



Silent Past

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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

Kelly Bishop adjusted the strap of her heavy backpack, its weight pressing into her shoulders as she squinted at the opening of the cave below her. She'd convinced herself that the unseasonably cold October air in Coldwater County was a good omen—a sign the conditions in this hidden cave system, nestled deep in Utah's Wasatch Range, would be ideal for exploration. Now, staring into the gaping mouth of the rock formation she and Mike Ramirez had driven hours to reach, she wasn't so sure.

Mike, her friend and fellow amateur spelunker, stood beside her, adjusting his headlamp. His easy grin never seemed to falter, even when he was tired or nervous, a trait Kelly had come to admire and envy in equal measure.

He caught her eye and grinned again. "You ready, Bishop? Or you wanna stand here and overthink it some more?"

Kelly rolled her eyes, but she smiled. "I was just deciding if I wanted to let you go first, Ramirez. You know, so you can scare away all the bears."

"Bears don't hibernate in caves this deep," Mike said, wagging a finger. "And anyway, you're the fearless leader. I'm just here to carry your snacks."

Kelly gave him a gentle shove as she stepped forward, her boots crunching against frost-rimed gravel. The air near the cave entrance felt colder than she'd expected, the chill biting through her thick fleece. She switched on her headlamp, its beam slicing into the darkened interior. The walls, slick with moisture, glistened faintly as she

examined the drop ahead of them.

“We’ll need the rope here,” she said, kneeling to secure their line to a sturdy rock outcropping. The descent wasn’t far—maybe twenty feet—but the walls were slick and uneven, making a rappel the safest option.

She drove an anchor into a crack in the rock, then tied a rope to it. She tugged on the rope to test the anchor before standing. “All set.”

Mike smirked. “Ladies first, Bishop. I insist.”

Kelly rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide her grin as she clipped into the rope and started her descent. The rope felt reassuringly solid in her hands as she lowered herself down, her headlamp illuminating the narrow walls. When her boots touched the ground, she called up, “All clear! Your turn.”

Mike followed with practiced ease, landing beside her moments later. “Not bad for a warm-up,” he said, unhooking himself. They left the rope tied off, ready for the climb back up when they were done. “This place better live up to the hype,” he said. “I canceled a perfectly good date night to be here.”

Kelly chuckled. “Oh, please. You canceled a video game marathon. Don’t act like you had real plans.”

Mike’s laughter bounced off the stone walls, the sound filling the confined space. “Busted. But seriously, you owe me a good story to make up for it. Think there’s a hidden treasure in here?”

“Maybe,” Kelly said. “But I’m more interested in those underground lakes people keep talking about. If we can find one, the pictures alone will be worth the trip.”

Photography had always been Kelly's passion. She loved capturing moments and landscapes others might overlook. It was her way of holding onto something tangible, something that wouldn't fade away with time. That drive had led her to spelunking, a hobby that often pushed her beyond her comfort zone.

She'd started exploring caves a year ago after a chance meeting with Mike at a photography exhibit. His enthusiasm for adventure had been infectious, and she'd found herself agreeing to tag along on one of his expeditions. Now, she couldn't imagine life without these adrenaline-fueled excursions.

They moved deeper into the cave, the temperature dropping with each step. Kelly's breath puffed in front of her like smoke, and she felt the damp chill creeping into her gloves. The walls seemed to close in, the passage narrowing into a jagged tunnel. They had to crouch to pass through.

"How's it looking up there?" Mike called.

"Looks like it opens up ahead," Kelly replied. She was relieved when the tunnel widened into a cavern, its ceiling arching high above them. Stalactites dripped water into shallow pools scattered across the floor, the sound rhythmic and oddly soothing.

Mike whistled, his voice reverberating. "Now that's what I'm talking about. This place is amazing."

Kelly's lips curved into a smile as she reached for her camera, her fingers fumbling with the strap around her neck. The soft click of the shutter blended with the dripping water as she took a few shots. She turned, framing Mike in the beam of her headlamp as he examined the formations.

"Hold still," she said. "This lighting is perfect."

“Should I pose?” he asked, striking a mock heroic stance.

Kelly snorted. “You’re impossible.”

As they continued through the cavern, the air grew colder and the sound of dripping water ceased. Their breaths fogged in the dim light. Kelly’s unease, which she’d managed to suppress, began to resurface. There was something about this place that felt...off. The silence was oppressive, as though the cave itself were holding its breath.

Mike must have sensed her tension because he said, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Kelly said quickly. “Just...thinking about how deep we are. It’s a little eerie.”

“Eerie?” Mike grinned. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“No,” she said, too forcefully. “I just have a healthy respect for enclosed spaces.”

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“Healthy respect, huh?” He elbowed her lightly. “Don’t worry, Bishop. If we get lost, I’ll eat the protein bars first.”

Kelly rolled her eyes but didn’t reply. They continued in silence, the tunnel winding downward. Her unease deepened with each step, though she couldn’t pinpoint why. Maybe it was the cold or the lack of sound beyond their movements. Or maybe it was the feeling that they weren’t alone.

Her mind flicked back to her childhood, to the time she’d gotten lost in a maze of narrow canyons while hiking with her parents. She’d been just eight years old, separated from the group after lagging behind to pick up a shiny rock. The memory of those endless red walls, their towering, featureless faces blotting out the sky, still haunted her. She’d screamed herself hoarse that day, the sound swallowed by the oppressive silence, and it had been hours before searchers finally found her curled into a trembling ball under a ledge.

Even now, the thought of being trapped or lost tightened her chest, making it hard to breathe.

She shook off the thought. Don’t be ridiculous, she told herself. It’s just your imagination.

But when her headlamp illuminated the next chamber, her breath caught in her throat. She spotted something that, at first blush, looked like another rock formation. But something about it seemed... wrong somehow. She stepped closer, her heart rate elevating.

And then, all at once, her eyes made sense of what she was seeing. Every muscle in her body seemed to tense at once.

The shape before her was not rock at all but flesh, a human dressed in what appeared to be traditional indigenous clothing. Layers of richly woven fabric, adorned with intricate beadwork and patterns of deep reds, blues, and earthy browns, clung to the body. A feathered headdress rested on its head, the vibrant plumage still vivid despite the passage of time. Bracelets of carved bone and stone adorned its wrists, and an ornate necklace with a pendant shaped like a sun dangled from its neck. The body was perfectly preserved, the skin pale and waxy, the eyes closed as though in sleep.

Mike stepped up beside her, his voice low and incredulous. “What the hell...?”

Kelly’s pulse thundered in her ears as she fumbled for her camera, her hands shaking. She snapped a photo, the flash momentarily brightening the chamber. She half-expected the figure to lurch forward, but it remained still, a macabre statue in the icy air.

Mike knelt beside the body, his face pale. “This is...I don’t even know what this is. Some kind of ritual?”

Kelly’s voice was barely a whisper. “We need to leave. Now.”

Mike looked up at her, his expression conflicted. “Shouldn’t we report this? I mean, someone needs to know about it.”

“We will,” Kelly said. “But not while we’re still in here.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

They turned and began retracing their steps, their movements hurried and clumsy.

Kelly's heart raced as she glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see the figure following them. The oppressive silence seemed heavier now, as though the cave were trying to keep them inside.

As they approached the section where they'd rappelled down earlier, Kelly froze. "Mike," she whispered, her voice trembling. "The rope...it's gone."

Mike stepped past her, shining his headlamp toward the ledge. "No way," he muttered, but his light confirmed what she'd seen. The anchor they'd left was still there, but the rope hung limply, its end frayed as if sliced through.

"Someone cut it," Kelly said, her voice hollow. "Why would anyone...?"

Mike's jaw tightened, his usual easy demeanor replaced by tension. "I don't know, but it means we're not alone down here."

CHAPTER ONE

Sheila Stone stood by her father's side at the edge of the empty gravel lot, her breath forming faint clouds in the crisp October air. The cold crept through her jacket, but she barely noticed it. Her eyes scanned the shadows around them, darting between the skeletal outlines of leafless trees and the occasional glint of moonlight on the windshield of a parked car.

