



Silent Home

Author: *Blake Pierce*

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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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PROLOGUE

Jessica Gregory slipped into the back row of Theater Three, grateful to find it empty. The documentary about sustainable farming played on, casting flickering shadows across the worn burgundy seats, but Jessica wasn't here to watch root vegetables grow.

She had exactly forty-seven minutes before her next shift at the concession stand, and she intended to use every second of it.

Sliding her backpack onto the seat beside her, she pulled out her well-worn copy of "The Glass Menagerie." The script's pages were dog-eared and marked with highlighter, post-it notes protruding from the edges like colorful feathers. Jessica ran her fingers over the familiar cover, remembering the first time she'd read it in her high school drama class. Now, six years later, she finally had a shot at playing Laura Wingfield in the Coldwater Community Theater's winter production.

If she could nail the callback tomorrow night.

The sound of a tractor engine rumbled from the screen, and Jessica glanced up. A weathered farmer was explaining something about crop rotation, his face illuminated by the golden hour sun. The few audience members scattered throughout the middle rows sat motionless, absorbed in his words.

Jessica envied their ability to lose themselves in the story. Her own mind was too full of Laura's monologues, of all the ways she could bring this fragile character to life.

She'd already bombed three auditions this month—a local commercial for Peak Mountain Credit Union, a supporting role in the college's production of "Our Town," and most painfully, a chance to understudy for a professional theater company in Salt Lake City. The director there had called her work "technically proficient but lacking emotional depth." The words still stung, especially because Jessica feared they might be true.

Yes, there was that one director—Brad—who'd taken an interest in her. But did he really think she was talented, or was he just using her for his own... amusement? Stringing her along with hints about different roles, different movies?

I don't need a repeat of what happened with 'The Winter Palace,' she thought bitterly.

Then again, holding grudges wouldn't get her far in her career. And neither would blind optimism.

The best thing, she decided, was to assume Brad wouldn't have anything for her. That way, if it turned out he did have a role for her, it would come as a bonus.

Despite her focus on finding a promising new role, the truth was that sometimes she wondered if she wanted to remain in the acting world at all. Some of the things she'd discovered had dampened her enthusiasm. She'd thought the whole system was merit-based, and if you had the talent, you'd get the roles. But she knew better now.

Still, that didn't keep her from hoping she'd make her breakthrough.

The Peak Mountain Film Festival was on its fourth day, transforming sleepy Coldwater into a buzzing hive of independent filmmakers, critics, and movie enthusiasts. Every hotel room within thirty miles was booked. Main Street had been closed to traffic, becoming a pedestrian mall lined with food trucks and pop-up shops. The crisp October air carried the scent of kettle corn and woodsmoke, along

with the excited chatter of people discussing the latest screenings.

Jessica had jumped at the chance to work the festival, even though it meant long hours of serving popcorn and explaining to irritated patrons why they couldn't bring hot drinks into the theaters. The connections alone made it worthwhile. Just yesterday, she'd handed a large combo to an indie director whose last film had won at Sundance. She'd managed to mention her acting experience, and he'd actually seemed interested, asking for her email address.

It was a small thing, but it felt like progress.

A burst of laughter from the screen pulled Jessica back to the present. She checked her phone—forty minutes left. Plenty of time to work on Laura's pivotal scene with Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller. Jessica had been practicing it for weeks, trying to capture that delicate balance between hope and fear, between wanting to emerge from her shell and needing to protect herself.

It wasn't so different from her own life, really. Except that Laura had her glass collection to retreat into, while Jessica had thrown herself into acting precisely because it forced her to connect with others. Every role was a chance to understand someone else's truth, to step outside her own tangled history and become something more.

The projection booth hummed overhead, its beam cutting through the darkness. Jessica glanced up, catching a glimpse of movement behind the small window. Probably Chad, the projectionist who'd been working this theater all week. He'd mentioned wanting to direct someday, and they'd had a few good conversations about storytelling between screenings. Jessica gave a small wave, though she wasn't sure if he could see her in the darkness.

Turning back to her script, she began to whisper Laura's lines, letting the familiar

words wash over her."I loved having my—glass collection in the light.You know what I mean?I loved to wash it."Jessica paused, considering the subtext.Laura was really talking about herself here, wasn't she?About wanting to be seen, to shine, even while fearing that exposure might somehow break her.

The documentary's soundtrack swelled with orchestral music, and Jessica used it as a backdrop for her next lines.She could almost see the stage lights and feel the weight of Laura's shy smile and hesitant gestures.This role meant everything to her.It was a chance to prove she could handle complex emotional material, that she was more than just a pretty face who could memorize lines.

Not that she'd had much success proving even that much so far.Her acting resume was a litany of minor roles: Townsperson #3, Party Guest, Woman in Park.The closest she'd come to a breakthrough was playing Mercutio's page in "Romeo and Juliet" last spring.She'd had exactly two lines, but the director had praised her "excellent stage presence."

Jessica wasn't sure if that was a compliment or a polite way of saying she was better at standing around than actually acting.

But Laura—Laura was different.Jessica understood her in a way she'd never connected with a character before.She knew what it was like to feel trapped by other people's perceptions, to long for something more while doubting your ability to achieve it.Maybe that was why the rejection from the Salt Lake City theater had hit so hard.

If she couldn't convince them she had depth, how could she ever expect to make it as a serious actress?

The sound of a door clicking shut echoed through the theater.Jessica looked up, expecting to see someone leaving, but the few audience members remained focused

on the screen. The sound must have come from the film, though something about it had seemed more immediate, more real. She shivered, realizing how cool the theater had become. The festival organizers were probably overdoing it with the air conditioning again, trying to combat the heat generated by the projector.

Through the emergency exit at the far end of the theater, Jessica could see slivers of early evening light. The festival would be in full swing now, with crowds gathering for the premier of some hotly anticipated documentary about climate change. She'd heard it was already generating Oscar buzz, though Jessica had learned to take such rumors with a grain of salt. Everyone at a film festival seemed to think their project was destined for greatness.

Still, there was something magical about being surrounded by so many creative people, all pursuing their dreams with such determination. It reminded Jessica of why she'd fallen in love with performing in the first place, back in middle school when Mrs. Hawkins had cast her as the Wicked Witch in "The Wizard of Oz." She'd been terrified at first, certain she would forget her lines or trip on her costume. But the moment she stepped onto that stage, something had clicked into place.

For the first time in her life, Jessica had felt completely present, completely alive.

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Now, however, as she stared at her script, the words all seemed to blur together before her tired eyes. The documentary was winding down, which meant people would start filing in soon for the next screening—some experimental short film about urban beekeeping. She needed somewhere quieter to practice, somewhere she could really delve into Laura's character without worrying about disturbing anyone.

She thought longingly of Theater Seven at the end of the hall. It had been closed all afternoon for technical difficulties—something about the sound system—and wouldn't reopen until tomorrow. Jessica had helped Chad unlock it earlier so he could check the equipment, and she was pretty sure he hadn't bothered to lock it again. He rarely did, claiming the ancient locks were more trouble than they were worth.

The prospect of having a whole theater to herself was too tempting to resist. She could work on the physical aspects of the role—Laura's limp, her nervous gestures, the way she seemed to fold in on herself when confronted with the outside world. Those weren't things Jessica could practice effectively while confined to a seat.

She checked her watch. Still more than half an hour before her next shift at the concession stand. Plenty of time to get some practice in.

Gathering her things, she slipped out of Theater Three as the credits began to roll. The corridor was surprisingly empty, though she could hear muffled conversation and laughter from the direction of the lobby. Most of the festival crowd would be at the climate change documentary premiere, leaving this wing of the building relatively deserted.

Jessica walked quickly past the other theaters, her footsteps muffled by the worn

carpet. A maintenance cart stood abandoned near Theater Five, cleaning supplies scattered across its surface. The festival was running the staff ragged—she'd heard two ushers quit yesterday after a particularly nasty confrontation with an angry patron.

Theater Seven's doors loomed ahead, their brass handles gleaming dully in the fluorescent light. Jessica glanced over her shoulder, but the hallway remained empty. She tested the handle. It turned easily, just as she'd expected. Slipping inside, she found herself in welcome darkness.

The theater was smaller than the others, with perhaps a hundred seats arranged in intimate clusters. Without the projector running, the only illumination came from the exit signs, casting everything in a faint red glow. The air felt thick with silence, broken only by the distant hum of the building's heating system.

Perfect.

Jessica made her way down the center aisle, trailing her hand along the seats. About halfway down, she dropped her backpack onto a seat and pulled out her script. Then, taking a deep breath, she stepped into the open space before the blank screen.

"I've—I've been spending my afternoons at Rubicam's Business College," she began, letting Laura's stammer creep into her voice. She took a hesitant step, adding the slight drag to her right foot that Laura's disability would cause. "Typing's just not my..."

A noise from above made her freeze. Something that sounded like footsteps coming from the direction of the projection booth. Jessica's heart jumped into her throat.

"Hello?" she called, her voice surprisingly steady. "I'm sorry, I was just..."

The footsteps stopped. In the silence that followed, Jessica became acutely aware of

how isolated she was. The nearest occupied theater was three doors down, and the thick walls were designed to block sound. Even if she shouted, it was unlikely anyone would hear her.

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. It's probably just Chad doing his rounds.

But Chad would have announced himself, wouldn't he? And he'd been busy with the documentary in Theater Three when she left.

"I'll leave," she called out. "Just let me grab my bag."

She turned toward her backpack, but before she could reach it, she heard the distinct click of locks engaging.

"Hey!" Jessica ran to the nearest exit, pushing against the bar. It didn't budge. "This isn't funny!"

Movement caught her eye—a shadow passing in front of the projection booth's window. But this was no accidental glimpse. Someone was standing there, watching her.

No, ... not just watching. They were holding a camera. But why would they—

There was a bright, disorienting flash, and Jessica covered her eyes. Too late. She was blind. She stumbled to the door again, pounding on it with her fists. She took a breath to call for help—

And a hand clamped around her throat, cutting off the sound.

CHAPTER ONE

Sheila Stone watched Tommy Forster through the hospital room window, trying to reconcile the pale figure in the bed with the man who'd tried to kill her just a week ago. Tubes and wires connected him to softly beeping machines, while the oxygen mask clouding with each breath offered the only proof he was still alive.

"I still don't get how it happened," Sheila murmured. "I had my two most trusted deputies watching him."

"Roberts swears nothing unusual happened during her shift," her father said from beside her. Gabriel Stone's silver hair caught the harsh hospital lighting as he studied his own reflection in the observation window. "Baxter says the same about his."

"They're good deputies," Sheila said, her gaze shifting from Tommy to Officer Roberts, who was sitting in a chair in Tommy's room, paging through a magazine. "They'd never involve themselves in something like this." Which made Tommy's current condition even more troubling. She'd specifically assigned Roberts and Baxter to guard Tommy after his attempt on her life, knowing his connections within the department made him vulnerable. Or dangerous. Probably both.

And yet, someone had gotten to him nonetheless. They hadn't killed him, but they'd done enough to put him in a coma—which, at least for now, was just as effective a way to silence him.

Sheila touched the glass, remembering how it felt to wake up in a hospital bed herself after Tommy had left her to die in that abandoned research facility. "Someone got to him during the shift change," she said. "Had to be."

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The official report said cardiac arrest—sudden, unexpected, no clear cause. But Sheila didn't believe in coincidences, not when it came to Tommy. Not when he'd been about to tell them everything he knew about the corruption that had infested the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department for decades. The same corruption that had gotten her mother killed ten years ago, when Henrietta Stone had discovered evidence that threatened powerful people.

Evidence that Gabriel had found during his time in Internal Affairs but had chosen to bury, hoping to protect his family. That decision had cost Henrietta her life and nearly cost Sheila hers, when those same powerful people planted Tommy in her department to spy on her—and eventually to silence her.

"Security footage shows nothing suspicious," Gabriel said. "No visitors, no unauthorized personnel. Just Tommy alone in his cell, then suddenly on the floor."

"Someone got to him," Sheila repeated. "The question is how." She studied Tommy's unconscious form. "And whether they'll try again when they realize he survived."

Gabriel shifted beside her, and she caught the subtle change in his posture that meant he was choosing his words carefully. "What if this can end with Tommy?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. If Tommy can't talk, if he can't name names..." Gabriel's voice grew quieter. "Maybe everyone stays safe. Maybe no one else has to die."

"Like Mom, you mean?" The words came out sharper than she'd intended.

Gabriel flinched but didn't look away. "Hank swears he didn't know what Tommy was planning. Says he was just doing a favor for his nephew, getting him a job."

He was referring to Hank Dawson, the interim sheriff before Sheila took over—and a man she'd considered to be as straight a shooter as they came. But Hank had helped Tommy get a position within the Coldwater Sheriff's Department, and Tommy had then tried to kill Sheila, which made her wonder if the older man had been in on it.

Gabriel had spoken with Hank and seemed to believe Hank was innocent. It was difficult to tell, though, if her father was just believing what he wanted to believe.

Gabriel sighed heavily. "What if he's telling the truth? What if we're seeing conspiracy where there's just coincidence?"

"You don't believe that."

"No." He was silent for a few moments. "There's definitely something going on. I guess seeing what they did to Tommy—it just gets a man thinking."

"You mean you're getting cold feet about going after the people who orchestrated Mom's death? You seemed gungho about it just a few hours ago." She made no effort to hide her anger.

Gabriel's expression was pained. "You're right. We need to see this through. I just don't want you getting hurt, is all. If they can get to Tommy when he's got two officers watching him..."

Inside Tommy's room, a nurse adjusted his pillows. Rosa, according to her name tag. She had to be close to retirement age, with silver-streaked black hair and the careful movements of someone who'd spent decades caring for the sick. She reminded Sheila of her mother's friend Maria, who used to bring soup whenever one of the kids

was ill.

"He's in good hands," Gabriel said, following her gaze. "Rosa's been here since before you were born. Used to patch me up when things got rough on patrol."

"But he has to wake up." Sheila watched Rosa check Tommy's vitals. "He's our only lead. Without his testimony—"

"We have nothing concrete. I know. In the meantime, what's your plan to keep Tommy safe?"

"Roberts and Baxter will look after him."

Gabriel frowned, surprised. "Even after what just happened?"

"They'll be twice as vigilant now. Besides, who else can I trust?"

"You're sure they weren't in on it?"

"If they were," Sheila said, "then I'm a terrible judge of character. And I couldn't do my job if I was a terrible judge of character."

Her father seemed to chew on this for a few moments. "And while they're looking after Tommy, what will you be doing? I know you too well to think you're just gonna sit on your hands."

"I can't make Tommy talk right now, but I can find evidence. Starting with a toxicology report. I want to know what they did to Tommy."

"Could be useful information."

Sheila watched Rosa adjust Tommy's IV with motherly care. "Someone in this county knows the truth. Someone has proof of what's really been happening. I just have to figure out who."

"And if you're wrong? If there's no proof to be found?"

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"There's always proof.Always."

For a long moment, neither spoke.Sheila knew her father was terrified of losing her, just as he'd lost her older sister, Natalie, though Natalie's death—suicide—had had nothing to do with corruption within the department.Still, a loss was a loss.

And Gabriel's life had been full of them.

But Sheila also knew that throwing in the towel wasn't in her blood, no more than it had been back when she was a kickboxer competing for the Olympic gold medal.And silence didn't mean safety—apparently she already knew too much, which was why Tommy had tried to silence her.

So why would she pump the brakes now?

"Well," her father said, clearing his throat, "I'm going to head out.Got a friend whose kid needs help moving into an apartment.You sure Roberts and Baxter can handle it?"

"They're the only ones besides Finn that I trust completely," she said."They've been taking shifts watching him since we brought him in."She paused.Her father's mention of an apartment had sparked an idea in her mind."Any idea where Tommy was staying?"she asked.

Gabriel blinked, surprised by the question."No, but it should be on file.Why?"

She decided to keep her reasoning to herself.She found herself questioning how much her father's heart was in this, and she didn't want him having second thoughts or

trying to talk her down. Better for her to fly solo for now.

"Just wondering," she said. She offered her dad a smile. "Be careful, okay? Your life could be at risk just as much as mine is."

He patted the holster concealed beneath his jacket. "I may be old, but I ain't slow."

That won't do you much good if you don't see them coming, Sheila thought as she watched her father shuffle off down the hallway. But she tried to assure herself her father could look after himself. As a former kickboxing trainer and sheriff, he was every bit as deadly with his fists as he was with a gun.

Still, if he didn't see them coming...

Sheila pushed the thought aside and pulled out her phone, bringing up Tommy's personnel file. His listed address was an apartment complex on Broadview Avenue, not far from the station. As acting sheriff, she technically had the authority to enter any property connected to an active investigation. And attempted murder—Tommy's attack on her in the research facility—certainly qualified.

She couldn't wake Tommy, not while he was in a coma. But that didn't mean she couldn't get answers.

The complex turned out to be one of those hastily constructed buildings that had sprung up during Coldwater's recent growth spurt—three stories of beige siding and narrow windows, with a sign advertising "luxury apartments" that looked anything but luxurious. Tommy's unit was 2C, halfway down an exterior walkway that creaked under her feet.

She knocked first, maintaining the pretense of officiality. When no one answered, she studied the lock. Standard hardware store deadbolt, nothing fancy. The kind of lock that property managers often forgot to change between tenants.

Sheila pulled out her keyring. During her days as a patrol officer, she'd collected spare keys from various apartment managers, making copies "just in case." It wasn't strictly legal, but it had helped her check on elderly residents during wellness calls. Now, she cycled through them, testing each one.

The fourth key slid in smoothly, and the door opened with a soft click. Sheila slipped inside, closing it behind her.

The apartment was sparsely furnished—a futon couch, a coffee table still bearing ring marks from the previous tenant, a TV mounted on the wall. Everything looked temporary, as if Tommy hadn't expected to stay long.

Or knew he wouldn't need to.

The kitchen held little beyond basic supplies and takeout containers. But in a trash can, she found a receipt from Peak Hardware dated three days before his attack on her. The items listed made her blood run cold: rope, duct tape...

Plastic sheeting.

Had he been planning to interrogate her, then get rid of her body? If so, who had put him up to it?

The bedroom yielded more clues about Tommy's true nature. The closet contained three identical sets of clothes—jeans, plain t-shirts, work boots. No personal touches, no photos or mementos. This wasn't a home; it was a base of operations.

Under the bed, she found a laptop.Password protected, of course.But if she could crack it, there was no telling what information it might contain.

Sheila's phone buzzed.Finn's name lit up the screen.

With a deep, calming breath, Sheila answered it."What's up?"

"We've got a body," Finn said, his voice tight."Young woman, found in Theater Seven at the film festival.Multiple witnesses say the victim was alive less than an hour ago."

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Sheila stared at the laptop in her hands, her mind racing. A murder at the festival would be devastating for Coldwater. Main Street's shops and restaurants had been packed all week, local hotels were booked solid, and the surge in tourism was exactly what the town's struggling businesses needed. One whisper of violence could destroy everything these merchants had been counting on.

Her heart sank at the thought.

"Did you hear me?" Finn asked.

"Yeah," she said, then cleared her throat, focusing on what he'd just told her. She thought of all the festival promotional materials she'd seen plastered across storefront windows—the promises of artistic celebration and cultural enrichment now tainted by violence. "I'll be right there."

Tommy's laptop would have to wait. But not for long, she hoped. And when she figured out who'd sent Tommy to spy on her and then try to end her life, who'd had her mother murdered...

There would be hell to pay.

CHAPTER TWO

The festival had transformed Main Street into something from another world. Food trucks lined the curbs, their generators humming beneath the morning bustle. The smell of fresh-ground coffee mingled with woodsmoke from a nearby BBQ vendor, and somewhere a street musician played jazz on a saxophone, the notes drifting

through the crisp October air.

Sheila pulled into the back lot of the Coldwater Theater, where three patrol cars were already parked in a loose semi-circle around the emergency exit. The sight of them—their light bars still flashing silently in the early morning sun—made her stomach tighten.

Another death. Another family that would need answers.

As she climbed out of her truck, she spotted Finn crouched near the exit door, studying something on the ground. Even from here, she could read the tension in his shoulders, the careful way he shifted his weight to favor his recently healed injury. He'd taken that bullet when she could just as easily have been the one to get shot, and though he never mentioned it, she knew it still bothered him on cold mornings like this one.

"Find something?" she called.

He looked up, and despite the grim circumstances, his face softened at the sight of her. It was one of the things she loved about him—how his guard dropped, just for a moment, whenever she appeared. His hazel eyes caught the morning light, and his sandy hair was slightly mussed, which she found endlessly endearing.

"Just trying to figure out these prints," he said, standing. His tall frame unfolded, his posture ramrod straight—a remnant of his fighter pilot days. "But there are too many of them overlapping each other. Can't tell which ones are recent."

She joined him at the door, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne mixed with coffee. This close, she could see the shadows under his eyes. "You haven't slept."

"That's what happens when you have back-to-back homicide investigations. Besides,

you don't look much better—well, except that you're a lot prettier."

She humored him with a smile.

"Star asked about you this morning," he continued. "Said to remind you about her art show next week."

The mention of their ward brought a smile to Sheila's face. Star had come so far from the angry, defensive fourteen-year-old they'd taken in. Now she was thriving in her photography classes, even teaching Finn how to use his old DSLR camera properly.

Sheila felt proud of Star—and proud of herself and Finn for the home they'd created for Star, too.

"I haven't forgotten," she said. "I was actually hoping to see what she's been up to later this evening, but after this..." She gestured at the theater.

Finn nodded, understanding. "I told her we might be working late. She said she'd stay at your dad's if needed."

The door creaked as Finn pulled it open, revealing a dimly lit service corridor. The air felt thick with dust and the musty smell of old carpet.

"Victim's Jessica Gregory, twenty-four," Finn said as they walked. "Local actress, worked concessions here during the festival. Chad Miller—he's the projectionist—found her about an hour ago when he came to check the sound system. Apparently they've been having technical difficulties with this theater, so it's been closed since yesterday afternoon."

"Locked?"

Finn nodded."Chad says he locked up yesterday.The doors were still locked when he came by about an hour ago."

"Could someone have locked it without a key?"Sheila asked.

"Not unless they stayed inside.And the place has been thoroughly checked."

They emerged into Theater Seven, where the scene before them made Sheila stop short.The movie screen glowed with soft white light, illuminating the stage area below.And there, positioned with theatrical precision, was Jessica Gregory.

The young woman sat in an ornate chair that must have been borrowed from one of the festival's prop departments.Her hands were folded delicately in her lap, her head tilted as if listening to something only she could hear.She wore a blue vintage dress that seemed to shimmer in the light, its fabric spreading around her like a pool of water.

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If not for the ligature marks on her neck, she might have been merely resting between scenes.

"Shit," Sheila breathed.

"Yeah." Finn's voice was tight. "Killer arranged everything. The dress, the chair, the lighting—even her hair and makeup appear to have been done post-mortem."

Dr. Jin Zihao, the county coroner, looked up from where he knelt beside the body. His silver-streaked black hair caught the light as he gestured them over. "Preliminary time of death between eight and ten PM last night," he said. "Strangulation with some kind of thin cord or wire. No defensive wounds visible."

"Maybe she knew her killer?" Sheila asked.

"Or never saw them coming," Finn suggested.

A man in an expensive sweater and wire-rimmed glasses hurried down the aisle toward them, his face pinched with worry. "Sheriff Stone? I'm Carl Rider, festival organizer. This is...I mean, we've never had anything like this happen before."

Sheila studied him. Mid-fifties, meticulously groomed, with the harried look of someone juggling too many responsibilities. "Tell me about Jessica Gregory," she said.

"Wonderful girl. Very professional, very dedicated. She worked concessions, but really..." He sighed. "She was an actress. Had been auditioning for local productions,

trying to break into independent films. Several directors here had noticed her."

"Any particular directors?" Finn asked.

"Bradley Greenwald took an interest. He's premiering his new documentary tonight—or was supposed to." Rider wrung his hands. "Sheriff, I know this looks bad, but we can't shut down. Not yet."

"Carl, someone was murdered."

"I understand that, but this festival..." He glanced around nervously before lowering his voice. "The hotels are full. The restaurants are packed. These four days keep some of our merchants in business through the winter. If we shut down now..." He spread his hands helplessly. "Half of Main Street was counting on this income."

"And I'm counting on keeping people alive," Sheila said. "Economic impact or not, I won't risk another victim. We need to clear the theaters, get everyone out before word spreads and we have panic on our hands."

"What about containing it? Extra security, restricted access to certain areas—"

"Someone got past whatever security we already had," Sheila said. "No. I won't gamble with people's lives. Not even to save the festival. I want it shut down."

Rider slumped, but he didn't argue further. Just then, Sheila caught movement in her peripheral vision as Finn moved closer to the stage. "The pose," he said quietly. "It means something. This wasn't random."

Sheila joined him, noticing what he meant. Everything about the scene felt deliberate and choreographed. The angle of Jessica's head, the way her hands lay in her lap, even the fall of her hair across one shoulder—it all spoke of careful arrangement.

"Like a scene from a play," she murmured.

"Or a movie," Finn added.

Above them, the projection booth's window stood dark and empty, a black eye watching over the theater. Sheila thought of Tommy's laptop, still hidden in her truck. One mystery at a time, she told herself.

"Mr. Rider," she said, "I need a list of everyone with access to this theater, including maintenance staff, projectionists, anyone who might have a key."

"Of course." Rider dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere more private? The lobby café is closed for the investigation, but my temporary office is just down the hall."

Sheila glanced at Jin, who nodded. "We'll be at least another hour here," he said.

Sheila turned to Rider. "Lead the way."

The festival office turned out to be a converted storage room, though Rider had done his best to make it presentable. Festival posters from previous years lined the walls—ten years of independent films celebrated in the heart of Utah. A desk fashioned from two sawhorses and an old door dominated the space, covered in scheduling grids, vendor contracts, and what looked like hundreds of business cards.

"Coffee?" Rider offered, gesturing to a fancy espresso machine that seemed out of place among the improvised furniture. "It's Italian. One of our sponsors insisted we have decent coffee, at least in the office."

"Please," Finn said, while Sheila shook her head.

As Rider fussed with the machine, its grinding and hissing filling the small space, Sheila studied him more closely. His sweater was cashmere, his shoes Italian leather, but there was something performative about the display of wealth. Like he was playing a role, he thought a festival director should play.

"This must be difficult for you," she said. "Running a festival this size, and now this."

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"Ten years," he said, handing Finn a cup of espresso. "Ten years we've built this festival from nothing, and now..." He sank into his chair, suddenly looking older. "Jessica was more than just staff. She was part of our little family here."

"Tell us about her," Finn said, leaning against a filing cabinet. "Everything you know."

Rider removed his glasses, cleaning them with his handkerchief. "She started working concessions last year. But she was an actress at heart—always practicing lines between customers, discussing technique with the directors who came through. She had such drive, such passion."

"Any conflicts with other staff members?" Sheila asked. "Or maybe rejection from a particular director?"

"No, nothing like that. Jessica was universally liked. Though..." He hesitated.

"Though what?"

"There was some tension with another local actress. Mara Winters. They were friends, originally—used to practice scenes together, go to the same auditions. But lately..." He spread his hands. "You know how competitive the acting world can be."

Sheila shared a look with Finn. "What changed between them?"

"Bradley Greenwald happened." Rider put his glasses back on, blinking as his eyes readjusted. "He's premiering his new documentary tonight—'Echoes of Silence.' It's

already generating Oscar buzz. Anyway, he took an interest in Jessica, said he might have a role for her in his next project. Mara...didn't take it well."

"Where can we find Mara?"

"She works at the Owl Street Coffee House, just down the block. At least, she did last week. These young actors, they tend to move between jobs as auditions and roles come up."

Finn set down his empty cup. "About theater security—are there cameras?"

Rider shook his head. "The main lobby, yes, and the exterior doors. But not in the individual theaters. Budget constraints, plus some directors were concerned about their unreleased films being recorded, even by security cameras. Paranoid, if you ask me, but..." He shrugged. "In this business, you learn to accommodate artistic sensitivities."

"Who has keys to Theater Seven?" Sheila asked.

"Myself, Chad, the maintenance staff—three people there. The property management company has a master key. And, of course, the original construction crew had access, though that was years ago." He began rifling through his desk drawers. "I have a staff list here somewhere..."

"What can you tell us about the festival itself?" Sheila asked, watching him search. "How has it changed over the years?"

Rider's face lit up slightly, despite the circumstances. "We started small—just local filmmakers, showing their work in this one theater. But it grew. Every year, more submissions, bigger names. This year we have over two hundred films, forty-eight premiere screenings." Pride crept into his voice. "We're not Sundance, but we're

getting there. Distributors come here now, looking for new talent. Careers are launched here."

"Including Bradley Greenwald's?" Finn asked.

"Yes, actually. His first documentary premiered here five years ago—won our grand jury prize. Now he's back as a special guest, full circle." Rider found the staff list and handed it to Sheila. "Everyone's contact information should be current. We update it weekly during the festival."

Sheila scanned the names. "Tell me about your maintenance staff."

For the next twenty minutes, Rider detailed his employees' backgrounds, their roles, their typical schedules. He was thorough, almost obsessively so, but Sheila sensed it was more about maintaining control than actual suspicion of his staff.

"One last thing," she said as they prepared to leave. "The dress Jessica was wearing—do you recognize it?"

"No, but it looks like something from our costume department."

"Costume department?" Finn asked. "I thought this was about showing movies, not shooting them."

"It's a mix of the two," Rider said, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses. "We're a production hub as well as a theater. Independent films shoot here year-round—the vintage architecture makes great period backgrounds, and we've got all the technical facilities they need. Plus, during the festival, we host premieres, cast Q&As, special events. Having a costume department lets us support both the productions and the festival activities."

He dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief."Charlotte runs that department—she'll know for sure about the dress."

"We'll need to speak with her," Finn said."And Chad, when he's ready."

"Of course.Anything you need."Rider stood, straightening his sweater."Sheriff Stone...I know you mentioned a shutdown, but the festival is scheduled to run for three more days.Hundreds of people have traveled here, filmmakers have invested everything in their premieres..."

"And I'm sure they'll be grateful to still be alive when this is all over," Sheila said."I want the festival shut down.Period.And Theater Seven stays sealed—it's an active crime scene."

"Of course," Rider said, looking crestfallen."But it'll take time to get the word out, start canceling events, all of that.If we start a panic, we could make things even worse."

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"Just get it done," Sheila said. "The sooner, the better."

Outside the office, the festival sounds had grown louder. Someone was testing a microphone on the street stage, their tapping echoing through the building. Somewhere, a film was starting, its bass notes thrumming through the walls.

"Mara Winters," Finn said quietly. "Want to split up? I can take the coffee shop while you talk to Charlotte about the costume department."

Sheila nodded, but her mind was already racing ahead. A young actress in a vintage dress posed like a scene from a film. The killer had chosen that theater, that costume, that pose for a reason. This wasn't just murder—it was performance.

And somewhere in this building full of storytellers, someone knew the rest of the script.

CHAPTER THREE

The costume department occupied what had once been the theater's ballroom, back when the building hosted vaudeville shows in the 1920s. Ornate crown molding still traced the ceiling, though now clothing racks dominated the space, creating narrow aisles between walls of fabric and forgotten stories.

