,” Doug said, his voice low and serious. “Here’s the deal. The reason you weren’t able to speak with Rayland Bax is because he’s protected.”

“Protected? What do you—”

“He’s an FBI informant.”

“An informant?” Sheila stopped in her tracks, her heart sinking. The thought of Rayland being involved with the FBI had never crossed her mind. “Are you sure?” she asked in a small voice.

“Apparently, he’s been feeding them information on some big players in the drug world,” Doug explained. “He’s been doing it for a while now, which is why they’re keeping him under wraps.”

Sheila stared out the window, her mind racing. This revelation complicated things even further. If Rayland was working with the FBI, then getting to him would be even more difficult than she’d initially thought. But she couldn’t let this

stop her. She needed to know if he had any involvement in her mother's murder, no matter the obstacles in her way.

"Even if he's an informant, I need to find out if he was involved in my mom's death," Sheila insisted, her determination unwavering. "Who do I need to talk to in order to get permission to see him?"

Doug sighed, hesitating for a moment before answering. "You'll need to speak with Agent Mitchell Collins. He's the one overseeing Rayland's case."

"Mitchell Collins," Sheila said, committing the name to memory.

"But don't tell him I directed you to him," Doug warned. "Tell him...hell...tell him you saw him visiting the prison. I don't know. Just don't mention me, and don't make a big deal out of it, okay?"

"Okay," she said softly. "Thanks, Doug."

"No problem. Best of luck, kiddo. The FBI isn't known for being overly cooperative when it comes to their informants, but maybe you'll be able to convince them." He didn't sound particularly optimistic.

"Oh, I can be convincing," she said. "Thanks again, Doug."

"Give my best to your father. Take care."

Sheila hung up the phone. She considered contacting Collins directly (there had to be a way to track down his number), but instead she decided to call her father first. She



trusted his judgment, and she knew he wouldn't try to talk her down from getting answers.

Her fingers trembled as she dialed his number, the gravity of Doug's revelations still sinking in. She could hear the faint ringing on the other end and held her breath, waiting for her father to pick up.

"Hey, Sheila," Gabriel said, his voice rough from a combination of years of smoking and shouting instructions at kickboxing students.

"Hi, Dad," she replied, trying to keep her voice steady. "I just got off the phone with Doug Fallow. You asked him to look into why I wasn't able to speak with Rayland Bax, remember?"

"Ah, yes," Gabriel said, a hint of warmth in his otherwise gruff tone. "What did he find out?"

"Apparently the reason I wasn't able to speak with Rayland is that he's an FBI informant."

There was a long pause. "Dad?" she asked. "You still there?"

"Unbelievable," he muttered.

"I know," Sheila said, feeling a wave of anger wash over her. "It complicates things even more."

"But it also makes sense now why the warden ran interference," Gabriel said, his voice now tinged with bitterness. "Did Doug say anything else?"

“He told me I need to speak with Agent Mitchell Collins if I want permission to meet with Rayland. He’s Rayland’s handler.”

“Collins?” Gabriel scoffed, his disdain evident even over the phone. “That son of a gun.”

“You know him?”

“We’ve crossed paths before, and believe me when I tell you, he never wanted to cooperate on cases. Always tried to keep us local law enforcement out of the loop, like we were beneath him or something.”

“Really?” Sheila asked, her heart sinking. “So what are the chances he’d be willing to help me?”

“Not good, sweetheart,” Gabriel said, his voice gentler now. “But don’t let that discourage you. There’s always another way.”

Sheila clenched her jaw, frustration bubbling within her. “What other way?”

He sighed. “I don’t know yet. Just give me some time to think it over, okay? Then we can come up with a game plan together.”

“Alright,” she said, though inwardly she hated the idea of waiting any longer.

“Hey, have you heard from Natalie yet?” Gabriel asked, concern evident in his rough voice.

Sheila sighed, rubbing her forehead. “No, Dad, not a word. I’ve been trying to call her all day. It’s not like her to just

vanish without telling anyone.”

Her father was silent for moments. “Now that I think about it,” he said, “she did message me the other day about being burned out. She said she needed some space, something about a ‘fresh perspective.’ That’s probably all this is, just her needing some time alone.”

“Maybe,” Sheila said, but she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that something was wrong. “Shouldn’t we file a missing persons report, though? Just in case?”

“Let’s give her till the end of the day,” Gabriel said, his tone cautious. “If she hasn’t turned up by then, we’ll get others involved. I don’t want to bother her if she really does just need some R&R.”

“Alright, Dad. I’ll let you know if I hear anything.” Sheila could feel the worry gnawing at her insides, but she tried to keep her voice steady for her father’s sake.

“Take care, Sheila. And keep your chin up—we’ll find a way to get to Rayland, one way or the other.”

“Of course, Dad. Talk to you later.” With a soft click, Sheila ended the call and slid her phone into her pocket.

As she paced back and forth in her small apartment, thoughts raced through her mind. The investigation into her mother’s murder seemed to be at a dead end, and now, with Natalie gone, the weight on her shoulders grew heavier. But Sheila Stone was not one to back down from a challenge, even when the odds were against her.

The agent Doug had mentioned might not be willing to help her, but Sheila was determined to find a way around that obstacle. She glanced around her apartment, her eyes landing on the set of keys hanging by the door. Her decision made, she grabbed them and headed out, her jaw set with resolve.

She was going to confront Mitchell Collins. If he wanted to deny her the chance to learn who had murdered her mother and why, he would have to do so to her face. She wasn't going to make it easy for him.

The sun bore down mercilessly as she strode across the hot asphalt of the parking lot, her keys jangling with each determined step. Her fingers wrapped around the door handle of her car, but she paused for a moment, taking a deep breath to steel herself for the confrontation ahead. It was then that her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Her heart lurched at the sight of a text from Natalie. There was a single word, pregnant with ambiguity.

‘Sorry.’

Sheila's brow furrowed as she quickly typed out a response. *What do you mean? Where are you?*

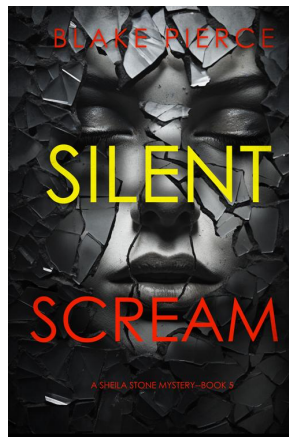
“Come on, Nat,” she muttered under her breath, but no immediate reply came. With growing concern, Sheila dialed Natalie's number. The phone rang and rang unanswered, leaving Sheila standing in the sweltering heat, her worry intensifying with each passing second.

“Damn it, Natalie,” she whispered, ending the call. What did Natalie have to be sorry for? Being hard to reach? Dodging

Sheila's calls?

Or was there something far worse?

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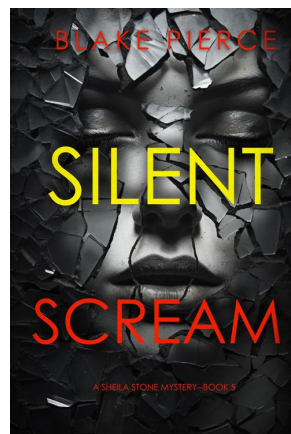
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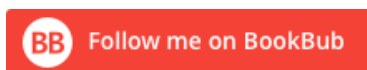
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