"Where is he?" Sheila muttered, her voice low.

Gabriel Stone didn't look at her. His gray eyes were fixed on the distant tree line, his posture relaxed but alert. "He'll show," he said, the gruffness in his voice doing little to hide the edge of tension beneath. "He always does."

Sheila tightened her grip on the flashlight in her hand, the metal cool against her skin.

She wasn't so sure. The man they were waiting for—Gabriel's old informant from his law enforcement days—was an enigma wrapped in an erratic streak. And he was late.

This meeting was far more important to Sheila than she cared to admit. It wasn't just about any investigation—it was about her mother's unsolved murder ten years ago. Henrietta Stone had stumbled across evidence of corruption in the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department, and someone powerful had silenced her for it.

Gabriel had spent years burying his own guilt, knowing he'd chosen to keep quiet back then to protect their family. But now, with the recent attempt on Sheila's life by a department plant named Tommy, the stakes were higher than ever. Tommy was in a coma—the result of an attempt on his life, presumably by the very people who had sent him to kill Sheila in the first place—but his actions had confirmed one thing: The corruption that killed Henrietta hadn't gone away. It had only grown stronger.

Even Finn, Sheila's partner and boyfriend, and Star, her fourteen-year-old charge, weren't safe. Just yesterday, Sheila had climbed into her truck to discover an armed stranger was in the seat behind her. He'd warned her to give up the investigation, implying both Star and Gabriel would be at risk if she didn't. Though he hadn't mentioned Finn, Sheila assumed he was in danger as well.

Star and Finn were currently together. The plan was that later, when Finn came into work, he'd first drop Star off at the gym where Bo Pratz, Sheila's former sparring partner and one of the best kickboxers she'd ever fought, would keep an eye on her. He was always more than happy to do the Stones a favor, and since he was divorced and only saw his kids on the weekends, he had plenty of free time on his hands.

Sheila took a deep breath as she and her father waited in the cold for a contact who might hold the next piece of the puzzle that would help her understand why her mother had been killed. But with every second that passed with no sign of her father's contact, her unease deepened.

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“Should we call him?” she asked.

Gabriel shook his head. “No. He doesn’t like that. Makes him jumpy.”

“Jumpy?” Sheila’s tone sharpened. “We’re standing out here like sitting ducks, and you’re worried about him being jumpy?”

“Relax, kid.” Gabriel finally turned to her, his weathered face softening. “I wouldn’t bring you out here if I thought it wasn’t safe.”

Sheila didn’t reply. Safe wasn’t a word she trusted anymore—not since Natalie, her older sister, had died. Not since the weight of their family’s fractured history had landed squarely on her shoulders. Not since she’d become painfully aware of the cracks in the system her father had once sworn to uphold.

And which she was now supposed to uphold as sheriff of Coldwater County.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out with a gloved hand. The message was from Finn.

Any updates? Star and I are good. No sign of trouble.

Sheila exhaled a small sigh of relief. She could picture Finn’s steady gaze, his protective presence as he watched over Star, the troubled fourteen-year-old who’d somehow wormed her way into their lives—and their hearts. The fact that Finn had become someone Sheila could trust so implicitly still surprised her, though she was grateful for it.

“Finn says they’re fine,” Sheila said, glancing up at her father.

Gabriel grunted. “Good.”

She texted a reply: Still waiting for him to show.

The silence stretched, filled only by the distant rustling of wind through dry grass. Sheila shoved her hands into her pockets, trying to suppress the nagging sense of unease that had been growing since they’d arrived. She thought about Natalie, how her sister had always been the one to lead, to face danger head-on. Natalie had been fearless—until the day she wasn’t.

She was distracted from her thoughts by the sound of footsteps. Her hand moved instinctively toward her concealed weapon, her body tensing. Gabriel’s hand came up in a calming gesture.

“Easy,” he said. “That’s him.”

A figure emerged from the shadows, moving with a deliberate slowness that set Sheila’s nerves on edge. The man wore a battered leather jacket and a wide-brimmed hat that cast his face in shadow. When he spoke, his voice was low and gravelly.

“Gabriel,” the man said, nodding. His gaze shifted to Sheila. “This the kid?”

Gabriel stepped forward. “This is my daughter. Sheila.”

The man’s eyes narrowed as he looked her over. “She the one causing all the trouble?”

"She's not the one who started this mess. But with any luck, she's going to help clean it up."

The man studied her for a few more seconds before reaching into his jacket. Sheila's pulse quickened, but Gabriel didn't flinch. The man pulled out an envelope and handed it over. Gabriel opened it and peeked, his eyes scanning the contents quickly before he nodded.

"This checks out," he said. He tucked the envelope into his pocket. "Anything else we need to know?"

The man hesitated again, his gaze flicking toward Sheila. "Just one thing. You're stirring up a hornet's nest, old man. You better be sure about what you're doing."

Gabriel's jaw tightened. "I'm sure."

The man nodded once, then turned and disappeared back into the shadows as quickly as he'd come.

Sheila watched him go, her mind racing with questions she didn't know if she wanted answers to. "What was that about?"

Gabriel didn't reply immediately. Instead, he pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with a practiced motion. He took a long drag before finally speaking.

"Means we're getting close," he said, his voice low. "And that scares some people."

"Close to what?" Sheila pressed.

Gabriel turned to her, his gray eyes sharp and unyielding. "Close to the truth."

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Sheila swallowed hard, her frustration simmering just beneath the surface. "What truth, Dad? What's in the envelope?"

Gabriel took another drag of his cigarette, exhaling slowly. "Not here. I'll show you when we're somewhere safe."

"Safe?" Sheila's voice edged with impatience. "You said this meeting was safe. What aren't you telling me?"

Gabriel glanced around the empty lot, his eyes scanning the shadows. "This place was safe enough for the drop. But what's in this envelope, it's not just about you or me anymore. It's bigger than that."

Sheila wanted to argue, but instead she bit her tongue. Her father took another drag, his eyes scanning the shadows, and then together they returned to the truck.

As Gabriel started the engine and the truck rumbled to life, Sheila crossed her arms and stared out the window. The envelope burned in her mind like an itch she couldn't scratch. They drove in silence for a few miles, the headlights cutting through the darkness of the back roads.

Finally, unable to stand it anymore, Sheila spoke. "If you're going to make me wait much longer, I'll just grab it and open it myself."

Gabriel glanced at her, his lips twitching in what might have been a smirk. "Patience, kid. But fine." He reached into his jacket, pulled out the envelope, and handed it to her. "Just don't freak out when you see it."

Sheila took the envelope, her fingers fumbling slightly as she tore it open. Inside were several pages of documents, some typewritten, others handwritten. There were photocopies of old reports, bank statements, and even a grainy photograph of a man she didn't recognize.

"What is all this?" she asked, flipping through the papers. Her eyes caught snippets of text: 'Illegal wire transfers,' 'offshore accounts,' and 'internal memo—Sheriff's Dept.' But the jumble of information made little sense.

"It's a trail," Gabriel said, his voice steady. "Connecting key players in the department to some very shady dealings. Bribes, cover-ups, even hits on people who got too close to the truth."

Sheila's grip tightened on the pages. "And this has something to do with Mom?"

Gabriel's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Everything to do with her. That"—he nodded toward the envelope—"is part of what she was working on when they killed her. She'd found out about the corruption, and she was gathering proof. Enough to bring the whole system down."

"If that's the case, why would that guy give up information like this so easily? It's not exactly the kind of thing you'd just hand over, not without getting something in return."

Her father gave her a long look. "Who says he didn't get anything in return?"

Sheila raised an eyebrow. "Did he owe you a favor or something?"

Gabriel exhaled heavily. "Back when I was working Internal Affairs, I covered for him. He made a mistake during an operation, and when it came across my desk, I made it go away. Let's just say he's been paying it forward ever since."