Charlotte Davis worked at a heavy wooden table near the windows, her silver-streaked hair caught up in a messy bun secured with what appeared to be a pencil. Pins bristled from the magnetic bracelet on her wrist as she marked alterations on a man's suit jacket. She looked up as Sheila approached, her round face creasing

with concern.

"Sheriff Stone." She set down her chalk. "I heard about Jessica. Is it true what they're saying? That she was..." Charlotte trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

"I'm afraid so." Sheila pulled out her phone, bringing up a photo of Jessica in the blue dress. "I'm hoping you can help us identify this costume."

Charlotte slipped on her reading glasses, then went very still. "Oh," she said softly. "Oh no."

"You recognize it?"

"Of course I do. I designed it." Charlotte sank onto her work stool, her hands trembling slightly. "It was for 'The Winter Palace'—independent film, shot here last spring. Period piece about the Russian revolution." She touched the screen gently. "The lead actress was supposed to wear it in the execution scene."

Sheila felt a chill despite the warmth of the room. "Was Jessica involved in that production?"

"She auditioned for the lead. Made it to the final round of callbacks, but..." Charlotte shook her head. "She was devastated when she didn't get it. Kept the sides—the audition scenes—in her locker for weeks afterward. I'd find her in here sometimes, just looking at the costumes, running her lines."

The room suddenly felt closer, heavier with meaning. Racks of period clothing loomed around them like silent witnesses: Civil War uniforms, flapper dresses, Victorian mourning gowns. How many other dreams were stored here, preserved in fabric and thread?

"Tell me about Jessica," Sheila said, pulling up a nearby chair. "How well did you know her?"

Charlotte began absently sorting her pins, a nervous habit that seemed to help her think. "She started coming here about a year ago, between customers at the concession stand. Said the costumes helped her get into character, understand the people she was trying to portray." A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "Most actors just want to look good, you know? But Jessica wanted to understand. She'd ask about the historical details, the social context, how the clothes would have affected movement and posture."

"Sounds like she was serious about her craft."

"She was. Maybe too serious, sometimes. This business..." Charlotte gestured at the surrounding costumes. "It can consume you if you let it. All that pressure to be perfect, to be what everyone else wants you to be." She set down her pins. "I got into this work because I love the artistry of it, the way clothing can tell a story. But I've seen what the industry does to young people like Jessica. The constant rejection, the criticism, always being told you're not quite good enough..."

Sheila thought of her own experience with Olympic kickboxing, the years of training only to fall short at the crucial moment and be eliminated from the competition. "How did she handle her rejection from 'The Winter Palace'?" she asked.

"She was different afterward. More driven, maybe. Started taking on extra shifts to pay for private acting coaches. Applied to every casting call within a hundred miles." Charlotte began straightening items on her worktable. "I tried to tell her to pace herself, that her time would come. But she was convinced she was running out of chances."

"Any conflicts with other actors? People who might have resented her dedication?"

Charlotte considered this. "There's always competition, especially in a small market like this. But Jessica wasn't the type to make enemies. Though..." She paused.

"What is it?"

"Last week, I overheard her arguing with someone in the hallway. A man's voice, but I couldn't hear clearly enough to tell if I recognized it." Charlotte frowned. "I didn't think much of it at the time—actors and directors are always having intense conversations around here. But Jessica seemed upset afterward."

"Could you make out what they were arguing about?"

"She said something about 'promises that had been made'—that was all I caught. But..." Charlotte's hands stilled on her table. "She came in here right after, asked to try on that blue dress. Said she needed to remind herself of something." She looked up at Sheila. "I never thought...I mean, who would do something like this? Stage a murder like a scene from a film?"

"Someone who wanted to send a message," Sheila said quietly. "Do you remember anything else about the man's voice? Any distinctive qualities?"

Charlotte shook her head. "Just that he spoke quietly, intensely. Like he was trying not to be overheard."

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Sheila's phone buzzed—a text from Finn:Finished with Mara.Need to talk.Tacos?

Standing, Sheila handed Charlotte her card."If you think of anything else, no matter how small it seems..."

"Of course."Charlotte picked up her chalk again, though Sheila suspected it was more for comfort than any intention to work."Sheriff Stone?Jessica...she never got to perform on a real stage.But she had such talent, such heart.Whatever happened, however, she ended up in that dress..."She swallowed hard."She deserved better than to become someone's prop."

Sheila paused at the door, looking back at the room full of costumes—hundreds of outfits designed to help tell other people's stories.

Whose story had the killer been trying to tell?Their own, or someone else's?

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheila found Finn at one of the food trucks—a converted Airstream trailer specializing in Korean fusion tacos.He'd already claimed one of the picnic tables scattered along Main Street, a spread of food laid out before him.The October sun caught his sandy hair as he looked up, offering a tired smile.

"Thought you might be hungry," he said, pushing a container toward her."Kimchi fries.The guy says they're his specialty."

Sheila sat, grateful for both the food and the moment of normalcy.Around them, the

festival was in full swing, the crowd seemingly unaware of the tragedy in Theater Seven. Film students with expensive cameras captured b-roll of the event. A group of indie rockers did a sound check on the street stage. A man adjusted a professional camera rig, taking in the festivities with a trained eye. The air smelled of food truck exhaust, fresh coffee, and woodsmoke from someone grilling Korean short ribs.

There were no signs at all that the festival would soon be shut down. Still, Sheila wasn't entirely surprised. It would take time for Rider to talk to the right people, decide what message they were going to send. Sheila didn't feel the need to intervene. Yet.

"Tell me about Mara," she said to Finn as she picked up a fork.

Finn's expression sobered. "She was working the morning shift at Owl Street. Place was packed—apparently half the festival crowd thinks it's the only decent coffee shop in town." He took a bite of his taco, gathering his thoughts. "When I told her about Jessica...I've done death notifications before, but this was different. She just...crumpled."

"They were close?"

"Used to be. Grew up together, did community theater, shared the same dreams." He wiped sauce from his chin. "Mara said they'd been drifting apart lately, especially after 'The Winter Palace.'"

A pair of film critics walked past their table, arguing passionately about aspect ratios and color grading. Somewhere nearby, someone was giving an interview, their voice carrying over the crowd: "This festival represents the future of independent cinema..."

"Charlotte mentioned that film," Sheila said. "Said Jessica took the rejection hard."

"According to Mara, it was more complicated than that. Jessica felt betrayed." Finn lowered his voice. "She thought she had the role locked down. Someone had implied she would get it—or at least, that's what she believed."

"So why did that drive a wedge between Jessica and Mara? If Jessica didn't get the role, I mean?"

"According to Mara, Jessica was just... different after that. Obsessive, secretive. Mara tried to reconnect, but Jessica seemed like a different person. Jessica started spending a lot of time with the film's director. Private meetings, late-night conversations. Mara thought maybe they were planning another project together."

Sheila watched a street performer juggle bowling pins, his audience seemingly oblivious to the police cars still parked behind the theater. "Did Mara know the director's name?"

"Bradley Greenwald."

The name caught Sheila by surprise. "The same Bradley Greenwald who's premiering his new documentary tonight?" she asked.

Finn nodded. "Mara said he's been holed up in the Mountain View Hotel all week, doing press interviews. Hasn't set foot in the theater since he arrived."

A festival volunteer hurried past, carrying a stack of programs. The cover featured a stylized image of mountains against a blood-red sky, with the text "PEAK MOUNTAIN FILM FESTIVAL" overlaid in stark white letters. Beneath that, in smaller print: "Featuring the world premiere of 'Echoes of Silence' by Bradley Greenwald."

"We need to talk to him," Sheila said.

"Already tried.His assistant says he's not taking meetings."Finn's eyes narrowed."But there's a Q&A session scheduled for two o'clock.Part of the festival's 'Conversations with Directors' series."

Sheila checked her watch.Just past noon."Where?"

"Theater Three."Finn gathered their empty containers."Though if Greenwald's involved in this—the murder, I mean—he might not show.And that's assuming the festival hasn't been completely shut down by then."

A group of film students passed by, arguing about shot composition and the merits of practical effects over CGI.One of them carried a vintage Super 8 camera, treating it with the reverence usually reserved for religious artifacts.The festival seemed to attract true believers—people who lived and breathed cinema, who saw the world through an imaginary lens.

Was Jessica's murderer here right now, walking in plain sight?

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"You okay?" Finn asked quietly.

Sheila realized she'd been lost in thought. "Just thinking."

"About Tommy?"

"No. But now I am." She chewed her lip, then met Finn's eyes. "I need to tell you something. I found a laptop in Tommy's apartment this morning."

Finn set down his coffee, his expression carefully neutral. "Tell me you had a warrant."

"I didn't." She held his gaze, refusing to look away. "But after what happened to him in custody, after everything that's gone down... I couldn't wait for paperwork."

A street performer started juggling nearby, drawing applause from a growing crowd. The sound felt jarring against the weight of their conversation.

"Where is it?" Finn asked quietly.

"In my truck." Sheila leaned forward. "It's password protected, but if anyone can crack it..."

"Don't." Finn ran a hand through his hair—a gesture she recognized as frustration mixed with concern. "Don't ask me to do that. Not without a warrant. You know anything we find would be inadmissible."

"I'm not thinking about court, Finn. I'm thinking about staying alive." She lowered her voice. "Tommy was planted in our department. Someone powerful enough to do that, to arrange my mother's murder, to get to Tommy in a secure holding cell—they're not going to play by the rules. So why should we?"

"Because the rules are what separates us from them." He reached across the table, taking her hand. "Sheila, I want these bastards as much as you do. But if we start breaking laws to catch them, where does it end?"

The touch of his hand was warm, grounding. She thought of all the times he'd been her moral compass, keeping her from crossing lines she might regret. But this time...

"I can't live the rest of my life in fear," she said softly. "I can't sit around wondering when they'll decide to strike again."

Finn was quiet for a long moment, his thumb tracing circles on her palm. Around them, the festival continued its chaotic dance—food trucks serving lunch crowds, filmmakers networking over coffee, tourists taking selfies with movie posters. The normality of it all felt surreal, given the nature of their conversation.

"What if there's another way?" he finally asked. "What if we can connect Tommy's attempt on your life to his 'cardiac event' in custody? That would give us probable cause for a warrant."

"That could take days. The laptop could have evidence about who's behind all this, who ordered my mother's murder..." She leaned closer. "Finn, I trust you. More than anyone. If you really think I'm wrong about this, I'll listen. But I need you to understand—this isn't just about justice anymore. It's about survival."

He studied her face, and she could see the conflict in his eyes. Finn believed in doing things right, in maintaining the integrity that had helped him survive his own dark

past. It was one of the things she loved about him. But she also saw the moment his resolve wavered—not because she'd convinced him she was right, but because he understood what this meant to her.

"Give me twenty-four hours," he said finally. "Let me try to get a warrant first. If I can't..." He took a deep breath. "Then we'll talk about alternatives. But Sheila?" His eyes held hers. "Promise me you won't do anything with that laptop until then. Promise me we do this together."

She thought about lying—it would be easier, safer, maybe. But their relationship was built on trust, on having each other's backs even when they disagreed. And hadn't she just told him she trusted him more than anyone else?

"I promise," she said. "Twenty-four hours." And in the meantime, she would keep the laptop hidden in her truck where nobody would stumble across it.

Finn nodded, relief crossing his features. "Thank you."

A fresh wave of festival-goers swept past their table, carrying paper cups of artisanal coffee and tote bags emblazoned with the names of independent production companies. Someone had set up a pop-up gallery nearby, displaying movie posters from the golden age of Hollywood. The images seemed to watch them—larger-than-life faces frozen in moments of drama, each telling a story that someone had carefully crafted.

"Two hours until the Q&A," Finn said, checking his watch. "Want to see what else we can learn about Bradley Greenwald?"

Sheila stood, her decision made. "Let's start with the festival staff. Someone must know more about 'The Winter Palace'—how the casting really went down, who was involved in those decisions."

They made their way through the crowd, past food trucks and vendor booths selling everything from vintage film equipment to locally made jewelry. A woman in cat-eye glasses was leading a tour group, her voice carrying over the general buzz: "And this is where Robert Redford once stopped for coffee during the very first Peak Mountain Film Festival..."

Sheila barely heard her. Her mind was already racing ahead to the Q&A session, to the questions she needed to ask Bradley Greenwald. Because something about all this felt staged, choreographed—like a scene from a movie where everyone knew their lines except her.

And she was tired of being left in the dark.

CHAPTER FIVE

They found Carl Rider in the festival's makeshift press room, a converted storefront space filled with journalists typing on laptops and filmmakers giving interviews in hushed tones. Monitors on the walls displayed screening schedules and promotional clips from featured films. The room smelled of coffee and anxiety.

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Rider was deep in conversation with a woman wearing a lanyard that identified her as press, his hands moving in animated gestures as he tried to explain something. When he spotted Sheila and Finn, relief washed over his face.

"Linda," he said to the journalist, "I really can't provide any further comment than that. Now, please, would you mind giving us some space?"

"Of course," the woman said with a plastic smile. She turned to Sheila and Finn. "But first, would either of you care to comment on—"

"We're pursuing all avenues of investigation," Finn said. "How's that?"

"Not very original."

"Well, I'm afraid that's the best we've got right now."

The journalist opened her mouth to answer, but Rider cut her off. "Please, Linda. If you'd be so kind—"

"Alright, alright," she said, raising her hands. "Can't blame me for trying."

Once the journalist had departed, Rider's professional smile faded. "Apparently, word got quickly to the press that we might be shutting the festival down."

"Might be?" Sheila asked.

Rider waved his hand dismissively as if it were a minor point. "I'm handling

it. Anyway, what brings you here? Please tell me you have good news."

"Actually, we need information about one of your previous films," Sheila said. "The Winter Palace. It was shot here last spring?"

Rider's posture changed subtly—a tightening around the eyes, a slight stiffening of his shoulders. "Yes, Bradley Greenwald's historical drama. Beautiful film, though it never found distribution." He glanced around the crowded room. "Perhaps we should step outside?"

The alley behind the storefront was quieter, though music from the street stage still carried over the buildings. A group of smokers huddled near a service entrance, sharing opinions about aspect ratios and digital color grading.

"What do you want to know about 'The Winter Palace'?" Rider asked, his voice lower.

"The casting process," Finn said. "Specifically regarding Jessica Gregory."

Rider pulled out his handkerchief, dabbing his forehead despite the cool air. "That was...complicated. Jessica was wonderful in the auditions. Raw talent, real vulnerability. Bradley was quite taken with her."

"Taken enough to imply she'd get the lead role?" Sheila asked.

Rider's hand stilled. "Who told you that?"

"Did he tell her that?"

"It's not that simple." Rider stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket. "In this business, things are said during the creative process. Enthusiasm is expressed. Sometimes performers hear what they want to hear."

"What exactly did Jessica hear?"

Rider sighed, suddenly looking older in the harsh daylight. "Bradley has a reputation for being...encouraging with young actresses. He likes to mentor them and says he's nurturing new talent. But sometimes..." He shook his head. "Sometimes lines get crossed."

A door opened behind them, and a production assistant stuck her head out. "Mr. Rider? The Associated Press is asking about tonight's premiere. They want to know if Mr. Greenwald will still be attending the Q&A."

"Tell them it's proceeding as scheduled," Rider said sharply.

"What are you talking about?" Sheila asked as the door closed. "Proceeding as scheduled? The whole festival should be shut down by then."

"I know, I know," Rider said, drumming his fingers on his desk. "But you have to understand—we've got twenty-seven filmmakers who spent their life savings to get here. Actors who took out loans just to afford festival passes. Brad Greenwald's people are expecting over two hundred industry guests for his premiere tonight." He leaned forward. "If we shut down now, in the middle of the day, we'll have panic in the streets."

"That doesn't change the fact that people are dying," Sheila said.

"What I'm proposing," Rider continued, "is we quietly cancel tomorrow's events, then make the official announcement at tonight's closing ceremony. Let people finish their scheduled screenings and give them time to make travel arrangements. Most of our high-profile guests are flying out tonight anyway."

"And in the meantime, someone else could die."

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"Look, we've already doubled security at every venue. I've got people monitoring all entrances, checking credentials. Give me until tonight—let me handle this in a way that doesn't create mass hysteria." He spread his hands. "The killer has been targeting specific people, not random festival-goers. A controlled shutdown is safer than having hundreds of panicked people rushing for the exits."

"I can shut this festival down right now," Sheila said. "I can exercise my emergency powers and—"

"And we'll have chaos," Rider cut in. "Think about it—all these people suddenly displaced, crowding the streets, overwhelming local hotels. How much harder will that make your job of protecting everyone? They'll just spill out into the broader community, where they'll still be vulnerable."

Sheila studied his face, weighing his words. Much as she hated to admit it, he had a point. People weren't ready for this sudden change, and the chaos created by suddenly forcing everyone out might actually give the killer more opportunities, not fewer.

"Fine," she said. "You have until tonight. But I want those security arrangements in writing. And if anything else happens before then..."

"Understood," Rider said quickly. "I'll have the shutdown protocol on your desk within the hour."

Sheila let out a heavy sigh, wondering if she would regret agreeing to this. Still, she didn't feel like she had many options.

"Can we get back to Jessica?" Finn asked. "You were talking about Bradley crossing lines."

Rider nodded and held up a hand to indicate he remembered. "Look, I don't want to speak ill of anyone, but after Jessica didn't get the role, there were...rumors. About why she kept meeting with Bradley. About what might have been promised in those meetings."

"What kind of rumors?" Finn asked.

"Last week, she requested a private meeting with the festival board. Said she had concerns about ethical violations during the production of 'The Winter Palace.' The meeting was scheduled for tomorrow morning."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "Did Greenwald know about this meeting?"

"I didn't tell him." Rider wiped his forehead again. "But in a festival this size, word gets around. Especially when someone's reputation is at stake."

A burst of laughter from the smokers made them all jump. The group was heading back inside, still debating the merits of various filming techniques.

"Bradley's documentary premieres tonight," Rider said quietly. "It's already being called his masterpiece. The timing of all this..." He met Sheila's eyes. "I should have said something sooner. About the rumors, about Jessica's concerns. Maybe if I had..."

"Mr. Rider!" The production assistant was back. "Bradley Greenwald's people are on the phone. They're asking about security arrangements for the Q&A."

Rider closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, his professional mask was back in place. "Tell them everything is being handled. No need to worry about a

thing."

The production assistant lingered, uncertain."And the power issues?"she asked in a low voice.

Rider smiled tightly."That's been addressed.No need to worry."

"Power issues?"Finn asked as the production assistant retreated.

Rider shrugged."Power's been finicky all week, especially in the Art House.Not sure why."

"We'd like to be at this Q&A," Sheila said.

"Of course, of course.Whatever you need."

As Rider hurried back inside, Finn touched Sheila's arm."You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That Bradley Greenwald had a lot to lose if Jessica talked?Yeah."She checked her watch."The Q&A's in ninety minutes.Think that's enough time to dig up everything we can on 'The Winter Palace' production?"

"Only one way to find out."Finn was already pulling out his phone."I'll call the film commission and see what permits were filed.You want to talk to the rest of the cast?"

Sheila nodded, her mind racing.Someone had posed Jessica's body like a scene from a film—not just any film, but one that represented both her greatest disappointment and potentially her last chance to expose whatever had really happened during its production.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

The question was: had Bradley Greenwald arranged this twisted tribute himself? Maybe as a way of silencing Jessica and sending a message to anyone else who might try to cross him?

Either way, Sheila intended to find out.

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They split up to cover more ground—Finn heading toward the film commission's temporary office while Sheila made her way back to the theater to track down more of the cast. The festival crowd had thinned slightly as people filtered into afternoon screenings, though the street musicians played on, their jazz riffs mixing with the chatter of film enthusiasts debating camera techniques.

That's when she felt it—the unmistakable sensation of being watched.

Sheila paused at a vendor's booth, pretending to study a collection of vintage movie cameras while scanning the crowd in her peripheral vision. There—near the coffee cart. A man in a charcoal suit that was a touch too expensive for the casual festival atmosphere. He stood with the straight-backed posture of someone with military or law enforcement training, his attention seemingly focused on his phone, though his dark sunglasses made it impossible to tell where he was really looking.

But something about the angle of his head, the too-casual way he kept his face turned just slightly away—it triggered every instinct she'd developed over years of law enforcement.

She moved to another booth, this one selling independent film posters. The man drifted parallel to her path, maintaining the same distance. His suit was perfectly tailored, his silver hair expertly cut. He could have been just another film industry executive, except for the deliberate way he moved through the crowd—never getting closer, never falling behind.

Perhaps watching her even as he pretended to be focused on his phone.

A group of film students passed between them, arguing about aspect ratios and lens choices. When they cleared, the man was gone.

Sheila's hand instinctively moved toward her weapon, though she forced herself to keep it casual. She scanned the crowd, looking for the silver hair and the charcoal suit. Nothing.

"Sheriff?"

She startled, turning to find Finn beside her.

"You okay?" he asked, frowning. "You seem tense."

"Just thinking about the case." She forced her hand away from her weapon, tried to relax her shoulders. "I thought you were going to speak with the film commission?"

"I figured after what you said about Tommy, it's probably best we stick together." He studied her face. "You sure you're alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine." She managed a smile, though her eyes still scanned the crowd. "Just ready to talk to Greenwald, get some answers."

Finn didn't look convinced, but he didn't push. It was one of the things she appreciated about him—knowing when to let her process things in her own time.

"Come on," she said, starting toward the theater. "Let's see what else we can learn about 'The Winter Palace' before the Q&A."

Inside the theater's main lobby, a promotional display for "The Winter Palace" still hung on one wall—a stark black and white poster showing a young woman in period costume, her face turned away from the camera as she stood before an ornate

window.Snow fell in the background, creating an ethereal effect.

"Beautiful composition," said a voice behind them."Bradley insisted on shooting on location in an actual palace.Cost a fortune, almost bankrupted the production."

They turned to find a young man with thick-rimmed glasses and a festival staff badge that read "Marcus Harlow—Technical Coordinator."He was adjusting something on one of the digital display boards that showed screening times.

"You worked on the film?"Sheila asked.

"Sound department."Marcus's fingers moved nimbly across the display's controls."Spent three months freezing my ass off in some drafty palace in Romania.But Bradley said the authenticity was worth it."He glanced at them."You're here about Jessica, aren't you?I heard what happened."

Finn pulled out his notebook."What can you tell us about the production?Specifically the casting process?"

Marcus's hands stilled on the controls."That was...complicated.Bradley had his heart set on Jessica at first.Said she had the perfect mix of vulnerability and strength for the role.She played Irina Romanov—one of the grand duchesses who died in the revolution."

"What changed?"Sheila asked.

"Money changed.The investors wanted a bigger name.Someone with festival recognition."He shrugged."That's how we ended up with Claire Montgomery.She'd just won Best Actress at Sundance, so..."

"How did Jessica take it?"

"Hard. But Bradley promised to make it up to her. Said he had another project in mind, something that would be perfect for her." Marcus lowered his voice. "They started having these private meetings. At first, everyone thought he was mentoring her, but..."

"But what?"

"Look, I don't want to spread rumors. But one night, late in post-production, I was working on the sound mix. Jessica came to the editing bay—she wasn't supposed to be there, but she had keys somehow. She and Bradley got into this huge argument."

Sheila recalled what Charlotte had said about overhearing an argument between Jessica and someone else. Had Jessica been arguing with Greenwald?

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"What was the argument about?" Finn asked.

"I had my headphones on, couldn't hear everything. But she kept saying he'd promised her something, that she had proof." Marcus glanced around the lobby, though it was mostly empty. "The next day, Bradley told everyone she was banned from the production office. Said she'd become obsessive, unstable."

Sheila exchanged a look with Finn. "When was this?"

"About two weeks ago. Right before Bradley started doing press for his new documentary." Marcus straightened up, his task with the display apparently finished. "Listen, I should get back to work.

They need me to check the sound system in Theater Three before the Q&A."

He was already turning away when Sheila said, "One more question—"

But Marcus held up an apologetic hand as his radio crackled. "Sorry, really can't be late for this." He hurried off toward the theaters, disappearing into the growing crowd of festival attendees.

Finn checked his watch. "Q&A's in less than an hour. We might as well make use of the time while we wait."

The lobby was filling up now, festival-goers drifting in from the afternoon screenings. Among them, Sheila caught glimpses of event security—men and women in black polo shirts with earpieces, doing their best to look inconspicuous. She thought

of the man who'd been watching her.

Was he watching her this very moment? Tracking her, following her movements?

"Sheila?" Finn asked. "Any thoughts?"

Before she could answer, her phone buzzed. A text from Deputy Neville: Doctor Jin needs to see you. Says it's urgent.

Sheila showed the message to Finn. Whatever Jin had found on Jessica's body, it couldn't wait. And maybe it would give them the edge they needed before confronting Bradley Greenwald.

CHAPTER SIX

The county morgue occupied the basement of St. Mark's Hospital, its fluorescent-lit corridors a stark contrast to the festival's creative energy. Dr. Jin Zihao stood at his workbench, his tall frame bent over a microscope as Sheila and Finn entered. Classical music played softly from his ancient radio—Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 if Sheila wasn't mistaken. Jin had once told her he found it soothing, a counterpoint to the gravity of his work.

"Forty minutes until the Q&A," Finn murmured, checking his watch.

Jin looked up, his sharp eyes bright behind his reading glasses. He'd been Coldwater's coroner for over two decades, having moved from Beijing in his thirties to study American forensic techniques. Now in his early sixties, his black hair was streaked with silver, but his mind remained razor-sharp.

"Sheriff Stone," he said, his accent barely noticeable after so many years in Utah. "I found something interesting about your victim's death."

He led them to where Jessica's body lay covered on the examination table. Even after fifteen years in law enforcement, Sheila never got used to this part of the job. Jin seemed to sense her discomfort—he always did.

"The ligature marks are distinctive," Jin continued. "Made by a very thin, strong cord." He indicated the precise line around Jessica's neck. "Not rope, not typical wire. I believe it was gaffer's wire—the kind used to rig lighting equipment in film and theater work. It has a particular weave pattern that left these striations in the skin." Jin's eyes narrowed as he studied the marks. "And given by how deep these marks go, I'd say your killer is quite strong. That's why I messaged you—I thought you'd want to see this right away."

"Think the killer's male?" Finn asked.

"Most likely, though I cannot be certain." Jin moved to his computer, pulling up detailed photographs. "See these marks? The killer stood behind her, using their height advantage. Very controlled, very precise."

Sheila studied the images, remembering how Jin had taught her to read such evidence during her early days as a deputy. He'd been a friend of her father's, had attended family barbecues, had helped her study for her forensics certification.

Now he was helping her catch another killer.

"The lividity patterns suggest she was moved and positioned shortly after death," the coroner continued. He retrieved an evidence bag from his workbench. "We also found this in her jacket pocket. It was well-hidden in the lining."

The business card was cream-colored, expensive stock. "Katherine Walsh, Entertainment Law," Sheila read aloud. A Salt Lake City address was embossed below.

"Thirty-five minutes," Finn said quietly.

"Anything else?" Sheila asked Jin.

He shook his head. "That's all I've got for now. I'll let you know if I come across anything else."

Sheila thanked him, and she and Finn walked away.

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"A business card hidden in the victim's pocket," he murmured. "What could that be about?"

Sheila recalled Rider's words about Jessica requesting a private meeting with the festival board to discuss concerns about ethical violations during the production of 'The Winter Palace.' Had she decided to hire an attorney, as well?

"I don't know," she said, pulling out her phone. "But let's find out."

She called the number on the card.

"Katherine Walsh's office," a carefully-neutral voice answered.

"This is Sheriff Stone with the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department. May I please speak with Ms. Walsh?"

"May I ask what this is regarding?"

"It may concern one of her clients. This is very important."

There was a pause. Sheila waited, hoping this wouldn't be any more complicated than necessary.

"I'm putting you through now," the secretary said.

A moment later, a second voice spoke. "This is Katherine Walsh. How may I help you, Sheriff Stone?"

"I'd like to speak with you about Jessica Gregory."

"In regards to...?"

"She's been murdered."

A long silence. "I'm very sorry to hear that," Walsh finally said. "How may I help?"

"We found your business card in her pocket. Was she in contact with you?"

"Yes, she came to my office about two weeks ago, very agitated. Said she needed legal advice about the film industry, but she was...uncertain."

"Uncertain how?" Sheila asked, putting the phone on speaker so Finn could hear.

"Like someone who knows they should speak up but is afraid of the consequences. We never got to specifics—she kept saying she needed to think about it, needed to be sure."

"That's all?"

"I wish I could tell you more, but she never came back. Never called. The only thing she said that struck me as odd was that she had proof of something, but she was afraid what might happen if word got out that she'd talked about it."

Like someone murdering her? Sheila wondered.

"Thank you, Ms. Walsh," Sheila said. "Please reach out if you think of anything else."

They wrapped up the call and checked the time. Twenty minutes until the Q&A.

"It fits," Finn said as they walked to his car. "She finds something during 'The Winter Palace' production—something worth killing over. Considers legal action but hesitates. Finally works up the courage to go to the festival board..."

"And someone silences her first," Sheila finished. "Stages her death like a scene from the movie that started it all."

"A warning to anyone else who might talk?"

"Or a signature," she said grimly. "Someone who sees murder as performance art."

They drove back toward the festival in tense silence, both aware they were heading into a confrontation with limited proof but growing certainty. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Main Street as they parked behind Theater Three.

"Ready?" Finn asked.

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Sheila checked her weapon, more from habit than expectation of using it. "Ready."

Whatever Jessica had discovered, whatever had gotten her killed—they were about to face someone who might have answers.

How far would that person go to keep their secrets?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Theater Three hummed with anticipation as Sheila and Finn slipped in through the side entrance, every seat filled with festival attendees eager to hear from the acclaimed Bradley Greenwald. The aisles were crowded with people sitting cross-legged on the floor, their passes dangling from lanyards. A festival volunteer with a clipboard hovered near the stage, looking anxious. A man stood at the back of the room, his tall frame partially hidden by the professional camera rig. Silver hair caught the theater lights as he made minute adjustments to his equipment, his wire-rimmed glasses reflecting the glow of the viewfinder display.

Sheila and Finn positioned themselves where they could observe both the stage and the audience. The room felt too warm, though Sheila couldn't tell if it was the crowd or her own tension raising the temperature.

"There," Finn murmured, nodding toward the front row.

Bradley Greenwald sat with his production team, his silver hair carefully styled, his casual blazer probably worth more than Sheila's monthly salary. He looked exactly like his festival headshot—handsome in that weathered way that made middle-aged

male directors seem "distinguished" rather than just older.

Carl Rider appeared at the podium, tapping the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're honored to present a conversation with one of independent cinema's most compelling voices. His new documentary, 'Echoes of Silence,' premieres tonight, but you may know him from his previous works, including last year's haunting period drama, 'The Winter Palace.'"

The audience applauded as Greenwald took the stage, moving with the easy confidence of someone used to commanding attention. He settled into the interviewer's chair, accepting a bottle of water from the hovering volunteer.

Sheila studied Greenwald. Though he affected a casual pose, his height was evident in his long limbs, and his hands were large, almost delicate in how they gestured as he spoke. His silver hair caught the stage lights, giving him the distinguished look that seemed mandatory for successful directors.

