



# Silent Grave

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**Category:** Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** With her Olympic dreams crumbled, Sheila, 28, struggles to find her place back home. She is surrounded by reminders of what could have been, stuck inside the shadow of her older sister: the golden child, the respected sheriff. But when her sister persuades her to join the local police force, Sheila's life and career start anew.

As she hunts serial killers, Sheila notices clues that others miss and offers a perspective that no one else has. She realizes she has a talent outside of fighting, and that she has a chance to embrace a new life in Salt Lake—a life outside the ring.

This is a different kind of ring, though. Sheila quickly realizes that to survive, she will need more than just her strength—she'll need a brilliance to match that of even the most diabolical killer....

Can Sheila win this match? Or will she finally lose it all?

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# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

Tyler Matthews sprawled in the bed of his pickup truck, staring up at the winter stars scattered like salt across the Utah sky. His breath fogged in front of him as he sipped cheap beer, trying to ignore the cold metal pressing against his back through the old blanket he'd thrown down.

The stars looked different here than they did in Seattle. Clearer. Colder. Not to mention how often they were covered by clouds in Seattle.

When he'd first left for college, he couldn't wait to escape this small town. Now, three semesters later, he found himself missing these stars. Missing a lot of things, if he was being honest with himself.

His phone buzzed. Another text from his mom:

Everything ok? Haven't heard from you all day.

Tyler smiled and typed back: All good. Just catching up with some old friends.

It wasn't exactly a lie. Kyle and Marcus were supposed to meet him here, same as they used to back in high school. Of course, back then, they'd been sneaking out, drinking warm beer stolen from their parents' garages. Now, the drinking didn't require any sneaking around, but somehow, it felt important to keep up the tradition.

If they ever showed up, that is.

He took another sip of beer, grimacing at the taste. The same cheap brand they'd always drunk, chosen more for nostalgia than quality. His roommate in Seattle would've mocked him for it—Travis with his craft IPAs and artisanal whiskeys. But Travis didn't understand what it meant to preserve something, even if that something was just drinking bad beer in the bed of a pickup truck under winter stars.

Sometimes, Tyler felt guilty about choosing a college so far away, leaving Mom alone in their too-big house. Especially since Dad had already left them.

But she'd insisted. "Don't you dare stay here because of me," she'd said, her voice fierce even as her hands trembled. "You're meant for bigger things than this town."

Maybe that was true. But lying here under these stars, Tyler wondered if "bigger things" were really what he wanted. In Seattle, everything moved so fast. Everyone was chasing something—funding, publications, prestigious internships. Here, time seemed to flow differently. The mountains watched over everything with ancient patience, unchanging even as the town below them slowly transformed.

Another text lit up his phone. Kyle this time: Running late. Marcus is being a dick about his car. Give us 30?

Tyler texted back a thumbs-up emoji and settled deeper into his blanket. The beer was making him philosophical, he decided. Probably best to slow down if he was already getting maudlin about mountains and time.

He heard an engine in the distance and sat up, but it was just someone on the main road below. This turnoff had always been their spot—secluded enough that local cops didn't bother checking it, close enough to town that they could make a quick escape if needed. The abandoned mine entrance gaped behind him like a mouth in the hillside, chain-link fence long since torn away by teenagers and scrappers.

Signs still warned of the dangers: KEEP OUT. UNSAFE CONDITIONS. NO TRESPASSING. They'd always joked about exploring it, but none of them had ever worked up the courage. There were too many stories about people getting lost down there, about unstable tunnels and sudden drops.

His mom used to tell him that his grandfather had worked these mines back before they closed. "He knew every tunnel like the back of his hand," she'd say proudly. "Could find his way out blindfolded." Tyler wished he'd had the chance to meet him, to ask what it was like working in the darkness day after day. But black lung had taken him before Tyler was born, like it had taken so many others.

The wind picked up, carrying the bite of snow. Tyler pulled his jacket tighter, debating whether to text Kyle and call it off. They could meet at the Copper Kettle instead, that new coffee shop downtown that was trying so hard to be Seattle it hurt. At least it would be warm.

That's when he heard it. A sound from the mine entrance—soft, almost lost in the wind. A whimper, maybe. Or a cry for help.

Tyler froze, beer halfway to his lips. The sound came again, clearer this time. Definitely a voice. Definitely human.

"Hello?" he called out, heart suddenly pounding. "Someone there?"

Only the wind answered, but he was sure he'd heard something. He fumbled for his phone's flashlight, sweeping the beam across the mine entrance. The light caught only darkness and scrub brush moving in the wind.

Common sense told him to stay put. Call the police maybe, let them check it out. But what if someone was hurt down there? What if they'd fallen, or gotten lost? He thought of his grandfather, who'd known these tunnels by heart. Would he have

hesitated?

"This is stupid," Tyler muttered, but he was already climbing out of the truck bed. The beer had given him just enough courage to be reckless. Besides, he'd only go a few feet in. Just enough to make sure no one needed help.

He took another pull from his beer for courage, then set it carefully on the truck's tailgate. The beam of his phone light seemed weak against the absolute darkness of the mine entrance. He took a step forward, then another.

"Hello?" he called again. "Anyone in there? Do you need help?"

The sound came once more, farther in this time. Tyler hesitated at the threshold, every childhood warning screaming in his head. But someone could be hurt. Someone could be dying. He couldn't just walk away.

He stepped into the darkness, phone held high. The temperature dropped immediately, as if the mine was breathing cold air onto him. His light caught glimpses of support beams, rails set into the ground, rough-hewn walls that disappeared into shadow.

Behind him, footsteps crunched on gravel.

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"Kyle?" Tyler turned, relief flooding through him. "Man, you scared the shit out of—"

The last thing he saw was a dark figure silhouetted against the starry sky. Then something struck his head, and even the stars went dark.

### CHAPTER ONE

The desert wind carried the smell of scorched coffee and diesel fumes across the truck stop parking lot. Sheila Stone watched the security footage for the third time, studying the grainy figure that moved through the frame at 3:47 AM.

Same walk. Same build. Even through the poor quality of the video, she was certain.

"That's him," she said quietly.

Gabriel Stone leaned closer to the monitor, his silver hair catching the fluorescent light. "You're sure?"

"I worked closely with Tommy on the Oscar Wells case. I know how he moves."

The night manager of Harry's Truck Stop hovered nearby, clearly uncertain whether he should leave the two strangers alone with his computer system. Sheila couldn't blame him for being nervous. They'd arrived just before dawn, flashing badges from another state, asking questions about a man who'd used his credit card to buy gas and supplies in the middle of the night.

"Did he say anything?" Sheila asked the manager. "Give any indication where he was headed?"

The man shook his head. "Barely spoke two words. Paid for his gas, bought some supplies—water, crackers, that kind of thing. Looked real nervous, though. Kept checking over his shoulder."

"He knows we're coming," Gabriel said.

Sheila's jaw tightened. Two days ago, she'd been in a hospital bed, recovering from hypothermia after Tommy had left her to die in an abandoned research facility. Now she was in New Mexico, watching grainy footage of the man who'd betrayed her department and tried to kill her.

Though Sheila didn't entirely understand why Tommy had tried to kill her, she had a rough idea. Years ago, back when her father Gabriel worked in Internal Affairs, he'd uncovered evidence of a money laundering ring within the department. He was warned not to act on this or report this information, but when Sheila's mother, Henrietta, discovered the files and started asking questions, Gabriel could no longer contain the situation.

Sheila's mother was shot in her own home, and Gabriel was told that if he didn't bury what he knew, his children would be next. So he transferred out of I.A., kept quiet, and eventually became sheriff. That worked until Sheila began investigating her mother's death on her own.

Gabriel, no doubt realizing he couldn't stop his determined daughter, helped her, and together they tracked down and caught the gunman: Eddie Mills. By his own admission, he hoped the truth would die with Mills. But Mills made it clear to Sheila that her father knew far more than he was letting on, leading Sheila to confront him. Gabriel dodged Sheila's questions, refusing to discuss the issue—until, that was, a

rookie named Tommy Forster was planted in her department and tried to silence her.

Permanently.

Now, seeing that the people responsible for Sheila's mother's murder had already decided Sheila was next, Gabriel realized that protecting his family no longer meant silence. It meant fighting back.

And it started by catching Tommy Forster.

But what did the FBI have to do with this? Could Tommy be a rogue agent—or were the agents looking for him the ones who had gone rogue?

Perhaps the case about departmental corruption that had landed on Gabriel's plate while he was in the I.A. went beyond the department. Perhaps it went federal, too.

"Can you send me this footage?" Sheila asked the manager.

He nodded, already typing. "Email okay?"

"Perfect." She handed him her card, then turned to her father. "We should check the highways. If he was heading south three hours ago..."

"He could be at the border by now," Gabriel finished. His face was grim. "Once he crosses, we may never get another shot at him."

Or at the answers he might have about her mother's death. About the money laundering in their department. About why he'd been planted in Coldwater to spy on her, learn what her father had told her—and then kill her.

Gabriel checked his watch. "Border patrol's been notified. They'll stop him if he tries



to cross. But if he's smart..."

"He'll find another way through." Sheila zoomed in on the footage, focusing on Tommy's face as he glanced toward the camera. He looked exhausted, haunted. Good. Let him be haunted. Let him feel a fraction of what her family had endured these past ten years.

The truck stop manager excused himself to help a customer, leaving father and daughter alone with the surveillance monitor. In the silence, Sheila could feel the weight of unspoken words between them. So many secrets. So many lies. Even now, she wasn't sure her father had told her everything about the corruption he'd uncovered, about the people who'd killed her mother to keep him quiet.

"I should have come clean with you when you started working in the department," Gabriel said quietly, as if reading her thoughts. "Told you about Internal Affairs. About what I found. Maybe if I had..."

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"Mom would still be alive?" The words came out sharper than she'd intended. She softened her tone. "We can't change the past, Dad. But we can damn well make sure Tommy doesn't get away with what he did."

Gabriel nodded, but his eyes were distant. "When they planted him in your department, I knew. I knew what it meant. That they were watching us again. That they knew you were getting close." He ran a hand through his silver hair. "I thought if I stayed quiet, kept my distance..." He shook his head. "I thought Tommy would realize you didn't know the details, and so they'd leave you alone. I guess I underestimated them—again."

"You were trying to protect me." Sheila's voice was gentle now. "I understand that. But if we don't catch Tommy, we'll spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders, wondering when they'll strike next."

"They won't stop," Gabriel agreed quietly. "Not now. Not after what happened with Eddie Mills."

A truck rumbled into the parking lot, its headlights sweeping across them through the window. Both of them tensed until it passed.

Sheila's phone buzzed. She checked it, hoping for news from border patrol, but it was a text from Finn: Star's giving me grief about missing your dad's famous Saturday pancakes. When are you coming home?

Home. The word stirred something in her chest. Finn and Star were waiting for her, worrying about her. And here she was, chasing shadows across state lines.

She typed back quickly: Soon. Keep her busy with those horrible action movies you both love.

"Your deputy?" Gabriel asked.

"He's more than that now." Sheila pocketed her phone. "He and Star... they're family."

Gabriel's expression softened. "You've built something good there. Which is why we need to end this. Make it safe for all of you."

The manager returned, clearing his throat. "Sorry to interrupt, but you might want to see this." He tapped at his computer, pulling up a different camera feed. "This was about twenty minutes after your guy left."

The footage showed a black SUV pulling in, two men in dark suits emerging. They spoke briefly with the overnight cashier showed something that might have been badges.

"Government plates," Gabriel said, leaning closer.

"They asked about the same guy you're looking for," the manager added. "Said they were FBI."

Sheila and Gabriel exchanged glances. Why would the FBI be after Tommy? What did they know? And most importantly... whose side were these agents on?

"Which way did they go?" Sheila asked.

"South. Like your guy." The manager hesitated. "Look, I don't want any trouble. If anyone else comes asking—"

"We were never here," Gabriel assured him.

Outside, the desert wind had picked up, carrying the first hint of dawn. Sheila slid behind the wheel of her rental car while Gabriel checked his phone.

"There's another gas station forty miles south," he said. "Only place to fuel up between here and the border."

Sheila started the engine. "You think Tommy's smart enough to avoid it?"

"I think those federal agents will be watching it." Gabriel buckled his seatbelt. "Which means we need to think like Tommy. Where else would he go?"

Sheila pulled onto the empty highway, her mind racing. "Did you know Tommy?"

Her father was quiet for a long moment, staring out at the dark desert. "Met him once or twice when he was a kid. Hank was showing him around the station."

Sheila absorbed this, thinking of Hank Dawson—the cheerful, affable man who'd stepped in as interim sheriff after Natalie's death. Who'd supported Sheila taking over, claiming he was ready to retire. Who'd gotten his nephew a job in her department.

"Do you think Hank knew?" she asked. "When he brought Tommy in? Or was he being used, too?"

"I don't know." Gabriel stared out at the lightening horizon. "But it's interesting timing, isn't it? He steps down right when things start heating up with Mills."

The implications settled like ice in Sheila's stomach. Had Hank gotten out because he knew what was coming? Or because he couldn't go through with whatever they had

planned?

A set of headlights appeared in her rearview mirror. Sheila tensed until they turned off at a side road.

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"We can ask him," she said, "but I suspect the only way we'll get the truth is if we talk with Tommy."

"Then we better hurry, because if those federal agents find him first..." Gabriel shook his head grimly. "Everything he knows about your mother's murder, about the corruption, about who's really pulling the strings—it will all disappear with him."

### CHAPTER TWO

Sheila's body was a coiled spring as she studied the old motel, which squatted against the desert landscape like a forgotten relic of better times. Its neon sign buzzed weakly in the growing light, half the letters burnt out. The vacancy sign flickered, though from the empty parking lot, vacancy wasn't an issue.

"You sure about this?" Gabriel asked as Sheila pulled into the corner of the lot from which they could watch both the office and the row of rooms.

"The clerk at the last gas station remembered him. Said he was asking about motels." Sheila killed the engine but left the key in the ignition. "This is the only one for twenty miles that takes cash and doesn't ask questions."

They sat in silence, watching. Paint peeled from the motel's wooden siding. A forgotten newspaper tumbled across the lot, caught in the desert wind. The sun was climbing higher, burning away the last traces of night, but the morning remained cold.

Sheila's phone buzzed. Another text from Finn: Star's asking questions. Getting

harder to keep her distracted.

She started to type a response, then stopped. What could she say? That she was staking out a fleeing suspect who might know why her mother was murdered? That she was trying to untangle a web of corruption that might involve people they'd trusted for years?

"He's here," Gabriel said softly.

Sheila looked up. A door had opened at the far end of the motel. Tommy Forster stepped out, a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He looked terrible—unshaven, clothes wrinkled, dark circles under his eyes. He didn't spot their vehicle as he hurried toward a battered pickup truck, perhaps as little as thirty feet from where Sheila and her father were parked.

"That's not the vehicle he was driving at the truck stop," Gabriel said.

"Must have switched cars." Sheila reached for her door handle. "Ready?"

But before either of them could get out, another vehicle turned into the lot—a black SUV with tinted windows. Tommy saw the approaching vehicle and froze, keys halfway to his truck's door.

"Federal agents," Gabriel muttered. "Damn it."

The SUV parked close to the truck. Sheila watched as Tommy backed away from his truck, looking like a cornered animal. She clenched her hands on the steering wheel, unsure what to do. If the agents got their hands on him first...

The SUV's doors opened. Two men in dark suits emerged, their movements precise, coordinated. Professional. They hadn't drawn weapons yet, but their hands stayed

close to their jackets.

Tommy looked toward the desert beyond the motel, clearly calculating his chances of running.

"He's going to bolt," Sheila said. "And if he does, they might shoot him." She reached for her door handle, but her father grabbed her arm.

"Not yet," he said.

"We have to do something!"

He gave her a sharp look, the same kind she'd seen many times before over the years. It meant, Trust me. She clenched her jaw in frustration. They were gambling with a man's life, and besides that, how could she trust him after what he'd kept from her about her mother's death? Did he think she'd just forget about that now that they were working together?

"Federal agents!" one of the men called out. "Thomas Forster, we need you to come with us."

Tommy's eyes darted between the agents, his truck, and the open desert. His hands trembled as he lowered his duffle bag to the ground.

"Show me your credentials," Tommy called back, his voice surprisingly steady.

The men exchanged glances. The taller one reached for his jacket, but Sheila noticed his partner's hand slip inside his coat toward what she suspected wasn't a badge.

"Now, Mr. Forster," the shorter agent said. His tone was pleasant, reasonable. Professional. But something in it raised the hair on Sheila's neck.



That's when Tommy spotted their car. He must have missed it before, camouflaged as it was by the gray, nondescript wall behind it.

The change in his expression was subtle—just a flicker of his eyes, a slight shift in his stance. But Sheila knew he'd seen them. He knew they were there. She reached for her door handle again.

"Not yet," her father murmured.

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The taller agent took a step forward. "Mr. Forster, we have some questions about your recent activities in Coldwater, Utah. This will go much easier if you cooperate."

Tommy licked his lips. "You're not really federal agents, are you?"

The shorter one smiled. "We can discuss this somewhere more private. Unless you'd prefer we handle things here?"

Gabriel shoved his door open and stepped out. "I think here works just fine," he said. Following his lead, Sheila got out on the opposite side.

Both agents turned, hands disappearing into their jackets. Gabriel's own jacket was open, showing his shoulder holster.

What's the play, Dad? Sheila thought. Please don't get us all killed.

"This is a federal matter," the taller agent said smoothly. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Funny," Gabriel replied, his voice cold. "I don't recall seeing any credentials yet." He walked forward slowly, positioning himself where he could see both agents and Tommy. "I'm Gabriel Stone, former Internal Affairs. Maybe you've heard of me?"

The shorter agent's smile faltered for just a moment. "Mr. Stone. Your reputation precedes you."

"Does it?" Gabriel's own smile was razor-sharp. "And which reputation would that

be?"

Sheila moved to flank the agents from the other side. Tommy remained frozen in the middle, watching the scene unfold. The morning sun cast long shadows across the parking lot, and somewhere in the distance, a crow called out.

"This is outside your jurisdiction," the taller agent said. His hand hadn't left his jacket.

"Like my father said," Sheila said, keeping her voice steady, professional, "show us your credentials."

"Or what?" the shorter agent asked softly.

"Or I start making calls," Gabriel replied. "To people who would be very interested to hear about two fake federal agents trying to make a witness disappear."

A bead of sweat rolled down the shorter agent's temple, despite the morning chill. "Witness?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." Gabriel took another step forward. His voice dropped lower. "You really think I don't know who sent you?"

The taller agent's face tightened. "Mr. Stone, you're interfering with—"

"A federal investigation?" Sheila cut in. "Then let's call the local field office. I'm sure they'd love to verify your credentials."

She pulled out her phone. The shorter agent's hand moved, but Gabriel's voice stopped him cold.

"That hand comes out of that jacket," Gabriel said quietly, "you better be holding a badge."

The parking lot fell silent. The vacancy sign buzzed. The wind stirred loose sand across the asphalt.

"Think carefully," Gabriel continued. His tone was almost gentle. "About the people who sent you. About whether they'll protect you when this goes bad. Because it will go bad if you try to take this man."

The shorter agent's smile had vanished completely now. "You don't want to do this, Stone."

"No?" Gabriel's eyes were hard. "Ten years ago, I walked away. Let them bury what I'd found. Let them murder my wife. Let them threaten my children." He took another step forward. "You really think I'm walking away again?"

Tommy was moving now, edging away from his truck, closer to Sheila's position. The agents didn't seem to notice—they were too focused on Gabriel.

"Last chance," the taller agent said. "Walk away. Forget you saw any of this."

"I'll make you the same offer," Gabriel said.

Seconds passed. Nobody moved. Then, without warning, Tommy ran.

He sprinted past Sheila's position, heading for the gap between the motel buildings. The agents spun, reaching for their weapons, but Gabriel was faster. His gun cleared his holster first, forcing them to freeze.

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"Sheila!" Gabriel called. "Go!"

She was already running after Tommy. Behind her, she heard Gabriel's steady voice: "Hands where I can see them, gentlemen. Nice and slow."

Tommy was fast, but Sheila had spent years training. She gained on him as they rounded the corner of the motel, past dumpsters and dead bushes. The desert stretched out ahead of them, empty and vast.

"Tommy!" she called. "Stop! They won't give up until they've killed you, so unless you want to spend the rest of your life on the run, I'm your best shot at living."

He glanced back, his face pale with fear and exhaustion. His foot caught on a piece of broken concrete, and he stumbled, going down hard on one knee. Sheila reached him before he could get up.

"You don't understand," he gasped as she grabbed his arm. "You have no idea what they'll do—"

"Then tell me," she said. "Tell me everything."

The sound of engines roaring to life came from the parking lot. Car doors slammed.

"They're leaving," Sheila said. "My father must have convinced them it wasn't worth it. Not here, not now." She tightened her grip on Tommy's arm. "But they'll be back. And next time..."

Tommy slumped, the fight going out of him. "I never wanted to hurt you," he whispered. "I tried to warn them that killing you would only make things worse. But they wouldn't listen."

"Who wouldn't listen, Tommy?"

He looked up at her, his eyes haunted. "The same people who killed your mother. The same people who've owned half the department for decades." He swallowed hard. "The same people who are going to kill me the second they get the chance."

### CHAPTER THREE

Coldwater County Sheriff's Department looked different in the predawn light. Sheila sat at her desk, watching through the window as two deputies she trusted implicitly led Tommy Forster to booking.

"Walks like a man condemned to die," Gabriel said from the doorway.

Sheila turned to look at her father. "Did he say anything while I was sleeping? Anything at all?" She and her father had taken shifts driving the seven hours from New Mexico back to Utah. She would've liked to stay awake the entire time, but considering how little sleep she'd been getting lately, she'd dozed off.

She just hoped she hadn't missed anything important.

Gabriel shook his head. "Quiet as a church mouse."

"And I can trust that?"

He lowered his eyes and sighed, looking ashamed. "I'm sure that's not easy now, not after everything, but I have no reason to lie to you again. It won't protect you."

He stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. "As far as his safety here," he continued, sounding eager to change the subject, "you made a good choice asking Roberts and Baxter to watch him. They're solid, dependable. They won't let anyone close to Tommy without your say-so."

Sheila said nothing. Her mind was wandering.

"What do you think he's waiting for?" she asked. "Tommy, I mean. He seemed so eager to talk when I caught up with him. Then... nothing."

"Probably figuring out what lawyer he should hire. Or..." Gabriel sank into the chair across from her desk. "More likely, he's weighing his options. Trying to decide if we can really protect him."

Sheila thought of those fake federal agents, how smoothly professional they'd been. How ready to make Tommy disappear. "Can we?"

"As long as he's in our custody? Yes." Gabriel ran a hand through his silver hair. "But he can't stay in that cell forever."

"He wants a deal." Sheila drummed her fingers on her desk. "He'd be crazy not to. Protection in exchange for what he knows."

"The question is, who can we trust to make that deal?" Gabriel's eyes were tired. "The state? The feds? After what we saw in New Mexico..."

Sheila's phone buzzed. A text from Finn: You home yet?

Home. After everything that had happened, the word felt strange. Like something from another life.

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She would've liked to involve Finn on this trip to New Mexico, but given that he was still recovering from a gunshot wound received during a previous investigation, she'd convinced him to stay back and look after Star. He had to be chomping at the bit to learn what was going on, though.

"I don't know," she said, getting back to her father's question. "We'll just have to wait and see what Tommy says. And in the meantime, I guess I go back to work and you—well, you can do whatever you want, can't you? The joys of retirement."

Her phone rang. Angela Matthews. A tight knot formed in Sheila's stomach—Angela had been one of her mother's closest friends, had brought casseroles for weeks after the funeral. These days, she runs the community outreach program at the department. She answered, noting the time—not quite 6 AM.

"Angela? Everything okay?"

"Sheila, I'm sorry to call so early." Angela's voice trembled. "It's Tyler. He's missing."

The fatigue weighing on Sheila's shoulders suddenly felt heavier. "Tell me what happened."

"He was supposed to meet some friends at the Copper Queen Mine two nights ago. His truck's still there, but he's gone. I know I should have called sooner, but I just kept hoping there was some reasonable explanation. But with every hour I don't hear from him..." She trailed off.



"How long ago did you last see him?" Sheila asked, already standing.

"Two days ago. Not long before he went to meet his friends."

"And you're sure about the meeting spot?" Sheila grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair.

"Yes, he was quite clear about it. Is it possible I'm just overreacting, Sheila? Maybe he's staying with other friends, and his phone's dead—I don't know."

"No, you did the right thing calling. I'll be right there." She ended the call and checked her gun, then her badge.

Sheila felt her father's questioning gaze. Despite her exhaustion, despite everything happening with Tommy, she couldn't pass this one off. Not Angela's boy. Not when she remembered Tyler growing up, remembered him bringing Angela flowers every Mother's Day, just like Sheila used to do for her own mom.

"Tyler Matthews," she explained to her father. "Angela's son. He's home from college, was supposed to meet some friends by the old Copper Queen Mine two nights ago. Never came home."

"And the friends?"

"Say they never saw him. Changed their plans, texted him, but he didn't respond. His truck's at the mine, but there's no sign of him. I'm going to head to Angela's first, talk with her face-to-face."

Gabriel stood. "Who's going with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Finn's still recovering. Baxter and Roberts are watching Tommy." He ticked them off on his fingers. "The only deputies you trust completely."

Sheila paused, one arm in her jacket. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting," Gabriel said carefully, "that you might need backup you can trust."

She stared at him. "You're retired."

"You can deputize me." The corner of his mouth twitched. "I think I remember how to do the job. Was sheriff myself for a few years, if I recall."

Sheila studied her father's face. After everything that had happened—the secrets, the lies, Tommy's betrayal—working together would be... different. But he was right. She needed someone she could trust.

"Okay," she said finally. "But we do this by the book. No cowboy stuff, no lone wolf decisions. We're partners, or we're nothing."

Gabriel nodded, his expression serious. "Partners."

As they headed for her vehicle, Sheila wondered what she was getting herself into. Working with her father—the man who'd trained her, inspired her, and sometimes infuriated her—was something she'd never expected.

She just hoped they were both ready for whatever this partnership might bring.

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Angela Matthews' hands trembled as she set down three mugs of coffee. None of them had asked for coffee, but Sheila recognized the need to keep busy, to do

something normal while discussing things that were anything but.

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"I know I should have called sooner," Angela said, sinking into her armchair. Dark circles shadowed her eyes—she clearly hadn't slept. "But all yesterday, I just figured he was off enjoying himself, maybe reconnecting with some old sweetheart I didn't know about. But to be gone two nights without a word—and leaving his truck at the mine like that..."

Sheila caught her father shifting in his seat, wondered if he was fighting his old habit of taking control of an interview. It had to be difficult to take a backseat to someone else—his own daughter, no less. But he stayed quiet, letting her lead.

"Tell me about his plans two nights ago," Sheila said. "Everything you remember."

"He was meeting Kyle and Marcus—they've been friends since elementary school."

"Their last names are...?"

"Sorry. Kyle Mackley and Marcus Tredway. They were supposed to..." Angela's voice caught. She took a breath. "They always hang out at that old mine entrance when they're home from college. I hate it, but Tyler says it's tradition."

Gabriel leaned forward. "Mrs. Matthews—"

"Angela," she corrected automatically.

"Angela." His voice was gentle, practiced. "Has Tyler seemed different lately? Worried about anything?"

Sheila watched her father work, noting how he'd softened his tone, how he'd mirrored Angela's posture. Same techniques he'd taught her years ago.

"No, he was..." Angela twisted her coffee mug in her hands. "He was excited, actually. Loving his time in Seattle. Sometimes he'd drop hints that it missed it here, but otherwise it seemed like things were good with him."

"Have you talked to Kyle and Marcus?" Sheila asked.

"They say they changed plans, decided to meet at the Copper Kettle instead—it was too cold out for them. Texted Tyler, but he never responded." Angela's hands tightened around her mug. "Tyler's truck is at the mine, so he went there... but then what happened?"

"Is there any chance he went into the mine?" Sheila asked. "Maybe got lost?"

Angela shook her head. "He knew better than to go in there. Besides, he got claustrophobic easily." She rose quickly, coffee sloshing over the rim of her mug. "I'm sorry—I just need a minute."

When she left the room, Sheila and her dad exchanged a glance. Sheila could see that her father felt the same sympathy for Angela that she herself felt. It had to be agonizing not knowing where her son was or what might have happened to him.

Angela returned a few minutes later, her eyes red but her composure restored. She sat back down, wrapping her hands around her mug as if seeking warmth.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just... not knowing..."

"Tell us more about Tyler," Sheila said gently. "What kind of person is he?"

A ghost of a smile touched Angela's face. "Smart. Determined. When he sets his mind to something..." She trailed off, then rallied. "He's studying biochemistry. Wants to do research on new cancer treatments."

"Sounds ambitious," Gabriel said.

"He is. Was." Angela caught herself, shook her head. "Is. He works so hard. Even when he's home, he's always studying." She gestured toward a family photo on the wall—Tyler in a cap and gown, his arm around his mother. "We used to be so close, but lately..."

"Lately?" Sheila asked.

"We've been... disagreeing. About faith, mostly." Angela's fingers worried at a cross pendant around her neck. "I raised him in the church, but after he started going to college... He says he needs proof for everything now. That faith isn't enough." She gave a wan smile. "Just one more thing for us to argue about, I suppose."

Sheila glanced at her father, saw him making mental notes just as she was.

"Mrs. Matthews," Gabriel said, "we'd like to talk to Kyle and Marcus. Do you have their contact information?"

"Of course." Angela reached for her phone with trembling hands. "They're good boys. They've known Tyler forever."

As Angela scrolled through her contacts, Sheila studied the family photo again. Tyler's smile was bright, confident. A young man with his whole future ahead of him.

Where had he gone? Had someone else shown up outside that mine, or had Tyler gone in? And if so, why?

"Here," Angela said, showing them the numbers on her phone. "Kyle's parents still live on Cedar Street. Marcus is staying with his sister while he's home from college."

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Sheila copied down the information. "We'll talk to them right away. And Angela?" She waited until the other woman met her eyes. "We'll find him. I promise."

Outside, walking to their vehicle, Gabriel spoke quietly: "You shouldn't make promises like that."

"I know." Sheila unlocked the doors. "But right now, hope is all she has, even if she'll be heartbroken by bad news."

Gabriel opened his door, then stopped. "I wasn't thinking about how she'll be affected if you can't keep that promise. I was thinking about you. You break enough promises in this line of work—good promises, made with the best of intentions—and they start adding up like stones in your backpack."

Sheila climbed into the driver's seat. "Then let's make sure we don't have to break that promise."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Sheila pulled into the station parking lot, mulling over the interviews.

"Well," she said, "their stories match perfectly. Maybe too perfectly."

Gabriel, seated in the passenger seat, clucked his tongue, an indication he was about to disagree with her. "No, not likely. I think Kyle and Marcus were genuinely worried. Besides, their timeline fits what we know. They texted Tyler at 8:47, decided to meet at the Copper Kettle instead. Their receipts confirm they were there



by 9:15."

"And Tyler's truck was already at the mine when they changed plans." Sheila drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "Which means..."

"He went into that mine." Gabriel's voice was grim. "Question is why? His mother said he was claustrophobic."

"Maybe he heard something? Thought someone needed help?" She sighed. "The entrance was searched last night, but we need to go deeper. Get a proper team out there."

Her phone rang. Finn.

"Hey," she answered, trying to keep the exhaustion from her voice.

"Hey yourself. Star's at school, Tommy's secure, and I'm going crazy sitting at home. Let me come in."

"Finn..."

"I can at least do desk work. The doctor cleared me for that much."

She could picture him pacing their living room, frustrated at being sidelined. "You took a bullet less than a week ago. You need to heal."

"I hear you're working with your father."