This admission made Sheila uneasy. "What kind of mistake?"

"He didn't kill anybody, if that's what you're wondering. It was a chain-of-custody thing—the kind of mistake that could ruin a career, given how it threatened to destroy a case the department had been building for years."

Sheila frowned, the pieces slowly coming together in her mind. "So he's helping you now because he feels guilty? Or because you could expose him?"

Gabriel's jaw worked for a moment before he said, "Maybe a bit of both. Nobody really knew the details of what he did, nobody except me. It would do some damage to his reputation if I shared those details. But I have no motive to do so."

"So long as he keeps playing ball."

"That's the way it works."

They were both silent for several moments. Sheila stared down at the envelope again.

"Whatever proof of departmental corruption this is," she said, "that's not really what we need. We need names. I want to know who sent Eddie Mills to our house ten years ago. He may have been the only one who pulled the trigger, but that doesn't mean he's the only one who killed Mom."

Her father stared out the windshield in silence. Empty countryside rolled by.

"Is there a name in here?" Sheila asked.

"You tell me. You're the sheriff."

Sheila flipped through the pages again, her eyes narrowing as she searched for

something that made sense. Finally, a particular document caught her attention—a photocopy of an old personnel file with scribbled notes in the margins. Her gaze landed on a name written in bold at the top: "Carlton Vance."

"Carlton Vance," she murmured. "Does that name ring a bell?"

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Gabriel's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "It should. He was one of the most respected deputies in the department back in the day. Worked Internal Affairs for a while—he hired me, actually." He grunted, and a small smile creased his lips. "Used to call me 'the Pitbull' because I'd get a hold of something and never let go. Seems a bit ironic in retrospect, though."

He fell silent for a few moments.

"Anyway," he went on, "he retired about five years before your mom... before she died. Why? What's he got to do with this?"

Sheila's stomach churned as she studied the file. "There's a memo here linking him to an offshore account. Looks like he's been getting payments from..."—she scanned the documents more closely—"a company called Meridian Holdings."

Gabriel leaned over to look at the memo. "You're sure? Meridian Holdings?"

"Have you heard of it?"

"It's a shell company. The kind people use to launder dirty money."

"And you know about it because...?"

"It's been tied to a lot of high-profile cases." He shook his head in disbelief. "I can't believe Carlton Vance is tied up in this. He could be secretive, sure, but I had no idea..." He trailed off, as if walking down the halls of memory.

Sheila traced the notes in the margins with her finger. "You think Carlton Vance sent Eddie Mills to kill Mom?"

"A week ago, I'd have said no way in hell. But now..." He paused, thinking. "If he didn't send Mills, then he very well may know who did. Getting him to admit it, though, could be difficult."

Sheila clenched her jaw. "He'll talk. One way or another. Where does he live?"

"Used to have a place out on Westwood. Don't know if he's still there."

"Well, then, we'd better go find out."

CHAPTER TWO

The truck's headlights illuminated a row of mailboxes along Westwood Drive. Gabriel slowed as they approached each driveway, his eyes scanning the numbers. When they reached 1437, he pulled over without hesitation.

"This is it," he said quietly.

Sheila studied the darkened house set back from the road. A "FOR SALE" sign stood in the overgrown yard, its post tilting slightly to one side. Through the bare branches of a maple tree, Sheila could see sheets draped over furniture in the front room.

Sheila's heart sank—it was looking less and less likely they'd find Vance here. "You sure this is the house?" she asked.

"I remember the house number." Gabriel shifted in his seat. "Used to come here sometimes. Department meetings."

Something in his tone made Sheila glance at him. Her father was staring at the house with an odd expression, one she couldn't quite read in the dim light. "Just department meetings?"

"What else would it be?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

Gabriel's jaw tightened. "There's nothing to tell."

She wanted to press further, but years of experience had taught her when her father's walls were up, they stayed up. Still, the way he avoided her gaze told her there was more to the story of his relationship with Carlton Vance than he was sharing, which made her very uneasy.

The empty house stood silent and dark. Dead leaves had collected in drifts against the foundation, and the lawn needed mowing. The realtor's lockbox hung prominently on the front door handle. No lights shone in any of the windows, and the driveway was empty except for a few scattered pine needles.

"Looks like Vance cleared out," Sheila said. "But maybe he left something behind."

She reached for the door handle, but Gabriel's hand shot out, gripping her arm. "Wait." His voice was low, urgent. "Before we do this, you need to understand something."

"What?"

"If we find anything connecting him to your mother's murder, there's no going back. These people, they won't just roll over because we have evidence. They'll fight back hard. You ready for that?"

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Sheila met her father's gaze. "I've been ready since the day Mom died."

Gabriel studied her face for a long moment, then nodded and released her arm.

They approached the house carefully, staying in the shadows. The front porch steps creaked under their weight. Sheila examined the lockbox while Gabriel kept watch.

"Could get a warrant," he suggested.

"And give him time to destroy evidence if he's staying here? No. We need to do this now." She moved to one of the windows, testing the frame. It didn't budge.

They circled the house, checking windows as they went. At the back, they found what they were looking for—a window with a broken latch, probably damaged during a storm.

"You sure about this?" Gabriel asked as Sheila worked the window open. "Breaking and entering's a felony."

"So is murder," she replied. "Besides, I'm the sheriff. If anyone asks, we had probable cause."

The window opened with a soft scrape. Sheila climbed through first, landing quietly on what felt like carpet. She pulled out her flashlight and swept the beam around what appeared to be a home office. Empty filing cabinets stood open, their drawers pulled out at odd angles. A layer of dust covered everything.

The room smelled musty, like old paper and neglect. Empty shelves lined one wall, their surfaces showing lighter rectangles where pictures or books had once sat. A heavy desk dominated the center of the room, its wood surface bare except for a few rings left by coffee cups.

Gabriel climbed in behind her, his movements less graceful but equally quiet. His eyes scanned the room, and Sheila noticed how his gaze lingered on certain spots—the desk, a particular shelf, the corner where a filing cabinet might have stood.

"You spent time in this room," she said. It wasn't a question.

Gabriel didn't answer. Instead, he moved to the desk and began opening drawers. They were all empty.

Sheila continued her sweep of the house. The kitchen was bare, its counters clean. The living room held only an old armchair and some wall-mounted shelves. In the master bedroom, she found a real estate brochure on the floor near the closet. Picking it up, she saw the house was listed for sale.

She glanced out the front window, and that was when she noticed the FOR SALE sign fallen on its side at the edge of the yard. They had missed it in the darkness.

Her heart sank as she realized the truth. She returned to the office where her father stood by the desk, his expression distant.

"He's gone," she said, holding up the brochure. "House is on the market. Has been for months, by the look of it."

Gabriel nodded slowly but said nothing. His mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"If I ask you a question," she said softly, "will you tell me the truth?"

He didn't look up, didn't speak.

"How well did you really know him?" she asked.

Silence.

"Were you friends?" she asked.

Gabriel sighed and finally turned toward her. "Look, it doesn't matter now. If he's involved, we'll bury him—together. It doesn't matter what's in our past."

Sheila studied her father in the dim light. "That's not what I'm asking. I need to know if I can trust you on this. If your loyalty is—"

"Don't." His voice was sharp, cutting through the darkness. "Don't ever question where my loyalty lies. Not after your mother." He moved toward the window they'd entered through. "We're done here."

Sheila watched him climb out, her throat tight with unasked questions.

The next morning, sunlight streamed through the kitchen windows as Finn flipped pancakes, humming off-key to some country song on the radio. Star sat at the counter, her dark hair falling in her face as she focused intently on her phone, probably texting one of her new friends from school.

Sheila had yet to tell Finn about last night's little adventure. By the time she came back, he'd already been asleep, and then he'd gotten up before she did.

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"Earth to Sheila," Finn said, waving a spatula in front of her face. "You want blueberries in yours?"

Sheila blinked, pulling herself from her thoughts. "What? Oh. Yeah, sure."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "You've been somewhere else all morning. Want to talk about it?"