"Tell us about your process," the moderator began. "How do you choose your subjects?"

"I look for the untold stories," Greenwald said, his voice carrying easily through the theater. "The moments between moments, the truths people try to hide." He leaned forward, warming to his topic. "Take my new documentary—'Echoes of Silence.' It's about the spaces we create between what we say and what we mean. The lies we tell ourselves to get through the day."

"And what drew you to that theme?"

"Experience." Greenwald smiled. "Years of watching people present one face to the world while hiding another. The festival circuit is particularly rich in those contrasts."

The moderator nodded thoughtfully. "Your previous film, 'The Winter Palace,' dealt with similar themes of deception and hidden truths. Was that a conscious progression?"

"Everything's conscious in filmmaking," Greenwald said. "Every choice, every frame, every performance—it all serves the larger truth we're trying to reveal."

Sheila watched his hands as he spoke, noting how they seemed to conduct an invisible orchestra, emphasizing certain words, brushing others aside. When the moderator finally opened the floor for questions, she waited while others asked about technique, about inspiration, about his new documentary. Then she raised her hand.

"Sheriff Stone, Coldwater County," she said when called upon, keeping her tone professional. "I was particularly moved by 'The Winter Palace.' Could you talk about your casting process? How do you find new talent?"

Something flickered behind Greenwald's eyes, but his smile remained steady. "Casting is one of my great passions. I believe in nurturing new talent, giving opportunities to undiscovered actors who might otherwise be overlooked."

"Like Jessica Gregory?"

The name landed softly in the room. Greenwald's pause was almost imperceptible. "Yes, Jessica auditioned. Very talented young woman."

"Did you continue mentoring her after production wrapped?"

His expression shifted—subtle, but Sheila caught it. "I try to stay in touch with promising talent when I can. This industry can be challenging for young actors."

"How recently had you been in touch with her?"

Now, Greenwald studied her more carefully, seemingly recognizing the careful construction of her questions. "Sheriff, is there something specific you'd like to ask me?"

"I'm just trying to understand the relationships within our film community," Sheila said. "Especially given recent events."

Murmurs rippled through the audience. It was possible that not everyone here was aware of why Theater Seven had been closed, but no doubt some of them were. Greenwald's professional facade cracked slightly.

"If you'd like to discuss anything specific," he said, his voice cooler now, "perhaps we could do so privately."

"I'd appreciate that," Sheila said. "Perhaps after this session?"

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Greenwald gave an apologetic smile. "Unfortunately, I have back-to-back interviews before the premiere. My schedule is quite full."

"This is a matter of some urgency, Mr. Greenwald."

"I understand, but surely tomorrow would—"

"The thing is," Sheila said, aware that others were listening, "I've been learning some interesting things about 'The Winter Palace' production. Things that might raise questions at tonight's premiere. The kind of questions that could overshadow your new documentary."

Greenwald's expression tightened. The moderator was already calling on someone else, but Greenwald held up a hand. "One moment," he said into the microphone. To Sheila, he added quietly, "Twenty minutes. The green room behind the stage."

Sheila nodded and sat back down. As the Q&A continued, she noticed Greenwald checking his phone, his thumbs moving rapidly over the screen.

"Think he's warning someone?" Finn whispered.

"Or getting legal help," Sheila murmured back. "And based on what we know so far, he's gonna need it."

The green room was a cramped space that had probably been elegant during the

theater's vaudeville days. Now, mismatched furniture crowded around a makeup mirror, and promotional posters from past festivals peeled at the corners. Greenwald stood by a small window, his phone in his hand, while his lawyer—a sharp-featured woman in her fifties—occupied one of two armchairs.

"Rebecca Morton," she said, introducing herself. "I represent Mr. Greenwald."

"That was fast," Finn said, choosing to stay near the door.

Sheila took the remaining armchair, noting how Greenwald kept glancing at his reflection in the makeup mirror. His carefully maintained composure showed signs of strain.

"Let's be clear," Morton said. "Any allegations about impropriety during 'The Winter Palace' production—"

"Actually," Sheila interrupted, "I'm more interested in what happened after the production." She focused on Greenwald. "You continued meeting with Jessica. Privately. Why?"

Greenwald exchanged looks with his lawyer, who nodded slightly.

"We were discussing another project," he said.

"These meetings often happened late at night," Finn said. "Sometimes in the editing bay."

"Is it illegal to work late?" Morton asked.

"No," Sheila said. "But it's interesting that Jessica was preparing to speak to the festival board about ethical violations during your production."

"There were no ethical violations," Greenwald snapped. Morton shot him a warning look.

"Then why did she need a lawyer?" Sheila asked.

Greenwald frowned, looking surprised.

"You didn't know, did you?" she asked.

He ran a hand through his silver hair, disturbing its careful styling. "No, but I guess it makes sense. Jessica...she was troubled. Talented, but troubled."

"Troubled how?"

He paced the small room. "She became fixated on 'The Winter Palace.' On the role she didn't get. She convinced herself I had promised it to her."

"Hadn't you?"

"No! I mean..." He sank onto the room's small sofa. "I encouraged her. Maybe too much. But the investors wanted Claire Montgomery. I had no choice."

"So why keep meeting with her?"

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Greenwald glanced at his lawyer again. "We were discussing potential projects. I felt I owed her that much, after she didn't get the part."

Sheila paused, considering her words carefully. "Mr. Greenwald, I sense you're holding something back."

Morton snorted. "Oh? And that's based on what?"

Sheila kept her eyes on Greenwald. "Based on the fact that a struggling actress who claimed to have proof of wrongdoing—something related to the production of a film you yourself directed, Mr. Greenwald—was found murdered just last night. A woman you, by your own admission, had a number of secret meetings with."

"I'm hearing a lot of conjecture," Morton said. "You care to offer any proof?"

Sheila ignored the lawyer. "Whatever she had, Mr. Greenwald," she continued, "it's probably still out there. And when it surfaces—and it will surface—you'll want to be on record as having cooperated fully with this investigation."

Greenwald stood abruptly, moving to the window. The silence stretched for nearly a minute.

"Bradley," Morton warned. "Don't—"

"During pre-production," he said quietly, still facing the window, "before Claire was cast..." He took a shaky breath. "I made a terrible mistake. Jessica and I became... involved."

Morton sighed and rubbed her temples.

"Sexually?" Finn asked.

Greenwald nodded miserably. "It was consensual. But I was married at the time. And there were... messages. Photos. Things that would have destroyed my marriage, my career."

"So she was blackmailing you?" Sheila asked.

"Not exactly. She just wanted to act. Really act, not just bit parts in local theater." He rubbed his face. "I promised to help her, to mentor her. And I did try. But she became increasingly unstable, demanding."

"The late-night meetings?"

"She would show up unannounced, wanting to rehearse scenes, discuss projects that didn't exist. I tried to let her down gently, but..."

"But?"

"Two weeks ago, she threatened to post everything online. The messages, the photos. Said she'd tell everyone how I'd used her." He paused, halting his momentum.

"And what did you do?" Sheila asked.

"My client's not going to answer that," Morton said.

"He will if he really cared about her. If he really wants justice for her."

"I paid her fifty thousand dollars," Greenwald said in a quiet, defeated voice. He

looked suddenly older in the harsh makeup lights.

Morton interjected, "Which we can document with bank records."She knew how to pivot quickly.

"And yes, I did really care about her," Greenwald continued."More than you can imagine."

"Did it work?"Sheila asked."The money?"

"For a while.Then, last week, she said she had something bigger."Greenwald's hands twisted in his lap."She was becoming erratic, paranoid.Said she'd found proof of corruption in the industry, that powerful people were involved.None of it made sense."

"Where were you last night?"Finn asked."Between eight and ten PM?"

"At the Mountain View Hotel," Greenwald said quickly."In a production meeting for tonight's premiere.At least twenty people can verify that.We ordered dinner in, worked until after midnight."

"Can you provide names?"

Morton pulled out her phone."I'll email you a complete list of attendees, along with the hotel's security footage showing my client never left the building."

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Sheila studied Greenwald's face. The fear there seemed genuine, but it wasn't fear of being caught—it was fear of what else might come out.

"What aren't you telling us?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing relevant to her death," he said. "I swear, I never wished Jessica harm. Yes, I behaved unethically. Yes, I used her feelings for my own benefit. I'm not proud of any of it. But I didn't kill her. I really did care about her."

Sheila exchanged a meaningful look with Finn. A successful director like Greenwald would certainly have the resources to arrange a murder-for-hire.

"You cared about her," Sheila said carefully, "but she was threatening your marriage, your career. That's a powerful motive to get rid of her—or have someone else do it for you."

"You think I hired someone?" Greenwald's face twisted in disbelief. "To garrotte her with stage equipment and pose her like a scene from my own film? Why would I want to draw attention to our connection?"

"Maybe you didn't specify the method," Finn said. "Maybe your hired killer had his own... artistic vision."

Greenwald started to respond, but Morton held up her hand. "Before my client says anything else, I want to be clear—we can document his movements and communications leading up to Jessica's death. His phone records, credit card statements, bank transactions—all of it is available to you."

"Those can be worked around," Sheila said. "Burner phones, cash withdrawals."

"Check them anyway," Greenwald said, his voice cracking. "Check everything. Because what you're suggesting—that I would orchestrate Jessica's murder, turn her death into some twisted homage to my own film..." He shuddered. "The truth is bad enough. I used her, I betrayed her trust, I paid her off to protect myself. But kill her? Create this grotesque spectacle? No. Never."

Sheila studied him. The revulsion in his voice seemed genuine. More tellingly, his fear had a different quality now—not the nervous tension of someone hiding murderous secrets, but the desperate anxiety of a man watching his career implode.

"The fifty thousand dollars you paid her," Finn said. "How was it transferred?"

"Cashier's check," Morton answered. "We have the documentation. It was deposited directly into Jessica's account two weeks ago."

"And since then?"

"No unusual withdrawals," Greenwald said. "No other payments. You can verify everything." He leaned forward. "Look, I know how this looks. Rich, powerful man being blackmailed by young actress who ends up dead. But I'm telling you—if I'd wanted to silence Jessica, I would have just kept paying her. It would have been cheaper, cleaner, safer than...than this horror show someone's created."

"Honestly, Sheriff," Morton said, "if my client hired someone to murder this woman, don't you think he would make sure it was done in a way that wouldn't lead you directly to him?"

The logic tracked. Besides, a man of Greenwald's means could have simply bought Jessica's silence indefinitely. Murder—especially murder staged as elaborate

performance art—brought exactly the kind of attention a blackmail target would want to avoid.

"We'll need those records," Sheila said. "All of them."

Morton nodded. "I'll have everything sent over within the hour. And Sheriff?" She glanced at Greenwald. "My client is willing to make a full statement about his relationship with Jessica. Every detail, no matter how damaging to his reputation. Because whatever else he's done, he didn't kill her."

"The board meeting tomorrow," Finn said, redirecting the conversation. "What was Jessica planning to reveal?"

"I don't know. After I paid her off, she said she'd found something else—documents, recordings, I'm not sure what. But it wasn't about me anymore." Greenwald's voice dropped. "She said she'd stumbled onto something bigger. Something dangerous."

"Like what?"

"She wouldn't tell me. Said she needed to be sure first." He met Sheila's eyes. "The last time I saw her, she was scared. Really scared. Not like before, when she was just trying to pressure me. This was different."

"When was this?"

"Three days ago. She came to my hotel room, completely hysterical. I thought she was having some kind of breakdown."

"What did she say?"

Greenwald gestured vaguely. "It was all nonsensical. She wasn't clear, wouldn't tell me

what it was really about."

"What happened next?" Finn asked.

"I called her a cab, told her to go home and get some rest." His voice cracked slightly. "That was the last time I saw her alive."

Sheila exchanged looks with Finn. Greenwald was hiding something—but maybe not what they'd initially suspected.

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"The cab company," Finn said. "Do you remember which one?"

"Peak Valley Taxi. I have the receipt in my hotel room."

"We'll need that," Sheila said, standing. "And Mr. Greenwald? Don't leave town."

He managed a weak smile. "I have a premiere tonight. And after that...well, let's just say I don't think the festival will be inviting me back."

Outside the green room, Finn pulled out his phone to call the taxi company. But Sheila's mind was already racing ahead. If Jessica had found evidence of something bigger than Greenwald's indiscretions, something that truly frightened her...

What exactly had she discovered? And who might have killed her to keep it hidden?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The October evening had turned cold by seven-thirty PM, but the man barely noticed as he watched Thomas Rivera collecting room service trays from the hallway of the Mountain View Hotel's third floor. In the overhead lighting, Rivera's profile caught the shadows perfectly—high cheekbones, haunted eyes, the slight tremor in his hands that spoke of desperation rather than weakness.

He would have been perfect for the role.

The man had first noticed Rivera six months ago, during auditions for "Ghost Light" at the Coldwater Community Theater. Rivera had brought something raw to the part

of Michael—a convicted murderer seeking redemption. But the director had gone with someone safer, someone more "reliable."

Now Rivera worked nights at the hotel, serving coffee to self-important filmmakers who wouldn't give him a second glance. His black uniform was slightly too large, like a toddler's clothes bought in anticipation of a growth spurt.

The man watched Rivera pause outside Room 317, balance the tray against his hip, and check a small notebook. Probably keeping track of which rooms still had dishes to collect. Such attention to detail, even in this menial role. Method acting at its finest, though Rivera didn't know he was performing.

From his position near the ice machine, the man could observe without being obvious. Festival guests passed by, too absorbed in their phones or conversations about aspect ratios to notice either of them. A perfect audience, unaware they were watching the prelude to something extraordinary.

Rivera moved to the next door, knocking softly. "Room service. Collecting trays."

His voice carried the remnants of classical training—proper diction, precise consonants. The man remembered Rivera's audition monologue, how he'd made the words feel modern, immediate. Such talent, wasted on gathering other people's leftovers.

But that would change soon.

The cleaning cart provided excellent cover as the man followed Rivera down the hall. He'd spent weeks studying the hotel's routines, its rhythms. He knew that Rivera always worked alone on this floor between seven and nine PM, while the festival crowd was out at screenings or networking events. Knew that the security cameras had blind spots near the service elevator. Knew that Rivera's car—a battered Honda

Civic—was parked in the darkest corner of the employee lot.

All the elements of a perfect scene, waiting to be directed.

Rivera's notebook fell as he reached for another tray. The man watched him bend to retrieve it, noticed how his uniform rode up to reveal a tattoo on his lower back—theatrical masks, comedy and tragedy intertwined. Even his skin told stories.

Eight o'clock now. The hallway had emptied as guests headed to evening screenings. Rivera's shift would end at eleven, but his real performance hadn't even begun.

The man touched the gaffer's wire in his pocket, appreciating its smooth strength. The same wire he'd used on Jessica, though she'd ultimately proved disappointing in her final scene.

But Thomas—Thomas would be magnificent.

The role had been written for someone exactly like him: a man who'd lost everything, who'd descended into darkness but maintained that spark of humanity. The man had seen it in Rivera's eyes during his audition, that perfect balance of despair and hope. He'd been robbed of the part then, but now...

Now, he would finally play it exactly as written.

The man smiled, already composing the scene in his mind. The staging would be different this time—something more intimate, more intense. Jessica's death had been a statement piece meant to send a message. But Thomas's performance would be pure art.

All he had to do was wait for the perfect moment.

After all, timing was everything.

CHAPTER NINE

Sheila held her phone up for Carl Washburn, waiting patiently as he studied the photo.

The taxi stand outside Peak Valley Transit's main office was nearly empty at eight PM. Most of the company's cabs were downtown, ferrying festival-goers between venues. But Carl Washburn's yellow Crown Victoria sat idle, its engine ticking as Washburn leaned against the driver door.

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"Yeah, that's her," he said, a cigarette bobbing between his lips as he spoke. "Pretty girl. Picked her up at the Mountain View three nights ago."

"What was her state of mind?" Sheila asked.

Washburn took a long drag, considering. "Upset. Crying. But trying not to show it, you know? Kept checking her phone the whole ride."

"Did she make any calls?" Finn asked.

"Nah. Just kept looking at it like she was expecting something. Or afraid of something." He flicked ash onto the cracked pavement. "Listen, I don't usually remember fares this well. But she reminded me of my daughter—same age, same kind of dreams about making it big."

A train whistle echoed in the distance. The parking lot's sodium lights cast everything in sickly yellow, making Washburn's weathered face look jaundiced.

"Where did you take her?" Sheila asked.

"That's the thing." Washburn straightened up. "She wanted to go home at first. Had an address over on Maple. But halfway there, she changed her mind. Said she needed to check something at the theater."

Sheila and Finn exchanged looks. "Which theater?"

"The Coldwater. Where they're doing the festival now." He dropped his cigarette,

grinding it out with his boot."Dropped her at the back entrance.Staff door, I think.She said she had keys."

"What time was this?"

"Around nine-thirty.End of my shift, so I remember."He pulled out his phone, scrolling through something."Yeah, here it is.Nine twenty-eight PM.Fifteen-dollar fare."

"Did she seem afraid?"Finn asked."Like someone might be following her?"

Washburn thought about it."Not following, exactly.But she kept looking over her shoulder.And when we got to the theater, she waited in the cab for a few minutes, watching the street."He shook his head."I asked if she wanted me to wait, but she said she was fine.Said someone was meeting her."

"Did she say who?"

"Nope.But she didn't seem happy about it."He met Sheila's eyes."Look, I got a daughter trying to make it as a singer.I know how rough the entertainment business can be.If something happened to this girl..."

"What else can you tell us?"Sheila asked."Anything at all?"

"Just that she was carrying something besides her purse.One of those bubble mailers, like for mailing documents?Yellow, about this big."He held his hands about a foot apart."Held it real close the whole ride, wouldn't put it down even to check her phone."

Finn made a note."Was she planning to mail it?"

"Don't know. But whatever was in it, she didn't want to let it out of her sight."

A dispatcher's voice crackled over Washburn's radio, calling him for a pickup. He held up an apologetic finger and responded, then turned back to them.

"That's all I got," he said. "Wish I could tell you more. She seemed like a good kid, you know? Sometimes you can just tell."

Sheila handed him her card. "If you think of anything else..."

"Yeah." He pocketed the card and opened his car door. "Hope you find whoever did this. Really do."

They watched his taillights disappear into the night. The train whistle sounded again, closer now.

"Three nights ago," Finn said. "Right after she tried to get more money from Greenwald."

"And whatever was in that envelope scared her enough to make her want to run." Sheila checked her watch: 8:15 PM. "The theater will still be full of festival people."

"Good time to search her locker without drawing attention."

Sheila nodded, already heading for their car. Whatever Jessica had found at the theater that night, whatever she'd been carrying in that envelope—it had been important enough to get her killed.

And somewhere in that building, those answers were waiting.

If they could just find them in time.

Jessica's locker in the employee break room was a standard metal box, identical to dozens of others. The combination from Carl Rider's employee records worked on the first try. Inside, they found the expected things: a spare uniform shirt, hairbrush, breath mints, a well-worn copy of "The Glass Menagerie" filled with post-it notes and highlighting.

"Look at this," Finn said, carefully removing a small notebook. The pages were filled with Jessica's neat handwriting—names, dates, times. Most entries were mundane: work schedules, audition notes, phone numbers. But the last few pages were different.

"She was tracking something," Sheila said, studying the cryptic notations. "Meeting times, locations..." She pointed to one entry: MV Hotel—3rd floor—8:45 PM—saw it again. "But saw what?"

They found other oddities: a receipt for a high-end video camera she shouldn't have been able to afford, a business card for a private investigator in Salt Lake City, a torn piece of paper with what looked like a computer password.

But nothing that explained what she'd discovered. Nothing worth killing over.

"Looks like a dead end," Finn said, carefully returning the notebook to the locker.

Sheila shook her head, frustrated. "There's something here. The private investigator,

the camera receipt, these notes...she was building toward something."

"But what got her killed? And where's that yellow envelope the cab driver mentioned?"

"Probably wherever the killer stashed her phone." Sheila closed the locker, letting the metal door click shut. "We need to think this through. Jessica comes here three nights ago, after trying to get money from Greenwald. She's carrying evidence of something, but she's scared."

"Scared enough to want to run."

"Right. But instead of running, she comes here." Sheila looked around the mundane break room with its coffee maker and outdated notices. "Why here? What was so important?"

"Maybe we should walk the building," Finn suggested. "See it how she would have seen it that night. Something made her choose the theater instead of going home."

Sheila nodded. "And we should check the festival crowd, see who's still around from 'The Winter Palace' production. Someone here knows what Jessica found."

They headed for the exit.

Outside, the festival had transformed as night fell. String lights crisscrossed Main Street, casting warm pools of light between deep shadows. The crowds were different too—more industry people now, fewer tourists. Filmmakers huddled in intimate groups, pitching projects in urgent whispers. Crowds spilled from the theaters, arguing passionately about the latest screenings.

"I don't hear any talk of a shutdown," Sheila said as they walked, their footsteps

clipped on the brick sidewalk."I'm starting to think Rider was just leading us on, buying as much time as he could."The thought filled her with anger.If someone else died because the festival hadn't been shut down, Sheila would carry the guilt with her, regardless of what Rider had promised them.

"Or that event he mentioned hasn't happened yet," Finn said."Either way, we should use this opportunity to look for the killer."

Sheila glanced sharply at him."You don't think the festival should be shut down?"

"No, I think you made the right decision.But clearly it's still running, which means there's a good chance the killer's here.Someone who knows the theater, knows the film industry."

Sheila watched a group of young actors pass by, their laughter carrying on the cold air."Someone who could be any of these people," she said, following Finn's train of logic.

A street musician played something melancholy on a saxophone, the notes floating up to mix with fog gathering under the string lights.The Mountain View Hotel loomed ahead, its windows warm against the darkness.Somewhere in that building, Bradley Greenwald was preparing for his premiere.

But Sheila's eyes were drawn to the shadows between buildings, the quiet corners where festival crowds didn't venture.Perfect places to watch without being seen.

"Jessica found something," she said quietly."Something specific to this festival, this place.The staging of her death wasn't just artistic—it was personal."

"You think she interrupted something?Saw something she wasn't supposed to?"

"Maybe." Sheila stopped walking, watching another crowd exit a theater. Everyone looked normal, excited about films they'd just seen. But any one of them could be their killer. "Or maybe she went looking for something specific. That private investigator's card, the video camera receipt..."

"She was gathering evidence," Finn finished. "Building a case."

"But against who?"

The saxophone player switched to something darker and more discordant. The fog was thickening, turning the string lights into halos. Perfect atmospheric lighting, Sheila thought. Like something from a film noir.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:03 am

Except this wasn't a movie. And somewhere in these festival crowds, a killer walked free.

They just had to figure out why before anyone else died.

CHAPTER TEN

Thomas Rivera loved the quiet moments on his shift, like now, when the hallways of the Mountain View Hotel briefly emptied as guests filtered out for evening screenings. Nine PM, and the usual lull had settled in. He'd finished collecting room service trays from the third floor and was organizing the storage closet, a task he found oddly satisfying after the chaos of festival check-ins.

The hotel felt different during the festival—more alive somehow, with every room booked and creative energy humming through the corridors. Directors huddled in the lobby, planning shot lists. Actors practiced lines in the elevator. Even the complaints were more interesting: a documentary filmmaker upset that his room didn't face the mountains he was here to film, a method actor who insisted on sleeping on the floor to prepare for a role about homelessness.

Thomas smiled as he sorted clean linens. His friend Jason from sound design had tried to get him back into acting last year, practically dragging him to audition for some psychological thriller.

What was it called? "Ghost Light"—that was it. A heavy piece about a convicted murderer seeking redemption through theater. Thomas hadn't prepared much, just showed up and read the sides. He'd gone purely to humor Jason, telling himself it was

just a favor for a friend.

But something unexpected happened when he stepped into that audition room. The moment he began reading, everything came flooding back—the electricity of inhabiting another person's skin, the raw thrill of discovering a character's truth. The role was complex: a man who'd made terrible choices trying to find redemption through art. As Thomas read deeper into the scene, he felt himself falling into the character's desperate need for forgiveness, his hunger to rewrite his own story.

By the time he finished the monologue, his hands were shaking. He'd forgotten how much he loved this, how alive it made him feel. The director had leaned forward, clearly interested, and for one bright moment, Thomas had allowed himself to imagine returning to the stage, reclaiming that part of himself he'd buried after the divorce.

But he hadn't gotten the part, which turned out to be fine after all. He'd stepped away from theater three years ago for a reason, needing something more stable after his marriage fell apart. The hotel job wasn't glamorous, but it paid the bills on time. And there was something peaceful about working nights, about being useful in small, concrete ways.

Still, sometimes late at night, he found himself running through that audition monologue in his head, remembering how it felt to lose himself in a role again, if only for a few minutes.

His radio crackled. "Rivera, you copy?"

"Go ahead," he said.

"Got an alert on the Carson Street emergency exit. Probably another smoker who doesn't want to walk around front."

Thomas sighed. It happened every festival—guests propping open emergency doors for convenience, not thinking about security. "I'll check it out."

He left the storage closet and headed toward the back of the hotel. The service corridors were quieter here, away from the guest areas. Industrial carpet replaced marble floors, and the walls were bare except for safety notices and cleaning schedules.

The festival always made him a bit nostalgic for his acting days. He'd been good once—not great, maybe, but solid character work in local productions. "Twelve Angry Men," "The Crucible," a decent run as George in "Of Mice and Men." But life had other plans. The divorce had hit hard, and somehow temporary survival jobs had become permanent.

Still, he enjoyed being adjacent to the film world during festival week. He liked overhearing passionate debates about cinema in the elevator, seeing rough cuts of documentaries on laptops in the lobby. Just this morning, he'd helped Bradley Greenwald's team set up their production office in the conference room. They'd been editing until all hours, preparing for tonight's premiere.

The emergency exit was at the end of a long hallway lined with vending machines. Their hum covered his footsteps as he approached. The door was indeed propped open with a block of wood, letting in cold October air and the distant sound of the festival crowds on Main Street.

Thomas moved to remove the block, but something made him pause. The hallway felt different—a shift in the air pressure, maybe, or a shadow that seemed out of place. He'd worked nights long enough to trust these instincts.

"Hello?" he called. "This area is for employees only."

No response, but the vending machines' reflection showed movement behind him.

Thomas turned.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sheila watched the festival transform as night deepened. Gone were the families clutching popcorn bags and the tourists with their festival programs. By ten PM, a different crowd had claimed Main Street—film students with expensive cameras slung around their necks, producers huddled in doorways making deals, directors holding court at café tables. The bars glowed with warm light, their windows fogged from intense conversations within. Outside the Antler Room, a group of documentary filmmakers debated the ethics of reenactments, their breath visible in the cold air as they gestured passionately.

She knew this was when the real business of the festival happened—after dark when the casual moviegoers had gone home, and only the true believers remained. These were the people who lived and breathed cinema, who saw the world through an imaginary lens.

And somewhere among them, she suspected, walked a killer who had turned murder into performance art.

"Jessica kept to herself mostly," said Annie Martin, a production assistant from "The Winter Palace." They'd found her nursing a beer at the Peak Mountain Brewery, where festival staff tended to gather after shifts. "But the last few weeks, she started asking questions. About the production, about financing, about who had access to what."

"What kind of access?" Sheila asked.

Annie shrugged."Digital files, dailies, raw footage.Weird stuff for an actor to care about."She took a sip of her beer."I figured she was just trying to learn the business side."

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The brewery's back patio was heated by portable propane units, creating islands of warmth in the October night. Every table was occupied by festival attendees, their lanyards catching the light as they gestured enthusiastically about the minutiae of filming.

"Greenwald's premiere is starting," Finn murmured, checking his phone.

Sheila glanced toward the Coldwater Theater, where a line had formed outside Theater One. Bradley Greenwald's "Echoes of Silence" was one of the festival's marquee events, and even their earlier confrontation hadn't dampened enthusiasm. If anything, the rumors of drama had increased interest.

Annie finished her beer in a large swallow and hastily rose. "Thanks for the reminder—I don't want to miss it." She took two steps, then turned back and said, "Hope you figure out what happened to Jessica." With that, she waved and hurried off.

"Guess the conversation's over," Sheila said with a sigh.

Thus far they'd spoken with a gaffer who remembered Jessica asking about access to the editing bay, a makeup artist who'd overheard her arguing with someone on the phone, and a location scout who thought he'd seen her taking photos of documents when she thought no one was watching. But nobody who could provide specifics about what Jessica had been looking into.

And nobody who had any idea why Jessica had been murdered.

"Come on," Finn said, rising. "Let's walk around. The movement helps me think."

Sheila rose and followed Finn out.

"She definitely found something," Finn said as they walked past the Mountain View Hotel. The lobby was visible through plate glass windows, full of people discussing the premiere they'd just attended. "But what was she looking for in the first place?"

A food truck was doing late-night business, serving coffee and pastries to the festival crowd. The smell of espresso cut through the cold air. Sheila bought a cup, needing the caffeine to help her think.

"Everyone says she changed in the last few weeks," she said. "Started asking technical questions, looking into the business side. Why?"

"Maybe she stumbled onto something by accident," Finn suggested. "Something in those late-night editing sessions with Greenwald."

They passed the Owl Street Coffee House, now closed but still hosting a small crowd of festival staff in their back room. Through the window, Sheila spotted Mara Winters, Jessica's former friend, deep in conversation with other actors.

"Should we talk to her again?" Finn asked.

Sheila shook her head. "Let her be for now. She's already told us what she knows."

The night deepened, but the festival showed no signs of slowing. They found a quiet spot outside the Antler Room, away from the crowds. Sheila leaned against a brick wall, letting the cold seep into her shoulders as she tried to organize her thoughts.

"Something's bothering me," she said. "If someone wanted to silence Jessica, why make it so theatrical? Why not make it look like an accident, or a robbery gone wrong?"

"The staging was deliberate," Finn agreed. "Personal, even. Like they needed her death to mean something."

"Or like they were proving a point." Sheila watched her breath cloud in the cold air. "Jessica was investigating something specific. She didn't just stumble onto it—she was looking for it. But why? What made her start digging in the first place?"

Finn shook his head silently. Sheila rested her head on Finn's shoulder, and together they watched festival-goers walk by.

"Ever wonder what it's like?" Finn asked softly. "Acting, I mean. Becoming someone else for a while."

Sheila considered this. "I suppose it's not that different from fighting, actually. When I was competing, stepping into the ring...you become a different version of yourself. More focused, more present."

"But fighting was real."

"Acting is real too, in its own way." She shifted closer to him, grateful for his warmth in the cold night. "You have to believe in what you're doing and commit to it completely. Like Jessica did."

"You sound like you've thought about it."

"Maybe a little." She smiled against his shoulder. "Star's been trying to get me to do a scene with her for her drama class. Says I'd make a good Lady Macbeth."

Finn chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. "I can see that, actually. You've got that whole 'determined woman with a complex moral code' thing going on."

"Is that your way of calling me scary?"

"Terrifying," he said, pressing a kiss to her hair. "In the best possible way."

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Their quiet moment was interrupted by Sheila's phone buzzing. A text from dispatch: 911 call from the Mountain View Hotel. Possible homicide.