There it was. The real reason for his call.

"I didn't have much choice," she said. "With you recovering and our most trusted

deputies watching Tommy..."

"You trust him now?" Finn's voice was careful. "After everything?"

She glanced at her father, who was pretending not to listen. "He's trying to make things right."

"By helping you find a missing college kid? Or by keeping an eye on you while Tommy's in custody?"

"Finn..."

"I just worry," he said softly. "He lied to you for years, Sheila. About your mother's murder. About the corruption in the department. What makes you think you can trust him now?"

She watched her father step out of the car, giving her privacy. "Because I don't have a choice. And because..." She took a deep breath. "Because he's finally telling me the truth. About everything."

"You sure about that?"

"No," she admitted. "But right now, I need backup I can trust. And whatever else he's done, he's still a damn good cop."

Finn was quiet for a moment. "Just be careful, okay? And keep me updated—on the missing kid, on Tommy, on all of it."

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"I will. Now go rest. Doctor's orders."

After hanging up, she joined her father outside the car. He didn't ask about the call, but his expression was knowing.

"He's worried about you," Gabriel said.

"He's worried about you," she corrected. "About whether I can trust you."

Her father nodded slowly. "Smart man. I would be, too."

She studied him, waiting for him to explain why she didn't have to worry. He remained silent. Perhaps that was best, though. If he'd been quick to dismiss her doubts, she would have been even more suspicious.

Or was that the very reason why he wasn't defending himself?

Tired of these thoughts, she checked her watch. "We should head to the mine. Get a proper search organized."

"Sheila." Her father's voice stopped her. "Finn's right to be concerned. But I meant what I said in New Mexico—no more secrets. No more lies."

She studied his face again, looking for any trace of deception. She found only determination and regret.

"I believe you," she said. "But I need you to know that this doesn't make everything

right between us, okay? Just because I don't think you have reason to keep lying to me, that doesn't mean you've earned my trust back. It doesn't mean we're close again." It pained her to say the words, but she had to let them out. She needed her father to know where things stood.

He winced. "I get it. Truly, I do. All I ask is that you give me the opportunity to win back your trust."

Sheila nodded slowly. "What do you think I'm doing right now?"

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The mouth of the Copper Queen Mine gaped like an open wound in the mountainside. Yellow crime scene tape fluttered in the cold wind, and the gravel parking area was crowded with vehicles: police cruisers, search and rescue trucks, even a few civilian four-wheelers belonging to volunteers.

"Doc Sullivan's here," Sheila said, spotting the mining historian's battered Jeep. "Good. We'll need his expertise."

Her father nodded. "Smart call getting him involved."

She'd made the calls an hour ago—to Search and Rescue, to Doc Sullivan, to the caving club that sometimes assisted with mine operations. If Tyler was down there, they'd need everyone's help finding him.

Doc Sullivan was already organizing equipment, his weathered face serious as he spoke with the Search and Rescue team leader. He looked up as Sheila approached.

"Sheriff," he said, "I've got preliminary maps here, but I should warn you—they're incomplete. The Copper Queen was abandoned before proper surveys were finished."

He spread the maps across the hood of his Jeep. The tunnel system looked like veins branching through the mountain's heart.

"The main shaft extends about half a mile," he explained, tracing the route with a calloused finger. "But there are dozens of secondary tunnels, some of them partially collapsed. The miners were following copper veins, you see. Anywhere they found ore, they'd dig."

"How deep?" Gabriel asked.

"The main shaft stays relatively level, but some of the secondary tunnels drop several hundred feet." Sullivan's expression was grim. "There are vertical shafts too—ventilation holes, mostly. Easy to miss in the dark."

Sheila studied the gathered volunteers. The Search and Rescue team was professional, well-equipped. The cavers knew their business. But the abandoned mine presented unique challenges even for experts.

"What's the stability like?" she asked.

Sullivan shook his head. "That's the problem. These supports are over sixty years old. The mine closed in 1961 after a partial collapse killed three men. The company claimed the copper had played out, but rumor was they just didn't want to pay for proper safety measures."

The wind gusted stronger, carrying the smell of old timber and stale earth from the mine's entrance. Sheila watched the search teams checking their equipment—helmets with mounted lights, rope, first aid kits, air quality monitors.

"They worked this mine for almost forty years," Sullivan continued. "Started in the twenties, when copper prices were high. The town practically grew up around it. Half

the old-timers here had fathers or grandfathers who worked these tunnels."

He pointed to various notations on the map. "There were three main copper veins they followed. The richest one led them deep into the mountain, but that's where they had the most stability problems. The geology out here... well, let's just say Mother Nature doesn't like having holes poked in her."

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Gabriel moved closer to study the map. "You said these are incomplete?"

"The company took most of the detailed surveys when they pulled out. These are reconstructed from memory, old photos, whatever documentation we could piece together." Sullivan tapped a section where the lines simply stopped. "Anything past these points is educated guesswork."

Sheila felt the weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders. They needed to find Tyler, but she couldn't risk sending people into unmapped tunnels without knowing the dangers.

"We'll work in teams," she said. "No one goes anywhere alone. Every team needs at least one experienced caver or rescue worker. Radio checks every fifteen minutes."

Sullivan nodded approvingly. "I've marked the most dangerous areas we know about. Flooded sections, unstable tunnels, drop-offs." He handed her a more detailed version of the map. "But remember—there could be hazards we don't know about. Sixty years of neglect does things to a mine."

The Search and Rescue leader, Dave Kendrick, joined them. "We've got air quality monitors," he said. "Pockets of bad air can collect in these old mines. And the deeper we go, the worse ventilation gets."

Sheila watched as the teams gathered their gear. The morning sun was climbing higher, but its warmth didn't reach the mine's entrance. The opening seemed to swallow light itself.

"The main shaft first," she said. "Then we branch out methodically. I don't want anyone getting lost down there while we're searching for Tyler."

Her father appeared at her shoulder with two helmets, lights already mounted. "Just like the old training exercises," he said, handing her one.

She took it, remembering the cave rescue courses he'd insisted she take when she first joined the department. "Except this isn't a training exercise," she said.

They waited while Sullivan gave the teams a final briefing on mine safety. The historian's voice echoed off the rock face as he explained the signs of imminent collapse, the importance of checking support beams, the dangers of old mining equipment.

"The miners had a saying," Sullivan told them. "'The mountain never sleeps.' They meant the rock is always moving, always settling. Listen to it. If something doesn't feel right, get out."

The teams began moving toward the entrance. Sheila hung back, watching them organize themselves. Her father stayed with her, adjusting his helmet.

"Your mother would have hated this," he said quietly.

Sheila glanced at him. "The mine?"

"She was claustrophobic too. Like Tyler." A faint smile crossed his face. "First time I took her on a date, I thought it would be romantic to go spelunking. There was this tourist cave outside town..."

"What happened?"



"She made it about twenty feet in, turned around, and walked straight back out. Left me standing there like an idiot with two helmets and a picnic lunch."

Despite everything, Sheila found herself smiling. "I'm surprised she gave you a second shot."

He grunted. "So was I." Then he paused, and his eyes grew distant. "But she was like that—giving people second chances. Always liked to believe there was more to people than met the eye."

Sheila wanted to ask more—about their early days, about what her mother was like before children, before responsibilities, before everything. It had only been ten years, but sometimes it felt like her mother had been gone forever.

Before she could formulate the question, however, her radio crackled. "Sheriff?" It was Kendrick. "You need to get out here. We found something."

The urgency in his voice made her stomach clench.

"Where?"

"Not in the mine. About half a mile east, near the old ventilation shaft. You better come quick."

She keyed her radio. "On our way." To the gathered teams, she called out: "Hold positions. Wait for my signal."

As she and her father hurried to their vehicle, she tried not to think about what they might find. But she knew. They all knew.

The search was over before it had really begun.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sheila's heart was heavy as she parked behind the Search and Rescue vehicles. She suspected Tyler was dead, but what she wasn't sure about was why or how he'd died.

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Had it been an accident? Or might there be foul play involved?

"Is that Gabriel Stone?" one of the Search and Rescue workers called out as they exited the vehicle. "Never thought I'd see you back out here, Sheriff."

"Just Gabriel now, Mike," her father replied with a wan smile. "Been retired a while."

"Once a sheriff, always a sheriff," Mike said. "Especially in this county." He turned to Sheila. "You're lucky to have him along. If anyone can get to the bottom of this, it's your father."

Sheila smiled politely, but inwardly, she was thinking about the Internal Affairs investigation. Her father hadn't exactly gotten to the bottom of that one, had he? Still, this was different. She had no doubt he would do everything he could to help figure out what had happened to Tyler Matthews.

As Mike drifted away, Sheila turned her attention to a rusted metal structure nearby that jutted from the mountainside like a broken bone.

"Old ventilation shaft," Gabriel murmured.

Dave Kendrick met them at the perimeter tape, his weathered face lighting up at the sight of Gabriel. "Well, look who they dragged out of retirement. Good to have you here—we could use your experience."

Dave turned to Sheila. "About thirty yards past the shaft," he said, gesturing toward a cluster of people. "One of our teams spotted him while checking possible escape

routes."

Sheila nodded, already pulling on gloves. Her father fell into step beside her, and she found herself unconsciously matching his measured pace—the same deliberate approach to a crime scene he'd taught her years ago. Don't rush in. Take in everything. The scene will tell you its story if you're patient enough to listen.

Tyler Matthews lay face-down in the dirt, his clothes torn and filthy. Even from a distance, Sheila could see the dark stains of dried blood matted in his hair. His right arm was stretched out as if reaching for something, curled fingers grasping a handful of dust.

"Shit," Gabriel muttered. He crouched beside the body, careful not to disturb any evidence. "How long has he been out here?"

"Based on his condition, not long," Kendrick said. "Maybe six, eight hours max."

Sheila circled the body slowly, cataloging details. Tyler's jeans were caked with a mixture of mud and what looked like mine tailings—the crushed rock waste left over from copper extraction. Deep scrapes marked his forearms, visible through tears in his jacket. His shoes were scuffed raw, the soles worn as if he'd been walking for miles in the dark.

"He was in the mines," she said quietly. "For at least part of the time he was missing."

Her father nodded. "The question was why. His mother told us he was claustrophobic, so what would cause him to go in there? Was he moving toward something or away from something?"

The county coroner's van pulled up just then. Dr. Jin Zihao emerged, medical bag in hand. He'd been Coldwater's coroner for over a decade, and Sheila had worked with

him enough to trust his judgment implicitly.

"Careful around the head," Sheila called out as he approached. Something about the way Tyler was lying didn't sit right with her. "I want to document everything before we move him."

She took photos from multiple angles while Dr. Zihao began his preliminary examination. Her father stepped back, giving them room to work, but she could feel him watching—not just the body, but her. Evaluating her process, maybe. Or just worried about how she was handling it.

"Ready to roll him?" Dr. Zihao asked after several minutes.

Sheila nodded, tucking her camera away. Together, they carefully turned the body over.

The cause of death was immediately apparent. The left side of Tyler's head was crushed, the injury pattern suggesting multiple blows from something heavy and blunt. Blood streaked his face and neck in dried rivulets.

"A hammer, maybe," Dr. Zihao mused. "Or a rock. Something with heft but not too large."

"Mining tool?" Gabriel suggested from behind them.

"Possible." The coroner pointed to several distinct marks around the primary injury. "See these parallel impressions? Whatever it was had a consistent shape."

Sheila studied Tyler's face. Despite the violence done to him, his expression was oddly peaceful. His eyes were closed, mouth slightly parted as if in sleep. No signs of defensive wounds on his hands or arms.

"He didn't fight back," she said. "Why wouldn't he fight back?"

Her father moved closer. "Maybe he knew his attacker. Or the first blow incapacitated him."

"It could also be that he was just too exhausted to resist," Dr. Zihao added. "Look at his condition—dehydrated, hypothermic, probably hadn't eaten in over a day. If he really was in those mines all this time..."

Sheila stood, needing a moment to process. She gestured to the forensics team to start setting up tarps.

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"It doesn't make sense," she said, more to herself than the others. "He disappears from one mine entrance, somehow makes it through God knows how many tunnels to emerge here, and then someone just happens to be waiting with a weapon?"

"Not a coincidence," her father said firmly. "Someone knew he'd come out here."

"But how? These tunnels are like a maze. Was someone following him, waiting for him to get out?"

Gabriel was quiet for a moment, considering. When he spoke, his voice was careful—the tone he used when he thought she might not like what he had to say. "Maybe they lured him in, like a cat playing with a mouse. Then, when he finally got out of the mines, the fun was over. Time to kill the mouse."

Sheila looked back at Tyler's body, at the peaceful expression that now seemed more sinister. Had someone lured him into the darkness, allowed him to hope he might escape, only to kill him the moment he saw daylight?

"If you're right," she said slowly, "then this wasn't some random act of violence. Someone planned this. Watched him. Waited for the right moment."

"And knew the mine system well enough to navigate it in the dark," her father added.

Dr. Zihao cleared his throat. "I'll need to do a full autopsy, but preliminary time of death appears to be early this morning, between two and four AM." He pointed to Tyler's clothes. "The mine dust is ground into the fabric. He was in there for a while, moving around. But the blood spatter is all localized here. He died where he fell."

Sheila imagined Tyler's final moments—emerging from the darkness, perhaps believing he was saved, only to face something much worse. He'd had so much ahead of him, so much to live for. And now those dreams had been crushed—not just for him, but for his family and friends as well.

Sheila thought of Tyler's mother, who would never get to embrace her son again. Never get to hear him talk about college and future plans, marriage and children and a career and all the exciting possibilities that had once been ahead of him. The very thought of all that had been lost turned Sheila's stomach sour.

She crouched near his outstretched hand, brushing aside dirt to reveal a faint outline in the earth. A symbol drawn just beneath his fingers.

"What is this?" she murmured.

Her father stepped closer, frowning. "A cross, by the look of it."

"Did he draw it in his final moments?"

Gabriel studied her carefully. "You're forgetting something."

She waited for him to explain, but he didn't. He was testing her, letting her figure it out on her own.

"Angela," she said, frowning as she recalled their conversation with Tyler's mother. "She said Tyler was agnostic."

Gabriel nodded. "So either, in his last moments, he reverted back to an earlier belief—"

"Or his killer drew the cross," Sheila said. "And judging by the dirt on the tip of



Tyler's finger... the killer made Tyler draw it."

## CHAPTER SIX

He watched from the tree line as they examined Tyler Matthews' body, cataloging every movement, every reaction. The sheriff and her father were thorough—he had to give them that. They noticed details others might have missed, like the cross he'd made Tyler draw. A final act of contrition, though Tyler had fought against it until the end.

They don't understand yet, he thought, adjusting his position behind a thick pine. But they will.

A few stray snowflakes fell around him, catching in his beard, melting against his skin. He barely felt the cold anymore. Years of working these tunnels had changed him, hardened him against discomfort. The same tunnels where his father had locked him as punishment, leaving him alone in the darkness for days at a time.

"Builds character," Frank would say afterward, unlocking the heavy chain that secured the entrance. "A real man faces his fears."

Yes, his time in the darkness certainly had built character, though perhaps not the kind of character Frank had intended, as he must have realized in his final moments. But that was nature's way: survival of the fittest. Not God's way, perhaps, but it was a fallen world, a shadow of what it was supposed to be.

Putting aside these thoughts, he watched as the coroner examined Tyler's head wound. Did the coroner have any idea what had dealt the blows?

The item itself—a shovel passed down to the man from his father—lay cleaned and oiled in his workshop now, ready for the next time he needed it. Everything in its

place, his father had taught him. Keep your tools maintained.

He remembered Tyler's final moments with perfect clarity. The boy had lasted longer in the darkness than expected—two nights of wandering the tunnels, calling out for help, slowly losing his grip on reality. The man had followed him the entire time with his night-vision goggles, a silent predator watching Tyler's descent into terror.

There, in the darkness, he had tested Tyler. And Tyler had been found wanting.

When Tyler finally found an exit, the dawn light had nearly blinded him. He'd fallen to his knees, weeping with relief. It was short-lived, however. Soon, the darkness found him again—for good, this time.

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Now, watching the sheriff photograph the cross, the man felt a familiar stirring. The urge to share his gift again. To help another entitled soul understand the truth about darkness and faith.

He shifted his weight, sensing movement in his peripheral vision. A deer, probably. The animals were used to his presence up here. His cabin sat less than a mile away, hidden in a stand of pines. The basement held his workshop, his supplies, and most importantly, his own private entrance to the mine system.

His father had built that entrance years ago, before the drinking got bad, before the punishments started. "Every miner needs his own way in," Frank had said. "In case of cave-ins." He'd died in those same tunnels years later, though not from any cave-in. His death had been more... dramatic. More fitting.

The sheriff was speaking to her father now, their voices carrying faintly on the wind. Something about the mine historian, about mapping the tunnels. The man smiled. Let them try. He'd spent decades learning these passages, memorizing every twist and turn until he could navigate them blindfolded. They were his domain now, his church where lost souls could find redemption through suffering.

He thought of Marcus Reed, the urban explorer whose videos he'd been studying. Such arrogance, treating these sacred spaces like tourist attractions. Filming them for likes and subscribers, making light of their dark power. Yes, Marcus would be next. He had already begun preparing, studying Marcus's patterns, learning his weaknesses.

The wind shifted, carrying voices more clearly.

"...serial killer profile..." the sheriff was saying.

"Too early to assume that," her father responded.

But the man knew they were right to worry. Tyler Matthews had only been the beginning. There were so many others who needed to learn to understand the gifts that darkness could bring. The peace that came with accepting your fears, embracing them until they became strength.

He touched the cross hanging from his neck—his father's cross, taken from his cooling body all those years ago. A reminder that salvation came through suffering, just as his father had taught him.

Deciding he'd seen all he cared to see here, the man turned away and moved silently through the trees. He had preparations to make. Marcus Reed's latest video showed him planning to explore an abandoned mine near Coldwater later today. No time to waste.

Walking home through the deepening snow, he smiled. Some would call him a monster. But monsters lived in darkness. He had become something else entirely—a teacher, showing others the path to enlightenment through the same dark tunnels that had shaped him.

His father would be proud.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Sheila was still thinking about the cross Tyler had drawn in the dirt, unwillingly or otherwise, as she and her father watched Doc Sullivan pour coffee from an ancient percolator that looked like it might have been here since the mines first opened.

Doc Sullivan's office was a converted storage room in the Miners' Museum, though 'office' might have been too generous a term. Every surface was covered with maps, geological surveys, and old photographs of men in hardhats standing proudly before mine entrances. Mining equipment from different eras filled the corners—pickaxes, shovels, helmets with carbide lamps. The room smelled of old paper and leather bindings.

"thirsty?" Sullivan asked, offering a mug of coffee. "It's not good, but it's hot."

Sheila accepted the chipped mug, noting how her father declined with a slight shake of his head. Gabriel was examining a topographical map that covered most of one wall, his eyes tracing the elevation lines that marked where the mountains had been riddled with mining tunnels.

"So," Sullivan asked, "what's the latest on Tyler Matthews' death? I didn't see his body myself—that's... not really my thing, if you understand. But I heard there were signs of foul play."

"He was bludgeoned to death near a mine entrance," Sheila said, watching Sullivan settle into his creaking desk chair. "But before that, it appears he spent two nights in the mines."

Sullivan's weathered face grew grave. He was older than her father, with deep lines carved by years of outdoor work, but his eyes were sharp and alert. A former miner himself, he'd dedicated his retirement to preserving the area's mining history. Now that history had turned deadly.

"And you think there will be others," he said. It wasn't a question.

"The way it was done—the planning, the execution—this wasn't the killer's first time using these tunnels." Sheila took a sip of coffee. It was exactly as bad as promised.

"Either he was waiting for Tyler outside that entrance, which seems unlikely given how many entrances there are, or he followed Tyler through the mines. My money is on the latter."

"Followed him?" Sullivan squinted, puzzled. "Why would anyone do that?"

Sheila shook her head. "I don't know. Part of some sick game, maybe."

Her father turned from the wall map. "In any case, we need to know every possible entrance to these mines. Every way in or out. He may very well strike again, and we need to know where that might be."

Sullivan barked a harsh laugh. "That's not as simple as it sounds." He stood, joints popping, and moved to a filing cabinet. "The mining companies kept detailed maps, sure. But locals? They found their own ways in. Prospectors, teenagers looking for trouble, homeless folks seeking shelter." He pulled out a drawer, rifling through files. "Some entrances were intentionally hidden to prevent claim-jumping."

"How many are we talking about?" Sheila asked.

"Official entrances? Maybe thirty, spread across three mountains." He found what he was looking for—a thick folder stuffed with loose papers. "Unofficial? Could be hundreds. Some are just gaps in the rock face, barely big enough to squeeze through. Others..." He spread several papers across his desk, revealing hand-drawn maps covered in annotations. "These were made by old-timers, marking entrances they remembered. But half of them are probably collapsed by now, and the other half..." He shrugged. "Memory gets fuzzy after fifty years."

Sheila studied the nearest map, trying to get a sense of the extent of the mines. From what she could tell, half of the notes on here were conjecture. While there were some well-known entrances, many smaller entrances were more rumor than fact.

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"We need to close the entrances," Gabriel said. "At least the ones we can find."

"And trap anyone else who might be down there?" Sheila countered, turning away from the map. "We don't know if Tyler was his only victim. There could be others."

Her father's jaw tightened—a subtle tell she recognized from childhood arguments. "If we leave them open, we're giving him hunting grounds."

"He already has hunting grounds," she said. "Closing a few entrances won't stop him. But it might stop someone from escaping."

Sullivan cleared his throat. "There's another problem. These mountains are full of campgrounds, hiking trails, even some old homesteads. People live up there, work up there. Maybe it's not my place to say this, but do you really have the manpower to monitor so many sites?"

Nobody spoke. Gabriel sighed heavily. "Even if we can't close them all," he said, "we still need to know where they are."

Sheila nodded and pulled out her notebook. "We need locations. Anywhere people might come into contact with mine entrances."

"That's most of the mountain," Sullivan said. He moved to the wall map, pointing. "Paradise Campground here. The old Miller place here. Hiking trails all through this area. And these blue marks? All known mine entrances within a quarter-mile of public access."

There were dozens of blue marks.

"What about parking areas?" Gabriel asked. "Places someone could leave a vehicle without being noticed?"

Sullivan considered this. "There's the old logging road that parallels the main tunnel system. Hardly used now except by hunters. And there's a fire road that passes near where Tyler was found." He traced the route with his finger. "Connects to three different trail heads. Popular with hikers."

"We need cameras on those roads," Sheila said. "And the main parking areas. If our killer was watching Tyler all that time..."

"He had to park somewhere," her father finished. "Assuming he's not local, which brings up another point."

"What's that?" Sheila asked.

"We need to talk to locals, see if anyone has seen or heard anything suspicious."

Sheila nodded, but inwardly, she was thinking about manpower. With Roberts and Baxter keeping an eye on Tommy Forster, the department was already stretched thin. Coldwater County was a sizable area, but it was a small department, always had been. And most of the time, that worked just fine for everyone.

Most of the time.

Sullivan was pulling out more maps. "I can mark likely locations. But you should know..." He hesitated. "These mines, they're not just holes in the ground. They're part of local history. People have been exploring them, using them, living near them for generations."



"What are you saying, Doc?" Gabriel asked.

"If you do decide to shut these mines down... people aren't going to be happy."

"You know what makes people happy? Keeping them alive."

Sheila gazed at the wall of photographs—miners, families, whole communities that had grown up around these mountains. Could one of them be the killer? If so, how would they know?

Sullivan pulled another file from his cabinet, this one labeled "ACCIDENTS AND INCIDENTS, 1950-1975."

"If you do try closing the mines, you wouldn't be the first ones," he said, laying out yellowed newspaper clippings. "After three miners died in '61, the company tried sealing off the most dangerous sections. Within a week, locals had opened new entrances. These mountains are like Swiss cheese—block one hole, people just make another."

"But why?" Sheila asked. "What's so important about keeping them open?"

Sullivan's eyes grew distant. "For some, it's about pride. Their fathers and grandfathers worked these tunnels. Others think there's still copper down there, waiting to be found. And then there's folks who just can't let go of the past." He tapped one of the photographs on the wall. "This place used to mean something. People built lives around these mines."

"And now someone's using them as a killing ground," Gabriel said quietly.

Sheila returned her attention to the wall map, noting how the tunnel system spread like a spider's web through the mountains. "We need to think like him," she said. "He

chose Tyler for a reason. Watched him, planned it."

"Unless it was just a matter of Tyler being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Crime of opportunity."

Sheila chewed her lip, considering this possibility.

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"The parking lot where Tyler's truck was found," her father said. "It's visible from the fire road."

"Perfect vantage point," Sullivan agreed. "You could watch that lot for hours and no one would notice. Hunters do it all the time, spotting for deer."

"And if Tyler was drinking..." Sheila traced the route from the parking area to the mine entrance. "He was vulnerable. Alone."

"An easy target," Gabriel finished. "Like I said, crime of opportunity."

Sheila turned back to Sullivan. "We need to know who else might be vulnerable. Who spends time near these mines? Who parks in these lots regularly?"

Sullivan began making a list. "Hikers, mostly. Rock climbers in the warmer months. Local kids looking for trouble. And lately there's been an increase in what they call 'urban explorers'—people who document abandoned places."

"Document how?" Gabriel asked.

"Videos, usually. Social media stuff." Sullivan shrugged. "Had one fellow in here last week, wanted to know about the Copper Queen's history. Said he was planning to film—"

"Wait." Sheila's hand tightened on her coffee mug. "Who was this?"

"Young guy, maybe mid-twenties. Had all kinds of fancy camera equipment."

Sullivan frowned, trying to remember. "Marcus something. Said he had a following online, people who watched him explore old mines."

Sheila and her father exchanged looks. Someone who announced their plans to explore the mines? Who would be alone, focused on filming, perfect prey for a killer who knew these tunnels?

"We need his full name," Sheila said. "And we need it now."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Marcus Reed checked his head-mounted camera for the third time, making sure the battery was secure. The hot noon sun beat down on the bed of his pickup truck as he sorted through his gear: backup lights, rope, first aid kit, the works. He had everything needed for a professional mine exploration.

Everything except permission.

"You're really going through with this?" his sister Amy asked from the driver's seat. She'd agreed to drop him off, but her disapproval was clear in every word. "After what happened to that college kid?"

"That's exactly why I have to do it." Marcus adjusted the camera angle, checking the preview on his phone. "My followers need to see this. To understand what happened to Tyler Matthews."

He caught his reflection in the truck's back window—sandy hair pulled back in a ponytail, stubble he kept meaning to shave, eyes bright with the familiar pre-exploration energy. At twenty-six, he was living his dream, even if that dream wasn't exactly paying the bills yet.

"You mean your followers need content," Amy said. "There's a difference."

Marcus sighed. Five years older than him, Amy had always been the practical one. The one who'd gone to nursing school, gotten a real job, made their parents proud. While he...

Well, he crawled into holes in the ground and filmed it.

"Look at these comments," he said, pulling up his latest video. "Eighty thousand views in two days. People care about this stuff."

"They care about drama." Amy killed the engine, turning to face him. "Tyler Matthews died up here, Marcus. This isn't some abandoned factory or empty hospital. This is where someone was murdered."

"Which is why someone needs to document it. Show people what really happened." He shouldered his pack, heavy with gear. "Remember what Dad always said about journalism?"

"Dad was talking about his newspaper career, not YouTube stunts."

The words stung more than he wanted to admit. Their father had been a career journalist, covering everything from city council meetings to major crimes, until cancer took him three years ago. He'd always pushed Marcus to find the real story, dig deeper, show people the truth.

Of course, he probably hadn't meant for Marcus to do it literally by exploring abandoned mines.

"This isn't just for views," Marcus said, softer now. "Tyler Matthews had his whole life ahead of him. If I can retrace his steps, maybe figure out why he went into that

mine..."

"And get yourself killed in the process?" Amy's voice cracked slightly. "I already lost Dad. I can't lose you too."

Marcus set his pack down and hugged his sister. She resisted at first, then melted into it like they were kids again.

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"I'll be careful," he promised. "Multiple light sources, rope lines, emergency beacon. I've done this a hundred times."

"Not in a murder scene," she muttered into his shoulder. "You know I'd go with you if I didn't get so claustrophobic."

He pulled back, meeting her eyes. "I know you would. But don't worry. I'll be gone two hours—that's all. Just enough to film the entrance and maybe the first hundred yards. Nothing crazy."

Amy studied his face, probably remembering all the times he'd made similar promises. Like when he'd said he was "just checking out" the old silver mine near Tucson, only to spend six hours mapping a newly discovered tunnel. Or the time he'd promised a "quick look" at a cave system and ended up finding a whole new chamber.

"Your girlfriend knows about this?" Amy asked.

"Ex-girlfriend," he said. "Rachel didn't exactly appreciate my career choices."

"Smart woman."

Marcus grabbed his pack again. "Two hours," he repeated. "I'll text you when I'm done."

Amy drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "You didn't answer my question from before. Are you really doing this because of Tyler Matthews? Or because you

know a video about his death will go viral?"

The question hit home. Marcus had been asking himself the same thing since he'd heard about Tyler's murder. Yes, the video would probably bring in views—maybe even enough to finally monetize his channel. But there was more to it than that.

"You didn't see the comments on my last Copper Queen video," he said. "People talking about exploring it themselves, treating it like some adventure playground. If I can show them what really happens in these mines..."

"You think that'll stop them?"

"Maybe not. But at least they'll understand the risks." He shouldered his pack. "And maybe we'll learn something about why Tyler went in there. Help the police find whoever killed him."

Amy shook her head, but he could see her resolving herself to his decision. "Two hours," she said. "Then I'm calling Search and Rescue."

"Deal." He started walking toward the mine entrance, then stopped. "Hey, Amy? Thanks. For understanding."

"I don't understand," she called after him. "But I love you anyway."

Marcus smiled and kept walking. The mine entrance loomed ahead, a dark rectangle cut into the mountainside. He pulled up his latest video on his phone, checking the comments again:

Crazy what happened to that college kid. You should do a memorial video.

Bet there's more to this story. Go find out what really happened!



Following in a murder victim's footsteps? Kind of sick, don't you think?

That last one gave him pause. Was this disrespectful to Tyler's memory? Or was he providing a valuable service, showing people the dangers these mines could hold?

He switched on his camera, darkness ahead.

"Hey guys, Marcus here. Today, we're exploring the Copper Queen Mine, but this isn't our usual kind of video. Just this morning, a young man named Tyler Matthews was found dead outside this mine. Apparently, he'd been in there for the past two nights..."

## CHAPTER NINE

Sheila pressed the call button again, watching the empty road ahead as Gabriel drove. Once again, Marcus Reed's phone went straight to voicemail.

"Marcus, this is Sheriff Stone. I need you to call me back immediately regarding the Copper Queen Mine. Do not enter the mine. I repeat, do not—"

The call dropped. No signal. She lowered the phone in frustration, watching the mountain roads wind ahead of them. They were heading toward Marcus's last known address, but something told her they were already too late.

"I'll try Jim," Gabriel said, taking a sharp turn that made the tires squeal. "He might know where he is."

"Jim?"

Gabriel was already dialing, his free hand steady on the wheel. "He's a neighbor of the Reeds, knows them pretty well. He and I used to go golfing with Frank."

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Sheila gave him a blank look. "Who's Frank?"

"Frank Reed? Marcus's father? He was a journalist, covered the copper mine collapse back in '61. Good man. Died a few years ago."

Sometimes Sheila forgot just how deep her father's connections ran in this town. Thirty years as a cop, half of that as Sheriff—he knew everyone's story, everyone's history.

"Jim?" Gabriel said into his phone. "Need a favor. Looking for Marcus Reed... Yeah, that's right... Okay. You think she'll know where he is?" A pause. "Sure, text me her number. Thanks, Jim. I owe you one."