She watched him slide a perfect golden pancake onto a plate. Normal. Domestic. Safe. Everything their life could be if she just let this go.

But she couldn't.

"I need to find someone," she said. "Carlton Vance. He used to work with my dad in Internal Affairs. Now he's gone—moved out of his house, disappeared."

"And you think he knows something about your mom?"

Sheila nodded, grateful for how quickly Finn understood. "He might have been involved. But how do you find someone who doesn't want to be found?"

Finn set the plate in front of her, his expression thoughtful. "Well, you're the sheriff now. You've got resources. Start with the basics—property records, DMV, tax returns. People leave traces, even when they try not to."

Sheila pushed her pancakes around the plate, considering. "I was thinking about checking with the post office—see if Vance left a forwarding address. Also, check

with the realtor who listed his house."

"Good places to start," Finn said, pouring more batter onto the griddle. Star had finally looked up from her phone, her interest caught by their conversation.

"What if he's using a different name?" Star asked. "Like in witness protection or something?"

Sheila and Finn exchanged a look. It wasn't a bad question.

"That's possible," Sheila admitted. "But he'd need resources to set that up. Money trails, connections..." She paused, remembering something from the documents her father's contact had provided. "Meridian Holdings. The shell company that was making payments to his account."

Finn leaned against the counter. "Shell companies leave paper trails too. Incorporation documents, tax filings—"

"Bank records," Sheila said. "If we can track recent transfers from Meridian, we might find where he went." She stood up, her breakfast forgotten. "I need to get to the office."

"Hey," Finn called as she headed for the door. "At least take a pancake with you."

She turned back, managing a small smile as he held out a paper towel-wrapped pancake. "Thanks." She hesitated, then added, "For everything."

"I'll meet you at the station in twenty minutes," Finn said, already moving to turn off the griddle. "Just need to drop Star at your dad's gym."

"Finn, you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do." His voice was firm but gentle. "We're partners, remember? And not just at home." He glanced at Star. "That okay with you? Going to the gym a little early?"

Star shrugged, sliding off her stool. "Coach Gabriel's there anyway. He always shows up at dawn, like some kind of crazy person."

The gym had become the central focus of Gabriel's life after he stepped down from being sheriff. It was where he'd trained both Sheila and her older sister Natalie to fight, and he still regularly went there to stay in shape and to pass on his skills to future generations.

"And Bo," Sheila said. "He's gonna be keeping an eye on you."

Star rolled her eyes. "Really? A babysitter?"

"Just till things calm down. Besides, he can teach you a thing or two. He's got a nasty left hook."

"It'll be fun," Finn said, nudging Star. "You'll hardly even know he's there."

Star grunted. "Sure, I won't."

Sheila felt a familiar warmth in her chest as she listened to the two of them. This was her family now—cobbled together and unconventional, but real. She thought of her mother, of all the family moments Henrietta had missed, and her determination hardened.

"Okay," she said. "Twenty minutes. I'll start pulling what records we have on Meridian Holdings."

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"And I'll swing by the post office on my way in," Finn added. "Someone there owes me a favor."

Sheila raised an eyebrow. "Do I want to know why?"

"Probably not." He grinned, then grew serious. "We'll find him, Sheila. Together."

As she walked to her truck, Sheila thought about how much had changed since she'd first started looking into her mother's murder. Back then, she'd been alone, carrying the weight of it by herself. Now she had Finn, had Star, had a whole department at her disposal.

At least to the extent that she could trust her department.

That thought followed her as she pulled into the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department parking lot twenty minutes later. The brick building sat squat and solid against the brightening sky, its windows reflecting the morning sun. Inside, the familiar smell of coffee and printer toner greeted her as she made her way through the bullpen.

Deputy Sarah Neville looked up from her desk. Sheila had come to rely heavily on the veteran deputy over the past year—her methodical nature and sharp investigative skills had solved more than a few tough cases. Now, despite the early hour, Neville was already fully engaged in her work, copper-red hair pulled back in her characteristic neat braid, forest-green eyes alert as she sorted through case files.

"Morning, Sheriff," Neville said, rising from her desk. "Got an update from Baxter

about ten minutes ago. No change in Tommy's condition, but they did notice increased activity in his room last night. More medical staff than usual."

Sheila paused by Neville's desk. "Any visitors?"

"None."

Sheila nodded. "Star says hi, by the way."

Neville's lips curved in a slight smile. "Hi back."

"You two have fun watching movies the other day?" She'd asked Neville to keep an eye on Star during the previous investigation, due to the threat on Star's life by the man who had hijacked Sheila's truck. The man with the Irish accent.

"She's a good kid, even if she's a bit infatuated with superhero movies."

"Thanks for spending time with her," Sheila said quietly. "It means a lot."

Neville shrugged. "Someone needs to educate her about classic films. All that CGI stuff rots your brain."

Sheila smiled, remembering how Star had described movie night with Neville: She made me watch some old black-and-white thing where people just talked for two hours. But it was kind of cool.

The morning routine of the department continued around them. Deputies filed reports, answered calls, checked schedules. On the surface, it looked like any other day. But Sheila couldn't help wondering how many of them might be involved in the corruption her father had been investigating.

How many might be reporting her movements to the very people she was trying to put behind bars?

She was about to head to her office when Neville's phone rang. The deputy answered it, her expression growing serious as she listened.

"Sheriff," Neville said after hanging up, "we've got a situation. Highway Patrol just called in a body discovered in the Wasatch ice caves. A couple of spelunkers found it yesterday."

"The ice caves?" Sheila frowned. "Those have been closed to the public for years."

"Apparently these spelunkers didn't get the memo."

Sheila frowned, thinking. "You said they found the body yesterday. Why'd it take them so long to report it?"

"Because they were trapped. Apparently someone cut the rope they used to rappel down."

CHAPTER THREE

Cold air hit Sheila's face as she stepped out of her department SUV at the ice caves trailhead. The sun did little to warm the October chill, and her breath formed clouds in front of her face. A Highway Patrol car and two other vehicles were already parked in the gravel lot—one belonging to Search and Rescue, the other a battered Camaro that had to be the spelunkers'.

Finn pulled up beside her in his own vehicle just as she was zipping up her jacket. The caves loomed ahead, their entrance a dark gash in the mountainside, partially hidden behind weather-worn "No Trespassing" signs.

"Kelly Bishop and Mike Ramirez," Finn said as he approached, checking his phone. "The spelunkers. They're at a nearby base camp being checked out by medical personnel. Mild hypothermia, some dehydration. They're pretty shaken up, according to the patrolman who took their statement."

"Can't blame them," Sheila said. "Being trapped in a cave overnight with a body..." She let the thought trail off as she retrieved her gear from the trunk. "Who cut their rope?"

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"That's what concerns me," Finn said, falling into step beside her as they started up the trail. "And whoever it was... are they still around?"

They reached the cave entrance, where a Search and Rescue member was setting up fresh ropes. Sheila studied the drop, remembering the last time she'd been here. It had been years ago, before the caves were closed. Before they'd found the first body.

Dr. Jin Zihao, the county coroner, stood near the entrance conferring with Marcus Weber from Search and Rescue. His silver-streaked black hair caught the morning light as he turned toward them.

"Sheriff Stone," he greeted her with a slight nod. "Deputy Mercer."

"What can you tell us?" Sheila asked as she checked her harness.

"Female victim, preliminary identification suggests it's Dr. Tracy Mitchell." Jin's sharp eyes narrowed. "She's a well-known anthropologist from the University of Utah. Published extensively on indigenous history and artifacts."

Finn frowned. "Mitchell? I just read something about her last week. She was supposed to be giving a lecture series in Colorado."

"Indeed," Jin said. "According to her department head, whom I just spoke with, she left for that trip two days ago. Never arrived."

Marcus stepped forward, his Search and Rescue uniform dusty from earlier trips into the cave. "We've got everything secured below. The scene's untouched since the

spelunkers found her."