"We have to get to the hotel," she said as she pushed off from the wall.

"Why? What is it?"

"Possible homicide," she said grimly. "I think our killer may have just struck again."

The Mountain View Hotel's service corridor was already crowded with emergency personnel when Sheila and Finn arrived. Red and blue lights from police vehicles outside strobed through the windows, creating an eerie light show against the industrial carpet and bare walls.

Dr. Jin looked up from where he knelt beside the body. "Same killer," he said without preamble. "Gaffer's wire, similar bruising pattern. And this victim, too, was repositioned after death."

Thomas Rivera sat propped against the wall near the emergency exit, his hotel uniform pristine except for the ligature marks on his neck. Unlike Jessica Gregory, he hadn't been dressed in any special costume—just his regular work clothes, though they'd been meticulously straightened after death. His hands were folded in his lap, his head tilted as if listening to something. Most disturbing was his expression—peaceful, almost serene, like an actor waiting for his cue.

Sheila's heart sank. She'd been right to want to shut down the festival. If they had, this might not have happened. But because she'd allowed Rider to have his way, because she hadn't exercised her powers to do what she believed was right, there was blood on her hands.

She took a moment to calm herself. Easy, she thought. Berating yourselves won't do anyone any good. You have to keep your head in the game.

She circled the body slowly, taking in every detail. The killer had positioned Rivera with the same careful precision used with Jessica, but something was different. "The first victim was dressed specially for the scene," she said. "This time he used what the victim was already wearing."

"Maybe he didn't have time to change the clothes," Finn suggested, crouching to study the ligature marks.

"Or maybe the uniform was part of the scene he wanted to create," Sheila said. She noted how the victim's shirt had been tucked in neatly, his name tag perfectly straight. "Everything's so...precise."

She turned to Jin. "Time of death?"

"Between nine and nine-thirty PM," Jin said. "Body temperature and lividity suggest he was killed here, then positioned about an hour later."

He pointed to some scuff marks on the carpet. "Signs of a struggle, but brief. The killer likely took him by surprise."

Deputy Neville approached with a preliminary report. She had to step carefully around the crime scene technicians who were photographing every angle of the scene, their flash units creating stark shadows with each burst of light.

"Victim is Thomas Rivera, thirty-four, night clerk. Been working here three years. The front desk got an alert when this emergency exit was breached around nine PM. They radioed Rivera to check it out since he was already on this floor."

"Security cameras?" Finn asked, standing and moving to examine the emergency exit.

"Nothing useful. This is a blind spot—cameras cover the main corridors but not this service area. The killer must have known that."

Sheila joined Finn at the door. The lock had been jimmied professionally—someone who knew what they were doing. She ran her fingers over the mechanism, feeling the damage. "This wasn't forced in a hurry," she said. "They took their time, did it right."

She turned back to the scene, where Jin was supervising the placement of evidence markers. "What do we know about Rivera?"

"Divorced, lived alone," Neville said, consulting her notes. "Used to do community theater but quit a few years ago. Coworkers say he was reliable, kept to himself mostly."

Something clicked in Sheila's mind. "Community theater—when did he quit?"

"After his divorce, according to his supervisor. About three years ago."

Jin stood, removing his gloves. "The bruising pattern is nearly identical to what we found on Jessica Gregory. Same killer, same technique. But this feels..."

"More practiced," Sheila finished. "Like Jessica was a dress rehearsal, and this is the real performance."

Crime scene technicians continued their methodical work, the click of their cameras

punctuating the silence. One of them called Jin over to examine something near the victim's feet, but it turned out to be just a scuff mark from the struggle. The emergency exit door creaked slightly in the cold wind from outside. Somewhere down the hall, a vending machine hummed.

"There's no denying it," Finn said quietly. "We've got a serial killer on our hands."

"A serial killer with an artistic vision," Sheila said. "And he's giving this town all it can handle. Come on, let's go talk to Rider. Maybe, just maybe, he can help us connect some dots—and put a stop to this for good."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sheila held her anger in check, watching Carl Rider as he absorbed the news about Thomas Rivera's death. He seemed to have aged a decade in the past few minutes.

Rider sat heavily in his makeshift office chair, the espresso machine behind him forgotten. His normally immaculate appearance had begun to fray—his cashmere sweater wrinkled, his wire-rimmed glasses slightly askew.

"Two murders," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "In less than twenty-four hours." He pulled out his handkerchief but just held it as if he'd forgotten what to do with it.

"One we could've prevented by shutting down the festival," Sheila said with barely-contained coldness. "Something you assured us you were handling."

"I was! I am. I..." He made a vague gesture. "I just didn't think it was quite so... sourgent."

"You didn't think having a murderer walking around was an urgent matter?"

Finn cleared his throat loudly and gave Sheila a warning look, as if to remind her that scolding Rider wouldn't help their investigation. "Did you know Thomas Rivera?" he asked Rider.

Rider nodded slowly. "Not well, but...yes. He worked the festival every year since starting at the hotel. Quiet man, very professional. Always volunteered for the night

shift during festival week because he knew that's when we needed the most help."

He paused, something occurring to him."He used to act, you know.Local theater, before my time here, but some of the long-time festival staff remembered him."

"What else can you tell us about him?"Finn asked, leaning against the filing cabinet.

"He...he helped us set up the conference rooms for press events.Knew exactly how we liked things arranged."Rider finally used his handkerchief, dabbing at his forehead."Just yesterday, he was helping Bradley Greenwald's team with their production office.Making sure they had everything they needed for the premiere..."His voice trailed off as he realized the significance of what he'd just said.

"Did you ever see him interact with Jessica Gregory?"Sheila asked.She was still angry, but she buried the feeling.She needed to be present, needed to be able to move forward.

"I don't..."Rider started, then stopped."Wait.Yes.About a week ago.Jessica was leaving the premiere of some experimental short film.She seemed upset about something, and Thomas...he got her a glass of water, talked to her for a few minutes.It seemed like they knew each other, maybe from theater circles."

Sheila exchanged a look with Finn.Another connection, another piece of the puzzle, but what did it mean?

Rider replaced his glasses, his hands trembling slightly."It makes me sick, you know?To think that killer's probably here right now.Watching us, walking among us.Maybe even..."He swallowed hard."Maybe even someone I know.Someone I've worked with."

"That's what we need to focus on," Sheila said."Someone who knows both the theater

and hotel layouts. Someone familiar with film production equipment, specifically gaffer's wire. Someone who would have known about the hotel's security camera blind spots."

"And someone who stages murders like scenes from a play," Finn added quietly.

Rider's face went a shade paler. "The way Jessica was posed...and now Thomas..." He stood abruptly, moving to the window that overlooked Main Street. Below, festival-goers still milled about, unaware of the second murder. "All these people. Hundreds of them. Directors, actors, crew members—they all know their way around sets and equipment. They all understand staging and theatricality." He pressed his forehead against the glass. "How many of them have I invited here? How many programs have I approved, how many passes have I authorized?"

"This isn't your fault," Finn said. Sheila wasn't entirely sure that was true, but it wouldn't do any good to disagree.

"Isn't it?" He turned back to them, and there were tears in his eyes. "I created this. Built it from nothing. Made it successful enough to attract exactly the kind of person who could..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

A knock at the door made them all jump. A festival volunteer stuck her head in. "Mr. Rider? The Q&A for the midnight horror block is starting in fifteen minutes. They're asking for you to introduce—"

"Cancel it," Rider said, his voice stronger now. "Cancel everything. Get security to begin clearing the theaters. Quietly, no panic, but firmly." He looked at Sheila. "I should have listened to you much sooner. I guess I thought..." He trailed off.

You thought maybe this would all just go away on its own, she thought. You wanted to keep the business going and protect your economic interests. And it may have cost an

innocent man his life.

She didn't say this, however. The guilt was written plainly on Rider's face—there was no need to rub it in.

"We'll coordinate with local law enforcement to manage the crowd once word gets out," Sheila said, deciding to take a more active role in the shutdown now. "And we'll need a complete list of everyone with festival credentials—staff, volunteers, filmmakers, press."

"I'll have my team start compiling it now." Rider moved to his desk, already reaching for his phone, but his hands were shaking too badly to unlock it.

"Take a moment," Finn said kindly. "We can help with the notifications."

Rider nodded gratefully, sinking back into his chair. "I keep thinking about Thomas. About Jessica. About all the little ways our paths crossed during festivals. All the small kindnesses, the brief conversations..." He looked up at Sheila, his eyes haunted. "How many more? How many more before you catch them?"

Sheila wished she had an answer for him. But as the muffled sounds of the festival filtered through the office walls—people laughing, discussing films, living their normal lives—she could only think about how the killer was out there somewhere, maybe already choosing their next victim.

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And how they had to stop them before anyone else died.

"We're going to do everything possible to catch whoever's responsible," Sheila assured him. Then something clicked in her mind. "Mr. Rider, you mentioned Thomas used to act. Jessica was posed like a scene from 'The Winter Palace'—a film she'd wanted to be in. Was Thomas ever up for any significant roles he didn't get?"

Rider frowned, considering. "I don't know specifically, but Marcus Harlow might. He does sound design for both film and theater productions. He and Thomas were friends, I think."

"Where can we find Marcus?" Finn asked.

"He should be in Theater Three, checking the sound system for..." Rider caught himself. "Well, I suppose that doesn't matter now."

"Thank you," Sheila said, heading for the door. "Let us know if you think of anything else."

In the hallway, she and Finn moved quickly through the thinning festival crowd. The news of the second murder hadn't spread yet, but people seemed to sense something was wrong. The earlier excitement had been replaced by uncertain murmurs and worried glances.

They found Marcus Harlow in Theater Three's sound booth, his thick-rimmed glasses reflecting the glow of his equipment displays. When Sheila explained why they needed to talk, his face fell.

"Thomas? No, that can't..." He sank into his chair, running a hand through his dark hair. "I just saw him yesterday."

"We understand you were friends," Finn said gently.

Marcus nodded. "Since community theater days. I actually got him to audition for a psychological thriller last year—'Ghost Light.' He was perfect for the lead role, this convicted murderer trying to find redemption through theater." He managed a weak smile. "Thomas didn't even want to audition. I practically had to drag him there."

"That's actually what I was hoping to speak with you about," Sheila said. "Did he take it hard when he didn't get the part?"

"That's the thing—he didn't care." Marcus shrugged. "He'd already stepped away from acting after his divorce. Said he preferred the stability of hotel work. The audition was a way of humoring me, I guess. I hoped it would spark some excitement in him, but apparently I was wrong."

Sheila made a mental note of this.

"Can you tell us about any specific scenes from 'Ghost Light'?" she asked. "Particularly involving the main character?"

"You'll have to be more specific than that."

"Sitting against a wall, hands folded in his lap, tilting his head to the side as if listening to something?"

Marcus frowned, puzzled. "Yes, there's a scene just like that. It's this powerful moment where the murderer character is waiting to hear if he's earned parole." Marcus paused, his eyes widening. "Why are you asking about that scene?"

Sheila hesitated, then decided he deserved to know."Because that's how we found Thomas.Posed exactly as you described."

Marcus's face drained of color."Oh God."He gripped the edge of his control board."Just like Jessica in the blue dress."

"Yes," Sheila said quietly.Both victims posed to recreate scenes from roles they auditioned for but didn't get,she added mentally.That's our killer's signature.

"But why?"Marcus asked, looking from Sheila to Finn, then back again."Did someone think the actors who got those roles didn't do a good job?But if you thought Jessica and Thomas would have been better, why kill them?It doesn't make any sense."

"Not to us, it doesn't," Sheila said.But in someone else's twisted logic, it did.

"Do you happen to know where we can get copies of 'Ghost Light' and 'The Winter Palace'?"Finn asked."We need to see these scenes for ourselves."

"'Ghost Light' is easy—it's still running at the Art House Cinema on Carson Street.But 'The Winter Palace' never got distribution."Marcus thought for a moment."Check with the festival archives in the basement.They keep copies of everything that screens here, even if it never gets released.Carl should have the key."

"Thank you," Sheila said, standing."And Marcus?Be careful.Lock up when you leave."

As they headed for the exit, Marcus called after them."Sheriff Stone?Thomas was a good guy.He deserved better than...than being turned into some killer's prop."

Sheila nodded, remembering Charlotte saying almost the same thing about

Jessica. Two lives reduced to scenes in someone else's twisted production.

They needed to figure out what connected these films—and fast. Before the killer decided to cast their next role.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The Art House Cinema looked different at night, its neon sign casting a soft blue glow over empty sidewalks. A lone employee—barely old enough to drive, by the look of him—was happy to let them in after hours when Sheila showed her badge.

Now the ancient projector hummed overhead as "Ghost Light" played to an audience of two.

Sheila and Finn sat in the middle row, sharing the armrest between them. The theater smelled of popcorn and history—it had been showing independent films since before Sheila was born. She remembered coming here as a teenager, watching foreign movies she barely understood but pretended to appreciate.

"Feels strange, doesn't it?" she whispered. "Like we're kids sneaking in after hours."

Finn's hand found hers in the darkness. "Except we're watching a psychological thriller about a murderer instead of making out in the back row."

"Who says we can't do both?" The joke felt good—a moment of lightness in the heavy air of investigation. But then the scene they'd been waiting for began to play out on screen.

The flickering light from the screen cast shadows across the nearly empty theater. The film's stark prison setting created a haunting backdrop as Micah Weller, the actor who'd gotten the role Thomas Rivera had auditioned for, sat against a prison wall, head tilted in that familiar pose. His prison uniform was deliberately shabby, his hands resting loose in his lap—exactly the position they'd found Thomas in. Even the lighting was similar, harsh overhead fluorescents casting dramatic shadows across his

face.

The similarity to how they'd found Thomas made Sheila's chest tighten. She felt Finn's hand squeeze hers gently.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just processing." She watched the scene unfold—the condemned man waiting to hear his fate, his stillness almost unnatural. The camera slowly pushed in on his face, catching every micro-expression. A guard's footsteps echoed down the corridor, growing closer. The prisoner didn't move, didn't even seem to breathe. Just that terrible, patient waiting.

"The staging is identical," Finn whispered. "Even the angle of his head."

"Not identical," Sheila corrected quietly. "Perfect. Like someone studied this scene frame by frame, memorized every detail."

She watched as tension built in the scene, the guard's footsteps stopping just out of frame. The prisoner remained motionless, but his throat worked as he swallowed. The camera held steady on his face, refusing to cut away.

"About Thomas. About Jessica. About how someone looked at them and saw...this. Saw them as characters to be posed in their own private performance."

The film's score swelled dramatically—strings and percussion building to a crescendo as the prisoner received news of his parole. The guard's voice was deliberately muffled, making the prisoner's reaction the sole focus. A single tear tracked down his cheek as the news sank in. The camera stayed brutally close, documenting every moment of his transformation from condemned man to free one.

On screen, the actor's performance was masterful—subtle shifts in his expression conveying disbelief, hope, fear that this might be a cruel joke. His hands trembled slightly as he raised them to cover his face.

But Sheila could only see Thomas Rivera's body, those same hands carefully arranged in his lap, that same head tilt captured with surgical precision. The killer hadn't just recreated this scene—he'd elevated it, turned murder into his own twisted form of method acting.

"Our killer didn't just watch this film," she said as the scene continued to play out. "He studied it. Memorized it. Understood exactly what made this moment powerful." She gestured at the screen where the actor was finally standing, unsteady on his feet as he absorbed his freedom. "And then he recreated it, detail by detail, using Thomas as his actor."

"But Thomas never got to finish his performance," Finn added grimly. "Never got to experience that moment of release."

The scene faded to black, the score gradually dying away until only the sound of the prisoner's ragged breathing remained. In the darkness, Sheila could almost see Thomas Rivera's face, forever frozen in that moment of anticipation, waiting for a resolution that would never come.

As the movie continued, Sheila found herself growing reflective.

"Sometimes I wonder," she said quietly, "if this job is changing me. Making me see the darkness in everything." She turned to Finn, whose face was illuminated by the flickering light from the screen. "Even this—sitting in a movie theater with you—feels different now. Tainted, almost."

Finn shifted in his seat to face her. "Tainted?"

She shook her head. "That's not the right word. I'm not trying to say this isn't special, it's just..." She sighed. "I don't know how to explain it."

He was silent for a few moments.

"You're not alone in this, you know," he finally said.

"I know." She managed a small smile. "That's probably the only thing keeping me sane right now. That, and Star's art show next week. Normal things to look forward to."

The scene changed. Sheila leaned her head against Finn's shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne mixed with coffee and autumn air.

"Remember our second date?" she asked. "Right here, watching that terrible French comedy neither of us understood."

"I was so nervous," Finn admitted. "Kept trying to think of clever things to say about the cinematography."

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"You didn't need to be clever." She pressed closer to him. "You just needed to be you."

Above them, the projector continued its steady rhythm, casting shadows and light across their faces. On screen, the story continued its dark exploration of redemption and revenge, but Sheila found herself focused on smaller things—the warmth of Finn's hand in hers, the soft sound of his breathing, the way their shoulders fit perfectly together.

"I've been thinking," she said after a while. "About what Rider said. About people who see murder as performance."

"What about it?"

"This murderer isn't just killing. He's directing. Casting. Creating his own narrative." She straightened slightly but didn't let go of his hand. "These scenes he's recreating—they're not random. They mean something to him."

"Like what?"

"I don't know yet. But watching this..." She gestured at the screen. "The way the main character is presented, the themes of judgment and redemption... Someone chose these specific scenes for a reason. Plenty of actors are denied roles, sometimes unfairly. But what made the killer focus on these two actors? Or was it more about these two movies?"

Finn was quiet for a moment, thinking. "We still need to watch 'The Winter Palace.' See how Jessica's scene fits into all this."

"Tomorrow," Sheila said. "Rider will have the festival archive key in the morning." She settled back against him, suddenly aware of how exhausted she was. "Right now, I just want to sit here with you. Pretend for a few minutes that we're just two people watching a movie together."

"We are two people watching a movie together," Finn said softly.

"You know what I mean."

The film played on, its images washing over them in waves of light and shadow. Sheila knew they should be paying closer attention, looking for clues in every frame. But for now, she let herself exist in this moment—in the quiet darkness of an empty theater, holding hands with the man she loved, pretending that tomorrow wouldn't bring more death and darkness to their door.

Because tomorrow would come soon enough. And with it, all the horror and complexity of their investigation would resume. But for these few precious minutes, they could just be Sheila and Finn, watching a movie together on a cold October night.

Even if the movie was about a murderer. Even if somewhere out there, a killer was perhaps planning their next performance.

The projector hummed steadily overhead, marking time like a metronome. Sheila closed her eyes, just for a moment, and let herself remember what it felt like to be young and hopeful in this very theater, before she knew just how dark the world could be.

Before, she knew that sometimes the most dangerous people were the ones who saw life itself as nothing more than a performance to be directed.

The festival archives occupied a cramped basement room beneath the Coldwater Theater, the concrete walls lined with metal shelves holding decades of independent films. Sheila stifled a yawn as she and Finn sat before the ancient TV cart where they'd just finished watching "The Winter Palace."

Neither had slept much. After leaving the Art House Cinema around 2 AM, they'd gone back to the station to coordinate the festival shutdown, then crashed for a few hours on the break room couch. Sheila's neck still ached from the awkward angle.

"Well," Finn said, ejecting the DVD, "that confirms it. The scene where Jessica was posed—it's exactly like Claire Montgomery's death scene. The blue dress, the chair placement, even the angle of her head." He rubbed his tired eyes. "Our killer has an eye for detail, I'll give them that."

"Almost like a director," Sheila said. She stood and stretched, trying to work out the kinks in her shoulders. "Two films, two scenes, two victims posed to match roles they didn't get."

"But why these specific scenes? These specific actors?"

Before Sheila could respond, footsteps on the stairs announced Carl Rider's arrival. He looked as exhausted as they felt, his sweater wrinkled and his wire-rimmed glasses slightly askew.

"Any insights?" he asked, gesturing at the TV.

"We need to talk to the actors who got these roles," Sheila said. "Claire Montgomery from 'The Winter Palace' and whoever played the lead in 'Ghost Light.'"

Rider pulled out his ever-present handkerchief, dabbing his forehead despite the basement's chill. "Claire's impossible, I'm afraid. She's filming a streaming series in Prague—has been for months."

"What about the lead from 'Ghost Light'?" Finn asked. "The role Thomas auditioned for?"

"Dylan Reeves." Rider replaced his handkerchief. "Actually, he's here at the festival. Or was, before we started shutting down. He moved to Los Angeles a few months ago, but he came back specifically for the festival. Said he wanted to network, try to parlay his 'Ghost Light' performance into bigger roles."

Sheila and Finn exchanged looks. "We need to find him," she said. "Before he leaves town."

"He was staying at the Mountain View," Rider said. "Though with everything that's happened, he might have checked out already."

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Finn pulled out his phone and dialed the hotel while Sheila paced the small basement room. After a brief conversation, he lowered the phone.

"He's checking out right now," Finn said. "Front desk says he's settling his bill."

They rushed up the basement stairs and out into the cold morning air. The festival's premature end had left Main Street feeling hollow, with only cleanup crews dismantling vendor booths and collecting abandoned programs. The Mountain View Hotel was less than two blocks away, but Sheila found herself jogging, unwilling to risk missing their lead.

They caught sight of Dylan Reeves in the hotel lobby just as he was heading for the exit, rolling suitcase in one hand and garment bag in the other. He moved with the easy confidence of someone who expected doors to open for him. Even in traveling clothes—designer jeans and a cashmere hoodie—he had the polished look of someone ready for a chance encounter with a casting director.

"Mr. Reeves," Sheila called out. "Sheriff Stone, Coldwater County. We need to speak with you."

Dylan turned, revealing classically handsome features and the kind of smile that probably got him callback after callback. "Listen, I'd love to help, but my flight leaves in two hours. Can we do this another time?" His voice carried the slight remnants of a Texas accent, softened by what Sheila guessed were years of dialect coaching.

"It's about the murders," Finn said quietly.

The smile faltered slightly. Dylan glanced between them, then at his watch—a subtle gesture that somehow managed to convey both concern and mild irritation. "I'm not sure how you expect me to be of any help."

"You got the lead role in 'Ghost Light,'" Sheila said. "The same role Thomas Rivera auditioned for before he was murdered last night."

Something flickered behind Dylan's eyes—recognition, maybe, or concern. But his expression remained carefully neutral. "Thomas Rivera? The hotel employee?"

"You knew him?"

"Not really. I mean, he brought room service a couple times." Dylan shifted his garment bag to his other hand. "Look, this is fascinating and all, but I really can't miss that flight. My agent set up meetings with—"

"The killer posed him to match your big scene," Sheila interrupted. "The one where you're waiting to hear about parole. Ring any bells?"

That got his attention. Dylan set down his luggage, his casual demeanor slipping just slightly. "Shit. You're serious?"

"Very. And we need to understand why the killer chose that scene, that role." Sheila gestured toward the hotel's coffee shop. "Twenty minutes of your time could help prevent another murder."

Dylan looked at his watch again, then sighed. "Fine. But I'm expense-claiming my changed flight." He managed a weak smile, as if trying to lighten the moment. "And I'm going to need coffee. Lots of coffee."

The coffee shop was empty except for a barista restocking pastries. Dylan ordered

something complicated with oat milk and extra espresso, then settled into a corner booth. Up close, Sheila could better study his mannerisms—the way he arranged his napkin just so, how he seemed to instinctively choose the seat with the best lighting. Everything about him spoke of someone highly aware of how he presented himself to the world.

"So," Sheila said, "what can you tell us about the audition process?"

"Pretty standard, really." Dylan shrugged as he stirred his coffee. "Cold read first, then callbacks with prepared scenes. I connected with the material right away—the whole redemption arc really spoke to me, you know? But I've always been good at evaluating my own strengths and weaknesses."

Sheila noticed how he managed to work in a mention of his acting ability, even while discussing a murder. She found herself wondering if his apparent cooperation was genuine or just another performance.

Dylan took a sip of his coffee, settling back in the booth. His posture was loose, open—either genuine comfort or very good acting. "I actually did time for the role," he said, catching their surprised looks. "Method stuff, you know? Spent a weekend in county lockup. Called in some favors, got permission to really experience what it's like being behind bars." He grinned. "My agent thought I was crazy, but it worked. Got me the part."

"Tell us about the actual audition day," Finn said.

"Let's see...there were maybe fifteen of us? All reading for the lead. They filmed everything—standard practice these days. Helps the creative team review performances later, compare different takes." He paused, tilting his head. "Come to think of it, I heard Thomas was really good. Quiet intensity, you know? Different interpretation than mine, by the sound of it, but solid work. He told me afterward he

was doing it more as a favor for a friend, though."

"You spoke with him?"

"Just a few words in the waiting room. Think he complimented my boots." Dylan glanced at his watch again, but without the earlier anxiety. "Listen, I know what you're thinking. Guy who got the role might have motive to be involved, right? But I was at a Q&A for 'Ghost Light' when Thomas was killed. Had to be thirty people there, all recording it on their phones. Plus the theater's security footage."

He pulled out his phone, bringing up social media posts from the previous night's Q&A. The timestamps supported his story.

Sheila studied him as he scrolled through photos. As far as she could tell, everything checked out. This wasn't the person they were looking for.

That didn't mean they couldn't learn any other useful things from him, though.

"You mentioned they filmed the auditions," she said. "Would those recordings still exist?"

"Oh yeah, they keep everything. Liability issues, you know? Plus, it helps casting directors review their choices if anyone ever questions their decisions." He took another sip of coffee. "Someone in the production office should have copies."

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Sheila felt a familiar spark of intuition. Audition tapes would show everyone who tried out for these roles—not just the people who made it to callbacks, but every person who walked through that door hoping for a chance. Every person who might have felt passed over, overlooked, denied their moment.

Then again, if the killer was someone who felt they'd been overlooked for a role (or multiple roles), why would they target others who'd also been overlooked? Wouldn't it be more logical for them to target the people who'd actually secured the roles?

It was clear to Sheila that she had yet to arrive at a working theory that explained the killings. Still, she sensed she was closer now than she'd ever been before.

"Who handles the technical side of recording auditions?" she asked.

"The festival has a whole AV department. Professional setup—multiple angles, good sound quality. You want to catch every nuance of the performance."

"But who specifically?" Finn pressed. "Who's in charge of documenting everything?"

Dylan thought for a moment. "Paul Wilson's been the technical director for years. He handles all the recording equipment and maintains the archives." He paused. "Actually, now that I think about it, he's kind of obsessive about documentation. Says he's creating a record of the creative process."

Sheila and Finn exchanged looks. Someone with technical expertise. Someone with access to all the theaters. Someone who would know about camera blind spots and how to work with specialized equipment like gaffer's wire.

"Would Wilson have access to the costume department?" Sheila asked carefully.

"Sure. He's got keys to pretty much everything. Been with the festival so long he's practically part of the building." Dylan checked his watch again. "Listen, I really do need to catch that flight..."

But Sheila was already standing, her mind racing. A technical director obsessed with documentation. Who would have seen every audition, every rejected actor, every moment of potential that never made it to the stage.

"We need to talk to Carl Rider," she told Finn as they left the coffee shop. "Find out everything he knows about Paul Wilson."

"You think Wilson's our killer?"

"I think someone's been studying these performances very carefully. Someone who understood exactly how to recreate specific scenes." She quickened her pace. "And someone who had access to all the equipment needed to document his own twisted productions."

They headed for Rider's office, both thinking about a man who spent his life watching others perform, recording their triumphs and failures. A man who might have decided to create his own performances, using the very actors he'd watched being rejected.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sitting in his basement workspace, surrounded by carefully organized shelves of audition tapes, he adjusted the volume on his private viewing station. The small TV cast a blue glow over his collection—hundreds of tapes, each one meticulously labeled and dated. Some went back decades, copied from the original reels before digital took over.

Sarah Martinez appeared in his third tape of the morning. Even in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the audition room, she had a presence—the kind that made you lean forward, hold your breath, and forget you were watching a recording. Her take on Elena in "Southwestern Gothic" was revelatory. Where other actresses played the character's madness big and theatrical, Sarah found the quiet horror in it.

The way she delivered the climactic monologue about her father's ghost, barely above a whisper...

He'd been eight when he first discovered the transformative power of cinema. Hiding in the basement of the local theater while his father raged upstairs in their apartment, he'd watch the same films over and over, learning how people could become someone else entirely. How they could escape. The projectionist—an older man named Ray—had let him stay, recognizing something in the quiet boy who memorized every line, every gesture.

By twelve, he was studying acting techniques. By sixteen, he was filming his own short movies with a borrowed camera. But his true talent lay in recognizing potential in others. He could watch an audition and see exactly what an actor was capable of, if only given the right direction.

Like Sarah. She understood Elena in a way the others didn't and brought layers of subtext to every line. But they'd given the role to Jessica Kent instead—a safer choice, someone with more festival credits to her name. "Southwestern Gothic" was supposed to premiere tonight, though the precipitous shutdown of the festival would change that.

Still, it didn't change the mistake the casting crew had made.

He paused the tape on Sarah's face and consulted his notes. She was still in town—he'd seen her at the Mountain View Hotel bar last night, drowning her

disappointment about the festival's cancellation. The role of Elena should have been hers. That scene in the bell tower, when Elena finally confronts her father's ghost...it could have been magnificent with the right staging.

He glanced at his worktable where the gaffer's wire gleamed under the basement's single bulb. Sarah deserved that role. Deserved to have her moment.

And he could give it to her. Could help her deliver the performance she was born to give.

Just like he'd helped the others.

He ejected the tape and returned it to its place in his collection, each one representing someone's dream, someone's chance at transformation. Then he began to plan how he would create Sarah's perfect scene.

After all, the show must go on.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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"What do you mean, he's not here?" Sheila asked Carl Rider, who stood amid boxes of festival materials being packed away. "I thought you said Paul Wilson's been your technical director for the past eight years."

"Nine," Rider corrected, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses. "And yes, it's strange. He's usually incredibly reliable—first one in, last one out. But he missed the morning staff meeting and hasn't answered his phone." He gestured at the half-dismantled festival office. "With everything happening so fast, I just assumed he was helping with the shutdown."

"When's the last time anyone saw him?" Finn asked.

Rider considered this. "Yesterday afternoon, I think. He was checking sound levels in Theater Three." He paused. "Though Marcus Harlow mentioned seeing him later, around eight PM. Said Paul was carrying some equipment to his car."

"We'll need Paul's home address. And a list of any other places he might go—storage units, workshops, anywhere he keeps equipment."

"Of course." Rider moved to his desk, rifling through employee files. "Though I should mention—Paul lives in that old converted theater on Cedar Street. The Revival Cinema? He bought it years ago, said he was going to restore it, but..." He shrugged. "It's mostly storage now, I think."

Sheila and Finn exchanged looks. An old theater would be the perfect place to hide—or to stage something.

"Got it," Rider said, handing over a personnel file. "Home address, emergency contacts, everything we have. Should I call around to the other venues? See if anyone's heard from him?"

"No," Sheila said quickly. "If he's involved in this, we don't want to tip him off that we're looking."

"Involved?" Rider looked troubled. "You don't really think...?"