He ended that call, waited for Jim's text to come through, and then dialed another number. "Calling Marcus's sister, Amy," he said to Sheila. "Apparently, the two of them are close."

Sheila nodded, trying to read her father's expression. There was tension there, but also something else. Pride, maybe? He was in his element, working his connections, using decades of relationships to get what they needed.

Just like the old days.

"Amy? Gabriel Stone." He paused, listening. "Yeah, it's been a while. Listen, I'm trying to reach your brother Marcus... When?" He clenched his jaw hard. "Which entrance?... No, don't start blaming yourself. I'm sure he's fine—we're just trying to be extra cautious... Yes, we'll make sure to have him reach out to you when we find

him."

So much for not offering false promises, Sheila thought.

"It's best if you just stay where you are," Gabriel continued. "We'll call you as soon as... Yes, I understand. Just don't—" He pulled the phone away from his ear, staring at it. "She hung up."

"What did she say?"

"She dropped Marcus off at the mine entrance an hour ago. Same one Tyler Matthews disappeared from. He wanted to retrace Tyler's steps, figure out what happened to him."

"Damn it." Sheila accelerated. "He's walking right into—"

"I know." Gabriel's voice was tight. "She tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen."

They crested a hill, and Sheila could see the mountain range spread out before them, peaks still capped with snow despite the warm day. Somewhere in those hills, Marcus Reed was walking into a killer's trap.

"Take Carson Road," Gabriel said suddenly. "It's faster."

"Carson Road adds three miles."

"Trust me." There was that tone again, the one that said he knew better. "It bypasses the switchbacks. I used to patrol these roads, remember?"

Sheila hesitated only a moment before making the turn. Her father had his

faults—God knew he had his faults—but she couldn't deny his knowledge of these mountains.

The road curved sharply upward, and before long, Sheila had to grudgingly admit her father was right. This route might be longer in distance, but they were making better time without the endless switchbacks of the main road.

Sheila still felt uneasy, however, despite making good time. There was no guarantee that if Marcus was in danger, they would have two nights to find him. If the killer was targeting Marcus, it was not at all unlikely that he would short his hunt considerably for fear of being apprehended by the police.

"There's something you should know," Gabriel said as they climbed higher into the mountains. "About this road."

"What?"

"It passes near another mine entrance. One that's not on the official maps."

Sheila glanced at him. "How do you know about it?"

"Found it back in '92. Group of teenagers had been using it to throw parties." He shifted in his seat, grimacing. "Had to drag three drunk kids out of there one night. After that, we tried to seal it, but..."

"But people kept finding ways in."

"Exactly." He pointed through the windshield. "Look there. See that old logging road?"

Sheila nodded. A narrow dirt track branched off from their route, disappearing into

the trees.

"Follows the original mining company access road. They used it to bring in equipment before the main road was built." He was using his teaching voice now, the same tone he'd used when training her as a rookie. "If our killer knows these mountains as well as we think..."

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"He could be using these old roads." Sheila pressed the accelerator harder. "How much further?"

"Five minutes. Maybe less." Gabriel shifted again, and this time she caught the way he rubbed his right leg.

"Your knee acting up?"

He waved off her concern. "Old injury. From that cave rescue in '87."

She remembered the story, though she'd only been a kid when it happened. A group of cavers had gotten trapped by a flash flood. Her father had led the rescue team, spent eighteen hours in near-freezing water. His knee had never been quite right after that.

They rounded another bend, and the trees opened up, revealing the mine entrance below.

"No vehicles," Sheila said as they pulled in.

"That's because Amy dropped him off," Gabriel said, already reaching for his weapon. "As for the killer, he could have parked somewhere else. Used one of those old access roads."

They got out quickly, Sheila checking her weapon while Gabriel radioed for backup. The mountain air was crisp, carrying the scent of pine and old timbers from the mine entrance.

"We can't wait," she said, checking her flashlight.

"Agreed." Gabriel started toward the entrance, then stumbled slightly on a chunk of rock. His hand went to his knee.

"Dad—"

"I'm fine." But his face was tight with pain. "Just need a minute."

Sheila was about to argue when a sound echoed from the mine entrance. A scream, distant but clear, followed by what might have been a voice calling for help.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sheila's heartbeat became an audible drumming in her ears as she pressed forward, listening for any repeat of that scream. None came.

She wasn't sure whether this was a good thing or a bad thing.

Twin flashlight beams cut through the darkness as Sheila and her father moved deeper into the darkness. The temperature dropped, and the musty scent of old timbers and damp earth enveloped them. Their footsteps echoed off the rocky walls, amplifying every sound.

Sheila tried not to think about how many tons of rock and earth loomed above them, tried to ignore the creaking of ancient support beams that seemed ready to give way at any moment. She'd worked dozens of cases in her career, but something about being this far underground made her pulse quicken, made her want to turn and run back toward daylight.

Gabriel's breathing grew labored after the first hundred yards. His flashlight beam

wavered slightly as he limped along, trying to keep pace.

"Sheila, wait." His voice echoed in the tunnel. "We need to slow down."

She turned back, almost grateful for the excuse to pause, to fight back the rising panic that threatened to overwhelm her. The tunnel suddenly felt narrower, the air thicker.

Gazing at her father, she didn't have to be a detective to read the pain etched on his face. Just one glance told her that he wasn't going to be able to keep up with her. "You should wait at the entrance. Call for backup," she said. Despite her own fear, despite every instinct screaming at her to get out, she couldn't risk losing Marcus, not when he might be in the killer's hands this very moment.

"No." He straightened, though she could see the effort it took. "I'm not leaving you alone down here."

"Dad—"

"I already lost your mother." His voice was rough with emotion. "And Natalie. I'm not losing you too."

The words hung between them in the darkness. Sheila felt the familiar ache that came with any mention of her mother or sister, but there was something else too—a warmth at hearing her father express his fears so openly.

"I can take care of myself," she said softly.

"I know." He managed a small smile. "I trained you, remember?"

A cry echoed through the tunnels then, bouncing off the walls until it was impossible to tell its direction. It might have been Marcus's voice, or it might have been the wind



playing tricks.

Or someone else's voice playing tricks.

Gabriel directed his flashlight at the ground, illuminating the dusty floor. Dozens of footprints crisscrossed the packed earth—the marks of search parties, investigators, and curious onlookers who'd been here since Tyler's disappearance.

"See the footprints?" Gabriel asked.

"Which ones? There are too many."

"Look closer." Gabriel crouched despite his knee, then pointed to a particular set of tracks. "See how these are laid over the others? Their tennis shoes—that roles out most of our search team, including ourselves."

"They could still belong to another tourist, maybe someone who heard about the murder and came here out of curiosity."

"That's possible, sure. But you show me a set of tracks here that looks more promising."

Sheila stared at the tracks, thinking. The tracks her father had indicated did overlap most of the others, suggesting they were more recent.

"It's worth a shot," she said, feeling the urgent need to get going. "Anything's better than standing around debating."

Gabriel nodded, and together they started forward.

They followed the tracks deeper into the mine, their lights cutting through the darkness. The tunnel had been shored up with heavy timbers, many of them rotting with age. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, a steady plink that seemed to count down the seconds.

Gabriel's limp was becoming more pronounced, but he pressed on, his jaw set with determination. The tunnel branched ahead—one path continuing straight, the other curving to the left.

"The fresh tracks go left," he whispered.

As if in response, they heard footsteps ahead—the distinct sound of boots on stone. Sheila's beam caught movement at the far end of the left tunnel.

A figure stood there, the green glow of night-vision goggles reflecting their light. For a moment, no one moved.

"Police!" Sheila shouted, her voice thundering through the passage. "Don't move!"

The figure turned and ran.

Sheila started forward, but Gabriel's hand clamped on her arm. "Wait!"

His flashlight beam swept the ground ahead, revealing a gaping hole in the tunnel floor. She'd been two steps from plunging into it.

They approached carefully, shining their lights down. The pit dropped at least thirty feet, and at the bottom...

"Oh God," Sheila breathed.

A body lay crumpled on the rocks below. From this distance, she couldn't tell if it was Marcus, but the body seemed to match his physical description.

Sheila's stomach turned over with disgust. They had failed to save Marcus. Still, that didn't mean they couldn't catch his killer.

She edged closer to the pit, trying to measure it with her eyes and decide if she could jump across. It would be risky, but considering the stakes—

"Don't even think about it," her father said, grabbing her arm again. "It's much too far."

"We can't just let him get away!" she said, exasperated. "We have to stop him, Dad!"

"And we will!" he said sharply. Then his voice softened. "We backtrack, radio for equipment and backup, then seal off every exit within a mile. If our friend with the night-vision goggles wants out, he'll have to come through us."

She knew he was right, but leaving anyone down here—alive or dead—felt wrong. "And what if Marcus is still alive?" she asked in a quiet voice. "What if he's just injured, paralyzed?"

"We'll get a team in here to rappel down. But right now, you and I can't help him—getting ourselves killed certainly won't do him or anyone else any good."

The darkness seemed to press in around them, filled with whispers and shadows.

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"Okay," Sheila said, composing herself. "But let's hurry—we can't let the killer slip away again."

They started back, neither speaking. In the darkness, Gabriel's breathing was as heavy as his footfalls.

"That shaft in the ground," Sheila said. "It's almost like the killer was trying to lure us into falling down it. Maybe he already lured Marcus in."

"And maybe," Gabriel said, "it was his voice we were hearing, calling us to the same place, the same trap. Like a siren leading ships to wreck on the shoals."

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The rappelling team made their final safety checks as floodlights illuminated the mine entrance. Amy Reed sat in her car at the edge of the lot, refusing to leave until they confirmed the identity of the body. Sheila couldn't blame her. She'd want to know, too.

They'd enlisted everyone they could trust to watch the exits—a few deputies at the two main entrances, Search and Rescue teams at three others, and experienced members of the local caving club covering the rest. Doc Sullivan had mapped out sixteen known exits within a mile radius. If the killer emerged, someone would spot him.

"Testing comms," the lead rappeller said, adjusting his radio. Dave Kendrick, the Search and Rescue coordinator, checked the signal strength and gave a thumbs up.

Sheila watched the team secure their lines to heavy steel anchors they'd drilled into the rock. The hole dropped straight down for thirty feet, requiring technical expertise to navigate safely. Three rescuers would descend—two to assess and secure the body, one to document the scene.

"Beginning descent," the lead rappeller announced. His headlamp illuminated the walls as he disappeared over the edge. The second rescuer followed moments later.

Gabriel stood beside Sheila, his bad knee finally getting the rest it needed. He'd refused to leave, despite her suggesting he get it looked at. "Reminds me of that cave rescue in '87," he said quietly.

"The one that messed up your knee?"

He nodded. "Thought I'd lost two men that day. Turned out they'd found an air pocket, survived eighteen hours in near-freezing water." He glanced at her. "Sometimes what looks hopeless isn't."

But Sheila very much doubted this was one of those times.

"We have visual confirmation," the lead rappeller's voice crackled over the radio. "Victim matches the description of Marcus Reed."

Sheila closed her eyes briefly. Even though she'd been expecting it, the confirmation hit hard. She could hear Amy's quiet sobs from the parking lot.

"As far as I can tell," the rappeller continued, "looks like he broke his neck. No signs of foul play here."

That doesn't say much, Sheila thought. She had no doubt that the person wearing the night-vision goggles had caused Marcus's death. It did, however, create a wrinkle in

their case. A clever defense attorney could argue that Marcus's death had been an unfortunate accident entirely unrelated to Tyler Matthews' death.

But that was thinking too far ahead. The first priority was catching the killer and putting an end to these murders. Everything else was secondary.

"Sheriff?" Her radio crackled with a different voice. Deputy Roberts. "We've got movement at Exit Four. Single male subject emerging, carrying what appears to be climbing gear."

Sheila tensed. "Description?"

"Tall, athletic build. Moving fast toward the old logging road."

She was already heading for her vehicle, Gabriel limping quickly behind her. "Maintain visual contact," she ordered into her radio. "Do not approach. We're three minutes out."

Sheila jumped into her vehicle, started the engine, then drummed her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel as she waited for her limping father to climb up. He hadn't even shut the door when she hit the gas. Gravel sprayed as she took the turn onto the logging road. The suspect was ahead somewhere, near Exit Four—a small opening that Doc Sullivan had marked as a local favorite for amateur explorers.

They drove in silence, the trees and plains rolling past their windows.

"There," Gabriel said, pointing to movement among the trees.

They spotted a tall figure in outdoor gear carrying what looked like a heavy pack. The man turned, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sunlight. A rifle was slung across his back.

Sheila stopped the car, drawing her weapon as she emerged. "Sheriff's Department! Hands where I can see them!"

The man raised his hands slowly. He was older than she'd expected, maybe mid-fifties, with a weathered face and a gray beard. His clothes were well-worn but high-quality outdoor gear.

"Easy now," he said, his voice steady. "I'm just out exploring with my family."



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"Your family?" Gabriel asked, positioning himself to cover the mine entrance. "And where are they?"

The man jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Back inside."

Sheila stared at the mine entrance. No movement from there.

"We heard about the deaths," the man continued. "But these mines, they're part of our heritage. Been exploring them since I was a boy."

"Is that so?" Gabriel asked. "What's your name?"

"John Tanner. My dad, Ezra, worked these tunnels back in the sixties."

"You know him?" Sheila asked her father in a low voice.

"Ezra, yeah. Or I did."

"You think his son would be capable of this sort of thing?"

Gabriel chuckled humorlessly. "I wouldn't have pegged him for the type, no. But who isn't capable of violence? Sometimes you think you know somebody..." He trailed off, then clenched his jaw as if wishing he could bite back the words. More than likely, he'd realized the irony of what he was saying, given the way he'd lied to Sheila recently.

"Where's this family you mentioned?" Sheila asked John, her weapon still trained on

him.

"Right behind me. Sarah!" he called toward the mine entrance. "Bring the boys out. Slowly now."

No answer. Nothing happened.

"I swear they were right behind me," John said, looking puzzled.

Sheila wasn't sure what to think. Was John lying, making up the part about his family so that he'd look less suspicious? Or was he telling the truth—in which case, his family might very well be in danger back in the mine?

"You spend a lot of time in these mines, John?" Sheila asked.

John shrugged, though he was clearly still tense. "Now and then. Not all the time."

"You religious like your father?" Gabriel asked.

John hesitated, looking surprised. "Religious? Why do you ask?"

"Just answer the question," Sheila said.

John took a few moments to think about it. "Not really. I go to church on the holidays, that sort of thing, but that's it."

Sheila studied him carefully, trying to decide whether she could believe him. Then, before she could come to a conclusion, a woman emerged from the darkness of the mine. She was holding the hands of two young boys, maybe eight and ten. They squinted in the sunlight, looking scared but not panicked.

"What's going on?" the woman asked, looking around in bewilderment.

"Are you this man's wife?" Sheila asked.

The woman nodded. "Yes. Sarah Tanner." She paused. Then she volunteered, "We just wanted to show the boys where their grandpa worked. Is something wrong?"

"Mind if we check your pack?" Gabriel asked.

John hesitated. "Why? Are you looking for something specific?"

"This'll go a lot easier if you let us ask the questions, son," Gabriel said.

"Just let them," Sarah said to her husband in a low voice. "What's the problem?"

John looked like he might continue to refuse. Sheila calculated how long it would take him to unsling the rifle and bring it around. Too long—she and her father would clear their holsters long before John had a chance to fire.

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But if they had to gun this man down in the presence of his kids...

Finally, with a weary sigh, John removed his pack and set it down. "Go ahead. Check it all."

Gabriel kept her weapon trained on John while Sheila searched the pack. She found typical caving gear: ropes, helmets, lights, first aid supplies. A thermos of coffee. Sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. No night-vision goggles.

"We wanted the boys to understand their history," Sarah explained as they searched. "But maybe this wasn't the best time."

"No," Sheila agreed, stepping back. "It wasn't."

The boys huddled close to their mother, looking cold and tired. This was clearly just a family outing gone wrong, interrupted by a murder investigation.

"I'd appreciate it if you all stayed out of the mines for now," Sheila said. "At least until we catch whoever's doing this."

John nodded, repacking his gear. "Shame what's happening. These mines used to mean something. Now they're just becoming graves." He started away with his family. Then, after a short distance, he stopped and turned back.

"You wouldn't happen to be looking for a pair of night-vision goggles, would you?" he asked.

Sheila and her father exchanged a surprised glance.

"Why do you ask?" Sheila asked.

"Because our boys spotted someone wearing a pair."

"Where was he going? Do you remember?" She glanced at the boys, who in turn looked uncertainly at their mother.

"Down a passage called the Hollow Road," Sarah said.

"Does that have any nearby exits?" Gabriel asked.

John shook his head grimly. "If the man you're looking for went down there, he's not going to surface anywhere nearby. That passage goes deep into the mountain... and if he ever does find the surface again, it's going to be many miles from here."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

He moved silently through the darkness, his night-vision goggles illuminating the tunnel in shades of green. The echo of his boots on stone bothered him—any sound could carry for miles in these passages. But he had no choice. He needed to put distance between himself and the authorities.

Marcus Reed's death hadn't gone according to plan. The man had intended to keep him down here for days, like Tyler, letting the darkness work its magic. But then he'd heard the voices—law enforcement, discussing search patterns through their radios. The sound had carried clearly through the old ventilation shafts, giving him just enough warning.

He'd needed to act quickly. Getting Marcus to fall had been almost too easy—it was

just a matter of spooking him toward the appropriate tunnel. In the green glow of his goggles, he had watched Marcus stumble forward, camera still recording, until the floor disappeared beneath him.

The crack of bones echoing up from below had been disappointing. Too quick. Too merciful. Nothing like the slow enlightenment that darkness could bring.

He stopped at a junction where three tunnels branched away into darkness. He swept his gaze across the walls, searching for the mark that would guide him home. His father had taught him about miners' signs—symbols scratched into the rock to help them navigate. He had adapted the practice, creating his own subtle marks that only he would recognize.

But where was it? His heart rate increased slightly as he studied the walls. The mark should be here—a small cross with a curved line beneath it, indicating the path that led to his private entrance. He'd carved hundreds of these symbols throughout the mine system over the years, each one a breadcrumb leading him safely through the darkness.

"Think," he whispered to himself, the sound dying in the stale air. Had he taken a wrong turn? No—he knew these tunnels better than anyone. The symbol had to be here.

He moved closer to the wall, examining every scratch and groove in the rock. Old mining marks confused the issue—arrows pointing to long-abandoned copper veins, numbers indicating depth and direction, the initials of men long dead.

Then he saw it, half-hidden behind a rotting support beam. The cross and curve, barely visible unless you knew exactly what to look for. Relief flooded through him. He hadn't lost his way after all.

The symbol pointed to the rightmost tunnel. This one would take him deep into the mountain, far from the exits the police were watching. It would be a long journey home—nearly five miles through twisting passages—but he had time. Their search would be thorough, tentative.

Which was to say, slow.

Those boys had seen him, true, but even if they reported what they'd seen, and even if the police acted quickly, they would still be far behind him. They wouldn't know which turns he took, couldn't navigate the darkness the way he could.

The tunnel ahead narrowed, requiring him to duck slightly. The air grew cooler, heavy with mineral scents that spoke of depth. Here and there, his light caught other symbols—a circle meaning "danger ahead," a series of dots warning of unstable ground. He'd mapped every hazard, marked every safe path. The darkness held no surprises for him anymore.

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Another junction loomed ahead. This one he remembered clearly—the cross mark would be low, near the floor, accompanied by a small arrow. Sure enough, he found it exactly where he expected. Two more miles to go.

Soon, very soon, he would get back to his important work. The darkness had so much to teach, if only people would listen.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Sheila emerged from the mine entrance well after midnight, her flashlight beam finally giving way to starlight. Eight hours of searching the Hollow Road and its tributaries had left her bone-weary, her throat raw from breathing mine dust. Yet they'd found nothing—no trace of the figure in night-vision goggles, no sign of where he might have gone.

Gabriel waited by the command post, two cups of coffee in hand. The floodlights cast harsh shadows across his face, deepening the lines of exhaustion around his eyes. He'd been coordinating search teams all day, his bad knee probably screaming at him, but he'd refused to leave.

"Here," he said, offering her a cup. "It's terrible, but it's hot."

She accepted the coffee and leaned against a folding table covered in maps. Her muscles protested even that small movement.

"They got Marcus's body out about an hour ago," Gabriel said quietly. "Coroner's doing the preliminary examination now, but I think we have a pretty good idea what



happened."

Sheila closed her eyes briefly, trying to shut out the memory of seeing Marcus's body sprawled at the bottom of that shaft.

"I'm guessing from the look on your face," her father continued, "that your search didn't go well."

She shook her head. "We followed the Hollow Road as far as we safely could. Checked every branch, every alcove."

"How far did you get?"

"About two miles in. The tunnels start getting unstable after that—too dangerous without proper equipment." She took a long drink of coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. "If he was down there, he's long gone."

"Or he never went that way at all." Her father studied one of the maps, tracing a route with his finger. "Eight hours we've had teams searching that section. Meanwhile, he could have circled back, used any of these other exits."

"While we wasted time following a false lead." She ran a hand through her hair, dislodging mine dust. "There are too many possibilities right now." She hesitated as a new worry nagged at her. "Think there's any chance we screwed up with John?"

Her father's bushy eyebrows pulled together. "What do you mean?"

"Could he have been the killer? Maybe he had his kids make up that sighting of the person with the goggles. Maybe John actually had them and ditched them somewhere."

"You think the killer was really in there with his wife and kids, and they just went along with it?" Gabriel shook his head. "I'm not buying it."

They were both silent for a few moments. Sheila took a big swallow of coffee, then pushed off from the table.

"Where are you going?" Gabriel asked.

I should get back in there, try another section—"

"When was the last time you ate?"

The question caught her off guard. "What?"

"Or slept?" He turned to face her fully. "You can't help anyone if you run yourself into the ground."

"We don't have time for—"

"You sound like me," he said softly. "Back when I was your age, working cases. Always pushing, never stopping."

She recognized his tone—the one he used when he was about to share a lesson wrapped in a story. But right now, she didn't want lessons. She wanted to find this killer before anyone else died.

"Dad, I appreciate the concern, but—"

"Let me tell you something." He settled into a folding chair, gesturing for her to join him. When she remained standing, he continued anyway. "Back in '85, we had a serial arsonist targeting churches. I was lead investigator, working myself to

exhaustion. Thought I was being dedicated, doing what needed to be done."

Despite her resistance to taking a break, she found herself asking, "What happened?"

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"My partner, Jim Martinez—you remember him? He saw what I couldn't. That I was making mistakes, missing details. One night, after I'd been awake for thirty-six hours straight..." He smiled at the memory. "He handcuffed me to my own desk."

"He what?"

"Wouldn't release me until I got some sleep. I was furious, of course. Thought he was sabotaging the investigation." Gabriel took a sip of coffee. "But when I woke up six hours later, my mind was clear enough to spot the pattern we'd been missing. Caught the guy that afternoon."

Sheila sank into the chair beside him, her body betraying her with its need for rest. "This is different. Every hour we waste—"

"Sleeping isn't a waste if it helps you see what you've been missing." He studied her face. "You're good at this job, Sheila. Maybe better than I was. But you're not superhuman."

Maybe better than I was—the words echoed in Sheila's head. She'd forgotten how much she lived in the overlapping shadows of her father and sister. Would Natalie have said the same thing? Was she even close to the Sheriff Natalie had been?

She was still pondering this when a familiar voice called out: "Sheila?"

She turned to find Finn approaching, looking concerned as he took in her exhausted state.

Before she could warn him about the dirt covering her clothes, he pulled her into an embrace. Despite her exhaustion, she found herself melting into his arms, letting out a long breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Star's worried about you," he said softly against her hair.

Sheila pulled back to look at him. "Is she okay?"

"She's with Mrs. Jacobs for dinner. Wasn't happy about it—said fourteen is too old for a babysitter. But with everything going on..." He shrugged. "Mrs. Jacobs knows how to handle her moods."

Gabriel quietly excused himself, giving them space. Sheila watched him limp toward the command post, then turned back to Finn.

"Has she mentioned Jake again?" she asked.

Sheila had recently discovered Star was dating a young man who had to be at least eighteen years old. Sheila had brought Star home, but not before calling in an officer to arrest Jake. After doing some digging into Jake's past, she knew she'd made the right decision. Jake had been in and out of court since his earliest teenage years on charges ranging from shoplifting to arson, which only underscored the importance of keeping him away from Star, who might easily see in Jake a fellow outsider who understood her far better than her upstanding guardian ever could.

Smart as Star was, she was still young and impressionable. Which was why it was so very important for Sheila to protect her.

Still, Sheila knew better than to think that arresting Jake would immediately solve the issue. Even if he got jail time—and he very well might, considering his checkered history—it would do nothing to heal the wounds in Star's heart, created by the

abandonment of one parent and the abuse of the other.

Until those wounds were healed, Star would always be vulnerable to those looking to take advantage of her. Sheila hoped to play a role in healing those wounds, but the truth was that she felt woefully inadequate for the task. She supposed only time would tell if this was true.

She looked at Finn, who was pondering her question about Jake.

"No," he said carefully, and there was a flicker of anger in the depths of his eyes. "Not to me, anyway. I think after your talk with her about older men taking advantage of teenage girls, it finally sank in. She's been throwing herself into her photography instead."

"Good." Sheila felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. At least one thing in her life was going right. "I should call her, though, just the same."

"Already told her you would, as soon as you're done here." Finn touched her arm. "She understands, you know. More than you'd think. She keeps saying you're out there making sure no one else gets hurt."

Sheila smiled despite her exhaustion. "When did she get so wise?"

"Around the same time, she started feeling secure enough to trust us."

Sheila nodded, encouraged by this news. "And how are you healing?" she asked, gesturing at his side, where he'd been shot during a previous investigation.

"Better than yesterday." He touched his ribs carefully. "Doc says another week before I can return to full duty. Though watching you run yourself into the ground while I sit at home..." He shook his head. "It's not easy."

"I need you healthy," she said, touching his arm. "And Star needs at least one of us functioning normally right now."

"Speaking of functioning normally..." He gestured to a cooler by his truck. "I brought real food. Actual sandwiches, not those vending machine things you've probably been living on."

"I haven't been living on anything," she admitted. "Haven't really eaten today."

"Your father mentioned that might be the case." At her look, he added, "We talked earlier."

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"Since when are you having private conversations with my father?" Her tone was light, but inwardly she felt uneasy at this development, though she couldn't have put her finger on the reason why.

Finn leaned against his truck. "He called me, actually. Wanted to know how you'd been sleeping, what with the developments with Tommy and that kind of thing. Said you sometimes get nightmares after traumatic cases." He studied her face. "Do you?"

She felt her face flush. It wasn't her father's place to speak about her like she was a child.

"He had no right to—"

"He's trying, Sheila." Finn's voice was gentle. "We talked about that too. About how he kept secrets thinking it would protect you, and how badly that backfired." He paused. "He also asked about us living together. Whether I was taking good care of you."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That you take care of yourself just fine, but that I have your back anyway." A small smile played on his lips. "He seemed to approve, though he tried not to show it. Said something about how at least I was honest with you, unlike him."

"You sound like you've changed your mind about it."

Finn took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his nostrils flaring. "It's more



complicated than I realized. Him being your father... Yes, he's broken your trust. But if anyone deserves the chance to repair that trust..." He trailed off.

Sheila studied Finn, unsure what to make of this reversal. "Do you trust him now?"

"I trust that he loves you. That he regrets lying." Finn chose his words carefully. "But do I trust him completely? No. And I don't think you should either. Not yet."

Sheila nodded but said nothing. It was difficult to know what to say, especially with how exhausted she was.

"Come on," Finn said, taking her hand. "Food." He led her to the cooler, then handed her half a roast beef sandwich.

"How's it been working with him?" he asked.

Sheila turned the slice of sandwich left and right in her hand, trying to muster an appetite. "Better than expected," she said finally. "He knows these mountains, knows the people. And he's not holding back information anymore."

"So do you trust him, then?"

"I trust that he wants to make things right." She took a bite of the sandwich, suddenly ravenous. "And right now, that's enough."

"And Tommy? Any progress?"

She shook her head. "Still not talking—I told the deputies looking after him to call me the second that changes. It's like he's waiting for something, but I can't figure out what."

A commotion near the parking area drew their attention. A group had gathered, carrying signs illuminated by news cameras' lights. CORPORATE GREED KILLS read one. SEAL THE MINES NOW demanded another.

Sarah Riggs, an environmental activist whose rallies Sheila had policed on more than one occasion when the protesting spilled over into violence, stood at the center, her steel-gray hair catching the camera lights as she spoke passionately to reporters. She had the weathered face of someone who spent most of their time outdoors, and her eyes blazed with conviction.

"These deaths are on the mining company's hands," Riggs was saying. "They abandoned these mines without proper securing, left them to become death traps—"

"Ms. Riggs." Sheila approached the group, still holding her half-eaten sandwich. "Can I speak privately with you for a minute?"

"Anything you have to say can be said right here in the open."

Sheila sighed. Why couldn't she catch a break?

"This protest?" she said, gesturing vaguely. "It isn't helping. We need people to stay away from these mines while we conduct our investigation. This only sensationalizes the situation, makes more people curious."

Riggs studied her, and Sheila was struck by the intensity in her eyes. This wasn't just some activist looking for attention—this was someone who truly believed in their cause.

"And how's that investigation going, Sheriff?" Riggs asked, her voice carrying across the parking lot. "Two dead already. How many more before you admit these mines need to be sealed?"

"There are other ways to help," Sheila said, lowering her voice to encourage a more private conversation. "Work with the county on safety measures, advocate for proper securing—"

"We've tried working with the system for years." Riggs matched Sheila's quieter tone but maintained her intensity. "I've spent the last decade documenting safety violations, filing reports, trying to get someone to listen. Did you know there was another death in these mines two years ago?"

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This caught Sheila's attention. "I wasn't aware."

"College student, just like Tyler Matthews. They ruled it an accident—said he was drunk, wandered in, got lost." Riggs pulled out her phone, quickly finding a photo. "Jason Fox. Nineteen years old. His parents begged the mining company to seal the entrance afterward. Know what the company did?"

Sheila studied the photo—a young Asian man smiling at the camera, full of life. "What did they do?"

"Put up a new 'No Trespassing' sign." Riggs's voice was bitter. "That was their solution. A sign."

"Sarah." A younger woman touched Riggs's arm. "The TGN news crew wants another statement."

"In a minute, Michelle." Riggs turned back to Sheila. "You know what's really happening here, Sheriff? These mines are still valuable. Cooper Mining knows there's copper down there—they just don't want to pay for proper safety measures to extract it. So they let the mines sit, 'abandoned' but not really abandoned, waiting for copper prices to rise enough to make it profitable again."

"That doesn't explain our killer," Sheila said quietly.

"No? You don't think decades of corporate negligence created the perfect hunting ground?" Riggs gestured to the dark mine entrance. "These tunnels should have been properly mapped, sealed, monitored. Instead, they're a maze where anyone can hide,

where kids can wander in and disappear."

Finn appeared at Sheila's side. "Sheriff," he said softly. "Dr. Zihao needs to speak with you about Marcus Reed's autopsy results. Apparently, he discovered something you'll want to see."

Sheila frowned, wondering what the coroner might have discovered. Something that would lead them to the killer, perhaps?

Behind them, a reporter was doing a stand-up: "With no leads on the killer's identity, authorities appear to be at a dead end..."

"Think about what I said," Riggs called as Sheila turned to leave. "And ask yourself—who really benefits from keeping these mines open?"

As they walked away, Finn squeezed Sheila's hand. "You okay?"

"No," she admitted. "Because some of what she's saying makes sense. These mines should have been secured years ago."