The descent into the cave was eerily quiet, broken only by the soft whirl of their ropes and the occasional drip of water. Their headlamps cut through the darkness, illuminating walls slick with ice and mineral deposits. The air grew colder as they descended, and Sheila could see her breath misting in the beam of her light.

"Watch your step here," Marcus called from below. "There's some ice build-up on this ledge."

The cave opened into a vast chamber, its ceiling lost in the darkness above. Powerful lights had been set up by the Search and Rescue team, creating islands of harsh brightness in the gloom. The lights cast long shadows across the cave floor, making the ice formations seem to move in the corner of Sheila's vision.

"Over here," Jin said, leading them toward a smaller side chamber. "Mind the formations. Some of these are thousands of years old."

They picked their way carefully between delicate ice columns and crystalline structures that looked like frozen waterfalls. The side chamber was smaller, more intimate somehow. The temperature here was even lower, their breath forming thick clouds in the artificial light.

The body lay in a shallow alcove, arranged with obvious care. Dr. Mitchell was wrapped in what appeared to be ceremonial garments, the rich colors standing out starkly against the ice. Intricate beadwork caught the light, and feathers from an elaborate headdress stirred slightly in the cave's subtle air currents.

"She wasn't killed here," Jin said quietly. "No blood, no signs of struggle. Someone placed her here, arranged her like this."

Finn crouched near the body, careful not to disturb anything. "These garments... they're museum quality. Where would someone even get something like this?"

"That's not all," Jin added. "Look at how she's positioned. Hands crossed over her chest, head oriented toward the cave entrance. This matches historical accounts of indigenous burial practices in the region. Whoever did this knew what they were doing."

Sheila studied the scene, taking in every detail. "Time of death?"

"The cold has slowed decomposition significantly, but based on liver temperature and other factors, I'd estimate between twenty-four and thirty-six hours ago." Jin gestured to the garments. "These weren't just thrown on her. They're properly wrapped, arranged according to specific traditions. It would have taken time, knowledge."

"So our killer knows about indigenous burial practices," Finn said. "That narrows it down."

"To anyone who's ever read Dr. Mitchell's work," Sheila pointed out. "She literally wrote the book on these traditions." She turned to the coroner. "Dr. Jin," she said, "I want your most thorough workup on this. Everything you can tell me about cause of death, time of death, any trace evidence on the body or the garments."

"Of course." Jin was already making notes on his tablet. "I'll need specialized help with the garments. We'll want to document everything properly before we move her."

"I'll get in touch with the university's anthropology department," Finn offered. "They might be able to tell us more about the significance of how she was arranged."

Sheila nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps. Two days ago, Dr. Mitchell had left for a trip she never reached. Now she lay dead in a sealed cave,

wrapped in historical garments, arranged in a traditional burial position.

Dr. Jin looked like he was deciding whether or not to say something.

"What is it?" Sheila asked.

"I hope it doesn't complicate matters, but you should know the FBI has been contacted. The ceremonial robes are tribal artifacts—that automatically triggers federal jurisdiction. Plus, these preservation cases are rare but not unique. They have a task force that specializes in ritual killings involving indigenous artifacts."

Sheila nodded. "Thanks for letting me know." She just hoped they'd be able to work with the FBI rather than getting into a competition over who could solve the case first.

She looked up at the darkness above them, remembering the spelunkers' story about their cut rope. Someone else had been down here, watching, waiting. Someone who knew these caves well enough to move around in the dark, who knew enough about indigenous traditions to arrange this elaborate scene.

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Someone who had not only killed Dr. Mitchell, but had nearly killed two more people as well.

"We need to talk to those spelunkers," Sheila said, turning to Finn. "They may have seen something they don't even realize is important."

They made their way back through the cave system, their footsteps echoing in the darkness. As they climbed out into the morning light, Finn rubbed his hands together, trying to warm them.

"What are you thinking?" he asked as they headed down the trail toward the base camp.

Sheila considered for a moment. "I'm thinking about the timing. Mitchell disappears. Less than forty-eight hours later, two spelunkers happen to find her body."

"And someone tries to make sure they don't leave the cave alive." Finn nodded. "Either our killer was still down there, watching..."

"Or they knew somehow that the spelunkers had found the body," Sheila finished. "Neither option is particularly comforting."

They walked in silence for a few steps before Finn spoke again. "You know what bothers me most? The care taken with the body. The traditional garments, the positioning. It's almost... respectful."

"Like a ritual," Sheila said. She glanced at him. "You're thinking this isn't his first?"

"The caves were closed for a reason," Finn said quietly. "And we never did find all the bodies from last time."

Sheila remembered that case from years ago—three hikers who'd disappeared in these caves. They'd only found two of them. The third was still out there somewhere, lost in the darkness.

They'd been college students from Elbridge—Lisa Kendrick, Mike Denton, and Travis Walsh—doing research on the cave system's unique mineral formations. All geology majors, all experienced cavers. They'd had the right equipment, filed the proper permits, done everything by the book. But a sudden storm had caused flash flooding in the lower chambers, and they'd gotten separated trying to find their way out.

They found Lisa and Mike three days later. The flood waters had receded by then, leaving their bodies wedged in a narrow passage. The medical examiner determined they'd died from hypothermia, their wet clothes stealing their body heat in the fifty-degree cave air. Travis Walsh's body was never recovered, though they found his backpack and one of his boots nearly half a mile from where his friends had died.

The search had gone on for two weeks before being called off. Travis's parents had hired private search teams, but even they eventually gave up. The caves were simply too vast, too complex, with hundreds of unexplored passages and chambers.

"You know what always bothered me about that case?" Finn asked, his voice echoing slightly in the tunnel. "Their equipment was top-notch. They had emergency supplies, backup lights, everything. Lisa Kendrick had even mapped these caves before. So how did they get so lost?"

"Sometimes nature just wins," Sheila said softly. She remembered the look on Travis's mother's face when they'd finally convinced her to stop searching. Some

questions didn't have answers, and some bodies were never found.

"The spelunkers who found Mitchell's body," she said, coming back to the present.

"They had to know the caves were closed. Why come here?"

"Maybe they were looking for a bit of adventure, somewhere off the beaten path."

"If so, I'd say they found more than they'd bargained for."

They reached the base camp, where several vehicles were parked and a medical tent had been set up. Two EMTs were looking over a young woman wrapped in a thermal blanket while a man about the same age sat nearby, clutching a cup of something hot.

Kelly Bishop looked up as they approached, her dark hair tangled and matted with cave dust. Despite her obvious exhaustion, there was something sharp in her gaze, an alertness that caught Sheila's attention. The camera hanging from her neck suggested she was more than just a casual explorer.

Mike Ramirez set down his cup and straightened his posture, almost military-like. His easy grin seemed forced, a mask to cover his nerves. Both of them had the lean, muscled build of experienced climbers.

"Ms. Bishop, Mr. Ramirez," Sheila said. "I'm Sheriff Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. How are you holding up?"

The spelunkers exchanged glances. "We're fine," Kelly said. "Just cold."

"And lucky to be alive," Mike added quietly.

Sheila pulled up a folding chair, positioning herself at their level. "I have to ask: What were you doing in the caves in the first place?"

Kelly's shoulders tensed. "We were documenting the cave system," she said. "I'm a photographer, focusing on underground formations. Mike's my safety partner."

"The caves were closed years ago," Finn said. "Why come here now?"

Another glance between them. Mike cleared his throat. "There were rumors. About new passages opening up after the spring floods. We thought... well, Kelly thought it would make a great addition to her portfolio."

"And that's when you found her?" Sheila prompted.

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Kelly nodded, her hands tightening around the thermal blanket. "She looked peaceful, almost. Like she was sleeping. Until we got closer and saw..." She trailed off.

"Did you see anyone else?" Finn asked. "Hear anything?"

"No," Mike said. "But those caves, they play tricks on you. Sound echoes strangely. And there are so many passages, so many places to hide."

Sheila leaned forward. "The rope being cut—when did you discover that?"