"We're not making any assumptions. But right now, considering what's at stake, we can't overlook any possibilities."

Rider nodded, but Sheila thought he looked uneasy. It wasn't every day the festival you worked so hard to organize was associated with two homicides.

As they headed for their car, Sheila found herself scanning the windows of the nearby buildings, searching for a pair of eyes looking back—like the eyes of the man in the charcoal suit.

Had he really been watching her? Or was her paranoia getting to her?

It was a short drive to the Revival Cinema, and before long the building's marquee loomed before them, dark and weathered. Plywood covered most of the windows, and faded posters advertised movies that had played there decades ago. A side door stood partially open.

"Someone's here," Finn said, nodding toward a blue Subaru parked in the alley.

They approached cautiously, weapons ready. The door creaked as Sheila pushed it wider, revealing a dim corridor that smelled of dust and old popcorn. Somewhere ahead, they could hear movement—the scrape of something being dragged across the

floor.

They found Paul Wilson in what had once been the main theater, surrounded by stacks of equipment. Cables snaked across the floor, connecting various pieces of sound and lighting gear. Wilson himself was on his knees, carefully wrapping gaffer's wire around a bundle of cables.

At the sight of the gaffer's wire, Sheila's hand instinctively moved toward her weapon.

"Paul Wilson?" she called out.

He startled, dropping the wire. "Shit!" He scrambled to his feet, revealing himself to be a thin man in his fifties with wire-rimmed glasses and prematurely gray hair. "You scared me. I didn't—I mean, the theater's closed."

"Sheriff Stone, Coldwater County. This is Deputy Mercer." Sheila studied the space, noting the careful organization of the equipment. "We've been trying to reach you."

"Oh. Right. My phone..." He gestured vaguely toward a pile of gear. "Battery died. I've been trying to get all this packed up now that the festival's canceled." His hands wouldn't stay still, fidgeting with a coil of wire. "Terrible business, those murders. Just terrible."

"You knew Jessica Gregory?" Finn asked.

"Sure, everyone did. Sweet girl. Always helping out, learning about the technical side of things." He swallowed hard. "She used to ask about lighting setups, sound equipment. Wanted to understand how everything worked."

Sheila watched him carefully. "Including the equipment in Theater Seven?"

Wilson's hands stilled for just a moment."I suppose.She had keys to most places—Carl gave the concession staff access for cleaning and maintenance."

"Mind telling us where you were last night between nine and nine-thirty?"

"Here."Wilson adjusted his glasses nervously."Moving equipment.The festival ending early means I have to get everything into storage faster than planned.Some of this gear is rented, has to be back by tomorrow."

"Anyone who can verify that?"

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He shook his head. "I work better alone. Less chance of expensive equipment getting damaged."

Sheila noted how precisely everything was arranged—like a stage being set. She thought about the gaffer's wire he'd been handling so expertly, about his access to the theaters, about his knowledge of camera blind spots and security systems.

"The audition tapes," she said carefully. "From 'The Winter Palace' and 'Ghost Light'—would you have copies?"

"We record everything during the festival. For insurance purposes, you know?" He started gathering up loose cables, his movements quick and jerky. "But those particular tapes would be in the festival archives. I just handle the technical side."

Something about his tone made Sheila uneasy. Was he being helpful, or just telling them what they wanted to hear? And why was he here alone, handling the same type of wire used to kill two people?

"That's a lot of wire you're working with," she said, keeping her voice casual.

Wilson glanced down at the coils. "Standard gaffer's wire. We use it to secure everything—lights, cables, sound equipment." He pushed his glasses up. "Though I suppose you know that, given how the victims were..."

"Strangled?" Sheila finished.

Wilson flinched. "Yes. Terrible way to die."

Finn moved closer to one of the equipment cases. "You said Jessica was interested in the technical side. Did she ever come here? To learn about the equipment?"

"Here?" Wilson's hands started moving again, compulsively organizing cables. "No, no. This is private storage. I don't... I mean, I've never brought anyone here."

"Mind if we look around?" Sheila asked.

Wilson hesitated. "I'd rather... there's expensive equipment, you see. Insurance requirements..."

"We'll be careful," Sheila said, already moving toward a door marked 'Projection Booth.' "Just doing our due diligence."

The booth was cramped but meticulously organized. Old film reels lined one wall, while digital equipment occupied the other. But what caught Sheila's attention was a small TV setup in the corner, complete with a DVD player and stacks of recorded media.

"You review a lot of footage up here?" she asked.

Wilson hovered in the doorway. "Sometimes. For quality control."

Sheila picked up one of the DVD cases. "These aren't festival materials."

"Personal collection," Wilson said quickly, taking the case and returning it to the shelf. "I'm something of a film buff. Been collecting since I was a kid."

"Mind if we take a look?"

"I'd really rather—" Wilson started, then seemed to catch himself. "I mean, they're not

organized. Just old movies, nothing important."

Finn appeared behind Wilson. "We could get a warrant."

Wilson's face tightened. "Listen, I don't appreciate being treated like a suspect. I've worked at this festival for nine years. Ask anyone—I'm professional and reliable. I would never..." He took a shaky breath. "Jessica was sweet. Thomas was kind. Why would I hurt them?"

"Nobody's accusing you of anything, Mr. Wilson."

"It doesn't feel that way."

"If you have nothing to hide," Finn said, then you won't mind if we take a closer look at your collection. Just to rule you out."

Wilson's hands clenched and unclenched. "Fine. Take them. Take whatever you want. But I want my lawyer present for any questioning." He backed out of the doorway. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have equipment to pack."

They watched him hurry back to the main theater floor, his movements more agitated than before.

"He's hiding something," Finn said quietly.

"Yeah." Sheila studied the DVD collection. "But is it murder? Or something else?"

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"Want me to call for backup? Have someone watch him?"

Sheila nodded. "And get CSU down here. I want this whole place gone over with a fine-tooth comb."

"What about us?"

"We should do some interviews," she said. "Talk to anyone connected to Paul Wilson, anyone who might be able to give us a clearer idea about whether he's our guy." She picked up another DVD case. "And I want these recordings carefully studied. Something tells me Paul Wilson's 'personal collection' might hold the key to everything."

If they could just figure out what they were really looking at.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sarah Martinez checked her phone again as she hurried up the stairs to her third-floor apartment. The group chat was buzzing with excitement—twenty-six local film buffs secretly gathering at the Mountain View Theater for one final screening. Someone had gotten hold of a preview copy of "Southwestern Gothic," and even though the festival was officially over, they were determined to watch it.

The irony wasn't lost on her. The film she'd poured her heart into auditioning for, the role that should have been hers, would finally be shown—just not to the audience it deserved.

Her phone buzzed again:Hurry up, S!We're sneaking in through the back in 30.

She fumbled with her keys, cursing the ancient lock that always stuck.Her apartment was small but bright, morning sun streaming through the bay window where she practiced her lines.A stack of well-worn scripts sat on the window seat, each one annotated with her careful notes.The "Southwestern Gothic" sides were on top, the pages crinkled from countless readings.

Sarah caught a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror—dark hair falling out of its messy bun, circles under her eyes from a mostly sleepless night.She'd spent hours tossing and turning, thinking about Jessica Gregory's murder, about Thomas Rivera.She hadn't known either of them well, but in a small theater community like Coldwater's, every death felt personal.

Still, she couldn't miss this screening.She had to see what Jessica Kent had done with Elena's role.Had to know if the director's "safer choice" had paid off.

Her phone buzzed again:Running behind.Door's propped for 10 more mins.

Coming!she texted back.

Sarah grabbed her messenger bag, the worn leather soft against her hip.Inside was her audition notebook, filled with research about Elena's character—the young woman haunted by her father's ghost, driven to madness in that lonely bell tower.She'd spent months developing Elena's backstory, understanding her motivations.The rejection still stung.

She needed her lucky sweater—the oversized blue cardigan she'd worn to her first successful audition.It was probably in her bedroom.As she turned to look, someone knocked on her door.

"Just a second!"she called out, assuming it was her neighbor Mrs.Grady, who often stopped by, ostensibly to share leftovers but really to trade gossip.Sarah had left the door unlocked—it would only take a minute to grab the sweater, and Mrs.Grady had been in her apartment dozens of times before.

The bedroom was a mess of scattered clothing and script pages.She found the sweater half-hidden under her pillow, pulled it on over her t-shirt.The familiar softness was comforting.She checked her phone again.If she hurried, she'd make it.

"Sorry for the wait, Mrs.Grady!"she called out, heading back toward the living room."I was just—"

But when she emerged from the bedroom, it wasn't Mrs.Grady waiting for her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The vinyl booth at Sunny's Diner squeaked as Marcus Harlow shifted uncomfortably.Empty coffee cups and half-eaten pieces of toast cluttered the table between them.Through the window, Sheila could see festival cleanup crews taking down the last of the street banners.

"I really don't know what else to tell you," Marcus said, pushing his thick-rimmed glasses up."Paul's just the tech guy.Barely talks to anyone except when he has to.I mean, yeah, he was around for all the auditions, but he was running sound.That's it."

Sheila shared a glance with Finn.They'd been at this for hours now, interviewing everyone connected to the festival's technical side.Their notepad was filled with dead ends.

She sighed deeply."Well, thanks for your time," she said, sliding out of the booth.

Outside, the October sun had burned away the morning fog, but the air remained crisp. Main Street felt hollow without the festival crowd—just local shops reopening, trying to pretend things were normal despite the murders.

"That's what, six interviews this morning?" Finn asked as they walked toward their car. "And still nothing solid."

"Seven if you count the custodian," Sheila said. "And all he could tell us was that Paul Wilson sometimes worked late. Not exactly damning information."

They crossed the theater parking lot, their footsteps sharp in the unusual quiet. A lone festival poster fluttered against a lamppost, already looking like something from the distant past.

"Let's break it down," Finn said. "What do we actually know?"

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Sheila counted off on her fingers. "The killer has intimate knowledge of both films. Access to theater equipment, specifically gaffer's wire. Knows the building layouts, security blind spots. And most importantly, strong opinions about who should have gotten these roles."

"Which could describe half the people involved in local theater," Finn said.

"True." Sheila paused near their car, looking back at the Coldwater Theater's facade. "But there's something else—the timing feels deliberate. Why now? Why during the festival?"

"Maximum impact?" Finn suggested. "More eyes on the performance?"

"Maybe." She leaned against the car, feeling the sun-warmed metal through her jacket. "It's not a knee-jerk reaction—if it were, Jessica would have been killed much sooner, maybe back when her film premiered."

"What I don't get is why, if you think they deserved these roles, you'd kill them. It would be more logical to me if he targeted the people who actually did get the roles. It would be a protest of sorts. But this..." He shook his head. "Why is he punishing the people he thinks are most talented, most deserving?"

"He must not see it as punishment," Sheila mused. "Maybe, in his warped view, it's a reward—everyone gets to see them in the role they auditioned for. Their moment of glory." She trailed off, chewing her lip.

"But if that's the case," Finn said, "what happens now that the festival is closed? Does

he stop killing... or just find a new audience?"

They stood in silence for a moment, watching a pickup truck haul away dismantled vendor booths. It was almost noon, and they were no closer to identifying their killer than they had been last night.

"Whatever the case, Paul Wilson's still our best lead," Finn said finally. "Those DVDs in his projection booth—they weren't just random movies. They were organized, labeled."

She thought about Wilson's nervousness and his too-quick explanations. Something about him nagged at her, but was it genuine suspicion or just the frustration of a stalled investigation?

"Well," Finn said, "if we're going to conduct any more interviews, we'd better get to it. This place is becoming a ghost town in a hurry."

Movement caught Sheila's attention, and she straightened up. "Maybe not as empty as we thought." She nodded toward the Mountain View Theater, where two people were slipping in through a side door, glancing around furtively as they did so. One carried what looked like a laptop bag.

"That's odd," Finn said. "So much for the festival being shut down."

They crossed the street, approaching the theater quietly. The door was propped slightly open with a wooden wedge. Inside, they could hear the muffled sound of a movie playing—not the usual booming audio of a proper screening, but something softer, like it was being played through portable speakers.

The theater's darkness enveloped them as they entered. On screen, a young woman in period dress was ascending a bell tower, her face illuminated by lightning flashes. The

image quality wasn't perfect—clearly a preview copy being projected from someone's laptop. About twenty people sat scattered throughout the seats, completely absorbed in the film.

A young man spotted them and jumped up. "Look, we know we're not supposed to be here, but—"

"Sit down," someone hissed. "We're missing Elena's big scene!"

"This theater is closed," Finn said, though he kept his voice low out of instinctive respect for the viewers. It was more a question than a statement.

A woman with bright red hair turned around. "Please don't stop it. We're film students—this was supposed to premiere tonight. 'Southwestern Gothic.' We've been waiting months to see it."

"You do realize there's been a murder," Sheila said, "and the festival's been shut down for safety reasons?"

"We're being careful," another viewer insisted. "Everyone here knows each other. We're part of the local film community. Look, there's only thirty minutes left—can't you just let us finish?"

Sheila studied the group. They did seem to know each other, chatting quietly between scenes, making notes in journals. These weren't random moviegoers but serious film enthusiasts.

"How did you even get a copy?" Finn asked.

Several people shushed him as a crucial scene began. On screen, the protagonist was confronting what appeared to be her father's ghost, the camera work creating a

dizzying sense of height in the bell tower.

"Sarah's friend works in post-production," the red-haired woman whispered. "Said we could do one private screening, just for the local crowd. Most of us were involved in the production somehow."

"Who's Sarah?" Sheila asked, her investigator's instincts awakening.

"Sarah Martinez." The woman sat up and looked around. "She's still not here?"

No answer. Sheila's toes instinctively clenched. "Did Sarah audition for this film, by any chance?"

The woman nodded. "Yeah, she auditioned for Elena—that's the lead role." She gestured at the screen where the protagonist was delivering an emotional monologue. "She was amazing in the audition, but they went with Jessica Kent instead. More festival credits to her name."

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"Sarah was devastated," someone else added. "She'd researched the role for months. Even learned bell-ringing to understand the character better."

"And she was supposed to be here?" Finn asked.

The red-haired woman checked her phone. "She helped organize this whole thing. I was texting all morning about it. But she hasn't responded in over an hour."

"That's not like her," another viewer said. "She's almost compulsively punctual. Says it's a trait she picked up from auditioning."

Sheila was getting a bad feeling about this. She moved closer to the group. "Tell me more about her audition."

"It was incredible," the red-haired woman said. "I was working sound that day. She brought something different to Elena—this quiet intensity. Everyone thought she had it locked. But then the producers insisted on someone with more name recognition."

"The same producers who are here for the festival?" Finn asked.

"We're here," someone said. "Most of them left when the festival got canceled. But yeah, same ones."

On screen, Elena was now at the top of the bell tower, the camera swirling around her as she confronted her demons. The scene was beautifully shot, but Sheila found herself more interested in the audience's reactions—particularly how several of them were shaking their heads.

"Kent's playing it too big," one viewer muttered. "Sarah understood the subtlety."

"Where does Sarah live?" Sheila asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

"Over on Maple Street," the red-haired woman said. "Apartment 3C. Should we...should we be worried? I mean, she's probably just sleeping in or something. The festival being canceled hit her pretty hard."

"Especially after what happened with Jessica Gregory," another viewer added. "Sarah said it reminded her how fragile an acting career can be. How quickly opportunities can disappear."

The movie was building to its climax now, the bell tower scene reaching its dramatic peak. But Sheila was already moving toward the exit, Finn right behind her.

A young actor, devastated about losing a role. And now she wasn't answering her phone.

They needed to get to Sarah's apartment.

Before she became the killer's next performance.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sheila took the stairs two at a time, her hand on her weapon. The third-floor hallway of Sarah Martinez's apartment building was eerily quiet, the kind of midday stillness that made every footstep seem too loud.

"Door's open," Finn said quietly, indicating apartment 3C.

Sheila's heart sank. No movement, no sound from within. Just the weight of silence

and the faint scent of Sarah's perfume lingering in the air.

They drew their weapons and approached carefully. Sheila noticed a blue sweater draped over a chair just inside—the casual domesticity of it made her throat tighten. Someone getting ready to go out. Someone who expected to come back.

"Clear the rooms together?" Finn asked softly.

Sheila nodded. They'd done this countless times, but something about today felt different. Maybe it was the morning sun streaming through the windows, making everything too bright, too real. Or maybe it was the growing certainty of what they would find.

The living room was a snapshot of an artist's life. Scripts are scattered across a window seat, and post-it notes are marking crucial pages. A video camera set up on a tripod, presumably for recording audition tapes. Coffee cups on every surface, some still half-full.

But no sign of struggle.

"Kitchen's clear," Finn whispered, checking around the breakfast bar.

They moved deeper into the apartment. A hallway led to what appeared to be a bedroom, its door partially open. Sheila's training kicked in as they approached—check the corners, watch the sight lines, stay focused.

But nothing could have prepared her for what they found.

The bedroom door creaked as Finn pushed it open, revealing a scene that made Sheila's breath catch. Sarah Martinez sat propped against the headboard of her bed, perfectly posed. She wore a vintage dress that must have been brought by the

killer—the same costume from the bell tower scene they'd just watched being projected at the Mountain View Theater.

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Her head was tilted back, eyes closed, hands folded in her lap. Around her neck, the familiar marks of gaffer's wire caught the morning light. But it was her expression that haunted Sheila—peaceful, almost transcendent, like Elena's face in that final moment of confronting her father's ghost.

"We're too late," Finn said softly.

Sheila holstered her weapon, her movements mechanical. "I should have connected it sooner. The screening, the missing role..."

She stared at Sarah's still form, at the precise arrangement of every detail. This wasn't just murder—it was direction. Someone had staged this scene with loving attention, creating their own twisted version of the film's climactic moment.

And Sheila had let it happen.

"Don't," Finn said, reading her thoughts. "We couldn't have known."

But they should have. The pieces had been there—an actor who lost a role, a crucial scene, a killer who turned rejection into performance. Now, Sarah Martinez would never see how Jessica Kent had played her dream role. Would never know if the producers had made the right choice.

Would never perform again.

Sheila moved closer to the body, careful not to disturb anything that might be evidence. The vintage dress was expertly fitted, as if the killer had known Sarah's

measurements exactly. The fabric shimmered in the morning light—authentic to the period, probably borrowed or stolen from the festival's costume department.

Jessica had been wearing a dress, too. But Thomas Rivera had been found in his work clothes. Why? Because he was murdered in a public place where the killer didn't have time to change him?

"Check the rest of the apartment," she said quietly. "The killer might have left something behind."

As Finn moved out, Sheila studied the scene more carefully. The position was perfect—exactly like the film's bell tower scene, but translated to this intimate setting. Sarah's dark hair had been arranged to catch the light from the window, creating the same dramatic shadows they'd seen on screen.

"Sheila," Finn called from the living room. "You need to see this."

She found him holding a notebook, its pages filled with Sarah's handwriting. "Her audition notes," he said. "Listen to this: 'Elena's final scene isn't about madness—it's about transcendence. She's not running from her father's ghost, she's embracing it. Finally understanding.'"

The words hit Sheila hard. Sarah had understood the role deeply, had seen layers that maybe even the writers hadn't intended. And someone had used that understanding to create this grotesque tribute.

"There's more," Finn said, turning pages. "She'd been studying bell towers, learning about their history. Even visited the one at St. Mark's Cathedral to get a feel for the height, the acoustics."

"The killer must have known all this," Sheila said. "Must have watched her audition,

seen her interpretation."She looked back toward the bedroom."This wasn't just about recreating a scene.It was about honoring her vision of the character."

"While destroying any chance she had of playing it."

Sheila swallowed hard."The festival being canceled didn't stop him," she said."If anything, it might have accelerated his timeline."

"We need to find Paul Wilson," Finn said."Those DVDs in his projection booth—"

"Might not mean anything," Sheila interrupted."Maybe we've been looking at this wrong.Wilson has technical knowledge, yes.But this..."She gestured toward the bedroom."This requires something else.An artistic eye.An understanding of performance."

An idea struck her."The audition tapes," she said."Wilson said they keep everything for insurance purposes.But who actually reviews those tapes?Who makes the final casting decisions?"

"The director," Finn said."And producers."

Sheila pulled out her phone."Call Rider.Get a list of everyone involved in casting for both productions.Someone watched these auditions, someone saw the performances that never made it to screen."

Someone who thought they could do better.

As if in response to her thoughts, a cold breeze drifted through the apartment.The killer had left the door open like a theater exit, inviting the audience—they—to witness his latest work.

His latest performance.

And Sheila had a terrible feeling it wouldn't be his last.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sheila scanned the festival's production logs spread across her desk, cross-referencing names with audition records. Her eyes kept catching on a single name that appeared in both "The Winter Palace" and "Southwestern Gothic" paperwork: Mitchell Blackwood, Executive Producer.

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"Look at this," she said to Finn, who was reviewing security footage nearby. "Blackwood was part of both casting decisions—choosing Claire Montgomery over Jessica Gregory and Jessica Kent over Sarah Martinez."

"What about choosing Micah Weller over Thomas Rivera?" Finn asked.

Sheila shook her head. "There's no record of it here. That doesn't mean he couldn't have been involved in a smaller capacity, though."

Finn leaned over to study the documents. "Looks like he pushed back when directors wanted to cast our victims. There's a whole email chain here about 'marketable talent' versus 'raw potential.'"

"Someone who might have resented seeing talented actors passed over for commercial reasons." Sheila stood, gathering the papers. "Let's find him."

Finn was already on his phone. "Dispatch? I need flight information for Mitchell Blackwood...yeah, all departures to Los Angeles today." He listened for a moment. "Got it. Thanks." He looked up at Sheila. "His 9 AM flight got grounded for mechanical issues. The next available seat isn't until tomorrow morning."

"So he's still in town. Where?"

"My guess? The Mountain View Hotel is the most likely option. Not far from the airport, has a few penthouse suites for the rich and famous. Just the kind of place for an executive producer."

"Let's give them a call, then."

Finn was already looking up the number. He found it and dialed.

"Hi, this is Deputy Mercer with CCSD...yes, can you tell me if Mitchell Blackwood is staying at your hotel?" A pause. "Yes, very important, I assure you. No, I'm sure he'd have no problem with you sharing that information—we just need to speak with him."

Another pause, then Finn's voice brightened. "Oh, he is? Well, thank you so much. We'll be there shortly."

He hung up and turned to Sheila. "Looks like we're in luck."

They found Mitchell Blackwood at the Mountain View Hotel bar, nursing what looked like his third scotch of the morning. He was still wearing his festival lanyard.

Blackwood looked exactly like what Sheila expected of an independent film producer—expensive casual wear, carefully maintained salt-and-pepper hair, the kind of tan you got from meetings on rooftop patios. He studied them over his scotch.

"Mr. Blackwood," Sheila said, sliding onto the barstool next to him. Her body ached from lack of sleep, and the bar's attempt at mood lighting wasn't helping her growing headache. "I'm Sheriff Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We were hoping for a few minutes of your time."

"This is about the festival murders, isn't it?" he asked without looking at her.

"That's right," Finn said as he sat on the opposite side of Blackwood, effectively

bracketing him."We understand you were involved in casting both 'The Winter Palace' and 'Southwestern Gothic.'"

"Among others."Blackwood swirled his scotch."Look, I've already heard about Sarah Martinez.Terrible thing.But I don't see how I can help."

"You were part of the decision to cast Claire Montgomery over Jessica Gregory in 'The Winter Palace,'" Sheila said."And Jessica Kent over Sarah Martinez in 'Southwestern Gothic.'"

"That's what producers do.We make decisions."He took a sip of scotch."Sometimes difficult ones."

"Tell us about those decisions," Finn prompted.

Blackwood sighed heavily."What's to tell?Claire Montgomery had festival buzz, awards recognition.Jessica Kent had family connections in distribution.In this business, talent isn't everything.You need marketable names, people who can help get the film seen."

Sheila noticed how he avoided eye contact when discussing the casting choices."And Jessica Gregory?Sarah Martinez?What did they have?"

"Raw talent."Blackwood's voice softened slightly."Gregory brought something special to that role—this vulnerability mixed with strength.And Martinez...hell, she understood Elena better than the writers did."He knocked back the rest of his scotch."But potential doesn't pay the bills.This isn't about art, it's about investment returns."

"Did anyone strongly disagree with these decisions?"Finn asked."Anyone involved in production who argued for Gregory or Martinez?"

Blackwood's hand tightened on his empty glass. "There's always disagreement in creative decisions. That's the nature of—"

"Names," Sheila interrupted. Her patience, worn thin by exhaustion and guilt, was rapidly fraying. "We need specific names."

"Look," Blackwood said, "I can't just—"

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"Three people are dead," Sheila cut in. Her voice was quiet but hard. "Three people who shared one thing in common: they lost roles someone thought they should have had. Roles they understood deeply. And now they'll never perform again." She leaned closer. "So I'll ask one more time: who argued for keeping them?"

Blackwood signaled the bartender for another scotch, though it wasn't yet noon. His hands weren't quite steady.

"Bradley Greenwald fought hard for Jessica Gregory," he said finally. "Said she had a quality the role needed. But he was just the director—he didn't have final say." He laughed bitterly. "That's the thing about independent film. Directors think they're artists, but really, they're just another line item in the budget."

"What about 'Southwestern Gothic'?" Finn asked.

"That was...messier." Blackwood accepted his fresh scotch but just stared into it. "Marcus Harlow pushed for Sarah. Said her take on Elena was revolutionary. Paul Wilson too—kept showing her audition tape to anyone who'd watch. But the money people wanted Kent."

"Paul Wilson advocated for her?" Sheila asked, exchanging looks with Finn. "The technical director?"

"Wilson's more than just a tech guy. He's been in theater his whole life, knows talent when he sees it. He and Marcus presented this whole argument about Sarah's interpretation, how she'd found layers in the character..." Blackwood took a shaky sip. "But the investors had already decided."

"Tell us more about Wilson's involvement," Sheila said, keeping her voice neutral despite her growing interest.

"He was...passionate about it.Said we were making a huge mistake.Started talking about the history of method acting, about authentic performance."Blackwood's face clouded with memory."Actually got pretty intense about it.Said we were destroying pure talent in favor of commercial success."

"When was this?"Finn asked.

"About two months ago, right after final casting.He confronted me right here, at this bar."Blackwood gestured with his glass."Said I was everything wrong with modern cinema.That true artists were being silenced by people like me."

Sheila felt her exhaustion lifting slightly as new possibilities emerged."Did he have similar reactions to other casting decisions?Like Jessica Gregory losing her role?"

"Now that you mention it..."Blackwood set down his scotch."He was involved in both productions.Always watching the auditions, saying he was adjusting sound levels or whatever.But thinking back, he paid unusual attention to the actors.Took notes.Made recordings beyond the official ones."

"His own private collection," Finn murmured.

"There was this one time," Blackwood continued, warming to the conversation, "when I found him in the editing bay late at night.He was watching audition tapes—not just from our productions, but from years of festival submissions.Said he was 'studying performance evolution' or something artsy like that."

Sheila leaned forward."Mr.Blackwood, this is important.Did Wilson have any personal connection to theater?Acting experience?"

"I heard he tried acting years ago. Never got any significant roles." Blackwood's eyes widened slightly. "Wait, you don't think... I mean, Paul's eccentric, sure, but he's been with the festival for years."

"Where would he keep his personal recordings?" Sheila asked. "Beyond what we found in the Revival Cinema?"

"He has a home studio. Used to invite people over to watch classic films, talk about performance theory." Blackwood shook his head. "Though now that I think about it, no one's been there in years. He got... intense about it. Started talking about how modern actors were destroying the craft, how someone needed to preserve true performance art."

Finn was already pulling out his phone, presumably to look up Wilson's address. But Sheila had one more question.

"The scenes where the victims were posed," she said carefully. "Would Wilson have had access to the films? Known the blocking, the costume details?"

"He worked on both productions. Knew every scene inside and out." Blackwood took another drink, his hand shaking more noticeably now. "Shit. Do you really think he... I mean, I knew he was passionate about performance, but..."

"One more thing," Sheila said. "Is there anyone else? Anyone whose audition particularly impressed Wilson, who didn't get the role they wanted?"

Blackwood thought for a moment. "There's a showcase screening tonight at the Art House—or was supposed to be, before everything got canceled. Local talent, emerging artists. Wilson was especially interested in one performer, Anna Martin. Said her monologue was 'transcendent.'" He checked his watch. "She was supposed to open the showcase at eight."

Sheila stood, her exhaustion forgotten. They had a possible suspect, a potential next victim, and a timeline. Now they just had to find Anna, make sure she was safe, and prove Wilson was their killer before he could stage his next performance.

"Do you happen to know where she's staying?" Sheila asked.

"Yeah, she's staying at a place over on Woodridge, right across from the laundromat. Can't miss it."

"Well, we appreciate your help. You should probably book a different flight out of town."

"Already done," he said quietly. "First flight tomorrow morning." He stared into his scotch. "You know what the worst part is? Wilson was right about some things. Sarah Martinez, Jessica Gregory—they were special talents. Real artists." He looked up at Sheila. "We just never thought someone would kill for art."

But as Sheila and Finn hurried out of the bar, headed to Anna's apartment, she wondered if that was really what this was about. Or maybe, like everything else in this case, they were just seeing what the killer wanted them to see.

Another performance in a production they were only beginning to understand.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Anna Martin's second-floor walkup was exactly the kind of place where you'd expect a struggling actor to live—crumbling brick exterior, window unit air conditioners rattling in their frames, bicycle delivery guys constantly coming and going. Her roommate, Tracy, met them at the doorway in paint-splattered overalls.

"Anna left hours ago," Tracy said, glancing between them nervously. "Said she was meeting Paul Wilson at the Revival Cinema. Something about preparing for tonight's showcase."

"The showcase was canceled," Finn said.

"That's what I told her. But she said Paul had this idea about filming her performance anyway. Said it could be good footage for her reel." Tracy twisted the hem of her shirt. "I thought it was weird, with everything going on, but Anna said Paul's been really supportive of her work. Said he understood her artistic vision."

Sheila felt her stomach tighten. "What's Anna's cell number?"

Tracy recited it quickly. Sheila dialed while Finn continued questioning Tracy.

"Did she say specifically where they were meeting?" Finn asked.

"The main theater, I think. He has all his recording equipment there." Tracy's eyes

widened as Sheila's call went straight to voicemail."Wait, is Anna in trouble?Is Paul—"

"Try her again," Finn said quietly.

Sheila redialed.This time, it rang once before going to voicemail.She shook her head.

"Call us immediately if she contacts you," Sheila said, already moving toward the stairs."And Tracy?Lock your door."

They hurried down to their car, Finn sliding behind the wheel while Sheila tried Anna's phone one more time.Still nothing.

"How far to the Revival?"she asked, checking her weapon.

"Four minutes with lights and sirens."

"Make it three."

The Revival Cinema's brick facade loomed before them less than three minutes later.Finn killed the sirens a block away, not wanting to announce their arrival.The side door was unlocked again, but this time the building didn't feel empty.As they drew their weapons, a door closed somewhere inside.

"You hear that?"Finn whispered.

Sheila nodded.They moved carefully through the dim corridor, checking each shadow.The main theater was dark, but a shaft of light spilled from beneath the projection booth door.