"But that's not why you're out here at midnight, covered in mine dust." He stopped, making her face him. "You're not here because of corporate negligence or mining rights. You're here because there's a killer using these tunnels."

"Yes," Sheila agreed softly, looking back at the protesters, the news crews, the floodlit mine entrance that seemed to swallow all light. "And I just might be the only thing standing between him and his next victim."

With that thought still lingering in her mind, she headed back toward her vehicle. It was time to learn what the coroner had discovered.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The county morgue always felt unnaturally cold to Sheila, as if the sterile air itself was frozen. She watched Dr. Jin Zihao work methodically, her father standing beside her as they observed the examination of Marcus Reed's body.

"Cause of death is consistent with the fall," Dr. Zihao said, indicating the massive trauma to Marcus's skull and torso. "Multiple fractures, severe internal injuries. Death would have been nearly instantaneous."

Sheila studied the body, trying to see beyond the obvious injuries. Marcus lay pale under the harsh lights, all the energy and enthusiasm she'd seen in his videos now extinguished.

"What about his movements before death?" Gabriel asked. "Any indicators of his path through the mine?"

Dr. Zihao nodded, lifting one of Marcus's hands. "Residue under his fingernails consists primarily of copper ore dust, but there are traces of limestone as well. That suggests he traveled through both the main mining tunnels and some of the natural cave formations."

Thus far, Sheila wasn't particularly surprised. Nothing they'd learned so far would help them identify the killer nor indicate where he might strike next.

So why had Dr. Zihao made it sound urgent for them to come down?

"Doctor," Sheila said finally, "you called us here specifically. Said you had something important to show us."

"Ah, yes." Dr. Zihao's eyes brightened with professional excitement. "When we were

processing his personal effects, I noticed something unusual about his glasses."

He moved to a small evidence table and lifted a pair of black-framed glasses. They were cracked but largely intact, surprisingly resilient considering the fall their owner had taken.

"At first glance, they appear to be ordinary prescription eyewear," Dr. Zihao continued. "But notice the unusual thickness of the frames, particularly near the temples. And this small panel here—" He pointed to a nearly invisible seam. "I've seen something similar before in a case involving corporate espionage. These are smart glasses."

Sheila leaned closer, examining the frames. "Recording devices?"

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"Essentially a wearable computer," Dr. Zihao said. "Popular with certain types of content creators. They can record video, take photos, even stream directly to the internet."

Gabriel stepped forward. "Marcus was a video blogger. These would let him film hands-free while exploring."

"Exactly." Dr. Zihao carefully turned the glasses over. "They're damaged, but the storage component appears largely intact. If he was recording when he encountered our killer..."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. After hours of searching dark tunnels and finding nothing but dead ends, they might finally have something concrete—actual footage of their killer.

"We'll need someone who knows how to extract the data," she said. "Someone who can handle damaged equipment without destroying potential evidence."

"I know someone," Gabriel said. "Tech expert over in Salt Lake City. Used to do data recovery for the FBI."

"How soon can they look at it?"

"I can make some calls." He studied the glasses. "But given the damage, there's no guarantee we'll get anything usable."

Dr. Zihao lifted the glasses carefully, holding them under a magnifying light. "The



main impact was to the front of the frames, but the storage components are housed in the temples. So I wouldn't give up hope."

Dr. Zihao placed the glasses in an evidence bag. "The damage appears superficial, but I'd recommend getting them to your expert as quickly as possible. The longer we wait, the more chance of further degradation to any stored data."

"I'll make those calls," Gabriel said, already pulling out his phone. "See if we can get the glasses looked at today."

Sheila took one last look at Marcus's body. Whatever his glasses might reveal, it had come at a terrible cost. Two deaths now, both young men with their whole lives ahead of them.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said. "Let us know if you find anything else."

They hurried toward the parking lot, leaving the sterile chill of the morgue behind. Somewhere in those damaged glasses might be the key to catching their killer. Sheila just hoped that, if there really was something actionable on the glasses, they would find it before the killer struck again.

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"You couldn't have warned me he was like this?" Sheila muttered to her father as they watched Dr. Malcolm Petty mutter to himself, turning Marcus's damaged smart glasses over and over in his latex-gloved hands.

They'd driven two hours to reach his workshop in Salt Lake City—a converted garage behind his home filled with computers, diagnostic equipment, and what looked like several decades' worth of dismantled electronics. It was nearly noon, and Sheila had hardly slept since finding Marcus's body.

"Malcolm's... particular," Gabriel admitted. "But he's the best. Got me crucial evidence in three different homicides back when he was with the Bureau."

"When was that?"

"Oh, they fired me in '05," Malcolm said absently, not looking up from the glasses. "Creative differences." He was a small man with wild gray hair and clothing that looked like he'd slept in it. Knowing what Gabriel had told her about his habits, he probably had.

"Creative differences?" Sheila asked.

"They wanted me to follow protocol. I wanted to actually solve cases." He set the glasses under a magnifying lens attached to his workbench. "Your father understood. Always brought me the interesting problems."

Gabriel smiled hesitantly. "Malcolm sees patterns others miss. Connections that aren't obvious."

"Patterns are everything," Malcolm said. He pressed something on the side of the glasses, frowning when nothing happened. "Hardware's intact, mostly. Some damage to the external controls, but the core components..." He trailed off, mumbling technical terms to himself.

Sheila watched him work, fighting her impatience. The caffeine from her last coffee was wearing off, and the shaking in her hands told her she probably couldn't take any more caffeine. She'd caught a bit of sleep during the drive here—her father had insisted that he hardly slept most nights, anyway—but not enough to cover the deficit.

"Should have been here an hour ago," Malcolm said suddenly, glaring at them. "Sun

angle's all wrong now. Changes the thermal patterns."

"The... thermal patterns?" Sheila looked at her father.

"Don't ask," Gabriel advised quietly.

Malcolm connected the glasses to a tablet, then to a larger monitor. Lines of code scrolled past. "Interesting," he muttered.

More typing. More muttering. Sheila paced the cramped workshop while Gabriel settled into what looked like the room's only chair not covered in computer parts.

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Finally, after what felt like hours, Malcolm sat back. "Good news and bad news."

"Good news first," Sheila said.

"Storage component is intact. Recent footage is there, encrypted but recoverable." He gestured at his screen. "Bad news is, we need his password. And given how much private content these influencer types record, it's probably a good one."

Sheila chewed her lip for a few moments, thinking. Then she pulled out her phone.

"What are you thinking?" her father asked.

"Amy, Marcus's sister. If anyone would know the password..."

Sheila dialed Amy's number, putting it on speaker. It rang three times before Amy answered, her voice hollow with grief.

"Sheriff Stone?"

"Amy, I'm so sorry to bother you. I wouldn't if this wasn't very important."

"Have you found who did this to him?"

"We're working on it. That's actually why I'm calling." Sheila chose her words carefully. "We recovered your brother's smart glasses from the scene. There might be footage on them that could help us, but we need his password."

A long silence followed. When Amy spoke again, her voice was barely a whisper. "His glasses? I didn't even think about those. He wore them everywhere, used them to record his videos..."

"I know this is hard," Sheila said gently. "But anything you can tell us about his passwords, his accounts—it could help us find whoever did this."

There was a long pause.

"Amy?" Sheila asked gently.

"I want to help," Amy said, her voice rough from crying. "But Marcus never shared his passwords. He was paranoid about security after his account got hacked last year."

"What about hints?" Sheila asked. "Something personal he might have used?"

"He changed them regularly. Said that was safer." Amy paused. "The only constant was that he always used something from our dad's old newspaper stories. Said it was his way of keeping Dad's memory alive."

Malcolm perked up. "What kind of newspaper stories?"

"Dad was an investigative reporter. Covered everything from city council corruption to cold cases." Amy's voice caught. "He always said the truth would set us free. That was kind of his motto."

"What kind of cases did Marcus find most interesting?" Sheila asked.

"Dad's biggest story was about corruption in the police department back in '61. Three officers were taking bribes, falsifying evidence. Dad broke the story, won a regional award for it." Another pause. "Marcus had the article framed above his desk. Truth

Prevails: Three Officers Face Justice."

Sheila felt a chill. Corruption in the police department—it wouldn't have anything to do with the money laundering her father had been investigating back when he was with I.A., would it? No, probably not. Nineteen-sixty-one was a long time ago.

"That's too long for a standard password," Malcolm muttered.

"What about dates?" Gabriel asked. "Would he have used the date the story broke?"

"June 15, 1961," Amy said immediately. "Dad referenced it all the time. Said it was the day that proved one person could make a difference."

Malcolm's fingers flew across his keyboard. "Adding special characters... trying variations..."

They waited in tense silence, only the sound of typing filling the workshop.

"Got something," Malcolm said suddenly. "Device is responding to 'TPJ61561.' Truth Prevails Justice, 6/15/1961."

Sheila leaned forward. "Can you access the footage?"

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"Decrypting now." Malcolm squinted at his screen. "Last recording was yesterday at 11:47 AM. File size suggests about twenty minutes of video before the device stopped functioning."

"That's when he entered the mine," Sheila said quietly.

They had Marcus's final moments. The only question was whether they would reveal the face of his killer.

Malcolm tapped commands into his keyboard, and the first video file began playing on his large monitor. The footage was shaky, showing Marcus walking through the mine entrance.

"Hey guys, Marcus here," his voice came through clearly. "Today we're exploring the Copper Queen Mine, but this isn't our usual kind of video..."

They watched as Marcus moved deeper into the mine, his narration growing quieter, more cautious. The smart glasses captured everything at his eye level, their built-in stabilization helping to smooth the footage.

"I'm still a little confused," Gabriel said. "I thought he was using his phone for recording?"

"He was," Sheila said. "Maybe he hadn't intended to leave the glasses recording, or maybe he just liked having two versions."

"Did you hear that?" Marcus whispered suddenly. The camera swung toward a side

tunnel.

A figure moved in the darkness ahead—just a shadow of indeterminate size.

"Hello?" Marcus called out. "Is someone there?"

The figure turned, and for a brief moment, they caught the green glow of night-vision goggles. There was something else, too—a small silver cross hanging from the figure's neck, catching the light from Marcus's headlamp.

"Hello?" Marcus called out again. "Look, I don't mean to intrude if you're exploring too. Just trying to document the mine."

The figure stood motionless, head slightly tilted. Then, slowly, deliberately, it reached into its jacket.

"Hey, it's cool," Marcus said, his voice betraying growing unease. "I can head back out—"

The figure withdrew something that glinted in the weak light. A blade, maybe, or something metallic.

"Listen, I don't want any trouble," Marcus said, backing up. "I'm live-streaming this, by the way. People know where I am." This was a lie, of course—even if he had tried to livestream, there was no way his phone would remain connected so far underground.

The figure took a step forward. Another. No words, no response to Marcus's claims. Just that slow, methodical advance.

That's when Marcus ran.



The footage became chaotic then—his ragged breathing, the sound of boots on stone, glimpses of tunnel walls as he fled deeper into the darkness.

"I promise this isn't a prank," he said to his unseen audience. "I have no idea who the hell that guy was." He stopped at a fork, turning left then right.

"Shit," he muttered. "Where'd I come from?"

There was a sound behind him—a footfall, maybe. Marcus sprinted forward, twisting around to look behind him. Then, suddenly, he was falling. There was a crash—a sound that, Sheila realized with horror, might've been the sound of breaking bones—and then the video ended in static.

Nobody spoke for several long moments. Sheila clenched and unclenched her hands. There was a sour feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Can you back up?" she asked.

"You want to see that again?" Marcus asked in horror.

"No, I mean to where we can see the figure with the goggles."

Malcolm rewound the footage frame by frame until the necklace was visible again.

"Simple silver cross," Gabriel said. "Probably thousands like it."

"But now we know he wears one," Sheila said. "It confirms the religious angle, just like the cross drawn by Tyler's body."

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Gabriel patted Marcus's shoulder. "Thanks for the help. I owe you one."

Malcolm nodded absently. "I'll keep working on the other files, see if there's anything else recoverable."

Outside, the afternoon sun felt harsh after hours in Malcolm's dimly lit workshop. Sheila squinted, exhaustion finally catching up with her.

"We need to track down those goggles," she said as they walked to their vehicle. "They're military-grade—someone may have sold them locally."

Gabriel nodded. "Three licensed dealers in Utah. We start there, show them pictures of the goggles, and see if anyone has purchased anything similar in the past few years."

Sheila slid behind the wheel and took a deep breath. She was thinking about the cross, wondering what kind of twisted religious beliefs a man could have that would pardon him for the heinous crimes he was committing.

Or if, in his worldview, he was actually obeying a religious mandate.

Like a man on a mission.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the parking lot of Outdoor Adventures & Surplus as Sheila pulled into a space near the entrance. The store

occupied a weathered strip mall on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, wedged between a discount furniture outlet and a vape shop. A neon "OPEN" sign buzzed in the window, competing with faded posters advertising camping gear and military surplus.

"Last one on the list," Sheila said, killing the engine. Her voice was rough with exhaustion. They'd spent the past four hours visiting the other two licensed night-vision dealers in Utah, showing them photos of the killer's goggles, coming up empty.

The first store had been almost comically unhelpful—a big-box outdoor retailer whose teenage employees barely knew what night-vision gear was, let alone its sales history. The second had proper records but nothing matching what they were looking for.

"This place is more promising," Gabriel said, studying the storefront. "Type of shop that does cash deals here and there, keeps things off the books."

Sheila glanced at her father. There was something in his tone that suggested he'd dealt with places like this before. She wondered how many contacts, how many sources, how many favors he'd accumulated over his decades in law enforcement.

And how many of those connections he'd kept hidden from her, just like he'd hidden so much else.

"You've been here before?" she asked.

"Once or twice." He shifted in his seat, grimacing as his bad knee protested. "Owner's name is Ray Hutchins. Ex-military, did three tours in Afghanistan. Knows his equipment."

Of course, he knew the owner's background. Sometimes, Sheila forgot just how deep her father's network ran in Utah law enforcement. She'd inherited some of those

connections when she became sheriff, but others—the unofficial ones, the ones that operated in gray areas—those belonged solely to Gabriel Stone.

And what about his connections within the department? she wondered. Why didn't he expose the money laundering? Was he protecting his family... or was he protecting the people whose crimes he'd discovered?

Gabriel was studying her. "Something wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just thinking."

Gabriel nodded. "Anyway, Ray knows about every piece of tactical gear that moves through this valley. If anyone can help us, it's him—assuming he wants to. He can be a bit... stubborn."

Sheila studied the storefront again. Bars covered the windows—not unusual for this neighborhood, but these looked newer than the rest of the building. Security cameras mounted in each corner swept the parking lot. Whoever Ray Hutchins was, he took his security seriously.

Sheila began to open her door, but her father's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Let me do the talking at first," he said. "Ray and I have history. Nothing bad," he added quickly, seeing her expression. "Just... complicated."

Sheila felt that familiar twist in her gut—the one that came whenever she discovered another aspect of her father's past he'd never shared. But she pushed it aside. Right now, they needed information more than she needed answers about her father's secrets.

The bell above the door chimed as they entered. The store's interior was dimmer than

expected, illuminated mainly by fluorescent strips that cast everything in a slightly sickly glow. Glass cases lined the walls, displaying everything from tactical knives to high-end scopes. The air smelled of gun oil and leather.

A man emerged from a back room, and Sheila's first thought was that he moved like a soldier—balanced, alert, always aware of his surroundings. Ray Hutchins was shorter than she'd expected, but broad-shouldered and fit despite being well into his sixties. His gray hair was military-short, and a scar traced a pale line from his left ear to his jaw.

"Well, well," Ray said, his voice gravelly but not unfriendly. "Gabriel Stone. Didn't expect to see you darkening my door again." His eyes flicked to Sheila, taking in her badge, her stance, everything that marked her as law enforcement. "And this must be the daughter I've heard about. The new sheriff."

"Ray." Gabriel nodded in greeting. "You're looking well."

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"Better than you, old man." Ray's eyes lingered on Gabriel's knee. "That old injury still giving you trouble?"

"Some days more than others."

Sheila watched this exchange with growing curiosity. There was clearly history here—not just professional courtesy, but something deeper. The way Ray kept his distance, the careful way her father stood... there was a story here she didn't know.

"What brings you by?" Ray asked, though his tone suggested he already knew. "Can't be a social call, not with both of you wearing badges."

Gabriel moved closer to one of the display cases, studying the array of tactical gear inside. "Need your expertise on something, Ray. Been making the rounds of night-vision dealers, trying to track down a particular model."

Ray's expression didn't change, but something shifted in his posture—a subtle tensing that Sheila might have missed if she hadn't been watching closely.

"Night vision's a specialty market," Ray said. "Not many civilian applications."

"Which is why we're here." Gabriel pulled out his phone, bringing up the still from Marcus's video. "This was captured yesterday. Military grade, probably Gen-3 or better based on the image quality. Ring any bells?"

Ray barely glanced at the image. "Lots of manufacturers make goggles like that. Could be surplus, could be newer civilian models. Without seeing them up close..."

He trailed off with a shrug that seemed a bit too casual to Sheila. She moved to examine a different display case, letting her father handle the conversation as agreed, but keeping Ray in her peripheral vision. The ex-soldier's eyes followed her movement, then snapped back to Gabriel.

"Thing is," Gabriel continued, "dealers are required to maintain records of night-vision sales. Class 3 and above, especially. Mind if we take a look at your logs?"

"Got them right here." Ray moved behind the counter and pulled out a thick binder. "Everything by the book, just like ATF requires."

Sheila noticed how quickly he'd produced the records—almost as if he'd been expecting this visit. She watched him flip through pages of sales records, each one meticulously documented with buyer information, serial numbers, dates.

"Last night-vision sale was three months ago," Ray said, turning the binder so Gabriel could see. "Hunting guide from Idaho. Got copies of his license and everything."

It was all too neat, too clean. Sheila thought about what her father had said about Ray, knowing every piece of tactical gear that moved through the valley. A man like that wouldn't survive just on officially documented sales.

"Mind if I look through these?" Gabriel asked, reaching for the binder.

"Be my guest." Ray's voice was steady, but his hand lingered on the binder a moment too long before releasing it.

While Gabriel examined the records, Sheila studied the store more carefully. Behind the counter, partially hidden by a rack of hunting clothes, she spotted a second door—heavier than the one to the stockroom, guarded by what looked like a keypad lock.

"Quite an impressive security setup," she said, gesturing to the cameras. "Rough neighborhood?"

Ray's eyes narrowed slightly. "Can't be too careful these days. A lot of valuable merchandise here."

"Including what's behind that door?" She nodded toward the heavy door.

"Storage," Ray said shortly. "Nothing interesting."

Gabriel looked up from the binder. "Everything seems in order here, Ray. Appreciate you taking the time."

But Sheila caught the slight emphasis he put on 'here,' and apparently so did Ray. The ex-soldier's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Always happy to help law enforcement," Ray said. His tone was pleasant enough, but there was an edge to it now. "That all you needed?"

"One more thing," Gabriel said. He closed the binder carefully. "Remember that situation in '98? With the missing equipment from Fort Douglas?"

The change in Ray's demeanor was immediate and dramatic. His face hardened, and his hand moved slightly toward his hip—an old soldier's reflex, Sheila guessed, reaching for a weapon that wasn't there.

At least not as far as Sheila could tell.

"That was a long time ago," Ray said quietly.

"Sure was." Gabriel's voice remained casual, but there was steel underneath it. "Never



did figure out where all that gear ended up. ATF was pretty interested for a while, as I recall."

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"What's your point, Gabe?"

"No point. Just reminiscing." Gabriel smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Unless, of course, there's something else you think we should know about. Something not in these official records."

The tension in the room ratcheted up several notches. Sheila found herself unconsciously shifting her weight, ready to move if needed. But Ray wasn't looking at her anymore. His attention was entirely on Gabriel, and in his eyes, Sheila saw calculation—a man weighing his options, measuring risks and consequences.

Finally, Ray spoke again, keeping his voice low. "Not here. Meet me out back in ten minutes. And leave the badges in the car."

Sheila and Gabriel exchanged glances. This was the moment where their investigation could break either way—Ray could give them what they needed, or this could be a setup. Sheila studied her father's face, looking for any sign of what he was thinking.

"Ten minutes," Gabriel agreed.

Outside, the sun had dipped lower, casting the back alley in deep shadows. Sheila leaned against their vehicle while Gabriel paced slowly, his limp more pronounced after hours of walking.

"Want to tell me what happened in '98?" she asked.

Gabriel paused his pacing. "Someone was stealing equipment from Fort Douglas—night vision, tactical gear, even some weapons. ATF suspected an inside job, but they couldn't prove anything."

"And Ray was involved?"

"Let's just say there was a lot of circumstantial evidence pointing his way." Gabriel looked toward the store's back door. "But sometimes it's better to have leverage than a conviction."

"So you what—helped bury it?"

"I helped ensure the equipment found its way back to the base. No questions asked." He met her eyes. "Sometimes the by-the-book approach isn't the best way to handle things."

There it was again—that gulf between them, filled with her father's compromises and justifications. How many other times had he bent the rules, made deals, kept secrets?

And had those decisions contributed to her mother's death?

Before she could pursue that line of thought, the store's back door opened. Ray emerged, carrying a laptop. He glanced around the alley before approaching them.

"This doesn't leave here," he said quietly. "I've got a business to protect."

"As long as what you tell us is useful," Sheila said, earning a sharp look from her father.

Ray's jaw worked for a moment. "I keep... alternate records. Cash transactions, special orders. Things that don't go in the official books."

"Illegal sales," Sheila said flatly.

"Gray market," Ray corrected. "Nothing that would hurt anyone. Just collectors, enthusiasts, people who prefer privacy."

He opened the laptop, pulling up a spreadsheet. "About four months ago, guy comes in asking about high-end night vision. Military grade, latest generation. Said he needed it for spelunking. Actually makes sense—lot of serious cavers use night vision these days. Better depth perception than regular flashlights."

Sheila thought about the killer moving through the mine tunnels with such confidence. "Did you get a name?"

"Paul Wilson." Ray's mouth twisted. "Obviously fake. Paid cash, had all the right paperwork, but something felt off about him."

"What do you mean?" Sheila pressed.

Ray shifted uncomfortably. "Way he moved, the way he carried himself. Military training, maybe special forces. And he knew too much about the equipment—asked about specific models, technical specifications. Not your typical civilian buyer."

"Description?" Gabriel asked.

"Tall, lean. Gray in his beard. Older guy, maybe fifty-five, sixty. Carried himself like someone used to being in charge." Ray scrolled through his spreadsheet. "Bought a pair of PVS-15s. Top of the line, about twelve grand worth."

"You remember anything else about him?" Sheila asked. "Any distinguishing features?"

Ray frowned, thinking. "He wore a cross. Silver, simple design. Caught my eye because it looked old, like a family heirloom maybe."

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Sheila's heart rate picked up. The cross from Marcus's video. "Did he say anything else? About where he was from, what he did?"

"Not much. But..." Ray hesitated. "He mentioned something about his father being a miner. Said something about carrying on a legacy, but he was kind of cryptic about it." He looked from Sheila to Gabriel. "Does that help?"

"More than you know," Sheila said. She and Gabriel thanked Ray and walked away.

"Time to do some digging," Gabriel said. "We need to figure out who has motive for the killings, who lost someone in the mine. If we cross-reference that with the details Ray gave us, we might be able to nail this guy."

Sheila nodded and pulled out her phone.

"What are you doing?" her father asked.

"Digging," she said.

He chuckled. "No, no. If you want my help with this investigation, then we do this the old-fashioned way."

"What's that?"

"Paper and ink. Say all you want about the convenience of the internet, but there's nothing so reliable as a stack of dusty old documents."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The county records room smelled of dust and aging paper. Late afternoon sunlight slanted through high windows, illuminating dancing motes in the air as Sheila and Gabriel pored over mining accident reports from the 1960s.

"Here's another one," Gabriel said, his voice rough from the dust. "Cave-in at the Sterling shaft, 1963. Two fatalities." He squinted at the faded type. "Both men left families. The Mitchell boys—three of them. And Frank Watson's son."

Sheila added the names to their growing list. They'd found seventeen children who'd lost fathers to mining accidents between 1961 and 1965. Each one has a possible connection to their killer, who would be about the right age now to match Ray's description.

Sheila glanced at her father, who was hunched over another stack of reports. She thought about their conversation with Ray, which had only underscored how little she knew about her father. Sometimes, despite all the time they'd spent together over the years—not least of all in the kickboxing ring—he seemed like a stranger to her, a Cold War secret agent who lived two lives.

She didn't believe for a second that he could have been complicit in her mother's death. He had loved Mom too much for that. But when it came to money laundering... was it possible that the reason he hadn't pursued the case while working in I.A. was because he benefited from it? That he was getting paid to turn a blind eye?

She wanted to believe that Gabriel Stone, pillar of the Coldwater community, would never sully his conscience that way. But still, she wondered.

"Whatever it is," Gabriel said without looking up, "you might as well get it off your

chest."

Sheila, caught by surprise, considered feigning ignorance but decided instead to be straight with him. Hopefully, he'd be straight with her in turn.

"When you came across that case in I.A.," she said, "were you really going to do anything about it? If Mom hadn't gotten involved... would you really have tried to put a stop to it?"

Gabriel's hands stilled on the papers. He looked up, and the pain in his eyes made her want to take back the question. But she couldn't. She needed to know.

"What are you suggesting?" he asked.

"I'm not suggesting anything."

Gabriel leaned back and tapped one finger on the desk, frowning. "I don't know how to win your trust back, Sheila. I really don't."

"Level with me. Why didn't you act on the information you had?"

"Because it wasn't enough. If you're going to expose a money laundering ring—one that's buried within a sheriff's department, no less—you've got to make sure you have all your facts right."

"And that's what you were doing? Getting your facts right?"

Gabriel nodded. "Carefully. Methodically. Whatever was going on, it wasn't limited to the department. The money trail implicated judges, prosecutors, prominent business people. I knew if I was going to expose it, I'd need an airtight case."



"But you never filed any reports. Never brought it to anyone's attention."

"Because I knew what would happen if I did." He pushed back from the table, running a hand through his silver hair. "Look what happened when your mother just asked questions about it. They killed her, Sheila. Killed her in our own home."

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The familiar ache bloomed in Sheila's chest at the mention of her mother's murder. "So which was it? Were you trying to build an airtight case, or were you afraid of retaliation?"

"Both. I was afraid for Mom, for you, for Natalie, for all of us."

Sheila studied his face, trying to read the truth there. "I want to believe you. I really do."

She regretted the words as soon as she saw her father wince, but there was no taking them back now. And perhaps it was best to be honest—not just with what she was thinking, but with how she was really feeling, too.

Gabriel pushed his chair back and stood, beginning to pace despite his bad knee. "You think I didn't want justice—especially after what happened to your mother? That I didn't lie awake at night thinking about what they'd gotten away with?"

"I think," Sheila said carefully, "that you've spent a lot of years justifying decisions you made out of fear. Telling yourself you were protecting us, when maybe you were just protecting yourself."

Her father stopped pacing, leaning heavily on a filing cabinet. The late sunlight caught the silver in his hair, and for a moment he looked older than she'd ever seen him.

"The night before your mother died," he said quietly, "she confronted me about the files. Asked me why I hadn't done anything. I told her I was working on it, building a

case. She didn't believe me."

"So she decided to report it herself," Sheila said. It wasn't a question.

"She said someone had to stand up to them. That evil thrives when good people do nothing." His voice caught. "I begged her to wait, to let me handle it my way. We argued..." He swallowed hard. "It was our last conversation."

Sheila felt cold despite the stuffy room. She'd always imagined her father as a paragon of virtue, a hero. But was he? Her mind told her that, no matter how much time he'd had, he never would've acted to stop the money laundering.

But then again, if he had tried to expose the corruption, would he even be alive today? Or would he, too, have been taken out?

"Just tell me this," she said carefully. "When you transferred out of Internal Affairs, when you became sheriff, started a new life... was it about protecting us from the people who killed Mom? Or was it about running away from what you'd failed to do?"

Gabriel looked stricken. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. "I... I don't know. That's the most honest answer I can give you. Maybe it was both."

Sheila stood, needing to move, to process this. "All these years you've been telling me about justice, about doing what's right no matter the cost. But when it really mattered, when you had the chance to expose real corruption... it feels like you were just taking the easy way out." She felt tears gathering in her eyes. She hated this conversation, hated how she was feeling and how she was making her father feel, but they had to air this out. It was the only way forward.

"There was nothing easy about it." His voice was earnest, desperate. "You think I

don't know I failed? That I don't wake up every night wondering what would've happened if I'd done the right thing? That I don't wish it had been me who was killed instead of your mother?"

"And now?" Sheila asked. "Are you here helping me because you want justice? Or because you're trying to make up for your failure?"

The question hung in the air between them, heavy with decades of unspoken truths.

Gabriel stared at his hands, and for a moment Sheila thought he wouldn't answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, sorrowful.

"When your mother died, something in me... broke. I convinced myself that staying quiet, keeping you kids safe, was the right thing to do. The only thing to do."

"And now?"

"Now I see what a coward I was." He gestured at the files spread across the table. "All these families destroyed by corruption—the mining accidents that weren't really accidents, the investigations buried, the lives ruined. It's the same kind of thing. And I can't help wondering where we'd be if I'd just listened to your mother. What's the point of safety if it means living a lie?"

Sheila sank back into her chair, studying her father's face. She wanted to believe him, wanted to trust that he'd changed. But doubt nagged at her.

"How do I know you won't do it again?" she asked. "When things get difficult, when the pressure builds—how do I know you won't choose the easy path?"

"Because this time I have nothing left to lose." He met her eyes steadily. "My wife is dead. Natalie's dead. You barely trust me, and for good reason. All I have left is the

chance to make this right, no matter what it costs me. I owe your mother that much."

Sheila watched him return to his research, noting how his shoulders sagged under the weight of his confession. Part of her wanted to comfort him, to say she understood. But another part—the part that had spent years idolizing him, believing in his principles—felt betrayed all over again.

"I need some air," Sheila said abruptly, standing. She couldn't look at her father, couldn't process any more revelations about his past right now. Without waiting for his response, she walked out of the records room, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallway.

She found herself in the building's small break room. The ancient couch against the wall had seen better days, its fabric worn smooth by decades of county employees seeking rest during long shifts. Sheila sank into it, the springs creaking beneath her.

Exhaustion crashed over her suddenly. She'd hardly slept the past few days, running instead on coffee and adrenaline. Now, with her world tilted sideways by her father's confession, the fatigue felt overwhelming.

I'll just rest my eyes for a minute, she thought, lying down on the couch. Just long enough to clear my head...

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Suddenly, in her mind, she was back in her childhood home. Everything seemed larger, distorted, the way places look in memories. She walked down the hallway toward her father's study, drawn by the sound of voices arguing.

"Someone has to stop them," her mother's voice said. "If you won't do it, I will."

"It's not that simple," her father replied. "You don't understand what these people are capable of."

Sheila reached for the doorknob, but it was too high, as if she were a child again. She stretched, straining to reach it.

The scene shifted. Now she was in the kitchen. Her mother stood at the sink, washing dishes. But the water running from the tap was red, staining her hands crimson.

"Mom?" Sheila tried to say, but no sound came out.

Henrietta turned, but her face was in shadow despite the bright kitchen lights. "Your father chose silence," she said. "Will you make the same choice?"

The kitchen darkened. Sheila heard footsteps behind her, heavy boots on linoleum. A green glow reflected off the windows—night vision goggles. She tried to warn her mother, but she still couldn't speak.

The scene changed again. She was in the mines now, running through endless tunnels. Her flashlight beam caught glimpses of crosses carved into the rock walls, hundreds of them, each one bleeding dark liquid that ran down the stone.

Her mother's voice reverberated through the tunnels. "You have to choose: Silence or truth. Safety or justice."