"We'd been down there only a short while," Kelly said. "When we tried to leave..." She shuddered. "Someone had to have been watching us. Waiting."

"How well do you know the cave system?" Sheila asked.

"Pretty well," Mike said. "We've been studying the old surveys, marking new formations. There are dozens of unexplored passages down there."

"Look," Kelly burst out, sitting up straighter despite her exhaustion. "I know we shouldn't have been in there. But we're professionals. We took every safety precaution, we had backup plans—"

"Except for someone cutting your rope," Finn said quietly.

Kelly's face flushed. "We couldn't have anticipated that. But we're not some amateur thrill-seekers. I have certification in advanced cave rescue, Mike's an experienced climbing instructor—"

Sheila held up a hand. "Ms. Bishop, you don't need to defend yourself. I don't care about the cave restrictions right now. There's a murdered woman down there, wrapped in ceremonial garments, arranged like some kind of ritual burial. And someone tried to make sure you'd never tell anyone about finding her. That's what matters to me."

Mike ran a hand through his dust-covered hair. "We should've reported it right away instead of trying to document everything first. Maybe if we'd—"

"Then you might both be dead," Sheila cut in. "Our killer was counting on having more time. The fact that you survived might be our best chance of catching them."

Kelly pulled the thermal blanket tighter around her shoulders. "What do you mean?"

Sheila exchanged a look with Finn before turning back to the spelunkers. "I have a proposition for you. I suspect our killer probably didn't expect the body to be found so quickly. They might still be down there, using passages we don't know about."

"You want us to help search," Kelly said. It wasn't a question.

"With a full Search and Rescue team," Sheila assured them. "No one goes anywhere alone. You'd have radio contact, armed escorts. But your knowledge of the cave system could be invaluable."

Mike straightened. "When do we start?"

"You don't have to do this," Finn added. "You've been through enough already."

Kelly's jaw set in a determined line. "Someone tried to trap us down there to die. And that woman, Dr. Mitchell—she deserves justice. We'll help."

Sheila nodded, her respect growing for these two who'd faced death and were willing to go back into the darkness. "Give the medics another hour to check you over. Then we'll gear up and head back in."

As she and Finn walked away to coordinate with Search and Rescue, he spoke quietly. "You sure about this?"

"No," she admitted. "But they're right—those caves are a maze. And right now, they're our best chance of finding wherever our killer's been hiding."

CHAPTER FOUR

"We should check her workspace," Sheila said as she pulled into the parking lot of the University of Utah's Anthropology Department. The red brick building rose before them, its windows reflecting the late morning sunlight. "Someone who took this much care staging her body might have been following her work."

Finn nodded, unbuckling his seat belt. "The traditional burial arrangement wasn't random. Either our killer studied indigenous practices..."

"Or they knew what Mitchell was studying," Sheila finished.

The anthropology building sat at the edge of campus, bordered by evergreens that rustled in the October wind. Students hurried past, wrapped in scarves and jackets, clutching coffee cups and backpacks. The normalcy of the scene felt jarring after the eerie quiet of the ice caves.

Inside, the building smelled of old books and floor polish. A directory on the wall pointed them to the third floor: "Cultural Anthropology & Indigenous Studies." The elevator hummed as it carried them up.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Finn asked.

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"Anything that might tell us why someone would kill her and stage such an elaborate burial." Sheila watched the floor numbers light up. "People don't just wake up one morning and decide to wrap a body in ceremonial garments."

The elevator opened to a long hallway lined with office doors. Display cases filled with artifacts and photographs lined the walls—pottery shards, woven baskets, black and white images of archaeological digs. They found the department office halfway down.

A student worker looked up from her computer as they entered. Her eyes widened at their badges.

"We need to speak with someone about Dr. Tracy Mitchell," Sheila said.

"Oh." The student's face fell. "You should talk to Dr. Harrison. He's the department head." She reached for the phone, then hesitated. "Is it true? About Dr. M?"

"We're investigating her death," Sheila said gently. "Did you know her well?"

"She was my advisor." The student's voice cracked slightly. "She was helping me with my thesis on preservation techniques for ceremonial textiles. She was supposed to be in Colorado..."

Dr. James Harrison arrived before the student could continue. He was tall and thin, with wire-rimmed glasses and patches of gray at his temples. His tweed jacket had seen better days.

"Sheriff Stone?" He extended his hand. "Your reputation precedes you. Please, come to my office."

Harrison's office was cramped but organized, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a window overlooking the campus quad. He cleared some papers from two chairs.

"This is devastating news," he said, sinking into his desk chair. "Tracy was one of our most respected researchers. Her work on indigenous burial practices was groundbreaking."

"That's actually what we'd like to discuss," Sheila said. "The way her body was arranged suggests someone familiar with those practices."

Harrison's eyebrows rose. "You think one of her colleagues...?"

"We're not excluding any possibilities," Finn said. "Could we see her office? Her current research?"

Harrison nodded slowly. "Of course. Though I should mention—some of her work involved sensitive cultural artifacts. The tribes she worked with trusted her implicitly."

"We'll be respectful," Sheila assured him.

Mitchell's office was at the end of the hall, a corner room with windows on two sides. Books and papers covered every surface. Maps of Utah's cave systems were pinned to one wall, marked with Post-it notes and red dots. The opposite wall held photographs of indigenous artifacts, carefully labeled and arranged in chronological order.

"This is exactly how she left it," Harrison said. "She was only supposed to be gone for a week."

Sheila moved to the desk while Finn examined the maps. A laptop sat closed beside a stack of academic journals. Papers were arranged in neat piles, each with its own color-coded tab. Even the pens in the holder were organized by color.

"She was methodical," Sheila observed.

"Absolutely." Harrison picked up a framed photo from a shelf—Mitchell at an archaeological dig, smiling at the camera. "Tracy documented everything. Every artifact, every interview, every site visit. She believed in preserving not just the objects, but their entire context."

Finn stood before the cave maps. "These recent?"

"Part of her new project." Harrison moved to join him. "She was documenting previously unknown ceremonial sites in the region's cave systems. She believed many traditional practices took place underground, away from prying eyes."

Sheila looked up sharply. "Did that include the ice caves?"

"I... I'm not sure." Harrison frowned. "Her notes would be on her laptop, but it's password protected. And she was very protective of site locations. Many of them are considered sacred by the tribes she worked with."

Moving around the desk, Sheila studied the papers more closely. Each stack seemed to represent a different aspect of Mitchell's research—carbon dating results, textile analysis reports, interview transcripts. But nothing immediately jumped out as relevant to their investigation.

A photo on the wall caught her attention—Mitchell with a group of tribal elders, all of them standing before the entrance to what looked like a cave. The caption read: "Documenting oral histories of the sacred spaces—Spring 2022."

"Did she ever mention feeling threatened?" Finn asked. "Anyone who might have objected to her work?"

Harrison shook his head. "She was remarkably good at building trust with the indigenous communities. She never published anything without their approval, never revealed site locations without permission." He paused. "Though..."

"Though what?" Sheila prompted.

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"There was some tension recently. She'd discovered something—she wouldn't tell me what exactly, but she was excited about it. Said it would change our understanding of certain ceremonial practices. But she was waiting for approval from the tribal council before documenting it."

Sheila and Finn exchanged looks. "When was this?"

"Last week." Harrison adjusted his glasses. "She was supposed to meet with the council after she returned from Colorado."

Just then, a young man appeared in the doorway, a stack of books clutched to his chest. His eyes widened at the sight of the badges, and he spun around so quickly he nearly dropped his books before disappearing down the hallway.

"Was that James?" Harrison asked, frowning. "James Cooper, Dr. Mitchell's research assistant."

Sheila was already moving. "I don't know, but I think we need to talk to him."

Sheila and Finn followed the sound of hurried footsteps down the hall, past the elevator to the stairwell. The door was just swinging shut as they reached it. Sheila and Finn took the stairs two at a time.