A woman's bag sat abandoned near the booth stairs—expensive leather, the kind of

investment piece a young actor might buy to look professional at auditions. A script lay nearby, pages scattered as if dropped in a hurry.

"Anna's?" Finn asked quietly.

Sheila picked up the script. The margins were filled with careful notes in small, precise handwriting. The same kind of detailed character analysis they'd found in Sarah Martinez's apartment.

They climbed the stairs silently, but the projection booth was empty. The door to a small adjoining room stood open, revealing something that made Sheila catch her breath.

The room's walls were covered in monitors, each displaying footage from different locations around town. The Mountain View Hotel lobby. The Coldwater Theater's stage door. The Art House Cinema's parking lot.

"He's been watching everyone," Finn said softly.

Shelves lined the remaining wall space, filled with carefully labeled recordings. Not just audition tapes, but surveillance footage going back years. Each box had a name, a date, and detailed notes about the subject's "performance evolution."

"This is more than just auditions," Sheila said, examining the labels. "He's been studying them. Their habits, their routines." She pulled out her phone to call for backup, but something else caught her eye—a notebook open on the desk.

The handwriting wasn't Wilson's careful block letters, but something more flowing, more artistic. The last entry was dated that morning:

P says he's finally ready to show me his private collection. Says he's been

documenting true performance art for years.Maybe this is my chance to prove I understand his vision.To show him I'm ready for a starring role.

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"Anna wrote this," Sheila said. "She came here willingly."

"But where did they go?" Finn was examining the surveillance monitors. "None of these shows the inside of this building."

Sheila turned slowly, studying the room with new eyes. Decades of film reels lined the walls, meticulously labeled. Ancient projection equipment gathered dust in corners. But something about the space felt wrong.

"The room's too small," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"For a projection booth. Look at the exterior wall—it should extend another ten feet at least." She ran her hands along the wood paneling. "There has to be..."

Her fingers caught on something—a slight gap, barely noticeable unless you were looking for it. She pressed, and a panel shifted with a soft click.

Behind it was another door, solid metal with a heavy handle.

"That's not original to the building," Finn said quietly.

Sheila examined the handle. "Recently used too. See the oil on the hinges? Someone's been keeping it maintained."

They shared a look, both thinking the same thing: Wilson had spent nine years

renovating this old theater.Nine years with unlimited access.Nine years to make modifications that nobody would notice.

Sheila checked her weapon, then reached for the handle."Ready?"

Finn nodded, his own weapon drawn.

The door opened onto a narrow staircase leading down into darkness.Sheila started down the stairs, keeping close to the wall.Each step felt solid, professionally installed.This wasn't some hasty renovation—someone had taken their time, created exactly what they needed.The stairs seemed to descend forever, curving deeper beneath the old theater.

A door closed somewhere below.Then the sound of footsteps echoed up the stairwell.

"They're on the move!"Sheila said in an urgent whisper as she raced down the stairs.The beam of her flashlight bounced wildly against the walls, creating disorienting shadows.

A door closed below them.Then another.

"Multiple exits," Finn said between breaths."He knows the layout."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, finding themselves in a concrete corridor that branched in three directions.Each branch disappeared into darkness, and all three had doors standing open.

"Split up?"Finn asked.

Sheila moved closer to the nearest doorway, listening."Wait..."

A faint sound carried from the left corridor—something metal scraping against concrete.

They moved quickly but cautiously down the left branch. The air grew colder, damper. More doors lined the corridor, but these were older, original to the building. Except one—a modern steel door that stood slightly ajar.

As they approached, they heard movement on the other side. Sheila gestured for Finn to take the high position while she went low. On a silent count of three, they pushed through.

The room beyond was massive—some kind of former storage space, now converted into what looked like a private theater. Rows of seats faced a small stage. But Wilson wasn't there.

A door was closing on the far side.

"Stop! Police!" Sheila shouted, already running.

They burst through the door into another corridor, catching a glimpse of Wilson disappearing around a corner. His footsteps echoed off the walls, creating a disorienting cacophony.

Had he not heard them? Or was he trying to escape?

Sheila and Finn rounded the corner to find a maze of pipes and maintenance accessways. Steam hissed from somewhere deeper in the complex. Their flashlight beams caught brief glimpses of Wilson moving through the shadows, always just out of reach.

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They followed the sound of Wilson's footsteps, but the echoes made it impossible to tell which direction they were really traveling. Every few seconds they'd catch a glimpse of him—his gray hair, his wire-rimmed glasses reflecting their flashlights—but he always seemed to vanish just as they got close.

They emerged into another large room, this one filled with ancient boilers and electrical equipment. Their flashlights revealed multiple exits—maintenance doors, ventilation shafts, utility access points.

And no sign of Wilson.

They stood in silence, listening. The steam pipes creaked. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness. And then—so faint they almost missed it—the sound of breathing from behind one of the boilers.

Sheila moved silently around one side while Finn took the other. They had him cornered.

But when they reached the other side, they found only Wilson's jacket draped over a pipe, positioned to cast a human-shaped shadow.

And on the floor beneath it, a note written in Wilson's careful handwriting:

She wanted to understand method acting. Now she'll get her chance.

The sound of a door closing echoed from somewhere far above them, followed by silence.

Wilson was gone.

And they still didn't know where he'd taken Anna Martin.

Sheila stood in the damp tunnel, studying Wilson's note. The handwriting was precise, controlled—just like the murders, just like the crime scenes. Everything about the man spoke of careful planning, of attention to detail.

"Method acting," she said quietly. "Anna Martin told her roommate that Wilson understood her artistic vision."

"He was grooming her," Finn said, examining the jacket Wilson had left behind. "Getting her to trust him, just like he did with the others."

They did one final sweep of the boiler room, but found nothing else useful. The tunnels branched out in too many directions to search without backup. And somewhere above them, Paul Wilson might already be with his next victim.

"We need to think this through," Sheila said, fighting down her frustration. "Wilson's been planning this for years. These tunnels, the hidden rooms, the surveillance system—none of this was improvised."

"And he knows we're onto him now," Finn added. "He won't go back to the Revival Cinema."

Sheila paced the small space, her flashlight beam catching cobwebs and rust-stained pipes. "What was in his notes about Anna? About her auditions?"

Finn pulled out his phone and navigated to the photographs he'd taken of some of Wilson's files. "She was up for the lead in 'Glass Heart'—some psychological thriller about a young actress losing her grip on reality. Wilson wrote that her interpretation

was 'transcendent' but the director went with someone more experienced."

"Where was it supposed to be filmed?"

"Most of it at the Art House Cinema. They were going to use the old dressing rooms in the basement for the psychological breakdown scenes." Finn looked up. "You think that's where he took her?"

"I think it's our best shot at finding her right now." Sheila started toward the nearest exit.

They made their way back through the utility tunnels, eventually emerging through a maintenance door into the alley behind the Revival Cinema. The October afternoon had turned gray and cold, matching Sheila's mood.

"How do we play this?" Finn asked as they hurried to their car. "If we go in with sirens and lights, Wilson might panic."

"We do it quiet," Sheila said, starting the engine. "But first we need blueprints of the Art House. If there are tunnels under the Revival, there might be connections to other buildings. Wilson could have a whole network we don't know about."

"I'll call it in." Finn was already on his phone. "But Sheila...we might already be too late."

She gripped the steering wheel harder. "No. Wilson's different with this one. He left us that note, led us through those tunnels—it's like he's putting on a show. And the show isn't over yet."

But as they drove toward the Art House Cinema, Sheila couldn't shake the feeling that they were still missing something. Wilson's surveillance system, his detailed

notes, the hidden rooms—it all suggested someone who preferred to watch rather than participate.

So why suddenly become a performer himself?

Unless this wasn't his performance at all.

Unless they were still watching exactly what someone else wanted them to see.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Sheila's phone buzzed with the blueprints she'd requested. The Art House Cinema's basement level was a maze of service corridors, storage rooms, and old dressing rooms from its vaudeville days. Many of the spaces weren't even used anymore, making them perfect for someone who wanted to stay hidden.

"Look at this," she said, showing Finn her phone. "There's a utility tunnel that connects to the city's steam system. If Wilson's been studying these buildings as long as we think..."

"He could move between them unseen," Finn finished. "Perfect for surveillance. Perfect for stalking victims."

A police cruiser rolled silently past the alley entrance, lights off as requested. Deputy Neville was coordinating with other units to establish a perimeter without drawing attention. The last thing they needed was to spook Wilson if he was inside with Anna.

"Main entrance is covered," Finn said quietly. "Loading dock too. If he's in there, he's not getting out."

Sheila studied the blueprints again. "Three basement access points—the main stairs near the lobby, the service elevator, and..." She traced a line with her finger. "This maintenance door leading to the steam tunnels."

"Which would you choose if you were him?"

"Steam tunnels," she said without hesitation. "It's what he knows. What he's comfortable with." She zoomed in on that section of the blueprints. "The tunnel entrance should be right about...there." She pointed to a heavy metal door partially hidden behind a dumpster.

They approached carefully, weapons drawn. The door's padlock had been recently cut, the metal still shiny where bolt cutters had done their work. Fresh scuff marks on the concrete suggested it had been opened within the last hour.

"He's here," Sheila whispered.

The door opened with a soft groan of hydraulics. Their flashlight beams revealed a narrow corridor sloping downward, pipes running along both walls. The air was thick with humidity from the steam lines, and their footsteps echoed despite their best efforts at stealth.

They descended slowly, checking each corner, each shadow. The basement level was even more complex in person than on the blueprints—a warren of corridors branching off in multiple directions. But Sheila noticed something: small marks on the walls, almost invisible unless you were looking for them. The kind of navigational aids someone might leave to avoid getting lost.

"Wilson's breadcrumbs," she murmured.

They followed the marks deeper into the building's substructure. The humidity increased, making it hard to breathe. Pipes creaked and hissed around them. And then—so faint they almost missed it—the sound of voices.

Finn gestured toward a corridor branching left. The voices grew clearer as they

approached. A woman's voice—young, probably Anna Martin's—and a man's measured response. They sounded like they were rehearsing something.

"Perfect," the man said. "Now try it again, but this time really feel the character's desperation. Remember, she's losing her grip on reality. Everything she thought she knew is falling apart."

"Like this?" Anna's voice had a trembling quality that made Sheila's skin crawl. Was it acting, or genuine fear?

"Yes, exactly! You see? You understand her completely. So much better than the actress they chose."

Sheila and Finn moved closer, using the pipes for cover. The voices were coming from behind a heavy door marked "Property Storage." Light spilled from beneath it, along with the smell of dust and old costumes.

They took positions on either side of the door. Through the gap, Sheila could see part of the room—old set pieces, racks of costumes, chairs arranged like an audience. And there, in what seemed to be a carefully lit performance space, stood Anna Martin. She wore a vintage costume that must have been from the film she'd auditioned for, her face streaked with tears. Whether they were tears of genuine fear or part of a performance, however, Sheila couldn't tell.

Paul Wilson sat in a folding chair before Anna, his wire-rimmed glasses reflecting the work lights he'd set up. He held a small notebook, making occasional notes as he watched. There was no indication he'd been hurrying through the tunnels moments before.

For that matter, there were no signs that Anna had been hurrying, either. Had she been waiting here all along?

Still trying to figure out what was going on, Sheila's gaze fell on the theatrical equipment lying on the table beside Wilson—including the gaffer's wire.

"Again," he said. "From the beginning. Really inhabit her madness this time."

Sheila caught Finn's eye and nodded. In one smooth movement, they burst through the door, weapons raised.

"Police! Don't move!"

Wilson's reaction was instant—but not what they expected. Instead of running or reaching for a weapon, he simply sighed and set down his notebook.

"You're interrupting a crucial moment," he said calmly. "Anna was just beginning to understand the character's true depth."

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"Paul Wilson, you're under arrest for the murders of Jessica Gregory, Thomas Rivera, and Sarah Martinez." Sheila kept her weapon trained on him as Finn moved to secure Anna.

"No, you don't understand," Wilson said, still unnaturally calm. "I'm helping them. Helping them achieve what they were denied. Their real potential."

"By killing them?"

"Killing them?" For the first time, Wilson's composure cracked slightly. "I haven't killed anyone. I've been documenting performances. Preserving them. That's what I do—I observe, I record, I protect the art form." He gestured at the surveillance photos and notes spread across a nearby table. "Why would I destroy what I've spent years trying to save?"

"Get up," Sheila said. "Slowly. Hands where I can see them."

Wilson complied, though his expression suggested mild annoyance rather than fear. "You're making a mistake. I was going to help Anna achieve something extraordinary. Something pure."

"By strangling her with gaffer's wire?" Finn asked, nodding toward the coiled wire on the table.

"That's for cable management," Wilson said, as if explaining something obvious. "I'm a technical director. I work with equipment. I document performances. I don't... I would never..."

But Sheila had heard enough. As she secured the handcuffs around Wilson's wrists, she recited his rights. He didn't resist, didn't try to run. He just kept insisting they were making a mistake that he was only trying to help, that they didn't understand what he was trying to preserve.

"Get him out of here," she told Finn. "I'll make sure Anna's okay."

As Finn led Wilson away, Sheila turned to Anna Martin, who stood trembling in her costume, tears still streaking her face.

"Are you alright?" Sheila asked gently. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, he...he just wanted me to perform. Said he could help me understand the role better than anyone else." Anna wrapped her arms around herself. "He seemed so sincere. So passionate about the craft. I never thought..."

"It's over now," Sheila assured her, though something about Wilson's reaction still bothered her. He'd been too calm, too insistent about his innocence. Almost like...

But she pushed the thought aside. They had their killer. The evidence was clear—the surveillance, the gaffer's wire, the costume, the staged performance. Everything pointed to Wilson.

So why did it feel like they were still missing something?

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The interrogation room at the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department was deliberately stark—bare white walls, a metal table bolted to the floor, three chairs, and a two-way mirror that reflected Paul Wilson's calm demeanor back at him. He sat perfectly straight, hands folded on the table as if attending a production meeting

rather than a murder interrogation.

Sheila had positioned herself in the chair across from him, while Finn leaned against the wall behind her, arms crossed. They'd done this dance countless times before—she would lead the questioning while Finn observed, ready to pick up on any subtle tells she might miss. After years of working together, they could practically read each other's thoughts.

"Let's go through this again," Sheila said, keeping her voice neutral. A paper cup of water sat untouched before Wilson—they'd offered it twenty minutes ago, but he hadn't so much as glanced at it. "You claim you were documenting performances?"

"I don't claim anything," Wilson replied. His voice carried the same measured tone he'd used in the Art House basement. "I state facts. I am a documentarian. I record performances, study them, preserve them. That's what the equipment in my projection booth was for. That's what all my work has been about."

"And the surveillance cameras?" Finn asked, tapping his foot—a consequence of the several cups of coffee he'd drunk since starting the interrogation. "The hidden rooms?"

"Necessary tools." Wilson adjusted his glasses—not nervously, Sheila noted, but precisely, like an actor hitting his mark. He seemed much calmer now than when they'd first confronted him at the theater.

"Do you have any idea how many brilliant performances are lost?" he asked. "How many moments of genuine artistry vanish because no one thought to preserve them?"

"Like Jessica Gregory's performance?" Sheila watched his face carefully. "Or Sarah Martinez's?"

"Exactly!" For the first time, real emotion crept into Wilson's voice. "Jessica brought

something raw and vulnerable to that role. Sarah understood Elena in ways the writer never did. I had to document that. Had to preserve it."

"By killing them?"

"No." Wilson's denial was immediate and firm. "I told you—I document. I observe. I record. The murder of these performers...it goes against everything I believe in. Everything I've worked for."

Sheila opened the case file before her, spreading out crime scene photos. "We found gaffer's wire in your possession. The same type used in all three murders."

"I'm a technical director. I work with theatrical equipment. That wire was for cable management—you can check my receipts, my work orders. I buy it in bulk every festival season."

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"And the costumes?The staged scenes?"

"I maintain a collection of theatrical materials.For documentation purposes."Wilson leaned forward slightly."Sheriff Stone, think about this logically.I've spent nine years building an archive of performances.Creating a record of artistic evolution.Why would I destroy what I'm trying to preserve?"

Finn pushed off from the wall and circled the table slowly."Tell us about Anna Martin."

"A remarkable talent.Her interpretation of mental breakdown in 'Glass Heart' was revolutionary.The producers made a terrible mistake not casting her."Wilson's eyes tracked Finn's movement."I was helping her develop that performance.Documenting it.Nothing more."

"In a basement," Sheila said."With gaffer's wire nearby."

"In a theater space, with professional equipment.I use those basement rooms for recording sessions—the acoustics are perfect."He gestured at the crime scene photos."Yes, I had wire there.I also had lights, microphones, cables—everything needed for proper documentation.That doesn't make me a killer."

Sheila studied him.His story hadn't wavered in the three hours they'd been questioning him.Every detail remained consistent, every explanation plausible.Even his apparent obsession with recording performances fit with what others had said about him.

"Where were you when Jessica Gregory was killed?" she asked.

"At the Revival Cinema. Checking sound equipment for the midnight screening." He didn't hesitate. "There's timestamped footage from the lobby cameras. I spoke with the projectionist around nine-fifteen."

"And Thomas Rivera?"

"Working late at the Mountain View Theater. Again, you can verify this with security footage. I was there until nearly midnight, preparing for Bradley Greenwald's premiere."

"Sarah Martinez?"

"I was meeting with festival technical staff about the shutdown procedures. Six people can confirm this." Wilson spread his hands. "I know how this looks. The recordings, the surveillance—it seems suspicious. But I'm not your killer. I'm just someone who recognizes artistic brilliance and wants to preserve it."

Sheila exchanged a glance with Finn. They'd been partners long enough that she could read his thoughts: Wilson's alibis would check out. He had to know they wouldn't release him until verifying his alibis, so it would be foolish to make up these details.

"Tell me about the tunnels," she said. "Under the Revival Cinema."

"Historical architecture. Part of the original building. I discovered them while renovating, realized they were perfect for storage and cable routing." Wilson's voice took on an enthusiastic tone. "Did you know there used to be a whole network of utility tunnels under downtown? Most are sealed now, but some still connect to the old steam system. Fascinating engineering."

"And you used them for observation."

"For documentation. The acoustics are remarkable in places. And the hidden rooms provided perfect storage for my archive." He gestured at the crime scene photos again. "Yes, I watched people. Yes, I recorded performances without their knowledge. I admit that. But killing them? Destroying what I've worked so hard to preserve?" He shook his head. "Never."

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Down the hall, a phone rang in the bullpen. Sheila rotated one of the crime scene photos, studying the precise arrangement of Sarah Martinez's body.

"If you're not the killer," she said carefully, "why run from us at the Revival?"

"Because I knew how it would look. The recordings, the surveillance—I knew you'd misunderstand. And I needed to protect my archive." Wilson leaned forward. "Sheriff Stone, someone is using my documentation against me. Using my knowledge of these performers to stage their deaths. But it wasn't me. I study performance. I preserve it. I don't destroy it."

"Then who is destroying it?" Finn asked.

"I don't know." For the first time, frustration crept into Wilson's voice. "I've been trying to figure that out myself. Someone who has access to my recordings. Someone who knows about the performances I've documented. Someone who..."

He trailed off, staring at his reflection in the two-way mirror.

"Someone who what?" Sheila prompted.

"Someone who understands performance," Wilson said quietly. "But not the way I

do. Not as something to be preserved. As something to be...directed."

The word hung in the air between them. Sheila felt Finn shift behind her—the subtle movement that meant he'd caught something significant.

"Are you saying someone else is using your surveillance system?" she asked.

"I'm saying someone else is using my life's work to destroy what I've tried to protect." Wilson's reflection stared back at him, ghostly in the harsh light. "And until you understand that, more performers will die. More art will be lost."

"In case you've forgotten," Finn said, "the festival has been shut down."

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"That hasn't stopped your killer yet, has it? And even if it does... what about when the next festival starts up? Will anyone be safe?"

Sheila closed the case file slowly. "We'll verify those alibis," she said. "In the meantime, you'll be staying with us."

Wilson nodded, almost serenely. "Of course. Though you're wasting precious time. Time others may not have."

Outside the interrogation room, the fluorescent lights in the hallway seemed unnaturally bright after hours of focused questioning. Sheila rubbed her eyes, feeling the weight of too many sleepless hours.

"You look like you need food," Finn said, loosening his tie. "When's the last time you ate something that wasn't from a vending machine?"

She tried to remember. "Yesterday? Maybe?"

"Peak Diner's still open. We could grab something, go over what we know." He checked his watch. "Though at this hour it's technically breakfast."

"Breakfast sounds perfect." She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a real meal. Between the festival murders, the discovery of Tommy's laptop, and now Wilson's calm insistence of innocence, everything was starting to blur together.

"Meet you at the car," Finn said. "Just need to hit the restroom. All that coffee's catching up with me."

Sheila nodded, already heading for the parking lot. The October night had turned cold while they were inside, and she pulled her jacket closer as she crossed to her truck. The lot was nearly empty this late—just a few patrol cars and her own vehicle sitting beneath flickering sodium lights.

She unlocked the door and climbed in, starting the engine to get some heat going. That's when she noticed it—a scent that didn't belong. Something crisp and masculine, like expensive cologne, but definitely not Finn's familiar scent.

Her hand moved instinctively toward her weapon.

"I wouldn't," said a quiet voice from the back seat. "Hands on the steering wheel, please. And don't turn around."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Sheila's hands moved to the wheel, her mind already cataloging details. The voice was cultured, precise—someone educated. The cologne smelled expensive. In her peripheral vision, she caught the edge of what looked like a tailored suit sleeve.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Drive," he said, ignoring her question. "Turn right out of the lot." There was the faintest hint of a lilt in his voice. Irish, maybe?

She pulled out onto Main Street, the truck's headlights catching empty sidewalks where festival crowds had thronged just hours ago. Her eyes darted to the rearview mirror, hoping to see Finn emerging from the building, but the parking lot remained empty.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll know when we get there." His voice remained pleasant, almost cordial. "Take Cedar Street toward the highway."

Cedar Street meant they were heading east, away from downtown. Away from witnesses. Away from help. Sheila ran through her options, dismissing each one:

She could crash the truck deliberately. But at these speeds, she'd likely survive—and so would he.

She could try to draw attention somehow. But the streets were empty this late, and any sudden moves would give her away.

She could attempt to reach the gun in her holster. But surely he'd be ready for that.

She could—

"I know what you're thinking," he said, as if reading her mind. "Calculating odds, looking for opportunities. But consider this: If you try anything—anything at all—certain things will be set in motion. Things involving people you care about. Your father, for instance. Or that young girl you took in... Star, isn't it?"

The threat was delivered so casually that Sheila almost had to second-guess what she'd just heard. Had he really just threatened not just her father's life, but Star's as well? Anger began to simmer deep down inside her, somewhere beneath the fear.

They crossed the railroad tracks, leaving the last streetlights behind. The October darkness pressed against the windows, broken only by the truck's headlights illuminating bare trees and empty fields.

"Take the county road," he instructed. "The one that parallels the highway."

They were heading into farm country now, past abandoned wheat silos and dark farmhouses set far back from the road.No cars passed them in either direction.Her phone sat in its dashboard mount, screen dark.She wondered if Finn had tried calling yet, if he'd realized something was wrong.

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"You work for them, don't you?" she asked. "The same people who killed my mother. Who sent Tommy to infiltrate the department."

"Turn left at the next crossroads."

The truck's tires crunched on gravel as she made the turn. They were deep in the country now, surrounded by fallow fields stretching away into darkness. Perfect place to make someone disappear.

"You should know," she said, "that killing a sheriff won't go unnoticed. Every law enforcement agency in the state will investigate."

"You assume too much." Was there amusement in his voice? "About my intentions. About what happened to your mother. About many things." A pause. "Pull over here."

'Here' was a stretch of road bordered by bare trees on one side and an empty field on the other. No houses visible, no passing traffic. Just darkness and the sound of wind in the branches.

Sheila put the truck in park, her hands still at ten and two. This is it, she thought. This was where it would end. All her investigation, all her search for justice—stopped by a man whose face she hadn't even seen.

The wind rustled through the bare trees, making branches creak. In the darkness beyond her headlights, something small—probably a rabbit—darted across the empty field. Sheila's hands remained locked on the steering wheel, her mind racing through

last-ditch scenarios, each more desperate than the last.

"You've been asking questions," the man said. His voice remained pleasant, unhurried. "About departmental corruption. About your mother's murder. About Tommy's role in all of this."

She caught a slight movement in her peripheral vision—him shifting position, maybe reaching for something. Her muscles tensed.

"If you're going to kill me," she said, "at least have the courage to show me your face."

"Kill you?" Now, there was definitely amusement in his voice. "Sheriff Stone, if I wanted you dead, I wouldn't have gone to all this trouble. A car bomb would have done the trick quite nicely. No, this is something else entirely."

Another movement behind her. She braced herself, but nothing happened.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"To deliver a message. A warning, if you will. There are certain investigations that shouldn't be pursued. Certain questions better left unasked."

Sheila thought about the laptop she'd taken from Tommy's apartment, the one in her car right this moment. Was it still there, or had the man behind her already found it? Had they been watching Tommy's apartment?

"Here's what's going to happen," he continued. "You're going to stop looking into your mother's case. Stop investigating departmental politics. Focus on solving your festival murders—that's what a good sheriff would do, isn't it? Leave the past where it belongs."

"And if I don't?"

There was a long, pregnant pause."I think I've already made myself clear on that score, haven't I?"

Star.Her father.Yes, he had made himself clear.Terribly clear.

A semi truck roared past on the distant highway, its running lights briefly visible through the trees.So close, and yet so very far away.

"I've watched you since you were a child," the man said, that Irish lilt becoming stronger now."Watched you grow up, train for the Olympics, join the department.You're very much like your mother—same determination, same sense of justice."A pause."Same inability to leave well enough alone."

"You sent Eddie Mills to kill my mother, didn't you?"Sheila asked.

"Your mother made choices.Asked questions she shouldn't have asked—like the one you just posed to me."Another slight movement behind her."Don't make her mistakes."

Silence filled the truck.Through the windshield, Sheila watched a cluster of dead leaves skitter across the empty field, carried by the October wind.Her mind raced through scenarios—she could slam the truck into reverse, ram something, force him off balance.She just needed the right moment, needed to catch him slightly distracted.

"Take out your weapon," he said, interrupting her thoughts."Slowly.Place it on the passenger seat."

Sheila didn't move.

Something pressed against the back of her seat, right where her spine met the headrest. "I won't kill you," he said. "But a bullet here—" the pressure increased slightly "—would leave you paralyzed. Like your sister Natalie. And we both know how that ended, don't we?"

The veiled reference to Natalie's suicide hit Sheila like a physical blow. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as rage coursed through her, but she forced herself to stay still, stay quiet.

"The weapon," he repeated. "Now."

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Moving with deliberate slowness, Sheila drew her Glock and placed it on the passenger seat.

"Good. Now the backup piece in your ankle holster."

She hesitated for just a moment, but the pressure against her seat remained steady. She reached down, removed her backup weapon, and placed it beside the first.

"Now get out. Leave your phone and keys."

Gritting her teeth, she stepped out into the cold night. The wind had picked up, carrying the scent of wood smoke from a distant farmhouse.

"Walk toward the field," the man said, his voice carrying through the open door. "If you turn around in the next five minutes, I'll shoot. If you try to run, I'll shoot. Just walk straight ahead and keep walking."

Sheila began walking, her shadow stretching long before her in the truck's headlights. Each step took her farther from her weapons, her phone, any chance of fighting back. But she could feel his presence behind her, monitoring every movement.

She passed through the beam of the headlights and into darkness. The gravel shoulder gave way to stubbled earth—a harvested corn field, she guessed from the stalks crunching under her feet. Still, she walked, counting steps, trying to maintain her sense of direction.

Behind her, she heard the truck's door open and close. She tensed, expecting to hear a gunshot any moment. Or maybe she wouldn't hear it at all; maybe everything would just go dark as the bullet pierced her brain.

One second passed. Two. Three.

She wanted to turn around, to at least see her killer's face before it was over. She felt certain he'd been lying to her about letting her go. After all, they'd sent Tommy to kill her. Why not just eliminate her now? Get it over with?

Then, to her surprise, she heard the sound of a second door closing, followed by the starting of her truck's engine. The headlights swung around as the truck turned, and suddenly her shadow stretched to her right instead of before her.

Her body flooded with relief as the truck's engine grew fainter. Finally, she allowed herself to turn around. She watched as the taillights of her truck faded into the distance like a pair of watchful eyes.

She sank to her knees, overcome by the mixture of terror and relief. She let out a long, ragged scream, sobbing with the knowledge that she'd just touched the threshold of death's door—and lived.

As the echo of her scream faded, the wind cut through her thin blouse, chilling her—she'd left her jacket in the truck along with her weapons, phone, and badge.

Pulling herself together, she rose and oriented herself, using the stars visible between scattered clouds. The highway had to be east of her position—she could faintly hear the occasional rumble of a semi-truck. But walking toward the highway meant crossing rough terrain in the dark. There had been a farmhouse somewhere to the northwest—she remembered seeing wood smoke earlier.

The corn stubble crunched under her boots as she turned slowly, scanning the horizon. There—a faint glow that had to be yard lights. It would mean walking across at least two fields, probably climbing fences, but it was her best option.

She started walking, using the scattered fence posts as guides. The temperature was dropping fast—typical for an October night in Utah. Her feet kept catching on dead stalks and furrows hidden in the darkness. An owl swooped silently overhead, hunting in the empty fields.

The first fence was barbed wire, probably for cattle. She found a post sturdy enough to support her weight and carefully climbed over, thankful for the years of physical training that kept her strength up. The second field was smoother—alfalfa maybe, or winter wheat.

The yard lights seemed to hover in the distance, not appearing to get any closer despite her steady progress. Out here in farm country, distances could be deceptive. What looked like a short walk could turn into miles.

Something skittered away through the darkness—a rabbit or maybe a coyote. Sheila kept walking. The wind had picked up, carrying the sharp scent of approaching winter. Her hands were growing numb, and she tucked them under her arms as she walked.

After what felt like an hour but was probably twenty minutes, she reached another fence. Beyond it, she could make out the silhouette of farm equipment—tractors and other machinery stored in a neat row. The yard lights illuminated a well-maintained ranch house and a large barn.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, she climbed the fence, not wanting to spook any dogs that might be around. Sure enough, a deep bark echoed from near the barn, followed by the sound of chain rattling against metal.

"Hello?" she called out, staying where she was. "I need help!"

A porch light flicked on. The door opened, spilling more light into the yard. A man's voice called out: "Who's there?"

"Sheriff Sheila Stone," she replied, barely managing to hold herself together. "My vehicle was stolen. I need to use your phone."

Silence for a moment. Then: "Stay where you are. I'm coming out."

The man who emerged carried a shotgun—not threatening, just careful. Out here, people learned to be cautious of strangers in the night. He was older, probably in his seventies, wearing work clothes despite the late hour.

"Sheriff Stone?" he asked, lowering the shotgun slightly. "Gabe's daughter?"

"Yes, sir." The recognition was a relief—her father's reputation in the county often opened doors. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late."

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"Come on in," he said, gesturing toward the house. "Martha! Put some coffee on. We've got company."