Something was chasing her. She could hear it getting closer. She rounded a corner and found herself face to face with her father. But he was younger, wearing his Internal Affairs badge.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice breaking. "I thought I could protect you."

Behind him, a figure in night vision goggles raised something metallic. Sheila tried to scream a warning, but—

"Sheila." A hand touched her shoulder, and she jerked awake to find Finn standing over her, his face tight with concern.

"What time is it?" she asked, struggling to shake off the nightmare's lingering unease.

"Just past seven. We've got a situation at the mines." He helped her sit up, his hand lingering supportively on her back. "The environmental protesters called in MSHA."

"Mine Safety and Health Administration?" Sheila ran a hand over her face, trying to focus. "Why?"

"Sarah Riggs apparently has connections there. She convinced them the deaths create a public safety emergency." Finn's expression was grim. "They're shutting down all access to the mine system. No exceptions—not even for law enforcement."

Sheila stood quickly, ignoring the head rush from sleeping in an awkward position. "They can't do that. We're in the middle of a murder investigation."

"They can, and they are. Two MSHA inspectors are already on site, posting closure

notices. They're talking about sealing the main entrances until a full safety assessment can be completed."

"Which could take weeks." Sheila grabbed her jacket. "Where's my father?"

"Already headed up there. He's the one who called me, asked me to keep an eye on you. He didn't want to wake you." Finn followed her out of the break room.

Sheila stopped abruptly, turning to face him. "Wait a minute. Aren't you supposed to be resting? Doctor's orders."

"I can help in a limited capacity." Finn gestured at his side where he'd been shot. "No heavy lifting, no chasing suspects through mine tunnels. But I can drive you places, help coordinate search teams, that kind of thing."

She studied his face, noting the stubborn set of his jaw. Part of her wanted to order him to go home and rest—his wound was still healing, and the last thing she needed was him reinjuring himself. But another part of her was grateful for his presence, his steady support, especially with everything happening with her father.

"Fine," she said finally. "But you stay on the sidelines. No heroics."

"Me? Heroics?" He gave her a small smile. "Never."

"I mean it, Finn. The second anything feels wrong with that wound—"

"I'll tell you and go straight home," he finished. "Promise."

She nodded, knowing it was the best she could hope for.



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"How bad are the protests?" she asked as they continued walking.

"Getting worse. News crews are up there now. Riggs is giving interviews about corporate negligence and public endangerment." They reached the parking lot, and Finn pulled out his keys. "I'll drive. You're still half asleep."

She wanted to argue but knew he was right. As they pulled out of the lot, she thought about their killer, hidden somewhere in that maze of tunnels. If MSHA sealed the mines, they'd lose any chance of tracking him through the tunnel system.

Which meant he'd won. At least for now.

Unless they could find another way to stop him before he killed again.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The protest crowd had doubled since Sheila's last visit to the mines. Flashlight beams and cell phone lights created a constellation of moving points in the gathering darkness, while portable floodlights cast harsh shadows across angry faces and hand-painted signs. NEWS 5 and other local station logos glowed from the sides of broadcast vans.

Sarah Riggs stood at the center of it all, her steel-gray hair catching the light as she spoke with a cluster of reporters. Two men in MSHA jackets conferred nearby, their clipboards illuminated by headlamps as they examined documentation. The larger of the two—middle-aged, with salt-and-pepper hair and the build of someone who spent more time behind a desk than in the field—kept shooting irritated glances at the

crowd.

Sheila spotted her father's familiar figure near the mine entrance, deep in conversation with Dave Kendrick from Search and Rescue. Gabriel's hands moved in sharp, frustrated gestures as he spoke. Even from a distance, she could read the tension in his posture.

"Your father spent twenty minutes arguing with the MSHA guys," Finn said as they made their way through the crowd. "Didn't get anywhere."

A sign bobbed past: CORPORATE GREED = MURDER. Another read, SEAL THE DEATH TRAPS. Sheila caught fragments of conversation as they walked: "...about time someone did something..." and "...can't believe they let people just walk in..." and "...whole mountain's probably unstable..."

She understood their fear, their anger. Two young men were dead. But she also knew that sealing these mines now might give their killer exactly what he wanted—a perfect hiding place, inaccessible to law enforcement.

Still, she couldn't deny Riggs had a point. Wasn't protecting potential victims more important than catching one killer? The thought of another person wandering into these tunnels, becoming prey to this twisted hunter...

But then she remembered Sullivan saying there could be 'hundreds' of unofficial entrances to the mines. She could seal every known entrance, post guards and barriers, but it wouldn't keep people out. Not if they were determined to get in.

"We can't seal what we can't find," she said quietly.

"Sheriff Stone!" Sarah Riggs's voice cut through the noise. "Care to comment on MSHA's intervention? Or would you rather keep pretending these mines are safe?"

Cameras swung toward Sheila. Reporter microphones materialized like mushrooms after rain. She felt Finn tense beside her, ready to run interference, but she gave him an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Better to handle this directly.

"Ms. Riggs," she said, keeping her voice steady. "I understand your concerns about public safety. But you're interfering with an active murder investigation."

"No," Riggs countered, "I'm preventing more deaths. These mines should have been properly sealed decades ago. Instead, they've become hunting grounds for a killer—a killer your department can't seem to catch."

The words stung, but Sheila kept her expression neutral. "We're making progress. But even if we could shut down the mines, it wouldn't stop everyone from—"

"Progress?" Riggs's laugh was bitter. "Two men are dead. How many more bodies need to pile up before someone takes action?"

More cameras. More microphones. The crowd pressed closer, drawn by the confrontation. Sheila felt the weight of their attention, their judgment. They wanted someone to blame—the mining company, the sheriff's department, anyone who might have prevented these deaths.

But they didn't understand. Couldn't understand. The real danger wasn't the mines themselves, but the darkness that lived in them. A darkness that wore night-vision goggles and a silver cross, that drew religious symbols in the dirt beside its victims.

A darkness that might very well benefit from all this attention. Might even crave it.

Suddenly, a commotion near the edge of the crowd drew Sheila's attention. A woman pushed her way through, her face tight with panic. She was in her fifties, dressed in hiking clothes, her silver hair escaping a utilitarian braid.

"Sheriff!" she called out, her voice trembling. "Please—I need help!"

Sheila moved toward her, Finn following close behind. The reporters swung their cameras to track them.

"I'm Sheriff Stone," she said. "What's wrong?"

"My name is Carol Martinez. My sister, Diana—she went into the mines this morning." The woman's hands twisted together as she spoke. "She's a geologist, studies ore deposits. She's been mapping the old copper veins for an environmental impact study."

Sarah Riggs pushed forward. "Another person missing? And you still think these mines should stay open?"

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"Ms. Riggs," Sheila said sharply, "please give us some space." To Carol, she asked, "When exactly did your sister enter the mine?"

"Around eight this morning. She was supposed to meet me for lunch at one, but she never showed." Carol pulled out her phone, showing a text conversation. "She sent me this at nine-thirty—said she'd found something interesting, wanted to check one more tunnel. That was the last I heard from her."

Sheila studied the texts. The last one read: Found unusual formation in north branch. Going to get samples. Signal's weak down here but will call when I'm out.

"Diana's done this survey work dozens of times," Carol continued. "She knows these mines, knows all the safety protocols. She always carries emergency gear, extra batteries, everything she might need." Her voice cracked. "When she missed lunch, I thought maybe she'd just lost track of time. She does that sometimes when she's working. But now it's been hours, and with everything that's happened..."

The larger MSHA inspector approached, frowning. "Ma'am, did your sister have authorization to enter these mines? This is private property."

"She has permits from the mining company," Carol said. "She's been conducting surveys for months as part of an EPA assessment."

Sheila exchanged looks with Finn. A professional geologist, experienced in the mines, properly equipped—this wasn't some random explorer who'd gotten lost. Something was wrong.

"Where exactly was she planning to survey?" Sheila asked.

"The north branch of the Copper Queen system." Carol pulled up a map on her phone. "She was documenting the extent of the old copper veins, trying to determine if acid mine drainage might be affecting groundwater."

The north branch. The same section where their killer had last been seen.

"That area's completely unstable," the MSHA inspector said, his name badge identifying him as Dan Hawthorne. "Those tunnels haven't been properly assessed in decades. No one goes in until we complete a full structural evaluation."

"There's a missing person," Sheila said, already moving toward the mine entrance. "That supersedes your authority."

"Sheriff—" Hawthorne stepped in front of her. "Under federal mining law, MSHA has absolute jurisdiction over mine safety. If I determine there's imminent danger—which I have—I can prohibit all entry, including law enforcement."

"She could be hurt down there," Carol said, her voice rising. "She could be—" She stopped, unable to finish the thought.

Sheila brushed past Hawthorne, clicking on her flashlight. "Then arrest me."

"Sheila, wait—" Finn caught up to her at the entrance.

"You can come with me or you can stay," she said, "but either way I'm going in."

Finn hesitated only a moment before pulling out his own light. They entered together, ignoring Hawthorne's continued protests.

The tunnel air hit them like a physical presence—cool, damp, heavy with mineral scents. Their lights caught ancient support beams, many visibly rotting. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, each drop echoing ominously.

They'd gone perhaps fifty yards when they heard it—a deep groan from somewhere above. Fine debris sifted down like rain.

"Sheila..." Finn's voice was tight with concern.

She played her light along the ceiling, seeing now how the weight above had warped other beams. A low groan emerged from the timber as mineral-laden water dripped through cracks in the rock. The sound of their footsteps seemed to vibrate through the unstable structure.

"Just a little further," she said, though her heart was hammering. "The next junction might—"

A sharp crack cut her off—the sound of wood finally giving way after years of strain. The sagging beam split with a sound like a gunshot. Finn grabbed her arm and yanked her backward as the first rocks began to fall.

The collapse spread outward from that central point, each falling beam triggering another failure. They ran as the chain reaction pursued them, bursting out of the entrance and continuing until they were clear of the collapse zone. When they finally stopped, both were covered in rock dust and breathing hard.

"Shit," Finn gasped.

Sheila stared at the mine entrance, where dust still billowed out like smoke. The reality of what had almost happened hit her hard. If Finn hadn't pulled her back...

"Like I said," Hawthorne said as he approached, his voice gentler now, "one wrong vibration could trigger a collapse. The whole system is that unstable."

Sheila watched another support beam crash down inside the entrance. He was right—they couldn't risk going in blind. But the thought of Diana trapped down there, possibly hurt, possibly with their killer...

"How long until your equipment arrives?" she asked, not taking her eyes off the mine.



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"Morning at the earliest."

Hours away. Hours their killer could use to his advantage—if he hadn't already.

Finn touched her arm, speaking quietly. "We can set up a perimeter. Watch the exits. If either of them surfaces..."

She knew he was right. It was their only option. But the thought of waiting, of doing nothing while Diana Martinez might be in danger...

"I need maps," she said finally. "Every known exit point within two miles of the north branch."

Doc Sullivan stepped forward—she hadn't even noticed him arrive. "I have detailed surveys of that section. And I know which unofficial exits are still passable."

"Get them," she said. Then, to Finn: "Call in everyone we can trust. I want teams of two at every possible exit point. Night vision equipment, radio contact, the works."

"What about the protesters?" Finn asked quietly.

Sheila glanced at the crowd, who were still milling around with their signs and cameras. "They can stay. Might even help—more eyes watching the area."

"And Carol?"

Carol stood rigid, staring at the mine entrance as if she could will her sister to

emerge.

"She stays with me," Sheila decided. "I want to know everything about Diana's usual routes, her equipment, her protocols. Anything that might help us figure out where she is."

As people moved to carry out her orders, Sheila felt the weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders. She was doing the only thing she could do—but it didn't feel like enough. Not nearly enough.

The killer was down there somewhere, in his element, in his darkness. And they were up here, handicapped by regulations and jurisdictions and safety protocols.

She just hoped Diana Martinez would still be alive when morning came.

Assuming she was still alive now.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Diana Martinez swept her headlamp across another exposed vein of copper ore, its green-blue surface glinting in the beam. Her digital camera clicked as she documented the formation. She'd lost cell service hours ago, and her watch told her she was well past her planned exit time, but she couldn't leave. Not when she was so close.

"Come on," she muttered, examining the rock face more closely. "Show me what you're hiding."

After thirty years as a geologist, Diana knew when something wasn't right. The patterns in these ore deposits—they didn't match the official mining surveys. According to those records, this vein had played out in 1961, leading to the mine's

closure. But what she was seeing suggested otherwise.

She pulled her pistol from its holster, checking it for the dozenth time. A Glock 26, compact and reliable. Carol had thought she was crazy to bring it along, but Diana had insisted after hearing about the murders. She wasn't about to leave herself defenseless, not even for the sake of scientific research.

"Gun or not, you shouldn't be going in there at all," Carol had said that morning. "Just wait until they catch this guy."

But Diana couldn't wait. The EPA wanted her report by the end of the month, and she needed conclusive evidence. Evidence that the mining company had lied about the copper deposits. Evidence that might explain why they'd really closed these mines, and why they'd fought so hard to keep them from being properly sealed.

She checked her backup light and spare batteries. Everything is still good. She had enough supplies to last another twelve hours if needed, though she didn't plan to stay nearly that long. Just another hour, maybe two. Just long enough to document what she'd found.

A sound reverberated through the tunnels—probably just settling rock, but Diana's hand moved to her pistol anyway. She'd been foolish to come alone, she knew that. But who would've been crazy enough to come with her? Certainly not Carol.

The beam of her headlamp caught another unusual formation. Diana frowned, moving closer. The rock face here showed signs of tool marks—recent ones, not from the original mining operations. Someone had been actively working this vein, and recently.

"That's why you're so nervous about these mines being sealed," she whispered, thinking of the mining company's representatives. "You're still extracting ore.

Illegally. Off the books."

Diana photographed the tool marks from multiple angles, making sure to include scale markers in each shot. The EPA would need solid evidence if they were going to confront the mining company.

She checked her watch again. Carol would be worried sick by now. Diana had meant to text her when she first discovered the signs of recent mining, but by then she'd already lost signal. She should head back, she knew that. But she was too close to stopping now.

Just a little further. Just a little more evidence.

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Her light caught something else—a splash of color against the gray rock. Moving closer, she saw it was a cross, painted in what looked like red paint.

No, not paint.

Blood.

Diana's heart rate spiked. Her hand moved to her Glock, drawing it smoothly as she swept her light across the tunnel. Nothing moved in the darkness. The cross gleamed wetly in her beam, fresh enough that it hadn't fully dried.

She should leave. Now. Call this whole thing off, get back to the entrance, report what she'd found to the sheriff.

But if she left now, the evidence might disappear. The mining company had decades of experience covering their tracks. How many other geologists had come close to discovering their secret operation, only to have the evidence vanish before they could document it?

"Think it through," she whispered to herself, a habit from years of working alone. The killer likely used the main entrance, the one where they'd found Tyler Matthews' truck. She'd come in through a different access point, one that only a handful of geologists and mining engineers knew about. Even if he was down here, the odds of him finding her were—

A rock clattered somewhere in the darkness.

Diana killed her headlamp instantly, letting the absolute darkness of the mine envelop her. She pressed against the tunnel wall, controlling her breathing the way she'd learned in her self-defense classes. Listen. Focus.

Nothing but the soft drip of water somewhere deeper in the tunnel system.

She waited five minutes in the darkness, her hand steady on her pistol. When no other sounds came, she reluctantly switched her light back on, keeping it pointed at the ground to preserve her night vision.

The blood-drawn cross seemed to mock her caution. How long ago had it been made? Minutes? Hours? There was no way to tell in the constant temperature and humidity of the mine.

Diana took out her camera again, documenting the cross and its location. Then she set down her pack and pulled out her field notebook, making quick notes:

Signs of recent mining activity in north branch

Copper vein extends beyond documented surveys

Evidence of illegal extraction

Fresh blood marking (cross symbol)—possible connection to recent murders?

She photographed these notes as backup, then tucked everything away in her waterproof pack. Time to go. She had enough evidence now—of both the illegal mining and whatever twisted game the killer was playing down here.

But just as she was about to put the pack back on, something hard struck her in the side of the head, sending her headlamp flying. The light spun as it hit the ground,

creating a strobing effect of shadows before going dark with a sickening crack.

Despite the pain, she recovered quickly from the blow. The Glock was already in her hand, and she fired three times toward where the attack had come from. The muzzle flash lit the tunnel in stark bursts, burning afterimages in her vision. In that fragmentary illumination, she caught a glimpse of a figure ducking away.

The sound of her shots echoed through the tunnels, a cascading thunder that seemed to go on forever. Then silence, broken only by the rapid drumming of her heart and the soft scuff of retreating footsteps.

She'd driven him off. But for how long?

Diana pressed herself against the cold stone wall, straining to hear over her own breathing. The darkness was absolute now, the kind of perfect black that existed only deep underground.

Keeping the gun in her right hand, she used her left to reach for the backup light in her pack. Her hand encountered empty air.

Puzzled, she crouched down and felt around the area where she was sure she'd left the pack. Nothing. It was gone.

Taken.

She swallowed hard. She was now in complete darkness far beneath the earth, with little hope of navigating back to the surface.

And somewhere in that darkness, a killer was waiting. Someone who knew these tunnels by heart, who had already murdered at least two people.

And who no doubt intended to make her the third.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



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Sheila and Carol sat in the mobile command center—really just an oversized van with radio equipment—watching monitors that showed various mine exits. The cramped space smelled of coffee and electronics. Outside, the protesters' voices had died down as night settled in, though most of them remained, their camps marked by battery-powered lanterns and the glow of cell phones.

"Tell me more about your sister," Sheila said, studying Carol's face in the blue light of the monitors. "What made her choose to survey these mines?"

Carol's hands were wrapped around a foam cup of coffee that had long since gone cold. "Diana's always been drawn to difficult projects. After the EPA identified potential groundwater contamination, she volunteered to map the extent of the damage." A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "Our father used to say she'd climb into Hell itself if she thought there was interesting geology down there."

"And she's experienced with these mines specifically?"

"She's been surveying them for months." Carol set down her untouched coffee. "Usually with a team, but lately she's been coming alone. Said she needed to confirm something, but wouldn't tell me what."

That caught Sheila's attention. "When did that change? The working alone part?"

"About three weeks ago. Right after, she met with someone from the mining company." Carol frowned, thinking. "She came home agitated that night. Kept going through old survey maps, making calls. The next day, she started carrying a gun."

"A gun?" Sheila leaned forward. "That's a pretty significant change in behavior."

"I thought so too, but she just said it was better to be safe than sorry." Carol's voice cracked slightly. "I should have pushed harder, made her tell me what was really going on."

Sheila watched Carol twist her coffee cup, destroying the foam in tiny, anxious movements. The resemblance between the sisters was clear in the photos Carol had shown her—same silver hair, same sharp features—but where Diana was described as intense and driven, Carol seemed softer, more careful. A retired high school teacher who'd spent her life nurturing others while her sister chased mineral deposits across the world.

"Did Diana mention anything specific about her meeting with the mining company?" Sheila asked. "Any details that seemed odd?"

"She said—" Carol stopped, gathering her thoughts. "She said something about the numbers not adding up. That the official surveys didn't match what she was finding." She looked up at Sheila. "I don't know what that means, exactly. Diana's the scientist. I just know she was upset about it."

Through the command center's windows, Sheila could see the MSHA inspectors still conferring near their vehicles, their headlamps bobbing as they gestured at maps. The ground-penetrating radar equipment was still hours away. Hours Diana might not have.

"What about today?" Sheila asked. "Did she say anything unusual this morning? Give any indication she was worried?"

"She was distracted. Kept checking her pack, making sure she had extra batteries, emergency supplies." Carol's fingers worked at the coffee cup's rim. "I tried to talk

her out of going in alone, but she said this might be her last chance before MSHA shut everything down. Said she needed to document something important."

"Document what?"

"She wouldn't tell me. Said it was better if I didn't know, in case—" Carol's voice caught. "In case something happened. God, why didn't I stop her?"

Sheila reached across the small space to touch Carol's arm. "You couldn't have known. And Diana clearly knew what she was doing—taking precautions, carrying protection."

"That's the thing," Carol said. "Diana's always been careful, methodical. Even when we were kids, she was the one who planned everything out. For her to go in there alone, knowing the risks..." She shook her head. "Whatever she found must be important."

A knock on the van's door made them both jump. Finn opened it, letting in a blast of cold mountain air. "Latest perimeter check is clear," he said. "No movement at any of the exits we're watching."

Sheila nodded, checking her watch. Nearly nine PM. Diana had been in the mines for thirteen hours.

"The protesters are finally thinning out," Finn continued, climbing into the van and settling carefully into a chair, mindful of his injury. "Though Riggs and her core group are staying. News crews too."

"Of course they are," Sheila muttered. She turned back to Carol. "You mentioned Diana was going to document something. What kind of equipment would she have with her?"

"Her usual survey gear—specialized GPS unit, digital camera, sampling tools. She always carries a backup light, extra batteries, emergency supplies."

Sheila was about to ask another question when the radio crackled. "Sheriff?" It was Deputy Walker, stationed at Exit Four. "We just heard what sounded like gunshots. Multiple reports, echoing through the tunnel system."

Sheila grabbed the radio. "How many? How far in?"

"Three shots, maybe four. Hard to tell with the echo. Sounded deep, but—"

Another voice cut in—Roberts, at Exit Seven. "Confirming gunshots. Seemed closer to my position."

More reports started coming in, each deputy claiming the shots sounded nearest to their location. The complex tunnel system was playing tricks with the sound, making it impossible to triangulate the source.

Carol had gone pale. "Diana's alive," she whispered. "She must be."

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But for how long? Sheila wondered. And if she'd been shooting at the killer, had she hit him?

Through the van's windows, she could see the MSHA inspectors hurrying toward them, no doubt having heard about the gunshots. Behind them, news crews were already setting up their lights, preparing to broadcast this latest development.

Thirteen hours in the mines. Three or four gunshots in the dark. And somewhere in that maze of tunnels, a killer who knew every twist and turn by heart.

Another voice crackled over the radio. "Movement at Exit Two," Deputy Barnes reported. "Just shadows, probably local wildlife, but—"

Two more shots rang through the tunnel system, more distant this time. Carol jerked up straighter, her face going even paler.

"That's five shots total," Finn said quietly.

"She's got ten rounds," Carol said, her voice rising with barely controlled panic. Her hands twisted together so tightly her knuckles were white. "She practices at the range. She knows how to make her shots count."

Despite her attempts at remaining calm, the flare of her nostrils and the rapid rise and fall of her chest gave her away. Suddenly, she whirled on Sheila. "We have to do something," she said, her eyes pleading. "She's down there fighting for her life while we just—we just sit here listening!"

"Carol—" Sheila started, but Carol cut her off.

"No, don't tell me to calm down! That's my sister down there! The only family I have left, and she's alone in the dark with a killer, and we're just standing around waiting for some—some equipment?" Her voice cracked. "What if she runs out of bullets? What if he's hurting her right now while we waste time up here?"

Sheila took a deep breath. "I promise you, Carol, we're going to find your sister. Right now, the best thing you can do is help us fill in some blanks."

Inwardly, she too was frustrated. Somewhere in the darkness of the mines, Diana was fighting for her life. And they were stuck up here, watching screens and listening to echoes.

Carol was silent for a few moments. "What do you want to know?" she finally asked in a small voice.

"Has Diana mentioned seeing anyone else in the mines? During her previous surveys?"

Carol shook her head. "No, but... she did say something odd last week. Said the mines felt different at night. Like they were alive." She frowned, troubled. "I told her she was being dramatic. But now..."

"How were the mines different at night? Did she elaborate?"

"She said she kept finding things moved around. Equipment she'd left in one tunnel would turn up in another. Survey markers displaced." Carol's hands twisted together. "I thought it was just other researchers, maybe kids messing around. I should've believed her."

"You couldn't have known."

Carol said nothing. She was, no doubt, thinking about her sister being down there in the darkness, down there with someone who knew the tunnels intimately and could move through darkness as easily as light. Someone who'd already killed twice, who treated these mines like his own private hunting ground.

And Diana had wandered right into his web.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The man leaned against the tunnel wall, pressing the bandana harder against his shoulder. One of Diana's shots had found its mark—not serious, but painful enough to demand attention. The night vision goggles showed the blood as an odd green-black stain spreading across his shirt.

He could almost hear his father's voice: Pain builds character, boy. The darkness teaches us who we really are.

Frank had been right about that much, at least. The darkness did reveal truth—just not the kind of truth he'd preached about during those endless Sunday sermons. The man had learned that during those long nights, his father had locked him in these tunnels, sometimes for days at a time. The darkness stripped away pretense, facade, the comfortable lies people told themselves.

Like Tyler Matthews. The college boy had lasted almost forty-eight hours in the darkness before finally finding his way out—only to die moments after seeing sunlight again. He'd earned that quick death through his ordeal. But Marcus...

Marcus had fallen too soon, denied the chance to learn what the darkness could teach.

The man pulled the bandana away, examining the wound through his goggles. The bullet had only grazed him, but it was bleeding freely. He retrieved a first aid kit from his pack—he'd learned long ago to keep medical supplies cached throughout the mine system. As he cleaned and bandaged the wound, he listened to the silence of the tunnels.

Diana would be running low on ammunition now. Five shots fired. Depending on her magazine capacity, she might have five more, maybe less. But it didn't matter. He could wait. The darkness was his ally, his oldest friend. And she would learn, just as he had learned, just as his father had taught him.

Though his methods would be different from Frank's—no chains, no scripture readings bellowed into the darkness, no promises of salvation through suffering.

Just patience. Just silence. Just the perfect, pure darkness that stripped away everything false.



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He secured the bandage, flexing his shoulder carefully. The pain was manageable. He had endured far worse in these tunnels, especially during those final days with his father.

The memory brought a thin smile to his face. Frank had never expected his lessons about darkness to be turned against him. Had never imagined his son would become so comfortable in the shadows that he could lead his father deep into the maze and simply... walk away.

A sound echoed through the tunnels—perhaps Diana moving, or maybe just the mountain settling. The man remained still, listening. He knew every sound these mines could make, could read them like his father had once read verses. The creaking of support beams, the drip of water, the soft settling of rock—they spoke to him, told him stories of depth and pressure and time.

Through his goggles, he studied the cross he'd painted earlier with Tyler's blood. Diana had seen it—he'd watched her photograph it, watched her make notes about it. Such a scientific approach to something that transcended science. She thought she was documenting evidence, but really, she was beginning her own journey into understanding.

The man set aside his first aid supplies and pulled Diana's pack closer, examining it methodically in the green-tinged vision of his goggles. It was a professional's kit—waterproof, reinforced seams, everything secured in separate compartments. This wasn't some amateur's daypack.

He opened the main compartment first. A tablet in a ruggedized case. Spare batteries.

Energy bars. A water filtration system. Emergency thermal blanket. Everything carefully chosen and organized—the equipment of someone who understood the dangers of being underground.

The second compartment held geological tools: a rock hammer, specimen bags, testing equipment he didn't recognize. Field notebooks filled with precise handwriting, diagrams, measurements. This woman had spent considerable time in his tunnels, measuring, documenting, studying. The thought should have angered him, but instead he felt a strange appreciation. She respected the mines in her own way, even if she didn't understand their true purpose.

A photo slipped from between the notebook pages—Diana with an older woman, both silver-haired, both smiling at the camera. Sisters, probably, given the resemblance. The man studied their faces for a long moment before carefully returning the photo to its place. Attachments were important. They made the darkness work harder, dig deeper into the soul.

In a side pocket, he found her phone. No signal this deep, of course, but the screen still lit up. The wallpaper showed the same two women plus a group of children—nieces and nephews, perhaps. Her password lock screen held no religious imagery, no hints of faith.

She would learn. They all learned, eventually.

The last compartment yielded something interesting—a detailed map of the mine system, annotated with her own notes. She'd marked geological features, potential hazards, alternate exits. But she'd also noted inconsistencies—places where the official surveys didn't match what she'd found. She was closer to certain truths than she realized, though not the ones she was looking for.

The man traced one of her marked routes with his finger. She'd been methodical in

her exploration, working her way through the tunnels section by section. That meant she'd have a mental map of the main passages, might even be able to find her way out in the darkness if she was careful enough.

Unless...

He pulled out her map again, studying it more carefully. Then he reached into his own pack for a pen. Carefully, precisely, he began adding marks to her map—false routes, nonexistent passages, dangerous areas marked as safe. When she found her pack again—and she would find it, he'd make sure of that—these altered maps would lead her deeper into the maze.

Deeper into darkness. Deeper into truth.

Just as his father had taught him, though Frank had used chains and locks instead of cartography. The methods changed, but the lesson remained the same: darkness strips away everything false, leaving only what truly matters.

He repacked everything exactly as he'd found it, making sure the altered map was clearly visible. Then he stood, ignoring the throb of pain from his shoulder. He knew exactly where he would leave the pack—at a junction where three tunnels met, where she was sure to stumble across it.

And then he would wait. Patient. Silent. Everything the darkness had taught him to be.

Diana wouldn't be his fastest student. But with her supplies restored and her confidence bolstered by recovering her pack, she might just become his best.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

A long night of waiting had left its mark on the interview room's cheap government furniture. Coffee rings stained the laminate table. Crumpled papers filled the trash can. The wall clock's steady ticking seemed to mock Sheila's impatience.

The door opened and Katherine Weston strode in, her silver hair swept into an immaculate French twist, her charcoal suit worth more than Sheila's monthly salary. Everything about the attorney suggested old money and older connections—from her pearl earrings to her butter-soft leather briefcase.

"Sheriff Stone." Weston's voice carried the precise diction of someone who'd attended the right schools. "I apologize for the delay. Traffic from Salt Lake was horrible." She settled into the chair across from Sheila, setting her briefcase on the table with practiced grace.

Sheila had done her research on Katherine Weston. Twenty-five years as a defense attorney specializing in high-profile cases. The kind of lawyer who rarely lost and never took on clients unless she was certain she could win. The fact that she'd agreed to represent Tommy suggested he had something valuable to offer.

"How's Tommy?" Sheila asked.

"Nervous." Weston pulled out a leather-bound notebook. "Your deputies—Roberts and Baxter—they're doing an excellent job. Very professional. But my client remains concerned about his safety."

"We've taken every precaution—"

"Yes, yes." Weston waved this away with manicured fingers. "The protective custody, the trusted guards, the secure facility. But we both know that won't be enough if certain people really want to get to him."

The implication hung in the air: The corruption in the department went deep. Deep enough that nowhere was truly safe.

"Tommy has information we need," Sheila said. "About my mother's murder. About who ordered him to kill me. About the corruption that's been poisoning this department for decades."

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Weston made a note in her book, her Mont Blanc pen flowing smoothly across the page. "The question is, what are you willing to offer?"

"We've discussed witness protection—"

"Not enough." Weston looked up, her gray eyes sharp. "My client needs guaranteed immunity from all charges related to his alleged activities in Coldwater."

Sheila felt her jaw tighten. "He tried to kill me."

"Allegedly." Weston's tone remained perfectly pleasant.

Nobody spoke for a few moments.

"Full immunity is a lot to ask," Sheila said carefully.

"What he's offering is worth more." Weston closed her notebook. "Is putting my client behind bars worth more to you than the truth?"

Sheila tapped her fingers on the table. "I'll need to discuss this with the DA."

"Of course." Weston stood, smoothing her already-perfect suit. "But don't take too long. My client's information has an expiration date. The longer we wait, the more likely certain parties are to... ensure his silence."

After Weston left, Sheila remained at the table, staring at the coffee rings. Did Tommy really know as much as he and his attorney were implying? And if so, could

he convince the DA to play ball?

A knock at the door broke her reverie. Finn entered, looking more like himself than he had in days. The color had returned to his face, and he moved with only a slight stiffness that hinted at his healing wound.

"That bad, huh?" he asked, taking in her expression.