They caught up with Cooper in the building's small library annex, a cramped room filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves of archaeological journals. He'd wedged himself into a corner study carrel, the books now spread out before him, trying to look absorbed in his work.

"Mr. Cooper," Sheila said, breathing heavily. "We'd like to speak with you."

His shoulders tensed. He was younger than Sheila had initially thought, probably a graduate student, with wire-rimmed glasses and rumpled clothes that suggested long hours in the library. A coffee cup from the campus shop sat empty beside his laptop.

"I... I have a lot of work to do," he said, not meeting their eyes.

"Why did you run?" Finn asked.

Cooper's hands fidgeted with a pencil. "I didn't run. I just remembered I had to... to check something."

"Something so urgent you nearly dropped your books?" Sheila pulled up a chair, positioning herself so she could watch his face. "Mr. Cooper, Dr. Mitchell is dead. If you know anything that might help us understand why..."

He looked up sharply. "Dead? Not just missing?"

"You knew she was missing?"

"I..." He slumped in his chair. "I should have said something sooner. When she didn't show up for our remote meeting on Tuesday, I knew something was wrong. Dr. Mitchell was never late. Never missed a meeting. But I thought maybe she was just having technical difficulties."

"Is that why you didn't report it?"

Cooper ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "That, and because she'd asked me not to tell anyone if something seemed off. She said she'd contact me if there was a real problem."

Sheila exchanged a look with Finn. "Why would she say that?"

"Because of the audiobook, I think. And the people following her."

"What audiobook?" Finn asked.

Cooper straightened slightly, seemingly relieved to move into more academic territory. "Dr. Mitchell was recording her lectures, her stories about the tribes she worked with. She was an oral historian—one of the last true ones. She could recall every detail, every story she'd ever been told. The tribes trusted her with histories that had never been written down."

"And someone was following her?" Sheila prompted.

"She mentioned it about two weeks ago. Said she kept seeing the same car in her rearview mirror, the same person in the campus coffee shop. But she wouldn't file a report. Said she couldn't risk drawing attention to her work until she'd secured permissions from the tribal council."

"What was so important about her work?" Finn asked.

Cooper's eyes lit up with academic enthusiasm despite his obvious nervousness. "You have to understand—Dr. Mitchell wasn't just recording facts. She was preserving the way these stories were meant to be told. The rhythm, the cadence, the subtle variations that never make it into written texts. She could tell you about burial rituals that hadn't been performed in a hundred years, describe ceremonial garments that only existed in tribal memory..."

"James," Sheila said, "how about you tell us why you really ran? And don't give us any more BS."

Cooper flushed. "I..." He paused, gathering his words. "Last Monday, Dr. Mitchell was working late, adding new material." He hesitated. "She seemed excited about something she'd discovered, but also... worried. She asked me to keep an eye on her office while she was gone, make sure nobody accessed her files."

"And did anyone try?"

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Cooper shook his head. "No, but..." He glanced around the empty library annex and lowered his voice. "Yesterday morning, I noticed her laptop had been moved. Just slightly, like someone had tried to access it. I thought I was being paranoid, but..."

"What does that have to do with you running?" Sheila asked.

"I felt guilty about not reporting with her laptop, like you might think I was somehow involved—but I was really just trying to protect her work. She made me promise not to tell anyone about her work until she gave permission. She said some of these stories... they weren't meant for everyone to hear. That knowledge can be dangerous in the wrong hands."

Cooper looked down at his hands. "The thing is... Dr. Mitchell wasn't just recording these stories. She was connecting them. Finding patterns."

"What kind of patterns?" Sheila asked.

"She started noticing similarities between different tribes' oral histories. Specifically about sacred caves." He pulled a notebook from his backpack, flipping it open. "She'd mapped out dozens of sites based on these stories. Places where ceremonies were performed, where important items were stored. But there was one story that kept coming up, across different tribes."

Finn leaned forward. "What story?"

"About a particular cave system. One that was considered both sacred and dangerous. A place where..." He checked his notes. "Where 'the old ones sleep beneath the ice.'"

Sheila felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. "The ice caves."

Cooper nodded. "Dr. Mitchell believed she'd found it. But she said she needed to verify something first before she took her findings to the tribal council." He closed the notebook. "That was the last time I saw her."

"The work she was doing," Sheila began. "We need to see it."

Cooper hesitated.

"She's dead, James," Sheila said gently. "Don't you think she'd want us to find out what happened to her?"

Finally, he swallowed hard and nodded. "She kept her research notes in a cloud account. I have access to it—I could show you."

Sheila glanced at Finn, who gave a slight nod. "We'd appreciate that."

As Cooper pulled up the files on his laptop, Sheila's mind was racing. Mitchell had found something in those caves, something worth killing for. But was she killed to keep that discovery secret? Or had someone used her own research against her, turning her into one more story in the caves' dark history?

"Here," Cooper said, turning the laptop toward them. "These are her most recent notes."

Cooper scrolled through pages of field notes, transcribed interviews, and location data.

"Wait," Sheila said, pointing to a date entry from last week. "Go back to that."

The entry was brief: Confirmed location matches Elder Joseph's description. Rock formation exactly as documented in 1922 survey. Evidence of recent activity—need to consult with Council before proceeding.

"Recent activity?" Finn asked. "In a sealed cave system?"

Cooper pushed his glasses up nervously. "Dr. Mitchell was worried about what she called 'unauthorized entries' into various sacred sites. People going into restricted areas, moving things around. She was concerned that artifacts were being stolen."

Sheila leaned back, considering. A murdered anthropologist, and a killer who knew enough about indigenous traditions to stage an elaborate ceremonial burial.

"Mr. Cooper," she said, "we're going to need copies of everything you can share with us. And I mean everything—emails, research notes, her calendar. Anything that might tell us where she went in those last few days."

As Cooper began copying files, Finn moved closer to Sheila. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked quietly.

Sheila nodded. "Mitchell found something in those caves. Something worth killing for."

"And someone who knew her research well enough to use it against her."

"The question is," Sheila said, watching Cooper work, "was she killed because of what she discovered? Or because of what she refused to share?"

CHAPTER FIVE

"I want every inch of those caves mapped," Sheila said, studying the grid pattern

Marcus Weber had drawn over the cave system blueprint. "No blind spots, no assumptions. Treat it like a crime scene sweep."

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The Search and Rescue command post buzzed with activity. Team leaders huddled over maps while technicians checked radio equipment. Kelly and Mike stood off to the side, now properly outfitted in Search and Rescue gear, their earlier exhaustion hidden behind determined expressions.

"We're breaking into four teams," Marcus said, gesturing to the map. "Bishop and Ramirez will each lead a team through the sections they've already explored. The other two teams will work the known passages. Full radio contact, buddy system, no exceptions."

Finn stepped closer to examine the map. "What about these unmarked areas?"

"That's the problem," Kelly said. "The old surveys don't show everything. The spring floods changed the cave structure. There could be dozens of new passages."

"Or old ones that were previously blocked," Mike added. "The water level drops this time of year, opens up lower tunnels."

Sheila nodded, her mind racing. "How long will the sweep take?"

Marcus checked his watch. "With four teams? At least six hours for a preliminary search. More if we find anything that needs processing."

"Keep me updated," Sheila said. "I want to know about anything out of place—recent camp signs, equipment, anything that suggests our killer's been living down there."

As the teams geared up, Finn touched her arm. "We should head to Dr. Mitchell's

place, see what we can learn about her work."

Sheila watched Kelly check her climbing harness, the young woman's hands steady despite what she'd been through. Something about her determination tugged at Sheila's memory—a similar drive she'd seen in Natalie, back when her sister was still alive.

"Sheriff?" Marcus called. "Teams are ready to move out."

Sheila pushed the memory aside. "Be careful down there," she told the assembled group. "Our killer's already shown they're willing to murder to protect whatever's in those caves. Don't take any unnecessary risks."

The teams moved out, their headlamps cutting through the morning fog. Sheila watched until they disappeared into the cave entrance, then turned to Finn. "Let's go see what Dr. Mitchell was hiding."