The farmhouse kitchen was warm and bright, with copper pots hanging from the ceiling and the smell of fresh-baked bread lingering in the air. Martha turned out to be a small woman with steel-gray hair and quick, efficient movements. She took one look at Sheila and disappeared into another room, returning with a heavy sweater.

"You're half frozen," she said, handing it over. "Sit down before you fall down. Coffee's almost ready."

Sheila sank into a kitchen chair and pulled on the sweater. She could have wept with gratitude.

"I need to use your phone," she said. "My truck was stolen—I have to put out an APB."

The farmer—who had introduced himself as Earl Peterson—handed her a landline phone. "Cell reception's spotty out here. But the landline's reliable. And if you need a ride, I'm more than happy to help out."

Sheila dialed dispatch, her fingers still clumsy with cold. When Neville answered, she quickly explained the situation—leaving out the man in the backseat, describing it simply as a carjacking. It wasn't just about protecting her family and Finn—though those threats weighed heavily. No, her gut told her that if she reported the man in her backseat, evidence would disappear. Reports would be altered. Witnesses would change their stories.

Better to keep this close, tell only Finn, and watch carefully to see what moved in the shadows.

She gave the truck's description and plate number, then added: "And get word to Deputy Mercer. Tell him I'm safe but stranded."

"You want us to send someone for you?" Neville asked.

Sheila glanced at Earl, who was already shaking his head. "No need," she said. "Mr. Peterson has offered to drive me back to town."

Martha set a mug of coffee in front of her, along with a plate of fresh bread and butter. "Eat something first," she insisted. "You look done in."

Sheila took a few bites of the still-warm bread, knowing she should take time to eat but too anxious to stay still.

"I really need to get back," she said, standing. "But thank you for the coffee and bread."

Earl nodded, already reaching for his truck keys. "Martha, I'm taking the sheriff back to town."

The drive back was quiet, just the sound of Earl's old pickup rattling over country roads. The heater worked only intermittently, coughing out warm air in fits and starts. Sheila watched the empty fields roll past, thinking about the man's Irish accent and his expensive cologne.

Who was he? And why hadn't he killed her? Simply to avoid the trouble that would come from the murder of a sheriff?

That's why Tommy abandoned me in that research station,she thought.To make it look like an accident.

Earl dropped her at the sheriff's department, refusing her offer to pay for gas.As she watched his taillights disappear around the corner, a cold certainty settled over her: Tonight hadn't been about stealing her truck or even really about threatening her.

It had been about sending a message.

And as she climbed the steps to the department's front door, she realized something else—something that made her blood run cold.The man had known which car was hers.Had gotten in without leaving marks.Had known her schedule well enough to catch her alone.

Which meant he had help.

Someone in her own department was working with him.

And now, whether they knew it or not, they had Tommy's laptop—and whatever secrets it contained.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The moment Sheila walked through the doors, Deputy Neville looked up from dispatch, relief crossing her face."Sheriff!Are you alright?"

"Fine," Sheila said, trying to project calm authority despite her borrowed sweater and windblown hair."Any word on my truck?"

"Nothing yet.We've got patrols looking, notified surrounding counties."Neville stood, looking a bit unsure of herself."What exactly happened?Your call wasn't very

detailed."

"Standard carjacking," Sheila said, moving toward her office. "Guy got the drop on me. It happens."

"To other people, maybe," Neville said. "Not to you."

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Finn appeared in the doorway to the breakroom, coffee cup in hand. His expression was carefully neutral, but Sheila knew him well enough to read the tension in his jaw, the way his eyes tracked her movement. He'd know she was holding something back.

"I'll write up a full report," Sheila said, not meeting his gaze. "Right now, I need to check on something."

She made it to her office, closing the door behind her. Her hands were steady as she sat at her desk, but inside she felt hollow, like someone had scooped out her insides and replaced them with ice. The man's words kept echoing in her head: Your mother made choices. Asked questions she shouldn't have asked.

A soft knock, then Finn entered, locking the door behind him. He closed the blinds without being asked, then sat in the chair across from her desk.

"Everyone's gone home except Neville," he said quietly. "Night shift is out on patrol. No one will disturb us." He leaned forward. "What really happened?"

Sheila took a shaky breath. "There was a man in my backseat. He'd gotten in—not sure how." She had to pause and steady herself. "He knew things, Finn. About my mother's murder. About Tommy."

Finn's face hardened. "What did he want?"

"To deliver a warning. He said to stop investigating the department, stop looking into my mother's case. Focus on the festival murders instead." Her voice caught slightly. "He threatened Dad. And Star."

"Tell me everything," Finn said. "Every detail."

She did, the words spilling out: the expensive cologne, the Irish accent, how he'd known about her childhood. How he'd talked about Natalie's suicide with such casual cruelty. How he'd made her walk into that dark field, knowing she was at his mercy.

As she spoke, Finn's expression grew darker. When she finished, he was silent for a long moment.

"He's been watching us, Finn," she finally said. "All of us, maybe."

"And now he's got your truck. Your weapons. Your phone."

"Those can be replaced." She met his eyes, then hesitated.

"What is it?" Finn asked.

It had just occurred to her that if her hijacker was connected to someone in the department, that same person might've bugged the building. They could be listening in right now.

Maybe watching, too. Which ruled out the easy method of scribbling a message to Finn on her notebook.

Finn was still studying her. She had to tell him something. Sensing he was about to repeat his question, she hurriedly said, "The important thing for now is to focus on the festival murders. That truck will turn up eventually, one way or another."

He was watching her intently. He could tell something was off, could tell she wasn't behaving naturally. Before he could say anything, however, Neville burst through the door. "Sheriff! They found your truck." Her face was both excited and grave.

"Just the vehicle?" Sheila asked anxiously. "Nobody in it?"

"That's right." Neville hesitated. "But whoever took it apparently didn't want you to get it back."

"What do you mean?"

"It's on fire."

Ten minutes later, they pulled up to a remote stretch of Caledonia Street, where orange flames lit up the predawn darkness. Sheila's truck burned like a beacon against the empty fields, sending sparks spiraling into the cold October sky. No fire trucks yet—they were still en route from the station.

Sheila's heart clenched like a fist at the sight of the flames. As soon as Finn parked the squad car, she opened her door and jumped out.

"Sheila, wait!" Finn called, but she barely heard him.

The heat hit her first—a wall of scorching air that made her eyes water. Then the smell: burning rubber, melting plastic, and beneath it all, the sharp tang of accelerant. This was no accident.

"Stay back," Finn said, catching her arm. "The gas tank could go any second."

But she'd already seen what she needed to see. There, on the roof of the cab, placed where she couldn't miss it: Tommy's laptop, or what remained of it. The plastic had melted and warped, the screen blackened beyond recognition. Any evidence it might have contained about departmental corruption, about her mother's murder—gone.

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And someone had clearly wanted her to know it was gone.

"Damn it," she whispered. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

"Is that what I think it is?" Finn asked quietly.

She nodded, watching sparks catch in the wind. "Tommy's laptop. So much for getting that warrant."

"You never took it out of your truck?"

She turned to him, suddenly feeling foolish and exposed. "I hid it in there—didn't think anyone would find it. How did anyone know I had it in the first place?"

The sound of distant sirens carried on the wind. The fire cast strange shadows across the empty fields, making ordinary things like fence posts and dead cornstalks look sinister and alive.

"How did they know?" she wondered aloud. "Did they bug my truck? How long have they been watching me?"

"You think he had help?" Finn asked. "Someone who knew where the laptop was?"

"Or someone was watching Tommy's apartment, and they decided to search my truck and got lucky." The words tasted bitter in her mouth. How had she been so careless?

The first fire truck arrived, its red lights mixing with the orange glow of the

flames.Firefighters jumped out, unrolling hoses and shouting instructions.But Sheila knew it was too late—anything useful on that laptop was long gone.

"We should have seen this coming," she said."After what happened to Tommy in his cell, we knew they had people on the inside."

"Hey."Finn touched her arm."This isn't your fault.You were trying to protect evidence."

"By keeping it in my truck?That wasn't protecting evidence—that was arrogance.Thinking I could outsmart them."She watched as the firefighters began dousing the flames."I did exactly what they wanted.Kept the laptop close, made it easy to find.And now..."

"And now we know something important," Finn finished."We know they're scared.Whatever was on that laptop—they couldn't risk letting you decode it."

She turned to him, really looking at him for the first time since they'd arrived.His face was lined with exhaustion, but his eyes were sharp, focused.

"They're watching us," she said softly."Right now, probably."

"Let them."His voice was equally quiet."They just showed their hand.They're not invincible—they're running scared."

The flames were dying now under the firefighters' assault, sending up great clouds of steam in the cold air.Sheila watched as her truck—and the evidence it had contained—was reduced to a smoking shell.

But maybe Finn was right.Maybe this wasn't just about destroying evidence.Maybe it was about sending another message:

We can get to you anytime.Anywhere.Even when you think you're being careful.

The question was: What was she going to do about it?

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The morning sun slanted through the station windows, catching dust motes as they drifted through the air.Sheila leaned closer to her monitor, fighting exhaustion as she clicked through another surveillance clip from Paul Wilson's archive.Beside her, Finn held a fresh cup of coffee but hadn't touched it, his eyes fixed on the screen.

The loss of her truck—and, more importantly, Tommy's laptop—gnawed at her.She'd spent the rest of the night updating security protocols, changing passwords, having Neville start the paperwork for replacement weapons.But no amount of bureaucratic busywork could erase the feeling of violation, of being watched and manipulated.The Irish-accented man had known exactly what he was looking for, had staged the whole thing to destroy evidence that might have exposed departmental corruption.

She wanted to dive deeper into that mystery, to chase down every lead about her mother's murder.But his warning about Star and her father still chilled her.He'd made it clear—pursue that investigation, and people would die.For now, she had to pivot back to the festival murders, had to trust that solving them might somehow lead to answers about the larger conspiracy.

She'd insisted on coming straight back to work despite Finn's concerns about her getting rest.Sleep wasn't an option, not with killers walking free.Better to lose herself in Wilson's surveillance footage, in the immediate puzzle of staged deaths and theatrical murders.At least that was something concrete she could pursue without putting her loved ones at risk.

"Stop," Finn said suddenly, interrupting her thoughts."Go back about thirty seconds."

Sheila rewound the footage. The timestamp showed two weeks ago, just after midnight. The camera angle showed the main hallway of the Coldwater Theater, the wall of production posters casting long shadows in the dim emergency lighting.

Charlotte Davis appeared in frame, walking quickly, her arms full of costume paperwork. She looked over her shoulder, then stopped abruptly as someone off-camera spoke to her. The sound was muffled by distance, but Charlotte's body language changed instantly—shoulders tensing, taking a half-step backward.

"Look at her hands," Finn said quietly.

Sheila leaned closer. Charlotte's fingers were clenched around her papers so tightly they shook. Whatever the unseen person was saying, it frightened her.

"Can we get any other angles?" Finn asked.

"Wilson had cameras everywhere. Let me check..." Sheila switched feeds, cycling through different views of the hallway. But the other person remained stubbornly out of frame, as if they knew exactly where the blind spots were.

The footage continued. Charlotte shook her head emphatically at whatever was being said. Her voice carried faintly: "...can't just take those records. There are protocols..."

The rest was lost as a heating vent kicked on. But something about the exchange nagged at Sheila.

"This was right around when Jessica started asking questions," she said. "When she began looking into technical aspects of the productions."

Finn finally picked up his coffee, but just held it, thinking. "You know what bothers me? Wilson documented everything. Every performance, every interaction. So why wouldn't he have footage of whoever Charlotte was talking to?"

"Unless..." Sheila sat back, realization dawning on her. "Unless someone had access to his archives. Someone who could remove footage they didn't want found."

She reached for her phone, then stopped. Some conversations were better to have in person.

She stood. "Come on. We need to talk to Charlotte."

They found her in the costume department, sorting through racks of vintage clothing. Though the festival had been shut down, the costumes and props had to be inventoried and returned to various lending companies and theater groups across the state—specialized pieces worth thousands of dollars that couldn't simply be abandoned when the festival ended abruptly.

The heavy wooden table where Charlotte worked was covered with fabric swatches and careful notes about measurements and alterations. She looked up as they entered, her hands stilling on a blue dress that looked painfully similar to the one Jessica Gregory had died in.

"Sheriff Stone," she said, her voice carefully neutral. "What can I help you with?"

"We need to talk about what happened two weeks ago," Sheila said. "In the theater hallway, after midnight."

Charlotte's fingers tightened on the dress. "I don't know what you mean."

"We have footage," Finn said gently. "Someone confronted you about costume records. Someone who scared you."

"I can't..." Charlotte glanced at the door, then lowered her voice. "You don't understand. There are people watching. Important people."

"We know about being watched," Sheila said quietly. She moved closer, keeping her voice low. "Charlotte, three people are dead. Three people whose measurements and

sizing details were in those records. This isn't just about costumes anymore."

Charlotte was silent for a long moment, her hands moving restlessly over the fabric before her. Finally, she said, "It wasn't the first time."

"What wasn't?"

"Someone going through my records. I'd noticed things moved, files accessed after hours. But that night..." She swallowed hard. "That night, I caught them in the act."

"Who was it?" Finn asked.

"I don't know. It was dark, and they stayed in the shadows. But they knew things—about the productions, about the costumes. Technical details most people wouldn't care about." She began straightening papers on her table, her movements sharp with anxiety. "They said they were doing inventory. But they were focused on specific performers. Jessica. Thomas. Sarah."

Sheila exchanged looks with Finn. "What exactly were they looking at?"

"Measurements. Sizing details. Notes about how costumes had been altered for specific scenes." Charlotte's voice dropped even lower. "The kind of information you'd need if you wanted to recreate those costumes exactly."

"Did you tell anyone?" Finn asked.

"Who would I tell? The festival board? They barely notice the costume department exists unless something goes wrong." She gestured at the racks of clothing around them. "Do you know how many people have access to this place? Directors, producers, technical staff—anyone could have a key."

"But not everyone would know which costumes to look for," Sheila said. "Not everyone would understand the significance of specific scenes."

Charlotte was quiet for a moment, then said, "There's something else. Something I haven't told anyone." She moved to a filing cabinet and pulled out a folder. "After that night, I started keeping track. Making notes about when things were moved, what files were accessed."

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She handed the folder to Sheila. Inside were careful notes about dates, times, which records had been disturbed. But more importantly, there were photographs—grainy security camera stills showing someone in the costume department after hours.

"I set up my own camera," Charlotte explained. "Just a cheap motion-sensor thing from the hardware store. The quality isn't great, but..."

Sheila studied the photos. The figure was always partly in shadow, always careful about angles. But in one image, there was a clear view of their hand on a file cabinet—a hand wearing an expensive-looking watch.

"These are from different nights," Finn said, looking over her shoulder. "They came back multiple times."

"Planning," Sheila said grimly. "They needed everything to be perfect. The costumes, the poses, the scenes..." She looked up at Charlotte. "Why didn't you come forward with this sooner?"

"Because the night after I put up the camera, someone broke into my apartment." Charlotte wrapped her arms around herself. "Nothing was taken. But things were moved, just slightly. Like they wanted me to know they could get in any time they wanted."

"Shit," Finn muttered.

"And then Jessica died." Charlotte's voice cracked slightly. "In that blue dress from The Winter Palace. The one whose measurements had been accessed multiple times. I

knew then that it wasn't just about costumes. But I was afraid... I am afraid..."

"We can protect you," Sheila said.

"Can you?" Charlotte met her eyes. "Like you protected Jessica? Or Sarah? Or Thomas?"

The words hit hard, but Sheila couldn't argue. Not when she'd failed to protect those victims. Not when her own truck had been torched just hours ago, as if to underscore how little control she really had.

"The person in the hallway that night," Finn said. "Could you tell anything about them? Height? Build?"

"Tall," Charlotte said. "Well-dressed—I remember thinking the suit looked expensive. Beyond that..." She shrugged.

"Male or female?" Sheila asked.

"I think male, from the build. But they stayed in the shadows." Charlotte moved to straighten a rack of costumes, her hands trembling slightly. "What bothered me most was how they knew exactly what they were looking for. They had the production numbers memorized, knew which shows each costume was from. That's not common knowledge."

"Someone involved in the productions," Finn said.

"But not just as crew," Sheila added. "Someone who understood the significance of specific scenes. The dramatic moments they wanted to recreate."

Charlotte pulled out her notebook again, flipping through pages. "They were

especially interested in pivotal scenes—emotional high points, dramatic confrontations. The kind of moments actors dream about performing."

"We need to look at everyone involved in these productions," Sheila said. "Not just technical crew. Directors, acting coaches, anyone who would understand both the technical and performance aspects."

"That's a long list," Finn warned. "The festival brings in dozens of industry professionals."

"Then we better get started." Sheila turned back to Charlotte. "Make copies of those notes—physical copies, nothing digital. And Charlotte? Be careful who you talk to about this."

They left the costume department, the smell of mothballs and old fabric following them into the hallway. The theater felt different now, more sinister. Every shadow could hide a watcher, every security camera could be compromised.

They reached the lobby, where morning sunlight streamed through the high windows, creating pools of light on the worn carpet. A janitor was sweeping up discarded festival programs, the soft swish of his broom the only sound in the empty building.

"We need to reexamine all the evidence," Sheila said. "Not just as crime scenes, but as performances. What was the killer trying to show us?"

Finn pulled out his notebook. "The auditions would be key. That's where they first saw these interpretations they're trying to recreate."

"Wilson said they record everything during festival auditions," Sheila said, thinking it through. "Who handles that? There must be someone documenting all these performances."

They headed back to Rider's office. He was still there despite the festival shutdown, surrounded by boxes of materials being packed away. Dark circles under his eyes suggested he hadn't slept much either.

"The audition recordings," Sheila said without preamble. "Who's responsible for filming them?"

Rider rubbed his eyes beneath his wire-rimmed glasses. "Paul Wilson handles all our technical equipment and archival documentation, but for the actual production filming and behind-the-scenes content..." He dug through a stack of papers. "That would be Andrew Thorne. He's been our primary videographer for what, three years now? Works closely with Paul on all the festival productions."

"Would he have access to the theaters after hours?" Finn asked.

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"Of course. He's always working late, getting atmospheric shots of the empty theaters, that kind of thing." Rider paused. "Come to think of it, he's particularly interested in performance. Always talking about capturing the perfect moment, the height of emotion. Some of the actors found him...intense."

"Intense how?" Sheila asked.

"He'd film them without their knowledge sometimes. Said he was documenting the creative process, catching genuine moments. We had a few complaints, but his work was exceptional, so..." Rider spread his hands helplessly.

"Where would he keep his footage?" Sheila asked.

"He has a studio above the Elysian Arts Cinema. The festival rents it for him year-round. He's probably there now, actually. Said something about preserving important festival moments despite the shutdown."

Sheila and Finn exchanged looks. A photographer obsessed with capturing perfect moments. Someone with technical knowledge, access to the theaters, and an intimate understanding of performance.

"We need to talk to him," Sheila said.

But as they headed for the door, Rider called after them: "Sheriff? There's something else. About Thorne." He hesitated. "He applied to direct a few years back. Had this psychological thriller script about a photographer documenting people's final moments. The festival board thought it was too disturbing. He didn't take the rejection

well."

Sheila felt the pieces starting to click into place. "Thank you, Carl. That's very helpful."

Outside, the morning had warmed considerably, but Sheila felt a chill as she thought about someone watching through a camera lens, documenting everything, waiting for the perfect moment to create their own twisted scenes.

"The Elysian isn't far," Finn said. "Want to pay Mr. Thorne a visit?"

Sheila nodded, already heading for their car. They had a new suspect—someone who understood both the technical and artistic elements of performance. Someone who might be documenting their own grotesque masterpiece, one murder at a time.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

They pulled up to the Elysian Arts Cinema ten minutes later. The building's facade was undergoing renovation, scaffolding creating a maze of metal pipes and wooden platforms that reached to the third floor. A construction crew worked near the entrance, making it impossible to slip in quietly.

"Can we access the studio from the back?" Sheila asked.

"There's a fire escape," Finn said, "but it's visible from the street. If Thorne sees us coming, there's no telling how he might react."

They circled the block, looking for options. A delivery truck blocked the alley behind the building, its driver arguing with someone about where to unload cases of concession supplies that should have been delivered during the festival.

When they finally made it to the building's rear entrance, they found it locked. Through the windows, they could see renovation debris scattered across the lobby floor—sawdust, drop cloths, tools. The construction noise from outside made it impossible to hear if anyone was moving around upstairs.

"We could call for backup," Finn suggested. "Get people watching all the exits."

Sheila shook her head. "We can't risk spooking him. If he's taken another victim, the sight of police might cause him to kill her on the spot." She studied the fire escape. "There has to be a way..."

A door opened above them. They pressed back against the wall as someone emerged onto the fire escape—but it was just a construction worker having a cigarette. He nodded to them absently, apparently assuming they were with the renovation crew.

"Excuse me," Sheila said, showing her badge. "We need to access the third-floor studio. For the investigation."

The worker shrugged. "Good luck with that. Power's out up there—they're rewiring the whole building. Some kind of electrical issue this morning."

Sheila felt her stomach tighten. "When did this happen?"

"Couple hours ago. The photographer guy was pretty upset about it. Said he had important work to do."

"Is he still up there?"

"Haven't seen him leave." The worker stubbed out his cigarette. "But there's a lot of ways in and out with all this scaffolding."

They thanked him and moved back to the alley entrance. A crash from above made them both look up. Through a third-floor window, they caught a glimpse of movement—someone disconnecting equipment, working by flashlight.

"Back door's too obvious," Sheila said. "He'll be watching it. We need another way up."

They circled the building again. The scaffolding created a complex grid of potential access points, but climbing it would leave them exposed. The construction crew had mostly moved inside, their tools and materials abandoned while they dealt with the power issue.

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"There," Finn said suddenly. "Service elevator."

A construction lift ran up the side of the building, currently holding painting supplies. It would be slow and noisy, but it might be their best option.

Before they could decide how to proceed, movement caught her eye—a figure on the scaffolding above, moving with practiced ease through the metal framework. Even from this distance, she could see he carried something bulky—probably a camera bag or hard drives.

"There," she said. "Northeast corner."

But as they watched, Thorne disappeared into a maze of wooden platforms and tarps. The renovation had created dozens of hiding places, multiple escape routes.

"We need to split up," Finn said. "Cover more ground."

Sheila nodded reluctantly. "You take the fire escape. I'll try the service elevator. But Finn?" She caught his arm. "Be careful."

"You're the one whose truck was just hijacked," he said.

"We'll both be careful, then."

They separated, each moving toward their chosen access point. Sheila reached the construction lift and hit the call button. Nothing happened.

"Power's out, remember?" a nearby worker called helpfully.

Of course. The power outage would affect the exterior lift too. She looked up at the scaffolding, mentally plotting a route. It wouldn't be comfortable, but she'd done worse during her kickboxing days.

A flash of movement above—someone crossing between buildings on a wooden platform. She caught a glimpse of camera equipment, a black bag that could hold hard drives or evidence.

Or weapons.

Sheila grabbed the scaffolding and began to climb.

The metal pipes were cold against Sheila's hands, years of kickboxing training making her movements efficient despite her exhaustion. Construction debris made each step treacherous—loose boards, coils of wire, abandoned tools that could shift under her weight.

Fifteen feet up, she paused to catch her breath behind a stack of plywood. The scaffolding created a three-dimensional maze, platforms intersecting at odd angles, tarps billowing in the morning wind. Somewhere above, Thorne was moving through this artificial forest of metal and wood. She could hear footsteps, but the sound echoed strangely off the building's facade, making it impossible to pinpoint his location.

Her radio crackled softly—Finn, keeping her updated on his position. "No sign of him on the fire escape. But there's equipment scattered everywhere up here. Looks like he left in a hurry."

"Copy that," she whispered. "Stay alert. He knows this layout better than we do."

She continued climbing, staying close to the building's wall where the scaffolding was most stable. At the second floor, she found more evidence of Thorne's hasty departure—a camera lens dropped near an equipment case, cables tangled around a support beam.

A door slammed somewhere above. Sheila froze, listening. Then came the distinct sound of someone moving across wooden planks, heading east toward the adjacent building's roof.

"Finn," she said into her radio. "He's moving between buildings. East side."

"Copy. But Sheila—there's a gap there. A good fifteen feet between structures."

She reached the third floor platform and saw what he meant. A makeshift bridge of wooden planks spanned the alley between buildings, secured with what looked like hastily tied rope. Beyond it, the flat roof of the neighboring furniture store offered multiple escape routes—fire escapes, utility access, even another set of scaffolding where that building was also under renovation.

Movement caught her eye—Thorne was already halfway across the makeshift bridge, a heavy bag slung over his shoulder. He moved with surprising grace for someone carrying equipment, clearly familiar with this improvised path.

"Stop! Police!" she called out, knowing he wouldn't but required to make the announcement.

Thorne glanced back. Even from this distance, she could see the camera hanging around his neck, could imagine him documenting everything, turning even this pursuit into a performance.

She started across the wooden planks. They shifted under her weight, the rope

creaking ominously. Below, the alley waited, three stories of empty air between her and the pavement.

"Careful," Finn's voice crackled through her radio. "That rigging doesn't look stable."

Thorne had reached the other side. Instead of running, though, he turned to watch her crossing. The camera came up to his eye—was he filming this? Creating another scene for his collection?

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The planks swayed with each step. Halfway across, she heard a snap—one of the ropes giving way. The bridge tilted sharply, and she had to grab a support cable to keep her balance.

"Sheila!" Finn's voice carried from somewhere behind her.

She looked back to see him emerging onto the platform she'd just left. But she was committed now—going back would be as dangerous as going forward. She took another careful step, feeling the boards shift beneath her.

Through his camera lens, Thorne watched her progress with an artist's intensity. Did he hope she'd fall? Was this moment of suspense just another scene in his twisted production?

The next step was met with an ominous cracking sound. The remaining ropes were straining, the wood beginning to splinter. She was still eight feet from safety, too far to jump.

She heard Finn shout something behind her, but her focus narrowed to the fraying rope, the splintering wood. Time seemed to slow. If she moved quickly enough...

The bridge gave way just as she launched herself forward. For a sickening moment she was airborne, the alley yawning beneath her. Then, her hands caught the edge of the furniture store's roof. Her body slammed against the brick wall, driving the air from her lungs.

Thorne stood a few feet away, still filming. But in that moment of distraction, he

failed to notice Finn had found another route—through the furniture store itself. The roof access door burst open behind Thorne.

"Drop the camera," Finn ordered, weapon drawn. "Hands where I can see them."

As Sheila pulled herself onto the roof, she saw something unexpected cross Thorne's face—not fear or anger, but relief.

"Careful with the bag," he said as she cuffed him. "The evidence is fragile."

"Evidence?" she asked.

"Why do you think I've been documenting everything?" His voice was quiet, almost sad. "Someone had to preserve the truth."

They led him down through the furniture store, where a very confused manager was trying to understand why police had just run through his business. Outside, backup units were arriving, lights flashing in the morning sun.

"I think," Thorne said as they reached the ground, "we need to have a very long conversation about what I've been filming these past few weeks."

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The interrogation room felt colder than usual, though maybe that was just Sheila's exhaustion catching up with her. Thorne sat across the metal table, his demeanor strangely calm for someone who'd just led them on a rooftop chase. His camera and bags had been secured as evidence, but he kept glancing at them through the observation window as if more concerned about his equipment than his own situation.

"Let's start with why you ran," Sheila said. She'd taken off her jacket, still sweaty

from the chase and climb. Her shoulders ached from catching herself on the roof's edge.

"I needed to protect the footage." Thorne's voice remained soft, measured. He had an artist's hands, she noticed—long fingers that kept making small gestures as if framing shots. "When the power went out, I knew they'd be coming for my equipment next. Had to get everything copied and secured."

"They?" Finn asked from his position by the door.

"Whoever's been staging these murders." Thorne reached for a water bottle, then stopped when he remembered his hands were cuffed. "I've been documenting strange behavior for weeks. People accessing the theaters after hours. Equipment being moved. Costumes being photographed."

"Documenting?" Sheila leaned forward. "Or planning?"

"You think I'm the killer." It wasn't a question. "That I staged those scenes, created those moments." He smiled slightly. "I understand why. The technical knowledge, the attention to detail, the theatrical elements. But you're misreading the narrative."

"Explain it to us then," Sheila said.

Thorne glanced at his equipment again. "It's all there, in the footage. I started noticing things during 'The Winter Palace' production. People watching the auditions too intently. Making notes about specific performers. At first I thought they were just talent scouts, but..." He paused. "There was something predatory about their attention."

"So you started filming them?" Finn asked.

"I film everything. It's what I do. But I started being more systematic about it. Setting

up cameras in overlooked places.Documenting patterns."His hands moved again, sketching invisible frames."When Jessica Gregory died, posed exactly like that scene from 'Winter Palace,' I knew I'd been right.Someone had been studying these performances, learning them.Planning them."

"And you didn't come forward because...?"Sheila let the question hang.

"Would you have believed me?A cameraman with an obsession for filming people without their knowledge?"He shook his head."I needed proof.Concrete evidence.So I kept filming, kept documenting.Even after Thomas Rivera died, after Sarah Martinez..."He swallowed hard."I should have moved faster.Should have seen the pattern sooner."

Sheila studied him carefully.His story made a certain kind of sense—a photographer documenting suspicious behavior, gathering evidence.But something nagged at her.

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"The power outage this morning," she said. "You said you knew 'they' would come for your equipment next. Who is 'they'?"

"I don't know names. But there's someone else who's been filming. Another cameraman, using different equipment. More professional gear." His hands sketched another invisible frame. "I caught glimpses in my footage—someone documenting the same events I was, but from different angles. Like they were creating their own version of events."

Could he be talking about Paul Wilson? But they'd already cleared Wilson. Then again, perhaps someone had accessed Wilson's cameras without his consent. Someone with darker motives than mere documentation.

"We'll need to see this footage," Finn said.

"It's all there." Thorne nodded toward his equipment. "Every file is dated and labeled. I was trying to create a timeline and understand the pattern. But this morning, when the power went out..." He shuddered slightly. "It wasn't an accident. They knew I was getting close. Knew I had evidence."

Sheila stood and walked to the observation window. Through it, she could see Thorne's camera bag, hard drives, memory cards—weeks or months of surveillance footage. If he was telling the truth, the killer's pattern might be hidden somewhere in those files.

If he was telling the truth.

"You understand how this looks," she said, turning back to him. "You ran. You had detailed knowledge of the murders. You were filming the victims before they died."

"I was filming everyone," he corrected. "Because I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know who to trust. The festival brings in dozens of film crews each year. Anyone could have been involved." He leaned forward. "But there's one thing I know for certain—the killer uses very specific equipment. High-end motion cameras, professional-grade lenses. The kind of gear that costs more than I make in a year."

"And you can prove this?" Finn asked.

"It's in the footage. Reflections in windows, shadows on walls—you can see the shape of their camera rig. Much bigger than anything I use. The kind of setup documentary crews favor."

Something tickled at the edge of Sheila's memory. Something about documentary filmmakers, about expensive equipment...

But before she could chase down the thought, a knock at the door interrupted them. Deputy Neville entered, looking apologetic.