"Tommy wants full immunity." Sheila ran a hand through her hair. "For everything. Including trying to kill me."

Finn leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "Think he's worth it?"

"I don't know. Difficult to tell whether the information is as good as his attorney seems to think, or if she's just trying everything she can to improve her client's position." She looked up at him. "Any word from the mines?"

"MSHA's ground-penetrating radar showed some promising cavities, but they all turned out to be natural formations." He shook his head. "Still no sign of Diana. Or our killer."

"We can't give up," Sheila said quietly.

"No one's giving up." Finn pushed off from the wall, wincing slightly. "But Sheila... you need to be prepared. The chances of finding her alive..."

"I know. They're not getting any better." She stood, needing to move. "But she's smart. She had supplies. And she was armed."

"Was being the key word. She's fired at least five shots that we heard. Maybe more we didn't hear. She has to be running low on ammunition by now."

If she was still alive to need ammunition.

The door opened again, and Gabriel entered, looking worn. He'd spent most of the night coordinating with MSHA, trying to find ways around their restrictions, calling in favors from his years in law enforcement. His silver hair was disheveled, his clothes wrinkled from too many hours in too many meetings.

"Thought I'd find you two here," he said, giving Finn a brief nod. The relationship between the two men remained careful, measured—Finn still wary of Gabriel's past deceptions, Gabriel aware of Finn's protective instincts toward Sheila.

"How'd it go with MSHA?" Sheila asked.

"About as well as everything else." Gabriel sank into a chair. "They're talking about expanding the closure zone. Something about potential structural instability extending beyond the original perimeter." He glanced at the empty chair where Katherine Weston had sat. "Tommy's attorney was here?"

"Just left." Sheila studied her father's face. "He wants full immunity."

"For trying to kill you?" Gabriel's voice hardened. "That's a hell of a big ask."

"His attorney seems to think he has enough evidence to justify it." Sheila hesitated, then added, "Speaking of Tommy... we need to talk about Hank Dawson."

Finn straightened slightly. Everyone knew Hank Dawson—the cheerful, well-liked interim sheriff who'd stepped in after Natalie's death, who'd supported Sheila taking over, who'd claimed he was ready to retire.



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Who'd also gotten his nephew Tommy a job in Sheila's department.

Sheila hadn't seen Dawson or spoken with him since Tommy's arrival and subsequent decision to leave her for dead, and she didn't know how culpable Dawson might be in Tommy's actions.

"Dad," Sheila said quietly. "Did Dawson know? When he brought Tommy in?"

Gabriel was silent for a long moment. "Walk with me," he said finally.

Sheila exchanged looks with Finn before following her father into the hallway. They walked until they reached a quiet corner near the water cooler.

"Hank and I go way back," Gabriel said, his voice low. "Worked together when I was in Internal Affairs. He was one of the good ones—or I thought he was."

"But?"

"But he knew things, Sheila. About the corruption I was investigating. About what happened to your mother."

"So you're saying he's involved?"

Gabriel ran a hand through his silver hair. "I'm saying I need to talk to him. Find out if he brought Tommy in knowing what they planned, or if they used him too."

"I'll come with you."

"No." Gabriel's response was quick, definitive. "Hank won't talk if you're there. He's got too much pride, too much history with this department. But me?" A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "I'm just another retired cop who's seen too much."

Sheila felt that familiar twinge of suspicion. Her father asked to handle something alone, claiming it was for the best. Was he being honest or doing damage control—maybe even trying to protect Dawson?

"Dad—"

"I know what you're thinking," he said softly. "And I get why you might be suspicious. But this isn't about keeping secrets. This is about getting the truth from a man who might not give it if he feels cornered."

Sheila studied his face, looking for any sign of deception. "And you'll tell me everything he says?"

"Every word." He met her eyes steadily. "No more secrets, remember? But Hank... he was my friend once. Let me talk to him first. Give him a chance to explain himself."

The water cooler gurgled quietly. Down the hall, phones rang and voices murmured—the normal sounds of a sheriff's department at work. But nothing felt normal anymore. Not with Diana still missing, not with Tommy demanding immunity, not with decades of corruption finally starting to unravel.

"Okay," Sheila said finally. "Talk to him. But Dad?" She waited until he looked at her. "If he was involved in what happened to Mom..."

"Then he'll answer for it," Gabriel finished. "Just like everyone else who was part of this."

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Diana huddled in the narrow passage, her back pressed against cold stone. Her watch said it was 8:47 AM, though time had become increasingly meaningless in the perpetual darkness. She'd been marking the hours on her arm with a pen salvaged from her pack, keeping track of how long she'd been down here.

Finding her pack had seemed like salvation at first. She'd come across it by accident, bumping into it where three tunnels converged. Everything was still there: her water, her emergency supplies, her tablet. Even her geological samples, carefully labeled and stored.

But the map. The damn map.

She traced her fingers over the notes written up and down her left arm, the ink slightly smeared from condensation on the tunnel walls. She'd started documenting everything after realizing the map had been altered. Subtle changes at first—a passage marked safe that led to a dangerous drop, a route that should have led to an exit but instead curved deeper into the mountain. By the time she'd understood what was happening, she'd already followed the false paths too far, lost her original bearing.

Her right arm held different notes: Blood cross—fresh when found. Green lights in darkness—night vision? Water source in NW tunnel—drinkable. Footsteps echo from multiple directions—acoustics or strategy?

She took another small sip from her water bottle, rationing what remained. The military-grade filter she kept in her pack had proved invaluable, allowing her to safely drink from the underground streams, but she had to be careful. Had to stay sharp. Had to keep documenting, keep thinking like a scientist even as exhaustion and fear clouded her mind.

Sitting in the darkness, she wondered whether her attacker had deliberately left the pack here for her to find it—and the altered map it contained. What kind of game was he playing? If he wanted her to die down here, he shouldn't have let her find her pack again.

Maybe he wants you alive, she thought. Maybe he's watching right now from the darkness, enjoying your misery. Drinking your suffering.

She shuddered and forced the thoughts aside. She couldn't let her imagination run wild—there were too many frightening possibilities.

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The beam of her backup light caught the crystalline structure of the tunnel wall, and for a moment, professional curiosity pushed through her fear. The geology here didn't match any of the official surveys. The copper deposits were richer, more extensive than documented. The veins she'd found showed concentrations of ore that should have kept the mine profitable for decades beyond its reported closure.

It might be the last discovery she ever made.

A sound cut through the darkness—perhaps loose rock settling, perhaps something else. Diana killed her light immediately, pressing herself deeper into the narrow passage. Five bullets left. She'd been counting them obsessively, touching each one in the magazine like a rosary bead. Five chances to survive, assuming she could even see what she was shooting at.

She thought about her sister Carol, probably sick with worry on the surface. About the samples in her pack that proved the mining company had lied about these deposits playing out. About the strange marks she'd found carved into the walls—crosses that looked decades old, evidence of someone else who'd once hidden in these tunnels.

But most of all, she thought about the map. The careful, precise alterations. The methodical way her pack had been repacked. Whoever was down here with her, he wasn't some opportunistic killer. He was patient. Methodical.

And he was waiting.

Diana pushed herself to her feet, ignoring the protest of stiff muscles. Staying still meant dying slowly. Moving at least gave her a chance, even if she wasn't sure where

she was going.

She clicked her light on, keeping the beam pointed at the ground. The battery was holding steady—she'd been careful about rationing its use—but she couldn't risk drawing attention with too much illumination. Just enough to avoid walking into a shaft or over a ledge.

Her geological training helped her read the tunnels, even with minimal light. The way water flowed, the slope of the floor, the patterns of erosion—they all told stories about depth and direction. She might not know exactly where she was, but she could tell she was gradually moving upward through the system.

Unless, of course, that's exactly what he wanted her to think.

A draft of air caught her attention—slight but distinct. She paused, holding her hand out to feel its direction. Air movement usually meant a connection to the surface, but it could also indicate a deeper shaft drawing air downward.

Still, following an air current was better than wandering blindly.

She followed the draft, marking her path with small arrows scratched into the wall. Not that she entirely trusted her own marks anymore—she'd found some of her earlier ones altered or obscured. But she had to try something.

The tunnel widened into what had once been a major excavation chamber. Support beams criss-crossed the ceiling, many rotting with age and moisture. Her light caught something odd near the far wall—a darker area that seemed to absorb the beam rather than reflect it.

Diana moved closer, gun ready, trying to stay silent on the debris-strewn floor. As she approached, details emerged from the darkness.

A foam sleeping pad. A military-style backpack. Empty water bottles and MRE wrappers carefully collected in a plastic bag.

Someone had been living here. Recently.

She swept her light around the area, taking in more details. A small camping stove. A battery-powered lantern. A stack of technical manuals about mining equipment. Everything was meticulously organized, almost obsessively neat.

Then her beam caught something that made her breath catch—a wall of photographs. Dozens of them, carefully arranged in neat rows. Some were clearly old, yellowed with age. Others looked recent. She stepped closer, careful to stay aware of the chamber's entrances.

The photos showed people in the mines. Workers from decades past, standing proudly with their equipment. More recent images of hikers and explorers, clearly taken without their knowledge. And in the center...

Diana's hand shook slightly, causing the beam to waver. In the center were photos of Tyler Matthews. Marcus Reed. Their images captured in the darkness, unaware they were being watched. Being hunted.

A final photo caught her eye—herself, taken just days ago, photographing mineral samples in the north tunnel. She was focused on her work, completely oblivious to being observed.

Something else hung on the wall beside the photos—a cross, old and tarnished. Not just decorative, but worn smooth in places, as if someone had handled it obsessively over many years.

This wasn't just a camp. It was a shrine. A memorial. A testament to whatever twisted

purpose drove the killer to stalk these tunnels.

A rock clattered somewhere in the darkness behind her.

Diana spun, raising her gun, but her light showed only empty tunnel. The sound came again—closer this time? Farther away? The mine's acoustics made it impossible to tell.

She had to move. Had to get away from this place. But as she turned to leave, something caught her eye. Partially hidden behind the sleeping pad was a tunnel entrance she hadn't noticed before. It was smaller than the others, clearly man-made rather than part of the original mine.

Diana moved toward the small tunnel, keeping her gun ready. Behind her, another rock clattered—definitely closer this time. She had seconds to decide: risk the unknown tunnel or retreat the way she'd come.

Making a split decision, she hurried into the smaller passage and clicked off her light. Pressed against the rough wall, she tried to control her breathing, to stay silent as footsteps entered the chamber outside.

They were unhurried, confident. The sound of someone who knew exactly where he was going. She stayed absolutely still, grateful for the darkness of her hiding spot.



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"I know you're here." The voice was soft, almost gentle. "I found your marks on the walls. Clever way of tracking your path."

Diana didn't move, didn't breathe. Five bullets left. But shooting blindly would only give away her position.

"You've survived longer than the others," the voice continued. "Most people panic in the darkness. Run until they're lost, exhausted. But you..." A pause. "You're different. Methodical. Like me."

The footsteps moved closer to her hiding spot. Diana eased backward into the tunnel, feeling her way along the wall. The passage sloped upward slightly—definitely man-made.

"Did you like my collection?" The voice was closer now. "All those people who came to these mines, thinking they understood darkness. Thinking they could just... visit it. Like tourists."

Another step backward. The tunnel curved. She clicked her light on for a split second, just long enough to see that the passage continued upward. Then she turned it off.

"The darkness isn't meant for visitors," the voice said, growing fainter as she moved away. "It's meant for teaching. For revelation. My father understood that, even if his methods were... flawed."

Diana kept moving, not daring to use her light again. The tunnel's slope increased, and the air felt different—cooler, fresher. Was this his private entrance to the mine

system? A way to come and go unseen?

The voice came one last time, distant now: "We'll talk again soon. After the darkness has had more time to work on you."

Diana pressed onward, hope mixing with terror. This tunnel had to lead somewhere. But would it lead to freedom?

Or was she walking into another carefully laid trap?

The tunnel grew narrower as it climbed, forcing Diana to turn sideways in places to squeeze through. Her shoulder scraped against rough stone, but she kept moving. The air definitely felt different here—there was a current to it, a movement that suggested a connection to the surface.

She risked using her light again, just for a moment. The beam showed wooden support beams ahead, older than the ones in the main mine system. This tunnel had been dug long ago, probably by someone who wanted private access to the mines. A miner creating his own entrance, maybe, or...

Or a father teaching his son about darkness.

My father understood that, even if his methods were... flawed.

The stranger's words replayed in her mind. Something about the way he'd said it—there was history here. Personal history. The kind, perhaps, that turned people into monsters.

Diana's foot caught on something, nearly sending her sprawling. She steadied herself against the wall, then carefully aimed her light downward. A chain lay half-buried in the tunnel floor, old and rusted. At one end was a manacle, sized for a child's wrist.

"Shit," she whispered, the implications hitting her. This wasn't just a private entrance. It was a punishment chamber. A place where someone—

A sound came up from below. Her attacker, following her.

Diana switched off her light and kept climbing. The tunnel grew steeper, the air cooler. Her legs burned with exhaustion, but she pushed on. There had to be an exit. Had to be a way out.

Unless she was playing right into his hands. Unless this tunnel was just another lesson in his twisted curriculum.

She reached the end of the tunnel and her light beam caught the ceiling—a heavy trapdoor of steel and wood, secured with a padlock that gleamed dully in her flashlight beam. So close. The fresh air seeping through the edges of the door told her the surface was just above.

Diana stretched up, fingers finding the cold metal of the lock. She yanked at it frantically, but it held firm. The door itself was even more solid—no amount of pushing or shoulder-ramming made it budge.

Footsteps reverberated from below, measured and unhurried. Getting closer.

"Come on," she whispered, pulling at the lock again. But it was industrial-grade, meant to keep people out—or in. No amount of desperate strength would break it.

The footsteps grew louder. Diana clicked off her light and pressed her back against the wall beside the trapdoor. Five bullets. She had to make them count. Had to wait until he was close enough that she couldn't miss in the darkness.

She steadied her breathing, the way she'd practiced at the range. Aim center mass.

Don't hesitate. Her finger found the trigger as the footsteps drew nearer.

Suddenly she understood what drove people mad down here—the weight of the mountain above, the knowledge that tons of rock separated you from the sky.

But she wasn't going to break. It wasn't going to become another photo on his wall of victims.

The footsteps stopped. Just around the last bend in the tunnel. Waiting.

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Diana raised her gun and aimed at the corner where he would appear.

Five bullets. One chance.

### CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The wall clock in Sheila's office read 9:17 AM, its steady ticking a counterpoint to her growing frustration. Doc Sullivan's maps covered her desk, their edges curling in the morning light. She'd highlighted every known entrance in yellow, every suspected private entrance in orange.

The result looked like a spiderweb drawn by a child with too many markers—messy, complicated, and ultimately not functional.

She rubbed her eyes, which were gritty from too little sleep. A full night had passed since Diana Martinez had entered the Copper Queen Mine. A full night of MSHA restrictions, protest signs, news crews, and dead ends. And somewhere in that maze of tunnels, a killer was playing a game whose rules only he understood.

Her father still hadn't called about his meeting with Hank Dawson, even though he'd left to speak with the former sheriff a few hours ago. That worried her. Gabriel had promised no more secrets, but old habits died hard. And Dawson...

What role had he really played in all this? Had he known what Tommy was when he brought him into the department? Or was he just another pawn in a game that had been running since before Sheila was born?

The sound of footsteps in the hallway made her look up. Finn appeared in her doorway, moving naturally again, as if he'd never been shot at all.

"Thought I'd find you here," he said. "Roberts called. Said you never went home last night."

"There was no point. Couldn't sleep anyway." She gestured at the maps. "I keep thinking we're missing something obvious. Some pattern in the private entrances, some way to predict where he might surface."

Finn crossed to her desk, studying the maps. "Star asked about you this morning. She's worried."

"I know. I'll make it up to her." Sheila traced a tunnel route with her finger. "But right now—"

"Right now Diana's still missing, Tommy wants immunity, your father's chasing old ghosts, and you're trying to hold everything together." Finn's voice was gentle. "But you can't help anyone if you burn yourself out."

She started to argue, but movement on one of the security monitors caught her eye. A MSHA inspector was doing his perimeter check.

"Five bullets," she said quietly.

"What?"

"Diana had a Glock 26. Standard magazine holds ten rounds. We heard five shots." Sheila stared at the mine entrance on the monitor. "She has five bullets left. Five chances to defend herself. And we're up here pushing paper and following protocols while she's down there alone with him."

"She's smart," Finn said. "And she knows those tunnels. She might—"

The radio on Sheila's desk crackled. "Sheriff?" It was Deputy Walker. "We just heard what sounded like gunfire. North entrance."

Before Sheila could respond, another voice cut in. "Barnes here. Heard it too, but it seemed to come from the east side."

More reports started coming in—each deputy certain they'd heard shots, each one reporting a different location. The mine's acoustics were playing tricks again, making it impossible to pinpoint the source.

Four more voices came across the radio, all reporting gunshots from different directions.

"How many shots?" Sheila demanded. "Did anyone get a clear count?"

The responses overlapped, contradicted each other. Two shots. Three shots. Maybe just one that echoed. The deputies' uncertainty bled through their voices.

Despite this uncertainty, Sheila felt a burst of hope. Somewhere in the darkness below, Diana Martinez was fighting for her life. She was alive, and by the sound of it, she wasn't going down easily.

Still, Sheila hated that she couldn't rush into those tunnels right away to help Diana. She'd already seen firsthand how unstable those tunnels could be, and getting killed or trapped in a desperate attempt to reach Diana would only make the situation worse.

She pushed back from her desk, needing to move, to think. "Let's go back to what we know," she said, more to herself than to Finn. "Ray said the buyer was older, gray in his beard. Military training. Religious."

"And his father was a miner," Finn added. "That's what you told me, anyway."

She turned to the whiteboard where she'd been tracking leads. Under "Killer Profile" she had listed:



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- Military background (special forces?)
- Religious connection
- Local knowledge of mines
- Father was a miner
- Likely 55-60 years old
- Uses night vision equipment
- Patient, methodical

"His father being a miner," she said slowly. "That's not just background information. It's central to who he is, how he operates." She grabbed the stack of mining accident reports she and her father had previously gone through. "My dad and I—we were looking at this wrong. We were focused on miners who died in accidents, thinking our killer might be an orphaned son."

"But?"

"But what if we're looking for someone whose father survived? Someone whose father worked these mines and lived?" She spread the reports across her desk, pushing the maps aside. "Ray said the killer mentioned something about carrying on a legacy."

Finn moved closer, studying the reports. "You think his father taught him about the mines?"

"More than that." Sheila pulled out the report about the 1961 collapse. "Three miners died that day. But look at the supervisor's statement—it's signed by Frank Whitman, mine foreman."

She grabbed another report, this one from 1963. "Here he is again. And again in '64." She laid out more papers. "Frank Whitman supervised these mines for almost twenty years. He would have known every tunnel, every access point."

"And if he had a son..."

"He would have taught him everything he knew." Sheila was moving faster now, energized by the possibility of a lead. "Pull everything we have on Frank Whitman. Employment records, incident reports, anything."

Finn was already heading for the door when another thought struck her. "And check church records. Ray said the killer wore an old silver cross—might have been his father's. If Frank Whitman was as religious as his son seems to be, he would have been active in a local congregation."

As Finn left, Sheila turned back to the reports, scanning for any mention of Frank Whitman's family. The man had supervised these mines during their most productive—and most dangerous—years. He would have known about the illegal mining, the covered-up accidents, maybe even the corruption her father had discovered years later.

But something else nagged at her. Something about the way the killer operated, the way he used the darkness as a weapon. That wasn't just knowledge passed down from father to son.

That was experience.

That was personal.

She picked up her phone to call her father, then stopped. Gabriel was supposed to be talking to Hank Dawson, trying to uncover another piece of this puzzle. But maybe there was someone else who could help—someone who'd been studying these mines and their history for decades.

She dialed his number. He answered on the second ring, the sound of coffee brewing in the background. "Doc Sullivan."

"Doc, it's Sheriff Stone. I need everything you have on Frank Whitman. Especially anything about his family."

"Frank Whitman," Doc Sullivan said, his voice carrying the weight of memory. "Now there's a name I haven't heard in years." Papers rustled on his end of the line. "Give me a minute to pull his file."

Sheila put the phone on speaker so Finn, who had just returned, could hear. More rustling, then the sound of a drawer opening.

"Here we go," Sullivan said. "Frank Whitman, mine foreman from 1959 to 1977. Respected member of First Baptist Church, served on the town council for three terms. On paper, he was a pillar of the community."

"But?" Sheila prompted.

"But there were rumors. Things the older miners still talk about, though never above a whisper." A pause. "Frank had... unusual ideas about safety protocols. Accidents that should have shut down operations for weeks were cleaned up overnight,

paperwork filed showing all proper procedures were followed."

"He was covering up unsafe conditions?" Finn asked.

"More than that. According to these notes, he was actively hiding evidence of rich copper deposits, helping the mining company claim certain veins had played out when they were still viable."

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Sheila leaned forward. "Why would they do that?"

"Think about it," Sullivan said. "If they officially closed sections of the mine due to depleted resources, they wouldn't have to follow safety regulations or pay union wages to extract what remained. They could use unofficial crews, keep the profits off the books. Frank Whitman would have known everything about those illegal operations. He had his fingers in every piece of it." Papers shuffled again. "But that's not the darkest part of his story."

"What do you mean?"

"Frank had a son. Peter. Born in '62 or '63, I think. The boy's mother died in a collapse in '70—one of the accidents Frank helped cover up." Sullivan's voice grew softer. "After that, people started noticing things. Bruises on the boy. Times when Peter would disappear for days, only to show up at school looking... different. Haunted."

"Was anything ever done?" Finn asked.

"This was the seventies. People didn't interfere in family matters, especially not with someone as powerful as Frank Whitman." A heavy sigh. "But miners would talk about hearing things in the tunnels at night. A child crying. Religious verses being shouted. Frank claimed he was teaching his son about faith, about facing darkness to find God's light."

Sheila felt her stomach turn. "He was using the mines to punish his son."

"That was the rumor. Some said Frank had his own private entrance to the mine system, a place where he'd take Peter for these... lessons." Another pause. "Then in '77, Frank disappeared. People assumed he'd finally had enough of the failing mining industry, moved away to start fresh. But..."

"But?" Sheila asked.

"His body was never found. No forwarding address, no bank activity, nothing. He just vanished." The sound of more papers being moved. "Here's something interesting—after Frank disappeared, Peter spent almost a year living with his uncle before leaving town. The uncle reported Peter had changed, become obsessed with the mines. Said the boy would vanish for days at a time, claiming he was 'learning what the darkness had to teach.'"

Sheila exchanged looks with Finn. "Do you have any photos? Of either Frank or Peter?"

"Just one. A group shot from '76 at the mine entrance. Frank's in it, and I think that's Peter standing behind him, though his face is partly hidden." A drawer opened. "I can scan it to you."

"Please." Sheila's mind was racing. "What happened to Peter after he left town?"

"Military, according to his uncle's statement. Special forces, I think. After that..." Sullivan trailed off. "After that, nothing. At least nothing in my records."

But Sheila barely heard him. Special forces. Military training. Just like Ray had said about the man who bought the night vision goggles.

"One more thing," she said. "This private entrance you mentioned—any idea where it might have been?"

"I wish I did," Sullivan said. "The miners who knew about it are long gone. Frank would have kept it secret—it was his private domain, his place of..." He didn't finish the thought. "I'll keep looking through the records, see if I can find anything else about the Whitmans."

After ending the call, Sheila grabbed her jacket. "The Whitman house," she said to Finn. "You know where it is?"

"Up on Cedar Ridge. Been abandoned for years, but..." He paused. "You think Peter might have returned?"

"If he's our killer, he'd want to be close to the mines." She checked her weapon, more out of habit than necessity. "And where better to hide than a place everyone's forgotten?"

They headed for her vehicle, the air sharp with approaching winter. As they pulled out of the lot, Sheila thought about Peter Whitman, about a boy whose father had used darkness as both punishment and twisted sacrament.

Now that boy was a man. And he was teaching his own lessons about darkness.

The question was: Would they find him before Diana Martinez became another of his students?

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Michelle shifted from foot to foot in the cold mountain air, checking the address on her clipboard against the small cabin's worn numbers. Most of the homes on her list had been in town, but Sarah Riggs had insisted they canvas the outskirts too.

"These mountain folks understand the dangers better than anyone," she'd said.

The cabin looked well-maintained despite its isolation. Smoke curled from the chimney, and fresh bootprints had left mud on the wooden steps.

Still, something about the place made her uneasy. Maybe it was the heavy steel bars on the windows, or how forbidding the unpainted door looked.

"Just get the signature," she muttered to herself. She had a lot of signatures to get by noon, and it was already ten o'clock, so there was no time to waste.

She knocked, the sound oddly muffled by the heavy door. Nothing happened for a long moment, then footsteps approached from inside.



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The man who opened the door made Michelle's breath catch in her throat. Despite his carefully pressed flannel shirt and seemingly kind eyes, there was something wrong about him—something that set off immediate alarm bells. His skin had an unnatural pallor, like cave fish that never see the sun, and though he appeared to be in his forties, deep shadows haunted his face.

"Good morning," Michelle said, doing her best to recover from her surprise. She cleared her throat and launched into her practiced speech. "I'm with Save Our Mountains. We're gathering signatures for a petition to immediately seal the abandoned mines in light of recent events."

"Recent events?" His voice was soft, educated. "You mean the deaths?"

"Yes. Two confirmed deaths, and now a woman missing." Michelle shifted her clipboard. "We believe these tragedies could have been prevented if the mining company had properly secured—"

"Please, come in," he said, stepping back from the door. "I'd love to hear more about your efforts. I've been following the situation closely."

Michelle hesitated. Her group had strict rules about not entering homes—too many horror stories about signature gatherers being assaulted. "I really can't. But if you'd like to sign—"

"I insist." His smile remained warm, but something shifted in his eyes. "It's freezing out here, and I have coffee brewing. We can discuss the mines properly."

Every instinct screamed at her to leave. "Thank you, but I have many more houses to visit. If you'd just like to sign—"

She turned to go, and his hand shot out, grabbing her arm with shocking strength. The clipboard clattered to the ground as he yanked her inside. She tried to scream, but his other hand clamped over her mouth as he kicked the heavy door shut.

The last thing she saw before darkness engulfed her was her clipboard lying on the ground, the petition's bold heading visible in the early morning light: SEAL THE DEATH TRAPS NOW.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Sheila felt the adrenaline hitting her veins as she and Finn studied the Whitman house, which crouched against the mountainside like a wounded animal, its windows dark and clouded with decades of neglect. The driveway was rutted, but there were no signs of recent vehicles or recent foot traffic.

Still, that didn't mean Peter Whitman wasn't here. It might serve his purposes to come and go through a separate entrance, allowing the building to maintain its air of abandonment.

"Stay behind me," Finn said quietly, drawing his weapon.

Sheila, who already had her gun out, considered reminding him that he'd only just recovered from a bullet wound. She suspected it would do no good, however.

They approached the house carefully, then took positions on either side of the door. Finn tried the door and found it unlocked. It swung inward with a faint groan, revealing a musty darkness.

Their flashlight beams cut through years of dust motes, illuminating a living room frozen in time. Faded religious paintings hung on wood-paneled walls. A heavy Bible lay open on a side table, its pages warped with age and damp.

Without a word, they spread out, picking their way through the house.

"Clear," Finn called from the kitchen.

Sheila moved deeper into the living room, studying the space where Peter Whitman had spent his childhood. Everything was exactly as it must have been when Frank disappeared—dishes still in the drain rack, coffee cups on the counter, a newspaper from 1977 yellowing on the kitchen table.

But something else caught her attention. Crosses. They were everywhere—hanging on walls, sitting on shelves, carved into doorframes. Not just decorative pieces, but heavy wooden crucifixes that seemed to loom in the beam of her flashlight.

"Sheila." Finn's voice drew her to a narrow hallway. "You need to see this."

She followed him to a small bedroom that could only have been Peter's. Here too, crosses dominated the decor, but these were different. Darker. Many appeared to have been carved by hand, the cuts deep and aggressive. They covered the walls in overlapping patterns, some etched directly into the wood paneling.

"Look at this," Finn said, gesturing to a patch of wall near the bed. The crosses there were smaller, closer together, like hash marks counting days. Beneath them, carved in a child's uncertain hand, I will learn what darkness teaches.

"How old was he?" Sheila wondered aloud. "When his father started..."

She didn't finish the thought. She didn't care to put into words what Peter's father had

done to him.

They continued through the house, documenting everything. In Frank's study, they found more evidence of religious obsession. Bible verses had been written directly on the walls, the handwriting growing more frantic as it climbed toward the ceiling: verses about light and darkness, their meaning twisted to serve a father's cruel purposes.

A photo album lay on Frank's desk, its leather cover cracked with age. Sheila opened it carefully, playing her flashlight over faded photographs. Frank Whitman stared out from many of them—a tall man with hard eyes and a preacher's stern bearing. In most photos, young Peter stood slightly behind his father, his expression carefully blank.

"Wait," Sheila said, stopping at one photo. It showed Frank and Peter at a mine entrance, but something about it caught her attention. She pulled out her phone, comparing it to the crime scene photos from Tyler Matthews' murder. "The cross. Look at the cross around Frank's neck."

Finn leaned closer. "Same one we saw in the video from Marcus Reed's glasses."

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"Peter kept it. Took it from his father's body, maybe." She turned another page and drew in a sharp breath. This photo showed Peter alone, perhaps twelve years old, standing in a mine tunnel. He wore what looked like prison chains, their links gleaming in the camera flash. His father's cross hung too large around his thin neck.

"He's smiling," Finn said quietly.

He was right. Unlike the blank expression in other photos, young Peter beamed at the camera, eyes bright with something that might have been joy.

Or madness.

They found more photos, more evidence of Frank's obsession with darkness and redemption. But nothing to suggest Peter had returned here recently. The house was exactly as it had been left decades ago, layers of dust undisturbed except for the occasional curious teenager or urban explorer.

In Frank's study, Sheila found a Bible with hundreds of handwritten notes in the margins. But these weren't typical religious annotations—they were twisted interpretations, paranoid ramblings about punishment and darkness that had nothing to do with actual Christian teachings. Frank had created his own religion, using fragments of scripture to justify his cruelty.

"Look at this," she said, showing Finn a passage where Frank had written: The darkness shall be his teacher, as it was mine. Through suffering comes understanding. Next to it, in different handwriting—perhaps Peter's—someone had added: The darkness speaks its own gospel.

"He wasn't following any real faith," Finn said, examining more of Frank's writings. "This was his own creation, his way of justifying what he did to his son."

"And Peter adopted it," Sheila added. "But he made it his own. Where Frank used Christian imagery to hide his cruelty, Peter embraced darkness itself as his religion." She gestured at the crosses scattered throughout the house. "These weren't symbols of faith for them—they were markers of control, of power."

They found more evidence of this perversion in Frank's journals. While he quoted scripture and claimed divine guidance, his actual beliefs had nothing to do with traditional Christian teachings of love, forgiveness, and redemption. This was a cult of one, passed from father to son, transformed through years of abuse into something even darker.

The entries also traced his descent into madness, which seemed to have begun in 1958, during Frank's early days as mine foreman. His military engineering background had made him confident—perhaps too confident—about the mines' stability. Then came the collapse that killed three workers under his command—and trapped him in total darkness for six days.

The early passages of one of the journals showed a man grappling with trauma—nightmares about the weight of earth above him, panic attacks at the sight of dark spaces. But as the weeks turned to months, something shifted. The darkness that had terrified him became an obsession. He began writing about its "purifying" qualities, how it stripped away pretense and weakness.

His fear was overcome by a sense of power—the realization that he could control who lived and died in the darkness.