"Sorry to interrupt, Sheriff, but CSU needs you to sign off on some evidence forms. And the tech team is ready to start analyzing those hard drives."

Sheila nodded. "We'll continue this later," she told Thorne. To Finn, she added, "Stay with him. I want to hear more about this other cameraman."

As she followed Neville out, her mind kept circling back to that nagging memory. Something she'd seen, or heard, or...

The answer was there, hidden in plain sight. She just had to figure out what she was

really looking at.

Just like the killer had been doing all along.

The evidence room hummed with electronics as the tech team began processing Thorne's hard drives. Sheila signed the forms Neville handed her, but her mind was elsewhere, turning over details from the case.

A documentary filmmaker using professional-grade equipment. Someone who understood both the technical and performance aspects of filmmaking. Someone who had been watching, documenting...

She froze, the pen hovering above the last form.

"Sheriff?" Neville asked. "Everything okay?"

"The film festival catalog," Sheila said. "I need to see it. Now."

Five minutes later, she was flipping through glossy pages in her office, scanning film descriptions and crew listings. There—"Echoes of Silence," Bradley Greenwald's documentary. The one that never got to premiere.

She pulled up the case files on her computer, specifically the notes about Jessica Gregory's movements the night she died. According to the taxi driver, Jessica had gone to the theater to check something. She'd been carrying a yellow envelope.

"What did you find?" Sheila whispered to herself, scanning the documentary's production credits. The director of photography was listed as James Morrison, with a biography noting his extensive work filming "intimate character studies" and "raw

human moments."

She did another search, this time through the theater's security logs. Morrison had been given full access during pre-production, using high-end cameras to film behind-the-scenes footage of other productions. Including "The Winter Palace." Including Jessica Gregory's audition.

The pieces were starting to fit together. But she needed to be sure.

She pulled up Charlotte's photos again—the grainy security camera shots of someone going through costume records. The expensive watch was visible in one shot, but there was something else she hadn't noticed before: a camera strap, high-end, the kind used for professional documentary work.

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Her phone buzzed—a text from Finn: Thorne says he has footage of someone filming Jessica the night she died. Tech team processing it now.

Sheila was already moving. In the evidence room, the tech team had multiple screens set up, processing Thorne's files. On one monitor, timestamped footage showed the theater hallway the night Jessica died. The angle was awkward—clearly one of Thorne's hidden cameras—but she could see Jessica walking quickly, clutching a yellow envelope. And behind her...

"Stop," Sheila said. "Go back a few frames."

The technician rewound slightly. There—in the corner of the frame, barely visible: someone following Jessica. Someone carrying professional camera equipment.

"Can you enhance that?"

The tech worked his magic, zooming and sharpening. The image was still grainy, but she could make out the camera rig—high-end, expensive. Documentary grade.

The kind James Morrison used.

"Pull up Morrison's festival credentials," she told Neville. "I want to know every building he had access to, every production he worked on."

She headed back to interrogation. Thorne was standing when she reentered, pacing despite his cuffs. Finn gave her a look that said he'd tried to keep him seated.

"Morrison," Thorne said before she could speak. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. But I needed to be sure you'd found enough to believe me."

"James Morrison," Sheila said. "Bradley Greenwald's cinematographer."

"More than that." Thorne finally sat, his hands making those framing gestures again. "He's been filming everything. Every production, every rehearsal, every private moment. Says it's for Greenwald's documentary, but..." He shook his head. "The angles he chooses, the moments he focuses on—it's like he's studying them. Learning them."

"Studying who? Who is he going after next?"

Thorne took a quick, hesitant breath.

"This isn't the time to hold out on us," Finn said.

"Morrison has this private studio above the Mountain View Hotel where he does his editing. The film festival rents it for him. Anyway, two nights ago, I managed to get inside and take a look around. I was planning to document everything, but I didn't have time—I heard someone coming up the stairs and got spooked."

Sheila studied him, sensing he wouldn't have brought this up if he hadn't found anything. "So you didn't document anything," she said. "But what did you see?"

"Just some of his editing notes. There's a sequence he calls 'The Final Performance.' He's been planning it for weeks." Thorne's hands finally went still. "And he already has his next actor picked out."

"Who, damn it?" Finn said.

"Bradley Greenwald." Thorne's voice dropped lower. "Morrison blames him for

ruining his vision.Says Greenwald doesn't understand true cinema, true performance.The notes talk about making him part of the ultimate scene."

Sheila was already moving toward the door."How sure are you about this?"

"I know what I saw," Thorne said."But Sheriff?"She turned back."Be careful.Morrison...he sees everything as a scene to be filmed.Everyone as actors in his production."He made one final framing gesture."And he always gets the shot he wants."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The editing studio above the Mountain View Hotel was dark when they arrived, but Sheila could see a faint glow from beneath the door—the kind of light given off by editing monitors.CSU was still ten minutes out, having taken a circuitous route to avoid drawing attention.

"Greenwald's not answering his phone," Finn said quietly."Hotel staff says he checked out an hour ago, but his car's still in the parking lot."

Sheila studied the door.No sound from within, but her instincts told her Morrison was in there.Probably editing his latest work, his "Final Performance" with Greenwald.

"Back entrance?"Finn suggested.

She shook her head."He'll have cameras covering all approaches.That's his signature—multiple angles, everything documented."

As if to confirm her theory, she spotted a tiny lens in the hallway's smoke detector, positioned for a perfect view of anyone approaching the studio.Morrison would already know they were here.

"We can't wait for CSU," she said. "If he's in there with Greenwald..."

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A muffled sound carried through the door—something falling, or being knocked over. Then, very faintly, the mechanical whir of a camera lens adjusting.

He was filming.

Sheila drew her weapon and moved to one side of the door, Finn taking position on the other. From inside came another sound—a voice, too muffled to make out words but with the distinctive cadence of someone delivering lines.

Their radios crackled softly—Neville confirming CSU was eight minutes out. Too long to wait if Morrison was already filming his "final performance."

Sheila met Finn's eyes and nodded. In one smooth movement, he kicked the door open.

The studio was a maze of equipment—editing stations, cameras on tripods, lights positioned to eliminate any shadows. But what caught Sheila's attention was the elaborate camera rig in the center of the room, currently focused on Bradley Greenwald.

The director sat in what looked like an antique theater chair, his hands bound to the armrests with gaffer's wire. More wire circled his throat—not tight enough to strangle, not yet. Morrison stood behind him, adjusting a light with one hand while the other held a remote camera trigger.

There was a watch on his wrist—a very expensive watch, by the look of it. Just like the one in Charlotte's photo.

"Perfect timing," Morrison said without looking up from his work. His voice was surprisingly gentle. "I was hoping for witnesses. This is, after all, my final act. And what's a performance without an audience?"

"Step away from him," Sheila ordered, her weapon trained on Morrison's chest.

"In a moment." He made a minor adjustment to the light. "This scene requires precise composition. You understand, of course. You've been studying my work."

Greenwald's eyes were wide with fear, but he didn't struggle. The wire around his neck ensured his cooperation.

"The other murders," Sheila said, moving slowly into the room. "You filmed all of them."

"Murders?" Morrison smiled slightly. "No, you misunderstand. I created moments. Perfect, pure performances." He gestured at his editing station, where multiple screens showed footage from previous scenes—Jessica in the blue dress, Thomas posed in the hotel corridor, Sarah arranged like her character's final moment. "Each one exactly as it should have been. Each actor finally achieving their true potential."

"By killing them?" Finn asked. He was moving to flank Morrison, but the killer seemed unconcerned.

"Death is the ultimate performance," Morrison said. "The moment when pretense falls away, when we see the truth of a character." He adjusted another light. "That's what I've been documenting. The perfect synthesis of actor and role."

"Like Jessica Gregory?" Sheila kept her weapon trained on Morrison while trying to analyze the room's layout. Besides the main editing station, there were at least three

other camera setups running, documenting this confrontation from multiple angles."What truth did you see in her performance?"

"Ah, Jessica."Morrison's hands moved with practiced grace as he adjusted another light."She understood vulnerability.That moment in 'The Winter Palace' when her character accepts her fate—she brought such raw honesty to it.But the producers wanted someone with more 'festival recognition.'"His lip curled slightly."As if that matters to true art."

"So you killed her?Because she lost a role?"

"I immortalized her."Morrison finally looked up from his work, meeting Sheila's eyes."She was carrying evidence of the festival's corruption—all those backroom deals, all that talent wasted because of politics.She thought exposing it would change things."He shook his head."She didn't understand that the system itself is broken.That only through perfect performance can we transcend these petty limitations."

Greenwald made a muffled sound, trying to speak through what must be a gag.Morrison touched his shoulder almost tenderly.

"Bradley here understands now, don't you?"He tightened the wire slightly, making Greenwald go very still."All those compromises, all those commercial decisions—they destroy true art.But tonight..."He smiled."Tonight we create something pure."

"By strangling him on camera?"Finn had managed to work his way around to the far side of the room, but Morrison still seemed unconcerned about being flanked.

"By capturing the moment, he finally understands."Morrison's free hand moved to a control panel."When pretense falls away, when the mask cracks—that's what I've been documenting all along.The instant when performance becomes a reality."

Sheila noticed something about the camera setups—they were positioned to cover every angle of the room, including the doorway where she and Finn had entered. Their own reactions were being recorded, integrated into Morrison's grotesque production.

"The envelope Jessica was carrying," she said, trying to keep him talking while she looked for an opening. "What was in it?"

"Financial records. Emails. Proof of how festivals really work—how roles are bought and sold, how true talent is ignored in favor of marketable names." Morrison's voice took on a lecturer's tone. "She thought exposing it would change things. I showed her a better way. A purer form of protest."

"Through murder."

"Through transformation." He gestured at his monitors. "Watch their faces in the final moments. The perfect synthesis of actor and role. Jessica became her character completely. Thomas lived his convict's redemption. Sarah transcended into her mad scene." His eyes took on a fervent gleam. "And Bradley here—he's going to show us the ultimate transformation. The moment a compromised artist finally understands the cost of betraying true vision."

The wire around Greenwald's neck tightened another fraction. The director's eyes were wide with terror, but also something else—recognition. He was finally understanding what Morrison had been trying to tell him all along.

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"You don't have to do this," Sheila said. "We can talk about the festival's problems, expose the corruption—"

"Talk?" Morrison laughed softly. "That's what Charlotte said, you know. When she found me going through the costume records. She wanted to report it, start an investigation. She didn't understand that investigation isn't enough. Documentation isn't enough." He touched a control, and one of the monitors showed Charlotte's confrontation in the hallway. "Only through perfect performance can we make people see the truth."

"Those costume records," Sheila said, still looking for an opening. "You weren't just studying measurements. You were tracking which roles had been promised to whom, which actors had been passed over for political reasons."

"Every production leaves a paper trail." Morrison adjusted another camera angle with his free hand. "Measurements, alterations, costume fittings scheduled before official casting announcements—it all tells a story. About who really earned the roles, and who bought their way in."

He touched a control, and another monitor flickered to life. Security footage showed Jessica in the costume department late at night, going through the same records Morrison had studied.

"She was getting close," he said softly. "Finding the same patterns I had. But she thought a lawsuit would fix things. Thought exposing the corruption would change the system." The wire tightened again, making Greenwald whimper. "She didn't understand that the system itself is the corruption. That only through perfect

performance can we achieve truth."

Sheila saw Finn reaching a position where he might have a clean shot, but the gaffer's wire around Greenwald's throat seemed to give Finn pause. One reflexive movement from Morrison and the director would die before they could reach him.

"You staged each murder to recreate their best performances," she said, keeping Morrison's attention on her. "The scenes they were denied."

"I gave them immortality." Morrison's eyes took on that feverish gleam again. "Jessica's vulnerability, Thomas's redemption, Sarah's descent into madness—now they'll be remembered exactly as they should be. Their perfect moments, preserved forever."

"And Greenwald?" Finn asked. "What perfect moment are you creating with him?"

"The moment of understanding." Morrison's hand moved to Greenwald's shoulder again. "When a compromised artist finally sees how far he's fallen. How many true performances he's denied." He adjusted a camera with his free hand. "The exact instant when he realizes that every decision to cast for politics instead of talent, every choice to favor marketability over art—it all led to this moment."

Greenwald was very still now, his eyes moving between Sheila and Finn. She could see him processing angles, possibilities, just as she was. The director in him was still working, even now.

"It won't work," Sheila said. "However you stage this, however you film it—it won't have the impact you want."

"No?" Morrison raised an eyebrow. "Watch the footage from the other scenes. Watch their faces in that final moment of transformation. When Jessica realized she'd finally

become her character completely. When Thomas understood true redemption. When Sarah—"

The movement was so subtle Sheila almost missed it. While Morrison was focused on his artistic justification, Greenwald's hands had been working at the wire binding his wrists. The director's years of experience with practical effects had taught him something about knots and bindings.

She saw the exact moment the wire gave way.

Greenwald lunged forward just as Morrison was adjusting another light. The wire around his throat pulled taut, but his newly-freed hands shot up, grabbing the gaffer's wire before it could strangle him. Morrison stumbled, caught off guard by the sudden movement, his camera remote clattering to the floor.

"Don't move!" Sheila ordered, but Morrison was already reacting, using his grip on the wire to yank Greenwald backward. The director's chair toppled, sending both men crashing into one of the camera setups. Expensive equipment crashed down around them.

Finn moved to get a clean shot, but the struggling figures were too entangled. Morrison had wrapped the loose end of the wire around his fist, trying to regain control of his scene as monitors sparked and lights toppled around them.

"You're ruining the composition!" Morrison shouted. "The framing has to be perfect!"

Greenwald drove an elbow backward, catching Morrison in the ribs. But the cinematographer's grip on the wire was too strong. They slammed into an editing station, sending hard drives and equipment crashing to the floor.

Sheila circled left while Finn went right, both looking for an angle that wouldn't put

Greenwald at risk. But Morrison seemed to sense their movements. He hauled Greenwald upright, using him as a shield while backing toward another set of monitors.

"Stop!" Morrison's voice had lost its gentle quality. "This isn't how the scene is blocked. This isn't how it's supposed to look!"

"It's over," Sheila said. "Let him go."

"Over? This is just the beginning of the third act." Morrison's free hand found another piece of wire on a nearby table. "The moment of crisis, when everything hangs in the balance."

But as he reached for the wire, Greenwald made his move. Instead of pulling away, he drove backward hard, slamming Morrison into the monitor bank. Sparks flew as electronics shattered. The grip on the wire loosened just enough.

Greenwald twisted free, but Morrison was already swinging the second piece of wire like a whip. It caught the director across the face, drawing blood. Greenwald stumbled, giving Morrison the opening he needed to lunge forward with the wire stretched between his hands.

"Freeze!" Finn shouted.

But Morrison wasn't listening anymore. His careful staging had been ruined, his perfect scene destroyed. Now, he moved with the desperate energy of a performer who'd lost his script, improvising a new ending.

He caught Greenwald around the throat with the wire just as Sheila reached them. Her tackle took both men to the ground, equipment crashing around them. Morrison's grip on the wire was maniacal—she couldn't break his hold without risking Greenwald's

throat being crushed.

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Finn tried to move in, but Morrison rolled, keeping Greenwald between them. "The scene isn't finished!" he screamed as he rose again, dragging Greenwald with him. "They have to see! They have to understand!"

Sheila saw Greenwald's face starting to turn purple. They had seconds, not minutes. Her hands found the wire, trying to work her fingers between it and Greenwald's throat, but Morrison's grip was too tight.

Then she felt something else—a second wire, the one that had originally bound Greenwald's hands. It had tangled around Morrison's legs during the struggle.

"Finn!" she called. "The wire!"

He saw it too. As Morrison focused on strangling Greenwald, Finn grabbed the loose wire and pulled hard. Morrison's legs went out from under him, breaking his grip just enough. Sheila wrenched the gaffer's wire away from Greenwald's throat as the director rolled free, gasping for air.

Morrison tried to scramble up, reaching for another piece of wire, but Finn was already on him. The cinematographer fought like a man possessed, screaming about ruined scenes and perfect moments, but Finn got him face-down on the floor.

"It's all wrong!" Morrison shouted as Finn cuffed him. "The blocking, the lighting—none of it works! We have to reset! We have to—"

"James Morrison," Sheila cut him off, "you're under arrest for the murders of Jessica Gregory, Thomas Rivera, and Sarah Martinez." She helped Greenwald sit up,

checking the wounds on his throat."And the attempted murder of Bradley Greenwald."

EPILOGUE

Four days after Morrison's arrest, Sheila stood in what remained of his editing studio, now thoroughly processed by CSU. The room felt smaller without all the equipment, but no less unsettling. Morning sunlight streamed through the windows, catching dust motes where camera rigs had once stood.

She turned slowly, taking in the scene. Hard drives and memory cards filled dozens of evidence boxes—Morrison had documented everything obsessively. Not just the murders, but years of festival politics, backroom deals, promised roles that went to other actors. It was all evidence, in his eyes, that these people were hacks who had no real appreciation for art, no sense of what acting was all about.

Which was why he'd set out to show them what acting ought to be—or his own twisted version, at any rate.

The festival itself would never be the same. Carl Rider had resigned as director after the full scope of the corruption emerged. The evidence on Morrison's hard drives went far beyond just the festival. Years of meticulous documentation showed how roles were essentially auctioned off to the highest bidder, with talent a secondary consideration to financial connections. Email threads revealed producers discussing which actors' families could provide the most funding. Spreadsheets tracked "donations" that mysteriously preceded casting decisions.

More disturbing were the recordings of private conversations—studio executives candidly discussing how to keep talented but unconnected actors from questioning the system. Morrison had captured it all, his cameras hidden in offices and green rooms across multiple venues. Some of the biggest names in independent film

appeared in his footage, their masks dropping as they discussed maintaining what they called "the natural order of things."

"Listen to this," Finn said, playing one of Morrison's audio files. A festival board member's voice filled the room: "Of course Sarah Martinez understood the role better. That's not the point. We need someone bankable, someone whose family can help fund the next three productions. Art is lovely, but art doesn't pay the bills."

Sheila moved to another box of evidence, this one containing financial records. "He tracked every deal, every compromise. Going back years." She pulled out a folder labeled 'Winter Palace—Financing Structure.' Inside were documents showing how Claire Montgomery's family had essentially purchased her role through a complex web of production investments.

"Jessica must have found some of this," Finn said. "That's what was in the envelope she was carrying."

"Which made her dangerous." Sheila spread more documents across the desk. "She wasn't just a rejected actor—she was a witness to systemic corruption. And Morrison..."

"Turned her into art," Finn finished grimly.

The fallout was spreading beyond Coldwater. Three major studios had already suspended relationships with producers implicated in Morrison's evidence. The Sundance Film Festival announced an emergency review of their selection processes. Trade publications were running exposés about the "pay-to-play" culture Morrison had documented.

"Look at this," Sheila said, opening another file. "Bradley Greenwald knew about all of it. Morrison has footage of him explaining to investors how the system

works—which roles are actually available versus which ones are already promised to people with connections."

"That's why Morrison targeted him for the final performance," Finn said. "He saw Greenwald as a gatekeeper of corruption."

Charlotte Davis had provided a formal statement about the costume records, detailing how certain actors would be fitted for roles before auditions even began. Her documentation, combined with Morrison's surveillance, painted a picture of a system designed to maintain power in the hands of a select few while creating the illusion of artistic merit.

"The whole thing was theater," Sheila said quietly. "Just not the kind anyone wanted to admit."

Marcus Harlow had come forward too, describing how sound department records were routinely altered to hide late-night meetings between producers and wealthy investors. Even Paul Wilson's legitimate surveillance system had inadvertently captured evidence of the corruption Morrison became obsessed with exposing.

"Here's what I don't understand," Finn said, studying another monitor. "Morrison had enough evidence to expose everything legally. Why resort to murder?"

"Because it wasn't ultimately about the corruption, not for Morrison." Sheila gestured at the carefully organized hard drives. "He thought of himself as an artist, first and foremost, not a whistleblower. In his mind, he was giving these people the roles they'd been denied, creating perfect moments—performances untainted by commerce or politics."

She picked up Morrison's production notes. "Look how he describes each murder: 'Jessica's vulnerability finally achieving its pure form.' Thomas transcending artificial

limitations."Sarah's character work reaching its natural conclusion."

The festival's sponsors were rapidly withdrawing, their carefully crafted statements unable to hide their panic at being associated with such widespread corruption. Local businesses that had depended on festival revenue were already feeling the impact. The Coldwater Theater stood empty, its screens dark, its future uncertain.

"Morrison's confession mentions something called 'The Collection,'" Finn said, checking his notes. "But we haven't found it yet."

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"Because it's not here." Sheila moved to the window, looking down at Main Street where workers were taking down festival banners. "He talked about a 'secure location' where he keeps his most important work. Somewhere even his studio cameras don't monitor."

"Another editing bay?"

"Maybe. Or maybe something else entirely." She turned back to the room full of evidence. "Whatever it is, it contains his original recordings. The ones he considered his true art."

A knock at the door interrupted them. Deputy Neville entered, looking troubled. "You need to see this," she said, handing Sheila a tablet. "Someone uploaded portions of Morrison's surveillance footage to multiple film industry websites. It's going viral."

The video showed a series of damning conversations—producers discussing payoffs, directors admitting to pre-arranged casting, investors laughing about keeping "outsiders" away from desirable roles. Comments were flooding in from actors describing similar experiences, creating a tsunami of revelations that threatened to reshape independent film.

"Morrison's final performance," Sheila said quietly. "Even arrested, he found a way to expose everything. I guess he decided that if he couldn't go on creating art the way he wanted to, he might as well take down some of the people he despised and hated."

"The festival board is calling an emergency meeting," Neville said. "They're talking about permanent shutdown, complete restructuring."

Sheila nodded, but her mind was already moving to the implications. If Morrison had planned this level of exposure, what else had he arranged? What other revelations waited in his mysterious "Collection"?

Sheila moved to the window, looking down at Main Street, where festival crowds had thronged just days ago. "He didn't even see them as murders. In his mind, he was giving these actors their perfect moments, their ideal performances. The scenes they'd been denied by festival politics."

Finn moved to stand beside her at the window. "I talked to Paul Wilson this morning. He had no idea Morrison was accessing his surveillance system. Thought the glitches in his cameras were technical issues."

"Morrison's work with documentaries gave him the skills to hack Wilson's setup," Sheila said. "He used that access to study his victims, learn their routines. Then he'd stage each murder to recreate the scenes they'd originally auditioned for."

The October sunlight felt weak, doing little to warm the empty studio. Down on Main Street, workers were taking down the last of the festival banners. It would be a long time before Coldwater hosted another film festival—if ever.

A familiar truck pulled into a parking space below—her father's old Ford. Gabriel Stone climbed out, moving stiffly in the morning cold.

"Did you call him?" she asked Finn.

He shook his head. "But after what happened with your truck..." He left the sentence hanging.

The memory of the Irish-accented man in her backseat sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the temperature. Her truck had been found burned, Tommy's

laptop destroyed. Someone had known exactly what they were looking for.

She had downplayed the incident to her father, avoiding any reference to her investigation into departmental corruption, but she had little doubt her father had connected the two.

"I should talk to him," she said. "After everything that's happened..."

"You think it's safe?"

She thought about the man's warning, about his threats against her father and Star. "I don't know. But keeping him in the dark might be more dangerous."

They left Morrison's studio, locking it behind them. The Mountain View Hotel felt different now, knowing what had happened in its rooms and corridors. Knowing how Morrison had used its spaces to stage his performances.

They found Gabriel in the lobby, pretending to read a newspaper. He folded it away as they approached.

"Thought I'd find you here," he said. His voice was casual, but his eyes were sharp. "Heard you caught the festival killer."

"James Morrison," she said. "Cinematographer with a twisted artistic vision."

Gabriel nodded slowly. "And your truck? Any leads on who torched it?"

The question hung in the air between them. Through the lobby windows, Sheila could see the spot where her truck had been parked that night. Where someone had been waiting for her, someone who knew about departmental corruption, about Tommy, about her mother's murder.

"That's...complicated," she said carefully.

"Usually is." Gabriel set his newspaper aside. "Maybe we should talk somewhere private."

Sheila glanced around the lobby. How many cameras were hidden in smoke detectors and light fixtures? How many people might be listening?

"Not here," she said quietly. "And not at the station."

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Her father's eyes narrowed slightly—he'd caught her meaning. "I know a place," he said. "Where we can talk freely."

They took Gabriel's truck, following winding back roads out of town. Sheila sat in the passenger seat while Finn followed in their department vehicle. The old Ford's heater worked sporadically, coughing out warm air that smelled faintly of engine oil.

"You're being careful what you say at the station," Gabriel said. It wasn't a question.

"The night my truck was taken," she said quietly, watching empty fields roll past, "the man who did it knew things. About Mom's case. About Tommy." She glanced in the side mirror, confirming Finn was still behind them. "About my childhood."

Gabriel's hands tightened on the steering wheel. They turned onto a dirt road that led toward the mountains, old tire tracks suggesting it was still used occasionally.

"Irish accent?" he asked.

Sheila turned to study her father's face. "You know him?"

"Not exactly." Gabriel kept his eyes on the rutted road. "But I've heard about him. Back when I was working in Internal Affairs, there were whispers. Someone who showed up when things needed to be...handled."

The dirt road ended at what looked like an abandoned ranger station—weathered wood, broken windows, roof partially caved in. But as they parked behind it, Sheila saw the building's disrepair was carefully maintained camouflage. The door's hinges

were new, well-oiled.

"Used to use this place as a safe house," Gabriel said as they waited for Finn to join them. "Off the books."

They left their phones in the vehicle and got out. Gabriel unlocked the door with a key that looked too new for the weathered lock. Inside, the station was a single room with a potbelly stove, some chairs, and a battery-powered lamp. No electronics, no phones, nothing that could be compromised.

When they were all inside, Gabriel lit the lamp and closed the door. "Tell me exactly what happened with your truck."

Sheila described the hijacking—the man's expensive cologne, his threats about Star, his warning to stop investigating the department. As she spoke, she watched her father's face grow increasingly grim.

"He didn't want you dead," Gabriel said when she finished. "He wanted you to know they were watching. That they could reach you anytime."

"They burned Tommy's laptop," she said. "How did they even know I had it?"

"Because they have people inside the department." Gabriel's voice was very quiet. "Just like they did when your mother was investigating them."

The lamp's light cast strange shadows on the walls. Outside, wind rustled through dead leaves, making the old building creak.

"Tommy's the key," Sheila said quietly. "He knows names, knows how deep this goes. That's why they tried to silence him in his cell."

Gabriel nodded slowly. "And now they know you had his laptop. They probably know you're trying to get a deal for him, too." He rubbed his face, suddenly looking older in the dim light. "This is exactly what I was afraid of. Exactly why I tried to keep you away from all this."

"It's too late for that," Finn said. "They're already watching her. Already made threats against Star."

"We need to get Tommy protection," Sheila said. "Real protection, not just deputies we think we can trust. Get him into witness protection, get him naming names."

"They'll have people in the D.A.'s office," Gabriel warned. "People who can block any deal, make evidence disappear."

"Then we go federal." Sheila leaned forward. "Find someone we can trust in the FBI, someone with no connection to Utah law enforcement."

"The man in your truck," Gabriel said carefully, "the one with the Irish accent—didn't he imply they have federal connections too?"

"Then we find someone they haven't corrupted yet. Someone new, someone they won't expect." Sheila stood and began pacing the small room. "Tommy's our best shot at exposing all of this. But he'll only talk if he believes we can protect him."

"And ourselves," Finn added quietly.

Sheila stopped pacing. "Star needs to stay with Neville for now. With Baxter and Roberts keeping an eye on Tommy, Neville is the only one left I can trust."

"How can you be sure she isn't involved?" Gabriel asked.

"Because they would have used her against me already if she was." Sheila met her father's eyes. "Just like they used Eddie Mills against Mom."

A long silence filled the room, broken only by the wind outside and the faint crackle of the lamp's flame.

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"There might be a way," Gabriel finally said. "Someone your mother trusted back when she was building her case. Someone outside the usual channels."

"Who?"

"Let me make some calls first. From a secure line." He stood, his joints crackling. "But Sheila?" His voice grew softer. "Whatever we do next, we have to be smart. These people—they've had decades to build their network, place their people. One wrong move..."

"I know." She thought of the burning laptop, of Tommy in his hospital bed, of her mother's unsolved murder. "But we can't just let them win."

"The problem is time," Finn said. "The longer we wait, the more chances they have to get to Tommy. Or destroy evidence we haven't found yet."

Gabriel moved to the window, checking the perimeter out of habit. "Tommy must have known he was in danger the moment he was arrested. If he was smart, he'd have gathered evidence he could use as leverage, something he would threaten to expose if the people he was working for tried to get rid of him."

"Like the laptop," Finn said. "The fact that they went to such great lengths to destroy it suggests they were afraid it had damning information. Without that leverage, they have no reason to keep Tommy alive."

Sheila chewed her lip, thinking. "You're forgetting something. They attempted to kill Tommy before I found that laptop, which suggests they're not afraid of him having

leverage—they're afraid of him talking. They need to shut him up at all costs—which means we have to get him to talk at all costs."

"And Star?" Finn asked in a low voice.

"Star." Sheila's voice caught slightly. "Can you call Neville? Make sure everything's okay?"

Finn was already pulling out his phone, stepping away to make the call. Sheila turned to her father.

"Who's this person you trust? The one Mom worked with?"

"Someone outside the department. Outside Utah law enforcement entirely." Gabriel's voice dropped lower. "But arranging a meeting will be tricky. They'll be watching all of us."

"Let me worry about that." Sheila glanced at Finn, who was still on the phone. "What matters is getting Tommy to talk before they try again."

Finn returned, his expression grim. "Star's fine. Neville has her at the house, watching movies. But Sheila..." He hesitated and glanced at Gabriel. "Star isn't the only one they threatened. You really want to push this?"

"What's the alternative?" She met his eyes. "Let them control us through fear? Let them keep using the people we love as leverage?" She shook her head. "That's exactly how they've operated for decades. How they kept Mom's murder buried all these years."

"I should be with you," Finn said. "When you meet this person."

"No." Sheila's voice was firm. "I need you with Star. Dad will be with me." She managed a small smile. "Besides, you're the only other person besides Neville I trust

completely. I need to know Star's protected."

"She's right," Gabriel said. "The fewer people at this meeting, the better." He touched his daughter's shoulder. "And I won't let anything happen to her."

Finn still looked unhappy, but he nodded. "When?"

"Tonight," Gabriel said. "After dark. I'll make the arrangements."

"You're sure about this person?" Sheila asked. "Sure they can be trusted?"

Gabriel's expression darkened. "I'm not sure anyone can be trusted right now. But we have to trust someone, don't we?"

The wind picked up outside, rattling the station's loose boards. Sheila thought about Star watching movies with Neville, unaware of the danger surrounding her. Thought about Tommy in his hospital bed, about her mother's unsolved murder, about decades of corruption that had destroyed countless lives.

"Make the call," she told her father. "Set up the meeting."

Because fear, she knew, was exactly what these people counted on. Fear of losing loved ones, fear of speaking out, fear of standing up to power.

And she was done being afraid.