Later entries suggested he'd started deliberately spending nights in the mines, claiming the darkness "spoke" to him. His religious references grew more twisted,

mixing scripture with ravings about tests of faith in the depths. By the time Peter was born, Frank had fully embraced his delusion that darkness was God's chosen instrument of revelation—a belief he would eventually inflict on his son in the most horrific ways.

They were interrupted by the buzzing of Finn's phone. He answered, listening for a moment. His expression changed. "We'll be right there."

"What is it?" Sheila asked as he ended the call.

"Another missing person," he said grimly. "One of the protesters."

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Sheila stood in Sarah Riggs' crowded office at Save Our Mountains headquarters, watching the protest leader pace between filing cabinets and stacks of signed petitions. The space smelled of coffee and printer ink, and a wall of monitors showed live feeds from the mine entrances—the protest group's own surveillance system.

"Michelle was covering the mountain residences," Riggs said, shuffling through papers on her cluttered desk. "We have strict protocols—check in every two hours, never enter homes, stay on marked roads." She found what she was looking for—a clipboard with a list of addresses. "But we're missing her route sheet. She took it with her."

"When was her last check-in?" Finn asked. He'd positioned himself near the door, trying not to disturb the organized chaos of the small office.

"Nine-thirty." Riggs checked her watch. "Almost three hours ago. She was supposed to call at eleven." She ran a hand through her steel-gray hair. "I should never have sent her up there alone. But with the media coverage of Diana Martinez's

disappearance, we needed those signatures. Needed to show the mining company that people want these death traps sealed now, not after some endless safety review."

Sheila studied the wall of monitors. "Your people really watch the mines twenty-four seven?"

"We track everything—vehicles entering the area, unusual activity, any sign the mining company is trying to destroy evidence of their negligence." Riggs gestured to a young man monitoring the feeds. "Show her the footage from this morning."

He pulled up a recording. The time stamp read 9:15 AM. Michelle Waring appeared, clipboard in hand, walking toward a cluster of mountain homes. She was young—early twenties maybe—with long dark hair and the earnest expression of someone who believed she could change the world.

"That's the last visual we have," Riggs said. "The cameras don't cover the private residences. Too many complaints about privacy."

"We need a list of every house on her route," Sheila said. "And any information about who lives there."

"Already compiled." Riggs handed her a folder. "Most are longtime residents—retirees, artists, people who like their solitude. But there are some rental properties, some vacation homes. And a few..." She hesitated. "A few where we're not sure who lives there."

Sheila opened the folder, scanning the list. Twenty-three addresses. Twenty-three possibilities.

"Any of these residents ever give you trouble?" she asked Riggs. "Complaints, threats, unusual behavior?"



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"A few don't appreciate our work," Riggs admitted. "Old-timers who think we're outsiders causing trouble. But nothing violent." She leaned over Sheila's shoulder, pointing to several addresses. "These ones worry me though. Properties that keep changing hands, or where we're not sure who lives there."

Finn joined them, studying the list. "We'll need teams to check each location. But we have to be careful—if Whitman sees us coming..."

He didn't finish the thought. They all knew what could happen if Peter felt cornered.

"I can help," Riggs said. "My people know these roads, these houses. We've been documenting everything up here for months."

Sheila considered this. Having the protesters' local knowledge could be valuable, but involving civilians in a potential manhunt was risky.

"What about utility records?" Finn asked. "Any of these houses showing unusual power consumption? Water usage?"

Riggs shook her head. "Most are off the grid. Solar panels, well water. It's why people choose to live up here—independence from the system."

Independence. Isolation. Perfect conditions for someone who'd learned to use darkness as a weapon.

Sheila pulled out her phone, calling dispatch. "I need every available deputy. And get Doc Sullivan up here—he might be able to help us narrow down which of these

properties could connect to the old mine system."

As she coordinated the response, her mind kept returning to the Whitman house. To those photos of a young boy in chains, smiling at the camera. To the cross that had been passed from father to son, transformed from a symbol of faith into something darker.

Somewhere on this mountain, in one of these twenty-three houses, he was continuing his father's work.

But something about this didn't align with what they knew about him. Sheila's hands tightened on the steering wheel as her mind raced through the possibilities. The killer had always used the mines themselves as his classroom, his sanctuary. He chose his victims at the entrances, letting the darkness do most of his work. Taking Michelle directly from the surface felt wrong.

A cold realization settled over her. "He's adapting," she said quietly. "He knows we've been monitoring the mine entrances."

"Which makes him even more unpredictable," Finn said.

"And more likely to make a mistake. Hopefully, one that will lead to his arrest."

But which house was his? And how many hours did they have before Michelle Waring became another lesson in his twisted gospel of darkness?

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Rachel Tolland had been watching Mine Entrance Four for hours straight, taking breaks only when other protesters could cover her shift. Sarah Riggs thought she was crazy for staying out here so long, especially after Michelle had disappeared.

But Rachel couldn't leave. Something about this entrance felt different.

Maybe it was the way the wind carried sounds from deep inside, despite MSHA's attempts to seal it. Or how the shadows seemed darker here, more absolute. Or maybe it was just that this entrance was farthest from the crowds, the cameras, the constant buzz of official activity.

The sun cast long shadows across the mountainside. Rachel checked her phone—no service, as usual. She'd have to hike back to the main road to update Sarah. But just as she stood to leave, a sound reached her from the mine.

A voice.

She froze, straining to hear. The wind played tricks up here, turned machinery groans into whispers, falling rocks into footsteps. But this had been distinct. Human.

Rachel moved closer to the entrance. MSHA had installed heavy steel barriers, but their work looked hasty, rushed. A gap remained near the ground where the barrier didn't quite meet the uneven stone—not big enough for an adult to squeeze through, but enough to let sound escape.

"Hello?" she called softly, then immediately regretted it. If the killer was down there...

But the voice came again, clearer this time. A woman's voice, weak but unmistakable: "Help."

Rachel's heart pounded. She should run back, get the police. That would be the smart thing, the safe thing. But if it really was Diana down there, barely alive after so many hours in the darkness...

She examined the gap more closely. If she pressed herself hard on the ground, she might be able to—

"Please," the voice called. "Anyone."

Rachel grabbed the edge of the barrier and pulled. Nothing. She tried again, bracing her feet against the stone wall. Something shifted, sending a shower of loose rock skittering into the darkness. The gap widened slightly.

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This is exactly how people die in horror movies, she thought. But she kept pulling. The barrier groaned, then suddenly gave way with a sound like tearing metal. The gap was wider now—maybe wide enough to squeeze through.

She shone her flashlight into the opening. The beam caught rough stone walls, rotting support beams, and decades of debris. But no movement, no sign of the killer.

"I'm here," the voice said. Closer now. "Please."

Rachel typed out a quick text to Sarah—Found something Entrance 4. Get help.—but it wouldn't send. No signal. She would have to choose: go back for help, or go in alone.

Another sound from the darkness: coughing, wet and painful.

Rachel pulled off her backpack and took out her backup flashlight. Then, before she could talk herself out of it, she lay flat and wiggled through the gap.

The tunnel air was cold, heavy with mineral scents and decay. Her lights showed a passage leading deeper into the mountain, decades of graffiti marking the walls. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, a steady rhythm like a broken metronome.

"Hello?" she whispered.

"Here." The voice came from a side tunnel, barely more than a crack in the wall. "I can see... your light."

Rachel approached carefully, both beams aimed ahead. The passage was narrow, forcing her to turn sideways to squeeze through. Her lights caught movement—a hand raised weakly.

"Oh my God." Rachel rushed forward, nearly stumbling on the uneven ground. "Diana?"

Diana Martinez lay crumpled against the tunnel wall, her clothes torn and filthy, her silver hair matted with blood and dirt. Her eyes were fever-bright.

"Careful," Diana whispered. "He's still... down here. Somewhere. He had me trapped, but I drove him off and got out of there. I'm not sure if I hit him."

"I'm getting you out." Rachel knelt beside her, trying to assess her condition in the harsh light. "Can you walk?"

"No." Diana's breath came in shallow gasps. "Fell. Running from him. Leg's broken... maybe worse." She gripped Rachel's arm with surprising strength. "Listen. The maps... in my pack. They prove..." A bout of coughing overtook her.

"Save your strength. Help is coming." But even as she said it, Diana's eyes closed.

"Diana?" she asked, gently shaking her. "Diana!"

But no answer came.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Sheila's vehicle skidded to a stop in front of Mine Entrance Four, sending gravel spraying. Rachel Tolland stood by the barrier, waving frantically, her clothes covered in rock dust and grime.

"Come quick!" Rachel said.

"Is she alive?" Sheila asked as she jumped out.

Rachel swallowed hard. "I... I don't know. She stopped responding. I tried checking for a pulse, but I was shaking so much..."

The gap in the barrier was just wide enough for a person to squeeze through. Sheila grabbed the metal edge, testing its strength. "How far in?"

"Maybe fifty yards, in a side passage." Rachel's face was pale in the harsh daylight. "She was conscious when I found her, but then..." She gestured helplessly at the entrance.

More vehicles were arriving—deputies, paramedics, MSHA inspectors rushing to assess the structural safety of the passage. Sheila heard familiar voices barking orders, saw Finn coordinating with the rescue teams.

"We need this barrier down," Sheila called out. "Now!"

Two deputies attacked the mounting points with prybars while others set up powerful work lights. The barrier groaned as they worked, releasing showers of powdered stone.

"Sheriff." One of the MSHA inspectors approached, clipboard in hand. "We need to check the tunnel stability before—"

"There's a woman in there who could be dying as we speak," Sheila said, cutting him off. "Your procedures nearly got her killed. We're going in."

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The barrier came free with a shriek of tortured metal. As soon as the opening was wide enough, Sheila led two paramedics into the darkness, Rachel close behind. Their lights caught decades of graffiti, water stains, the detritus of abandoned industry.

"Here," Rachel said, pointing to a narrow side passage.

Aware that the killer could be lurking nearby, Sheila drew her weapon and led the way into the cramped tunnel. The passage twisted like a wound in the mountain's flesh, forcing them to move sideways in places. Then her light found Diana.

She lay crumpled against the rock wall, her clothes in tatters, her silver hair dark with blood and filth. One leg was bent at an unnatural angle.

Alive or dead? Sheila couldn't tell.

The paramedics pushed past Sheila, dropping their bags and immediately starting assessment. Words flew between them—medical terminology that painted a grim picture.

"Is she alive?" Sheila asked, holding her breath.

A pause. One of the paramedics pressed her fingers to Diana's throat.

"Her pulse is faint, but it's there," she said. "But she's not out of the woods yet, not by a long shot. She's severely dehydrated, possible internal injuries. Decreased breath sounds on the right side."



"We need to move her," another paramedic said. "But carefully. That leg's definitely broken, and there might be spinal involvement."

Sheila keyed her radio. "I need a backboard and collar in here. And more lights. As many as you can get."

They worked quickly but cautiously, stabilizing Diana's neck, splinting her leg, starting an IV. Throughout it all, she didn't stir, didn't respond to voices or touch.

"Come on, Diana," Sheila whispered. "Stay with us. Your sister's waiting."

But Diana's eyes remained closed, her breathing growing more labored with each passing minute.

The backboard arrived, carried by two more paramedics who had to carefully angle it through the narrow passage. Bright halogen work lights followed, casting harsh shadows across Diana's pale face.

"On my count," the lead paramedic said. "One, two, three—"

They lifted her onto the board with practiced precision, but the movement drew a weak moan from Diana's lips. Her eyes fluttered.

"Diana?" Sheila leaned closer. "Can you hear me?"

Diana's lips moved, forming words too quiet to hear. Sheila had to put her ear almost to the injured woman's mouth to make out what she was saying.

"The girl," Diana whispered. "He has... the girl."

"Michelle Waring? Did you see her?"

"Heard screaming. Above..." Diana's voice faded, then came back stronger, urgent. "I fought him off, and he ran. So I tried to find my way out. He must've doubled back, gone through the door..." She trailed off, frowning as if there was something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"What door?" Sheila asked. "What door, Diana?"

Diana seemed to be fading by the second, as if she had used up most of her strength already. "It's a trap... a trap..." Her eyes fluttered, then closed.

"BP's dropping," one of the paramedics called out. "We need to get her in the ambulance ASAP."

Sheila followed as the paramedics rushed the stretcher away. Had Diana meant the killer was laying a trap for them? If so, what kind of trap?

And where?

They emerged into harsh daylight. Carol Martinez broke away from the gathered crowd, running toward her sister, but deputies held her back as the paramedics rushed Diana to the waiting ambulance.

"She's alive," Sheila told Carol, gripping her shoulders. "But I need you to ride with her. Stay with her. If she wakes up again, if she says anything about where she was, about the trap—"

"Trap?" Finn appeared beside them, his face tight with pain from moving too quickly.

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"She said he has Michelle Waring, and she also mentioned something about a trap. Maybe Whitman's intending to use Michelle as a hostage—I don't know."

The ambulance doors slammed shut. Carol climbed in the front seat, and the vehicle pulled away, sirens wailing. Sheila watched it go, carrying with it perhaps their best chance of finding Michelle Waring before it was too late.

"Anyway," Sheila continued as the ambulance's taillights disappeared around a bend, "it wasn't very clear what Diana was talking about. She was fading in and out—it didn't make sense."

"Could have been delirious from dehydration," Finn suggested. "All that time in those tunnels..."

Sheila's eyes glided to Rachel, who was talking with one of the deputies, apparently asking for a ride.

"What do you want to do?" Finn asked.

"Above," Sheila murmured, her head bent low in thought as she began pacing. "She said he ran, then doubled back through some kind of door. A door 'above'..." She stopped suddenly. "Not a door. A trapdoor."

Finn's eyes widened. "Like a cellar entrance?"

"Or a private access point to the mines." Sheila pulled out the list of properties they'd gotten from Sarah Riggs. "Look at these addresses. Most of them are newer

construction, built long after the mines closed. But some..." She pointed to several listings. "These are original homes. Built when the mines were still operating."

"When miners might have wanted their own way in and out," Finn said, following her logic. "Doc Sullivan mentioned that was common—private entrances that weren't on any official maps."

Sheila spread the list on the hood of her vehicle. "Twenty-three houses on Michelle's route. But we can eliminate the newer ones—anything built after 1980 wouldn't have connected to the mine system." She began crossing off addresses. "That leaves nine."

"Still too many to search quickly," Finn said. "We need to narrow it further."

"Okay, think. What else do we know about Whitman?" Sheila pulled out her notebook. "He's methodical. Organized. Military background. He'd want a property that offered privacy and control."

"Considering how important these mines are to him," Finn said, "he's probably living at this place. So none of the seasonal properties or vacation rentals." That eliminated four of the possibilities.

They studied the remaining properties. "This one," Finn said, pointing to an address. "Look at the note Riggs made—'Original mining-era cabin, recently renovated. Current resident unknown.'"

"What else?" Sheila asked, sensing he was onto something.

"It's isolated, set back from the road. Built in 1959, according to the records. Perfect if you wanted to come and go without being noticed."

Sheila felt that familiar tension in her chest—the sense of pieces clicking into place.

"What about the other four properties?"

"Two are too close to other homes. One's been empty since a fire last year. And the last one..." He checked the notes. "Elderly couple, lived there forty years."

"So our best bet is the cabin."

He paused, his lips parting in surprise.

"What?" Sheila asked.

"The last-known residents... they were Theresa Whitman's aunt and uncle."

"Theresa died in the mines," Sheila said, remembering Sullivan's research. "A collapse in 1970 that Frank helped cover up."

Finn nodded. "According to these records, her aunt and uncle—the Caldwells—inherited the property. They were the only family Theresa had left. After she died, they tried to get custody of Peter, but Frank wouldn't allow it. They passed away about five years ago. Property's been vacant since."

"Until Peter came home," Sheila said quietly. "Back to his mother's family land—land that connected to the mines she died in."

This was all the confirmation she needed. "How far is it to the cabin?" she asked as she hurried toward her vehicle, followed by Finn.

"About three miles, but there's no direct road. We'll have to approach on foot for the last quarter mile."

"Call for backup," Sheila said, checking her weapon. "But tell them to maintain

distance. No sirens, no helicopters. If Whitman hears us coming, he might kill Michelle."

"You think he has her?"

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"We have to assume he does, yes."

"In that case," Finn said, "we should probably assume he's ready for us, too—and probably happy to take us down with him, if need be."

### CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The cabin sat in a small clearing, its weathered logs almost black with age. Three outbuildings—a barn, a workshop, and what might have been a storage shed—formed a rough semicircle behind it. Trees pressed close, their shadows already lengthening in the late afternoon light.

"No vehicles," Finn said quietly as they crouched in the tree line. "But look at the ground between the buildings."

Sheila studied the packed earth. Despite the surrounding vegetation, the paths between structures were oddly clear—maintained, but made to look neglected. Someone routinely walked these routes.

They watched the property for a few moments, documenting any movement, any sign of life. Nothing. The whole place felt wrong, like a movie set designed to look abandoned.

"We go in soft," she said finally. "Could be motion sensors, security cameras. He has military training—"

"And resources," Finn added. "All that specialized equipment."

They approached the cabin in stages, using the trees for cover until they reached the edge of the clearing. The windows were grimy but intact, covered from the inside with what looked like heavy fabric. No smoke rose from the chimney despite the cold.

The front steps creaked under their weight. Sheila tested the door handle—unlocked. That raised red flags immediately. Either Whitman was confident no one would find this place, or he wanted them to enter.

She eased the door open, weapon ready. The interior was dark, the covered windows blocking most of the natural light. Their flashlight beams revealed a space that was both lived-in and carefully maintained.

No dust. No cobwebs. Everything is meticulously organized.

The main room held a sleeping bag on a narrow cot, a small table with a camp stove, and shelves lined with military-style supply crates. One wall displayed topographical maps of the area, with certain locations marked in red. Sheila recognized them—mine entrances, but not all were on the official surveys.

"Check this out," Finn whispered, gesturing to a desk beneath the maps. A laptop sat open, its screen dark. Beside it lay a logbook filled with precise handwriting—times, dates, locations. And names.

Sheila's stomach turned as she read the entries. Tyler Matthews. Marcus Reed. Diana Martinez. Each name followed by detailed observations, times of entry and exit from various mine locations. The most recent entry was for Michelle Waring.

"He's been tracking them," Finn said. "Learning their patterns."

"Not just tracking." Sheila pointed to another section of the logbook. "Look—he's



timing their 'lessons.' How long they last in the darkness before breaking down. Their reactions to different scenarios he creates."

They moved deeper into the cabin. The kitchen area was sparse but functional—military rations, bottled water, everything arranged with obsessive precision. A generator hummed softly in one corner, powering what looked like communications equipment.

"Military-grade radio setup," Finn said, examining it. "He could monitor emergency frequencies, track search patterns."

In the bathroom, they found recently used towels hanging to dry. The medicine cabinet held basic supplies plus several prescription bottles. Sheila photographed the labels—medications for chronic pain, anti-anxiety drugs, sleeping pills. All in different names, probably stolen or bought illegally.

The bedroom revealed more of Whitman's obsession. Photos covered one wall—surveillance shots of various mine entrances, people exploring them, search and rescue operations. In the center hung an old silver cross, similar to the one from the video but clearly different. A second cross?

"Sheila." Finn's voice drew her to a corner where a clipboard lay on a small table. Michelle's petition was still attached.

There could be no doubt that Michelle had been here. The question was, what had happened to her? And where was she now?

A sound from outside made them both freeze—branches moving in the wind, or something else? They waited, listening. Nothing but the usual forest sounds.

"Where would he keep her?" Finn whispered. "No basement that I can see."

"The outbuildings." Sheila studied the photos on the wall again. Several showed the barn and workshop from different angles, but something was off about them. The perspective seemed wrong, as if—

Her phone buzzed, making them both jump. Gabriel.

"Dad?" she answered quietly. "Kind of in the middle of something."

"I talked to Hank," Gabriel said without preamble.

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Sheila's throat tightened. She wanted badly to know what her father had to say—especially about whether or not Hank had been involved in her mother's murder—but as important as that was, this just wasn't the time.

"I know, Dad," she said quickly, "but Finn and I are at a suspect's house right now. I can't talk."

"Frank Whitmore's place?"

"No, we already searched—" She stopped, puzzled. She and Finn had discovered the killer's identity after her father left to speak with Hank, not before. "How'd you know about that?"

"That's not all I know," Gabriel continued. "Listen, while I was talking with Hank, we started getting into the investigation—the mines, the killings, all of it."

Sheila put the phone on speaker so Finn could hear. "Go on," she said to her father.

"When I shared everything we knew about the killer's profile," he continued, "it jogged Hank's memory. He was the lead investigator back when Frank Whitman disappeared."

"Okay," Sheila said slowly, not sure where this was going. Finn was frowning at the phone in concentration.

"According to Hank," Gabriel continued, "when Frank disappeared, they found some interesting writings in the midst of all the quasi-religious crap."

"What kind of writings?" Sheila asked.

"Blueprints. For some kind of reinforced trapdoor system."

"Like a bunker entrance?" Finn asked.

"More elaborate. Custom-built, with multiple failsafes. Frank was paranoid about security—he'd been a military engineer before becoming a miner." Another pause. "The blueprints showed connections to the mine system, but they never found the actual entrance."

"We searched Frank's property, too," Sheila said. "There was nothing there."

"That's just it," Gabriel said. "Hank always suspected the entrance wasn't on Frank's property, but somewhere else."

Sheila recalled what Finn had read about this cabin belonging to Theresa's family. It made sense that if they had an entrance to the mines on their property, Frank would be very interested in it.

She studied the photos on the wall again. It occurred to her that the perspective wasn't wrong—the buildings were. The workshop in the photos wasn't the same one standing outside. At some point, someone had torn down the original and rebuilt it, keeping the weathered exterior to maintain the illusion of age.

Why would someone tear down the old workshop just to rebuild it in the same place?

"Dad," she said, "we've got to go."

"Be careful, Sheila, okay? I'll be there in twenty minutes. Just sit tight."

"Of course," Sheila said, not really meaning it. "See you then." She hung up the phone and found Finn watching her.

"Guess I'm the one lying now," she said.

Finn chuckled softly. "Your father ought to know you well enough to realize you're not just gonna sit on your hands, not when a woman's life is in danger." He frowned at the photos. "What was it you noticed? Something about the buildings?"

"The workshop—look out the window."

Finn did so.

"It's new," he murmured. "Newer than the one in the picture, anyway."

"Peter let these other outbuildings rot, but not that one. Why?"

Finn gave her a long look. "I think we'd better go find out."

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows as Sheila and Finn approached the workshop. From the outside, it looked as weathered as the other buildings—gray wood darkened by decades of rain and snow, rusted hinges, clouded windows. But now that Sheila knew what to look for, she saw the careful artifice of it all: newer nails deliberately rusted, fresh wood stained to match the old, recent construction hidden beneath a veneer of age.

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The door hung slightly open. Another calculated detail, she suspected. Everything about this place felt staged, like a theater set designed to tell a specific story.

"Watch the threshold," Finn whispered as they entered, weapons ready.

The workshop's interior was meticulously organized. Tools hung on pegboards in careful arrangements—hammers, saws, wrenches, each item aligned with precision. Workbenches lined the walls, their surfaces clean except for a thin layer of sawdust that looked almost deliberately placed. The concrete floor, however, had been swept recently.

"Look at these tools," Finn said softly, examining the pegboard. "They're all new. High-end brands, too."

Sheila nodded. Peter Whitman might dress this place up to look abandoned, but he spent money where it mattered. Just like the night vision goggles—he invested in quality tools for his work.

Whatever that work might be.

Their flashlight beams caught more details as they moved deeper into the space. A generator hummed softly in one corner, connected to what looked like a sophisticated ventilation system. Metal shelving units held supplies that seemed out of place in a workshop—rope, climbing gear, first aid equipment.

"The floor," Finn said suddenly. "Something's off about it."

Sheila studied the concrete. At first glance, it looked ordinary—old, stained, cracked in places. But the cracks formed too perfect a pattern, like lines on a map.

"It's been poured in sections," she said. "Recently."

They began a systematic search, checking every corner, every shadow. The trapdoor had to be here somewhere, but Peter would have hidden it carefully. A man with military engineering experience would know how to conceal an entrance.

A workbench caught Sheila's attention. Unlike the others, which were bolted to the walls, this one stood free in the center of the space. Its surface held a half-finished woodworking project—some kind of decorative cross, she realized with a chill.

"The floor under this," she said. "Help me move it."

Together, they carefully slid the workbench aside. The concrete beneath looked identical to the rest of the floor—same color, same texture, same deliberate stains. But something about the dimensions nagged at her.

Finn was already measuring with his eyes. "I don't know about you, but that looks like the right size for a trapdoor if you ask me."

"But how would it open?" Sheila ran her fingers along the edges of the section, feeling for seams. Nothing. The concrete was seamless, perfectly matched to the surrounding floor.

A sound echoed from somewhere below—maybe a voice, maybe just settling stone. But it galvanized them both.

"There has to be a mechanism," Finn said, examining the nearby walls. "A switch, a lever, something."

Sheila turned slowly, taking in the whole space. If she were designing this, where would she hide the controls? Somewhere accessible but not obvious. Somewhere that looked natural in a workshop.

Her eyes fell on the pegboard with its carefully arranged tools. One hammer hung slightly off-center, disrupting the otherwise perfect alignment.

"No way," she muttered, reaching for it. "It couldn't be that simple."

But when she grasped the handle, she felt the subtle click of a mechanism engaging. The hammer was fixed in place, more like a lever than a tool.

She met Finn's eyes. He nodded, weapon ready.

Sheila took a deep breath and pulled the hammer down.

The hammer moved with well-oiled precision, and a soft hydraulic hiss filled the workshop. At first, nothing visible happened. Then, with glacial slowness, the concrete section began to rise on one end, revealing a dark space beneath.

The engineering was impressive—counterweights and springs working in perfect balance, allowing the heavy concrete panel to lift smoothly despite its weight. As it rose, Sheila saw why they hadn't found any seams: the edges were beveled, designed to sit flush with the surrounding floor when closed.

"Military tech," Finn whispered. "High-end. This isn't something you buy at Home Depot."

The panel stopped at a forty-five-degree angle, locked in place by some hidden mechanism. Steel stairs descended into darkness, their surfaces treated to prevent reflection. A soft current of air carried mineral scents from below—the unmistakable



breath of the mines.

Sheila played her flashlight beam down the stairs. They curved slightly, preventing her from seeing the bottom. The walls were lined with some kind of acoustic dampening material, explaining why they hadn't heard more sounds from below.

"This isn't just an entrance," she said quietly. "It's an airlock. Look at the seals around the edges."

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Finn examined the rubber gaskets that lined the opening. "Airtight when closed. Probably soundproof too." He pointed to marks on the stairs. "And these grooves—there's another door at the bottom. Probably the same setup."

A sound drifted up from below—perhaps a voice, perhaps just the wind in the tunnels. But it carried an urgency that made Sheila's skin crawl.

"We should wait for backup," Finn said, though his tone suggested he knew what her answer would be.

Sheila checked her weapon, then her flashlight. "He already has Michelle—finding her clipboard made that much clear. We don't have time."

"Then we go careful," Finn said. "Real careful. This guy's had years to set this place up exactly how he wants it."

"I'll take point," she said. "Watch our six."

"Sheila—"

"You're still not a hundred percent," she said, cutting off his protest. "That wound is barely healed. I go first."

Finn clearly wanted to argue, but they both knew she was right. Instead, he just said, "Ten minutes. If we don't find anything, we come back and wait for your father."

She nodded, though they both knew that was unlikely. Michelle was down there

somewhere. Every minute they waited was another minute Peter had to hurt her, to break her like his father had broken him.

And that was the only real hope they had: that Peter would be so focused on psychologically torturing Michelle that he would keep her alive. Ironically, the crueller the fate he had planned for Michelle, the greater the chances were that Sheila and Finn might rescue her.

Sheila started down the stairs, keeping close to the wall. The dampening material absorbed the sound of their movements, making their descent eerily silent. At the bottom, just as Finn had predicted, they found another door—this one made of wood.

"This must be how Frank originally came down here," she murmured. "Before Peter raised the level of security."

"It's got to be the trapdoor Diana was talking about."

A rusted padlock lay on a small shelf nearby. Sheila tested the trapdoor and found that it swung open, though not without protest.

Beneath it lay a tunnel, its walls smooth and reinforced. Unlike the rough-hewn mine passages, this had been carefully engineered—a modern bunker connecting to the ancient mine system.

"Ten minutes," Finn reminded her.

Sheila nodded and stepped through the doorway, into whatever darkness Peter Whitman had prepared for them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The tunnel air hit them like a physical presence—cool, heavy with mineral scents, thick with decades of darkness. Their flashlight beams caught modern construction, gradually giving way to older mine workings. The transition was deliberate, Sheila realized. Peter had created a bridge between present and past, between manufactured and natural darkness.

Sound behaved strangely here. Their footsteps seemed to alternate between deadened and oddly amplified, suggesting more of the acoustic treatment Whitman had used above. He was controlling the environment completely—light, sound, even the flow of air through hidden ventilation systems.

"Look at these marks," Finn whispered, indicating the tunnel wall.

Crosses had been carved into the stone at regular intervals, each one slightly different in design. Some were recent, their cuts still sharp. Others had aged into the rock, suggesting years or even decades of accumulation. A record of time spent in darkness, each cross perhaps marking another "lesson" taught.

They reached a junction where three tunnels branched away into darkness. Here, the modern construction ended entirely. They were in the original mine system now, though Sheila noticed subtle changes—reinforced support beams, hidden power conduits, more of the crosses carved into key points.

"Which way?" Finn asked.

Before Sheila could answer, a sound echoed through the tunnels—perhaps a voice, perhaps just the wind playing tricks. But it seemed to come from the leftmost passage.

"There," she said, already moving.

The tunnel sloped downward, following what might have been an original copper vein. More crosses marked their path, along with other symbols that seemed to be some kind of personal navigation system. Peter had created his own language down here, turning the mines into a maze that only he could properly read.

They passed old mining equipment, carefully preserved. Ore carts sat on rusted rails, their metal somehow gleaming as if recently cleaned. Tools hung on the walls, arranged with the same precision they'd seen in the workshop above. Everything had its place in Peter's underground domain.

Another sound reached them—definitely a voice this time, though still too distant to make out words. Sheila quickened their pace while still trying to move silently. The tunnel floor had been cleared of debris, making quiet progress easier, but that same preparation made her nervous.

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Everything down here was exactly as Peter wanted it.

The tunnel opened into what had once been a major excavation chamber. Support beams crisscrossed the ceiling like wooden ribs. Their flashlight beams caught something that made them both stop—photographs covering one wall, protected from the mine's dampness by plastic sheeting.

"Shit," Finn breathed.

The photos showed people in the mines—workers from decades past, modern-day explorers, even search and rescue teams. But the centerpiece was a collection of what could only be Peter's victims. Tyler Matthews stumbling through darkness. Marcus Reed examining a tunnel wall. Diana Martinez checking her equipment. And now, Michelle Waring, her face caught in a moment of dawning fear.

"He documented everything," Sheila said, studying the photos. "Every 'lesson' he taught down here."

"Some of these go back years," Finn added. "Look at the dates. He's been doing this a lot longer than we thought."

A scream cut through the darkness—close now, and unmistakably human. It came from a narrow passage on the far side of the chamber, barely visible behind a stack of old timbers.

Sheila started toward it, but Finn caught her arm.

"Listen," he whispered.

She held still, barely breathing. At first she heard nothing but the usual mine sounds—distant water, settling rock, the soft movement of air through ancient passages. Then she caught it: footsteps, moving with practiced confidence through the darkness. And they were getting closer.

They killed their lights immediately, pressing themselves against the chamber wall. The footsteps grew louder, accompanied now by a gentle humming—an old hymn, Sheila realized, twisted into something darker by the mine's acoustics.

A green glow appeared in the passage ahead—night vision goggles. Peter Whitman was coming.

And they were standing next to his wall of trophies, caught between him and the tunnel where they'd heard Michelle scream.

They pressed against the rough tunnel wall, hiding behind a stack of old support timbers. The beams smelled of age and creosote, decades of darkness sealed into their grain. In the absolute black, Sheila could hear Finn's controlled breathing beside her, feel the tension in his body as they waited.

The humming grew louder. The hymn was familiar—something she'd heard in church as a child—but Peter's rendition made it sound wrong, almost profane. The green glow of his night vision goggles cast a weird glow on the walls as he entered the chamber, turning the crosses into dancing specters.

Sheila's hand tightened on her flashlight. Her other hand found her weapon, though she knew drawing it now would be risky. In the darkness, with his military training and knowledge of the tunnels, Peter would have the advantage in any firefight.

He moved with absolute confidence, his steps sure despite the uneven ground.

Sheila barely breathed. He was closer now. She could smell gun oil and something chemical—probably cleaning supplies. Everything about him was methodical, controlled.

Just a few more steps. Sheila felt Finn shift slightly beside her, ready to move.

Now. It had to be now.

Sheila swung out from behind the timbers, flashlight blazing. The beam caught Peter directly in the goggles, and he staggered slightly. Finn moved with practiced speed, grabbing Peter's arms and forcing them behind his back.

But something was wrong. Peter wasn't resisting. If anything, he seemed to relax in Finn's grip.

"Peter Whitman," Sheila said, keeping her light on him while drawing her weapon. "You're under arrest for the murders of Tyler Matthews and Marcus Reed, the attempted murder of Diana Martinez, and the kidnapping of Michelle Waring."

Peter said nothing. He just stared back at her through his goggles, looking almost... amused?

"Where is she?" Finn demanded, securing Peter's hands with cuffs. He pulled off Peter's goggles and tossed them aside.

"Safe. Learning. Just like I learned." Peter's voice remained calm, reasonable. "My father understood that darkness teaches us who we really are. What we're really capable of."



"This ends now," Sheila said. "Tell us where Michelle is."

Peter smiled, and something about the expression made Sheila's skin crawl. "You can arrest me. Take me away. Process me through your system of justice." His head tilted slightly. "But if you do that, I promise you Michelle will never see the light of day again."

Sheila kept her weapon trained on Peter, studying his face in the harsh beam of her flashlight. He seemed utterly at ease despite the cuffs, despite being caught. His calmness suggested confidence rather than resignation.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

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"These tunnels are extensive," Peter said. "Miles of passages, hundreds of connecting chambers. Some which only I know about." He spoke as if giving a lecture, sharing interesting facts. "Have you considered how long someone could survive down here? With adequate food, water, air circulation?"

"Stop playing games," Finn said. "Tell us where she is."

"I designed this place carefully," Peter continued, ignoring him. "Multiple sealed chambers, each with its own independent air supply. Each one a perfect classroom for learning what darkness has to teach." His eyes found Sheila's. "Michelle is in one of those chambers. Safe. Comfortable, even."

He paused, studying them both. "For now. But these tunnels are treacherous. Unstable. One wrong step, one misplaced vibration..." He shrugged. "The mountain never sleeps, as the old miners used to say."

"He's bluffing," Finn said.

"I've spent decades learning these passages," Peter continued as if Finn hadn't spoken. "Every weak spot, every false floor, every section that could collapse with the slightest disturbance." His eyes found Sheila's. "Did you know that certain types of rock formations amplify vibrations? That a single misplaced footstep can trigger a chain reaction through the entire system?"

Sheila felt cold despite the stuffiness of the tunnel. They'd all heard stories of entire mine sections collapsing without warning, of rescue teams lost trying to reach trapped miners.

"You've already rigged certain sections," she said. It wasn't a question.

Peter smiled slightly. "My father taught me to be thorough. To plan for every contingency." He shifted in the cuffs. "You could search for days, weeks even. But how many people would you lose in the process? How many deputies and rescue workers would die trying to reach her?" His voice softened. "And in the end, would you even find her body?"

"We'll bring in mining experts," Finn said. "Engineers—"

"Who don't know these tunnels like I do. Who haven't spent years mapping every crack, every stress point, every deadly pocket of bad air." Peter's eyes gleamed in the flashlight beam. "The original miners, they had a saying: 'The mountain chooses who lives and who dies.' But in this case..." He smiled again. "I get to decide, don't I?"

Sheila studied his face, looking for any sign of deception. But all she saw was the calm certainty of a man who had planned for this very moment, who had prepared the darkness itself as his accomplice.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Want? I want what I've always wanted—to help people understand what darkness can teach them." He shifted again, and something in his movement suggested he was far too comfortable for someone in handcuffs. "But if you take me away now, if you try to find her without my help... well." His voice remained gentle, almost kind. "I've seen what these tunnels can do to people who don't respect their power. Who don't understand their secrets."

"So, what, you want us to let you go?" Finn said with a snort. "You tell us where to go, and we just send you on your way?"

Peter laughed softly. "No. You misunderstand. I don't want to escape. I want to guide you." His eyes found Sheila's in the harsh flashlight beam. "I want you to experience the journey. To understand what I've created down here."

"You mean your torture chamber?" Finn's grip tightened on Peter's arms. "Your private little corner of hell?"

"Hell?" Peter smiled. "No. This is something far more profound. My father thought darkness was punishment. He was wrong. Darkness is a teacher. The most honest teacher there is." He shifted again, that same unsettling movement. "Take these cuffs off. Let me show you the true path to Michelle. Let me guide you through what I've spent decades learning."

"Not a chance," Sheila said.

"Then she dies." Peter's voice remained gentle, reasonable. "Maybe quickly, if she's lucky. Maybe slowly, if she wanders into one of the deeper chambers where the air goes bad. Or maybe..." He tilted his head. "Maybe she'll find one of the passages I've prepared. The ones that look solid until you're halfway through. The ones that collapse with just the right pressure in just the right place."

Sheila felt the weight of the decision pressing down on her like the mountain itself. Every instinct screamed that this was a trap, that Peter was manipulating them. But if he was telling the truth about the dangers...

"How do we know you won't lead us into one of those traps yourself?" she asked.

"Because I'll be with you," he said simply. "Everything I've built down here, every lesson I've designed—it requires a guide. A teacher." His eyes took on that zealot's gleam again. "Let me show you what I've learned. What the darkness has taught me."

Sheila studied him in the harsh beam of her flashlight, weighing impossible choices. Every instinct, every bit of training told her not to trust him. He was a killer, a madman who'd turned his own childhood trauma into a twisted religion of darkness.

But he also might be their only real chance of finding Michelle alive.

She thought about the mine's dangers—the unstable passages, the bad air pockets, the maze of tunnels that could trap searchers for days. Even with proper equipment and experienced teams, they'd lost people in rescue attempts before. And that was in sections they knew were safe.

Here, in Peter's domain, where he'd had decades to learn every deadly secret...

"Sheila, no," Finn said quietly, reading her expression. "We can find another way."

"Can we?" She kept her eyes on Peter. "How long would it take to bring in mining engineers? To map safe routes? To check every passage, every chamber?" She drew a deep breath of stale mine air. "How long before we're recovering a body instead of saving a life?"

"He'll lead us into a trap," Finn insisted. "This is exactly what he wants."

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"Of course it is," she said. "But right now, I don't see another choice." To Peter, she said, "If we do this—if we let you guide us—you try anything, make one wrong move, and I'll put you down without hesitation. Understand?"

Peter's smile was almost gentle. "Perfectly, Sheriff. Now take off these cuffs, and we can begin."

Finn laughed humorlessly. "Not a chance."

"Then you'll never find her," Peter replied. "These tunnels require careful navigation. Sometimes you need to squeeze through narrow spaces, climb over unstable sections." He kept his voice reasonable, calm. "You can leave them on, of course. But then I won't be able to show you the safe paths. Won't be able to help you avoid the traps."

"He's manipulating us," Finn said to Sheila. "The second those cuffs come off—"

"I'll be free to show you where to go," Peter said. "And frankly, I'm not going to take another step until you remove them. I hope poor Michelle isn't suffering."

A scream echoed through the tunnels—distant, distorted, but unmistakably human. Michelle.

"Time is becoming a factor," Peter said softly. "The longer we debate, the more likely she is to panic. To try finding her own way out." He shifted again, the cuffs clinking softly. "These tunnels are like a living thing. They sense fear. Respond to it. One wrong step by a frightened person..."

"Shut up," Finn snapped, but Sheila heard the uncertainty in his voice.

She ran through their options quickly. If they kept him cuffed, he wouldn't help them. And he was right about the physical requirements of navigation—she could already see places where they'd need full mobility to pass safely.

"Here's what's going to happen," she said finally. "We take the cuffs off, but you stay between us. One wrong move, one step out of line, and you get a bullet. Clear?"

"Crystal." Peter's smile remained eerily calm.

"Sheila, please," Finn said quietly. "We can't trust him."

"We don't have a choice." She kept her weapon trained on Peter while Finn reluctantly unlocked the cuffs. And we don't have to trust him, she added mentally. We just have to be ready when he makes his move.

The cuffs came off. Peter brought his hands forward slowly, rubbing his wrists.

"Now," he said, "shall we begin your first lesson?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Peter gestured toward one of the darker tunnels. "Michelle chose this path initially. Tried to find her own way out." He shook his head sadly. "They always run at first. Always think they can escape the darkness on their own. But darkness isn't something you escape. It's something you learn to embrace."

"Move," Sheila ordered, ignoring his philosophical ramblings. "Slowly. Stay where we can see you."

Peter started forward, his movements confident despite the uneven ground. Sheila followed close behind, keeping her light and weapon trained on him. Finn brought up the rear, his own flashlight beam sweeping the tunnel walls for any sign of threat.

The tunnel narrowed slightly, forcing them to walk single file. Peter moved with the confidence of someone who'd walked these paths thousands of times. His hand occasionally brushed the wall, touching crosses carved into the rock—some old, some newer, each one marking something only he understood.

"You're wondering if I'm lying," Peter said as they continued deeper. "If these dangers are real or just another manipulation." He stopped at a junction where three tunnels branched away into darkness. "Would you like me to prove it?"

"What we'd like," Finn said from behind them, "is for you to shut up and keep moving."

"The left tunnel looks most promising, doesn't it?" Peter gestured with his chin. "Slopes upward, suggests a path to the surface. The kind of route a scared young woman might choose." He smiled slightly. "Would you like to see what happens when someone takes that path?"

Before either of them could stop him, he picked up a rock and tossed it into the left tunnel. The sound of it bouncing echoed strangely, then—

A rumble shook the passage. Rocks clattered down from above as a section of the left tunnel collapsed, sending clouds of dust billowing toward them.

"You see?" Peter remained calm despite the chaos. "The mountain remembers its wounds. Old collapses, abandoned dig sites, places where support beams have rotted through." He turned to face them, dust settling on his shoulders. "How many rescue workers would you have lost trying to search these tunnels without my guidance?"



"Move," Sheila ordered, but her voice held less conviction now. The collapse had proven at least some of what he'd been saying about the dangers.

They took the right tunnel, descending deeper into the mountain. The air grew cooler, heavy with mineral scents and decades of darkness. Peter touched more crosses as they walked, almost like a Catholic making the sign of the cross for protection.

"My father's first lesson lasted three days," he said conversationally. "He chained me to a support beam and left me in complete darkness. Said it would teach me to fear God." He laughed softly. "But I learned something else instead. Something about darkness itself."

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"I said shut up," Finn snapped.

"Did you know fear changes how we perceive time?" Peter continued, ignoring Finn. "In complete darkness, with no reference points, the mind begins to... drift. Hours feel like minutes. Or days." He touched another cross. "Michelle understands that now. Just like Tyler did. Just like Marcus—though he never got to complete his lesson."

A sound echoed through the tunnels—maybe a voice, maybe just settling rock. But it seemed to come from somewhere above them.

"That's impossible," Finn said. "We've been heading down."

"Sound plays tricks down here," Peter said. "The tunnels are like a living thing, carrying voices in unexpected ways." He paused at another junction. "Would you like to follow that sound? Try to trace it to its source?" His smile widened slightly. "Or would you like me to show you the actual path to Michelle?"

Sheila studied him in her flashlight beam. Every instinct screamed that he was leading them deeper into his trap. But that collapse had been real. The hollow sound of unstable ground had been real.

How many other death traps waited in the darkness? And how long did Michelle have before she stumbled into one of them?

"Which way?" she asked finally.

Peter's smile widened. "That depends," he said softly, "on how much more you're

willing to learn about darkness."

Sheila kept her weapon trained on Peter's back as they moved deeper into the tunnel system. The air grew noticeably heavier, and the walls seemed to press closer. Their flashlight beams caught more crosses carved into the rock, appearing more frequently now.

"The main shaft intersects here," Peter said, stopping at another junction. "The original miners used to—"

"I don't care about mining history," Sheila cut him off. "Where's Michelle?"

"But you should care," Peter said mildly. "Understanding is important. For instance, do you know why they abandoned this section?" He gestured to a tunnel branching off to their left. "Three men died here in '61. The company claimed it was unstable ground, but really..." He smiled. "Really, they found something they didn't want anyone to know about."

"What are you talking about?" Finn asked despite himself.

"Rich copper deposits. Still untapped. My father helped cover it up—he was good at covering things up." Peter traced a cross carved into the wall. "The company found it was cheaper to extract ore illegally, off the books. No safety regulations, no union wages." He turned to face them. "Did you think I was the only one with secrets down here?"

Another sound echoed through the tunnels—closer this time. A cry, perhaps, or just the mountain settling.

"This way," Peter said, starting down the right-hand tunnel.

They'd gone perhaps fifty yards when Peter stopped suddenly. "Listen."

A faint sound carried through the darkness—metal creaking under strain. Peter smiled. "Interesting."

"What is it?" Sheila demanded, her voice tight with apprehension. A cold trickle of sweat ran down her spine.

"That support beam—" He gestured upward with his chin. "The one holding up this entire section. I've been... experimenting with its load-bearing capacity."

The creaking grew louder. Sheila's heart hammered against her ribs as fine debris began sifting down from above, sparkling in her flashlight beam like deadly snow.

"One more thing about these tunnels," Peter said softly. "Sound isn't the only thing that travels in unexpected ways. Vibrations, too. For instance—" He stamped his foot hard against the ground.

The effect was immediate. The creaking turned to groaning as decades-old timbers shifted above them. Dust and small rocks showered down.

"Stop," Sheila ordered, unable to completely mask the fear in her voice, but Peter was already moving.

He spun with startling speed, shouldering into Finn before either of them could react. The impact sent Finn staggering backward just as a larger rock crashed down between them. More followed, cutting off their line of sight to Peter.

Sheila grabbed Finn's arm, pulling him back as more debris rained down. The tunnel was collapsing in slow motion, the ancient support structure finally giving way.

"He's getting away!" Finn shouted over the noise.

A scream echoed through the tunnels—closer now, more distinct than before. It was followed by another cry, this one unmistakably Michelle's voice, coming from the right passage.

"Michelle first," Sheila said, fighting to keep her voice steady as the mountain seemed to groan around them. "We have to—"

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The rest was lost as a massive beam crashed down, nearly crushing them. Terror shot through Sheila's body as they scrambled back, watching helplessly as the collapse cut off the left passage—and any chance of immediately pursuing Peter.

"The right tunnel," Sheila said, already moving. "Before that comes down too."

They ran, the sound of falling rock pursuing them like something alive. Peter had known exactly how to trigger this, had probably spent years learning the mine's weaknesses. Every stamp of their feet threatened to bring down more of the ceiling.

The passage ahead split again. In the beam of her flashlight, Sheila caught a splash of color—a bright red jacket half-buried under a fallen rock.

"There!" She rushed forward, Finn close behind.

Michelle lay unconscious but breathing, partially protected by a cave-in that had formed a small pocket around her. They worked quickly to free her, aware that any wrong move could bring down the rest of the unstable section.

"She's alive," Finn said, checking Michelle's pulse. "But we need to get her out of here now."

Sheila played her light back the way they'd come, now completely blocked by the collapse. "That was his plan all along. Force us to choose between catching him and saving her."

"And make sure we couldn't follow immediately even if we did choose him." Finn

carefully lifted Michelle. "There has to be another way out. He wouldn't trap himself down here."

"Which means he has other exits we don't know about. Places that aren't on any of the maps."

A rumble from deep in the mountain emphasized her point. This section wasn't done collapsing.

"We need to move," Finn said. "Before—"

A crack like thunder cut him off as another support beam gave way somewhere ahead of them. The sound of cascading rock grew louder.

"Run," Sheila ordered, looking at Finn and the unconscious Michelle. But even as she said it, a different thought crystallized. "No—wait. You take her out. Follow the air current, it'll lead to an exit."

"What?" Finn shifted Michelle's weight in his arms. "You can't be serious."

"He has private exits, Finn. Ones that aren't on any map." Her flashlight beam caught falling debris as another rumble shook the tunnel. "If we lose him now, we may never find him again."

"Sheila—"

"He won't be able to resist," she cut him off. "Me, alone, in his darkness? It's everything he wants. And this time, he won't have the advantage of night vision."

A massive crash rumbled deeper in the tunnels. The mountain was coming apart around them.

"You'll die down here," Finn said quietly.

"Get her out," Sheila replied, already turning back toward the darkness. "That's an order."

She heard Finn's footsteps retreating, then forced herself to focus. The tunnels groaned around her as she moved deeper, her flashlight beam catching clouds of dust and debris. Every step could trigger another collapse. Every breath could be her last.

But she knew Peter would come for her. His twisted need to teach, to control—he wouldn't be able to resist one final lesson.

She killed her light and waited in the absolute darkness, controlling her breathing the way she'd learned in the academy. Listening. The mountain's death throes created a cacophony of sound—falling rock, splintering timber, the deep groan of earth shifting above.

Then—footsteps. Careful, measured. Moving with the confidence of someone who knew these tunnels by heart, with or without night-vision goggles.

He must have been following us, she thought. He must have gone around, using a route we didn't see.

"I knew you'd understand," Peter said from the darkness. "The final lesson. The most important one."

Sheila remained silent, tracking his location by sound. He was circling, trying to get behind her.

"In darkness, we're all equal," he continued. "All stripped of pretense. Of illusion." A pause. "Except I've had decades to learn its secrets. To become one with—"



Sheila fired toward his voice. The muzzle flash lit the tunnel in strobing bursts, momentarily blinding them both. She heard him curse, followed by the sound of him stumbling backward.

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Then darkness again. Complete. Perfect.

"You missed," he said, but his voice was tight with pain.

"Did I?"

More debris fell as the tunnel continued its slow collapse. Sheila moved silently to her right, using the wall as a guide.

"The darkness speaks to those who listen," Peter said, his voice moving. Hunting her. "My father taught me that. Taught me to embrace—"

"Your father was a monster," Sheila cut him off. "And you became something even worse."

She heard him moving closer, drawn by her voice. Just a few more steps...

The attack came from her left—fast, silent, deadly. But Sheila was ready. She ducked under his grab and drove her elbow up, catching him in the throat. They went down hard as more rocks clattered around them.

Peter recovered faster than she'd expected, rolling away and then lunging back. His fist caught her ribs, driving the air from her lungs. She stumbled, using the wall to steady herself as debris continued to rain down around them.

"You think you understand darkness?" Peter's voice came from somewhere to her right. "You've only played at its edges. I was born in it. Shaped by it."

Sheila controlled her breathing, listening past the mountain's groans. A scuff of boot on stone betrayed his position. She spun and struck, her fist connecting with solid flesh. Peter grunted but grabbed her arm, shoving her against the wall.

Pain exploded across her back. She brought her knee up instinctively, felt it connect. His grip loosened, and she broke free, dropping and rolling as his fist whistled through the space where her head had been.

"Good," he said, breathing heavily. "You're learning. The darkness forces us to trust other senses. To become more than what we are in the light."

A support beam crashed down nearby, showering them with splinters and rock dust. Sheila used the sound to mask her movement, circling to flank him. But Peter had the same idea. They collided in the darkness, grappling blindly as the tunnel continued to disintegrate around them.

His hands found her throat again, fingers digging into soft tissue. Sheila drove her thumb into the pressure point at his wrist, forcing his hand away. She followed with a head-butt that connected with his nose.

Peter staggered back, cursing. "You think this changes anything?" His voice was thick with blood. "These tunnels are my home. My church. You're just another student who needs to learn—"

Sheila swept his legs out from under him, sending him crashing to the ground. But he caught her sleeve as he fell, dragging her down with him. They rolled in the darkness, trading blows, neither able to gain advantage as rocks continued to fall around them.

His elbow caught her temple, sending stars exploding across her vision. She responded with a knee to his solar plexus, felt the whoosh of air leaving his lungs. But he was already moving, years of fighting in darkness making him deadly even

when stunned.

"Your father locked you down here," she said through gritted teeth as they struggled. "Chained you in the darkness. And instead of breaking free, you became just like him."

Peter's response was a savage blow to her ribs, but she was ready this time. She caught his arm and used his own momentum to flip him. He landed hard, and she followed him down, driving her knee into his back as she reached for her cuffs.

He bucked and twisted with surprising strength, nearly breaking her hold. But Sheila had trained for this—countless hours in the gym, practicing holds and takedowns in low-light conditions. She shifted her weight, maintaining control as she fought to secure the cuffs.

"It's over," she said as the first cuff clicked into place.

Peter thrashed harder, almost dislodging her. "The darkness..." he wheezed. "It still has so much to teach..."

"The only thing it taught you was how to hide from your pain."

She got the second cuff on just as another section of tunnel collapsed nearby. The whole mountain seemed to be giving up, decades of secrets finally coming to light.

Sheila yanked Peter to his feet, her initial triumph fading as she realized their situation. The tunnel behind them had completely collapsed, and the groaning from above suggested the rest would follow soon. In the darkness, every passage looked the same.

"Which way?" she demanded, her heart pounding as more debris rained down. When

Peter didn't respond, she shook him. "Tell me!"

"Why would I do that?" His voice was calm despite their dire situation. "Let the darkness decide our fate, I say."

A massive crash from somewhere above made Sheila flinch. Fine dust filled her lungs, and she could taste copper—whether from blood or the mine itself, she wasn't sure. The beam of her flashlight caught falling rocks that seemed to grow larger with each passing second.

"Last chance," she said, fighting to keep the tremor from her voice. "Tell me how to get out of here, and we'll both live."

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Peter just laughed—a horrible, empty sound that echoed through the disintegrating tunnels.

Sheila swallowed hard and made her choice. She grabbed Peter's arm and started down the right passage, praying her instincts were right. The tunnel floor sloped slightly upward, which had to be good. Had to mean they were heading toward the surface.

But each step brought more collapse. Support beams that had held for decades were giving way, and her flashlight beam caught glimpses of the ceiling sagging dangerously above them. Her breath came in sharp gasps as they stumbled through the darkness, and she couldn't stop the trembling in her hands.

"We're going to die down here," Peter said matter-of-factly. "Just like all the others who thought they could master the darkness."

"Shut up," Sheila snapped, but fear clawed at her chest as another support beam crashed down behind them. The sound of collapse was getting closer, like a wave of destruction chasing them through the tunnels.

They reached a junction and Sheila hesitated, her flashlight darting between three identical passages. The wrong choice now would kill them both. Her light caught crosses carved into the walls—Peter's navigation markers—but they meant nothing to her.

The decision was taken from her as the left passage collapsed completely. The ceiling above them groaned—a deep, horrible sound that seemed to come from the mountain

itself. Rocks and timber rained down as the main support beams began to fail.

Sheila stumbled forward, dragging Peter with her, knowing they were running out of time. Her flashlight beam caught nothing but falling debris and collapsing tunnel. The roar of destruction was deafening now, and she couldn't stop the sob that escaped her throat as she realized this might really be it.

"Sheila!" A voice echoed through the darkness—her father's voice. "Where are you?"

Relief flooded through her so strongly her knees nearly buckled. "Here!" she called back, but the sound of falling rock nearly drowned her out.

The tunnel groaned ominously above them. Major support beams were failing now, the collapse accelerating.

"Sheila!" Closer now. A flashlight beam cut through the dust.

"Dad! Here!"

Gabriel appeared through the chaos, limping but moving fast. His face was streaked with grime and blood—he must have fought his way through partial collapses to reach her.

"The whole system's coming down," he said. "We've got maybe two minutes."

They ran through the darkness, Gabriel leading the way. He didn't hesitate to make a decision when the tunnel branched—he must've memorized every twist and turn on his way in.

They burst into daylight seconds before the final collapse, the mountain settling behind them with a sound like thunder. Emergency vehicles and floodlights lit up the

scene as deputies swarmed in to secure Peter.

Sheila turned to her father, seeing the fear and relief warring on his face. "You came back for me," she said in a choked voice. She embraced him, and he hugged her back.

"Always will," he said quietly into her hair. "No matter what's between us."

Above them, the mountain finally stilled, its secrets buried in darkness once again.

## EPILOGUE

The press conference room was packed, reporters jostling for position as Diana Martinez, still using a cane but standing tall, approached the podium. Sheila watched from the back, Finn at her side, as Diana laid out the evidence they'd recovered from her pack—proof of illegal mining operations spanning decades, documentation of safety violations, and evidence of corporate corruption that had led to multiple deaths.

"The copper deposits were never depleted," Diana said, her voice strong despite her recent ordeal. "Cooper Mining deliberately misled federal regulators, claiming the veins had played out while continuing to extract ore illegally. Without safety protocols, without proper oversight, without regard for human life."

Sarah Riggs stood nearby, tears streaming down her face as years of activism were finally vindicated. The EPA had already announced a full investigation, and the state attorney general was preparing criminal charges against Cooper Mining's board of directors.

After the conference, Michelle Waring approached Sheila. She looked better than she had in the hospital—some color had returned to her face, though shadows still haunted her eyes.



"The mines are being sealed," Michelle said. "For real this time. They're using the geological data from Diana's survey to identify all access points, even the unofficial ones."

"And how are you holding up?" Sheila asked.

Michelle managed a small smile. "Better. The counseling helps. And knowing he can't hurt anyone else..." She trailed off, then squared her shoulders. "I'm testifying at his sentencing next week. I want him to see me. To know he didn't break me."

Sheila squeezed her arm, proud of the young woman's courage. As Michelle walked away, Finn caught Sheila's eye from across the room and gestured for her to join him.

"Got something?" she asked as she approached.

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"Finally got access to all of Whitman's financial records." He held up a thick folder. "Think I found the money trail."

They headed to his office, where stacks of bank statements and property records covered his desk. Finn had been digging into Peter's background since his arrest, trying to understand how he'd funded his elaborate underground operation.

"Military pension," Finn said, pointing to bank statements. "Plus a successful career as a private military contractor. He made a fortune in Iraq and Afghanistan, training special forces units in advanced combat techniques."

"Then came home and used those skills to hunt people in his private killing ground," Sheila said.

"The cabin renovations were paid for in cash, spread across multiple contractors to avoid suspicion. But the real money went into the tunnel modifications." Finn shuffled through more papers. "The equipment alone—ventilation systems, reinforced doors, custom security features—cost millions."

"When did the killings start?"

"First confirmed victim was in 2018. Jacob Chen, a geology student. Body was never found." Finn met her eyes. "But something changed last year. The frequency increased. The victims got younger."

"Why the escalation?"

"Terminal diagnosis." Finn held up a medical report. "Aggressive brain cancer. Doctors gave him six months. He must have decided to complete his 'work' while he still could."

"Teaching his twisted gospel of darkness until the end."

Finn was quiet for a moment. Then: "You could have died in those tunnels. Going back in like that..."

"I had to." She touched his hand. "He would have disappeared, found new hunting grounds. More people would have died."

"I know." His fingers intertwined with hers. "Doesn't mean I have to like it." He paused. "I have to admit, I'm grateful your father went in after you. When he heard you were still down there..." He shook his head. "I've never seen him move so fast, bad knee and all."

"He saved my life," Sheila said quietly.

"Maybe it's time you two talked about that." Finn nodded toward her office. "He's been waiting to speak with you."

Sheila followed his gaze. Through the glass, she could see her father sitting in one of her office chairs. Even from here, she could read the exhaustion in his posture.

"About what?" she asked.

"Hank, I think. He said the two of them spoke, but he didn't want to spill the beans to me. It was for your ears only."

Sheila chewed her lip, wondering what her father had learned. Then, eager to find

out, she squeezed Finn's hand once more and headed to her office.

"Finn said you wanted to see me?" she said as she entered.

Her father looked up. His eyes, troubled a moment before, cleared at the sight of her.  
"How are you holding up, honey?"

"Good. Thanks to you. If you hadn't come into those tunnels..."

Gabriel waved his hand as if to say it wasn't worth mentioning.

"I talked with Hank," he said.

"And?" Sheila watched him, trying to gauge how this conversation would go. She had no idea.

"He claims he knew nothing about what Tommy was planning. Says he was completely blindsided by all of it."

"And you believe him?"

"I want to. You should have seen him, Sheila. When I laid it all out—Tommy's real purpose here, the attempt on your life—Hank looked physically ill. Said bringing Tommy into the department was just helping family. That his nephew needed a fresh start after some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Nothing violent. Some disciplinary issues in his last department. Insubordination, mainly. According to Hank, Tommy claimed he'd learned his lesson, wanted to prove himself. And Hank thought, what better place than here? Under family supervision?"

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Sheila studied her father's face, looking for any hint of what he really thought. "And you're sure he's telling the truth?"

"I've known Hank since the academy." Gabriel's voice grew distant, remembering. "We worked patrol together, had each other's backs more times than I can count. He was the first person I called when..." He stopped, swallowing hard. "When your mother was killed."

"That doesn't mean he's innocent."

"No. But it means I want to believe him." Gabriel pulled out another page of notes. "He broke down during our talk, Sheila. Actually broke down. Said he keeps thinking about all the signs he missed, all the times Tommy's behavior should have raised red flags."

"Like what?"

"The questions Tommy asked about old cases. His interest in Internal Affairs files. The way he'd steer conversations toward certain topics." Gabriel shook his head. "Hank says he thought Tommy was just being thorough, trying to learn department history. Now he wonders if he was gathering intelligence all along."

"Or that's what Hank wants us to think." Sheila leaned back in her chair, considering. "He's been in law enforcement over thirty years, Dad. That's plenty of time to learn how to sell a story."

"You think he's lying?"

"I think someone in this department wanted me dead. Someone helped Tommy get close to me, gave him access, covered his tracks." She met her father's eyes. "And Hank's either part of it, or he's the most conveniently oblivious former sheriff in county history."

Gabriel was quiet for a long moment. "When your mother died," he said finally, "Hank was the one who pushed hardest to keep the investigation going. Even after the higher-ups wanted it classified as a random burglary gone wrong."

"Maybe because he knew it would never lead anywhere. That the evidence would be too corrupted, the trails too cold."

"Or maybe because he truly wasn't involved. People can surprise you, Sheila. Sometimes they're exactly what they appear to be."

"And sometimes they're wearing masks so convincing even their closest friends can't see through them. What else did he say? About Tommy's activities, his contacts?"

"Claims total ignorance. Says Tommy kept his private life private. Lived alone, didn't socialize much with other deputies." Gabriel paused. "Though he did mention something odd. Said Tommy would sometimes disappear for hours, claim he was following up leads. But there'd be no record of the calls in dispatch, no notes in any case files."

"Meeting his real employers?"

"That's what I thought. But Hank says—"

Her phone buzzed, interrupting him. A text from Roberts. Sheila had to read it several times to absorb what it was saying. As she did so, her blood ran cold.

Medical emergency in Tommy's cell. Not breathing. Possible cardiac arrest.

She jumped to her feet.

"What is it?" Gabriel asked, alarmed. "Something happen?"

"Tommy," she said as she hurried to the door. "Someone doesn't want him talking, and it sounds like they might've just found a way to silence him."