The drive to Mitchell's house took them through the university district, past coffee shops and bookstores catering to students. Fall leaves skittered across the sidewalks, and the mountains loomed in the distance, their peaks already dusted with early snow.

"You're worried about them," Finn said as they turned onto a quiet residential street.

"The spelunkers?" Sheila kept her eyes on the road. "They've been through enough already."

"That's not what I meant." Finn's voice was gentle. "Kelly Bishop. She reminds you of Natalie, doesn't she?"

Sheila's hands tightened on the steering wheel. Sometimes she forgot how well Finn could read her. "Same determination. Same need to prove herself." She paused.

"Same disregard for personal safety."

"She's got backup this time," Finn reminded her. "The whole Search and Rescue team, Mike watching her back."

Sheila wanted to be reassured by this, but she wasn't. She kept thinking of the sight of Natalie's body on the floor of her cabin. Kelly Bishop wasn't her sister, but then again, death was death. And Sheila didn't want another one on her conscience.

She took a breath, trying to focus on the present. "Mitchell's house should be just ahead."

The anthropologist lived—had lived—in a modest craftsman-style home with a small front garden. Dead leaves cluttered the porch, suggesting no one had been here for days. A ruby-red SUV sat in the driveway.

"That's not Mitchell's car," Finn said, checking his notes. "She drove an Impala."

Sheila was already moving, her hand near her weapon as she approached the house. The front door stood slightly ajar, and voices drifted from inside.

She exchanged a look with Finn, who nodded and moved to cover the back. Sheila drew her weapon and approached the door.

"Sheriff's Department," she called out. "Anyone inside, make yourself known."

The voices stopped. Footsteps creaked across old hardwood floors.

A woman appeared in the doorway, her silver hair pulled back in a neat bun. She wore a tailored blazer and carried herself with academic authority. "I'm Dr. Elena Martinez, head of the Indigenous Studies program at Arizona State. Tracy Mitchell

was my colleague." She held up a university ID. "The department asked me to secure any sensitive materials."

Sheila didn't lower her weapon. "Why didn't you contact law enforcement first?"

"Because some of these materials are protected by tribal privacy agreements," Martinez said. "They need to be handled according to specific protocols." She gestured inside. "My assistant is cataloging everything now."

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Finn appeared around the corner of the house, responding to Sheila's signal. She nodded for him to check the back entrance while she dealt with Martinez.

"I'm going to need to see some additional identification," Sheila said. "And documentation of your authority to be here."

Martinez's professional demeanor cracked slightly. "Sheriff, with all due respect, time is critical. If word of Tracy's death gets out before we secure her research..."

"It's a crime scene, Dr. Martinez. Nobody touches anything without my approval." Sheila stepped past her into the house. "Finn?"

"Back door's clear," he called from the kitchen. "One more person present, looks like support staff."

The house's interior was neat but lived-in. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a laptop sat open on the coffee table. A young man in khakis and a polo shirt was examining a filing cabinet, making notes on a tablet.

"Step away from the cabinet," Sheila ordered. "Both of you, sit down. Now."

Martinez and her assistant sat stiffly on the couch while Sheila examined their credentials. The documentation seemed legitimate—both had proper university IDs, and Martinez produced emails from the anthropology department authorizing her to secure Mitchell's research materials.

"Why the urgency?" Sheila asked, handing the papers back. "What exactly are you

afraid might get out?"

Martinez exchanged a glance with her assistant before answering. "Tracy was working with several tribes, documenting oral histories that have never been recorded before. Stories that weren't meant for public consumption."

Sheila was about to ask a follow-up question, but just then her phone buzzed. Dr. Jin's number.

"Excuse me," she said, stepping into the kitchen. "Dr. Jin? What have you found?"

"You need to see this," the coroner said without preamble. "I've found something unusual in the initial examination. Something you'll want to see in person."

Sheila glanced toward the living room, where Finn was questioning Martinez about Mitchell's recent behavior. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

She returned to find Martinez describing Mitchell's last department meeting. "She was excited about something she'd discovered, but also nervous. Said she needed to verify her findings before bringing them to the tribal council."

"These findings," Finn said, "did they have anything to do with the ice caves?"

Martinez's expression closed off. "I'm not at liberty to discuss specific site locations."

"Dr. Mitchell is dead," Sheila cut in. "Arranged in a ceremonial position in those same caves. Someone used her own research to stage her murder. So I suggest you reconsider what you're at liberty to discuss."

Martinez opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again. She seemed to be thinking it over.

Sheila pulled Finn aside. "Keep them here," Sheila told him quietly. "I need to see Jin, but I want to know everything they know about Mitchell's research. Especially anything about those caves."

"What did Jin find?"

"He didn't say. Just that I should come alone." She studied Finn's face, saw his concern. "I'll be careful. And I'll call you as soon as I know what's going on."

The drive to the morgue gave Sheila time to think. Martinez's arrival was too convenient—either she was telling the truth about securing sensitive materials, or she was looking for something specific.

The county morgue occupied the basement level of the medical center. Dr. Jin waited for her in the autopsy suite, still in his protective gear.

"Initial findings are... unusual," he said, leading her to where Mitchell's body lay. The ceremonial garments had been carefully removed and photographed. "First, she was likely still alive when brought to the cave."

Sheila's eyes narrowed. "How can you be sure?"

"The rate of freezing, tissue samples—they all suggest she died in or very near the cave itself." Jin indicated the base of Mitchell's skull. "Cause of death was this—a single puncture wound, precise and deliberate, directly through the brain stem. This would have rendered her instantly unconscious. Death would follow within two minutes. She wouldn't have felt any pain."

"A humane killing." Sheila studied the wound. "Any idea what caused this?"

Jin pursed his lips together. "Maybe an improvised tool of some kind. It's difficult to

say."

"A heavy-duty needle?"

"Possibly."

"And she had her back to the killer when it happened. No defensive wounds, no signs of struggle..."

"Suggesting she either went willingly, or was coerced," Jin finished. "But whoever did this—they wanted her death to be quick, painless."

"An odd choice for a murderer," Sheila mused. "To be so careful about causing minimal suffering, then spend time arranging her body in ceremonial dress."

"Someone who respected her, maybe," Jin suggested. "Or at least, respected what she represented."

Sheila's phone buzzed—an update from the search team. She needed to check on their progress, but first: "Full tox screen?"

"Already ordered. Results should be back within 48 hours."

"Rush them," Sheila said, already moving toward the door. "And Jin? Keep this between us for now. Especially the details about the killing method."

"Of course," he replied. "Though Sheriff—there's something else you should know."

She paused at the door.

"This type of precision kill," Jin said carefully, "it's not common. In fact, I've only

seen it once before."

"When?"

"The missing hiker. The one they never found, from the last time the caves were closed."

CHAPTER SIX

Finn watched Martinez fidget with her sleeve as she described Mitchell's last department meeting. Everything about the professor's timing felt wrong—showing up at the victim's house unannounced, claiming authorization from a department head who hadn't even finished processing the news of Mitchell's death.

"So Mitchell discovered something important," he prompted. "Important enough to make her nervous."

"Tracy was always careful with her research," Martinez said. Her assistant—David Bowden, according to his ID—kept glancing at his tablet, his leg bouncing with nervous energy. "She understood the responsibility she carried."

"You keep saying that." Finn leaned forward. "But what exactly was she responsible for? What made this research so sensitive?"

Martinez smoothed her blazer, a gesture that reminded Finn of his old flight instructor's tells. "Archaeological sites are complex. Sacred spaces need protection—"

"Dr. Martinez," Finn cut in. "Someone killed your colleague. Arranged her body in ceremonial dress. Used her own research against her. So either you start giving me straight answers, or I'll have probable cause to bring you both in for obstruction."

Bowden's leg stopped bouncing. Martinez's lips tightened into a thin line.

"David," she said quietly. "Show him."

Bowden hesitated, then handed over his tablet. On the screen was an email chain between Mitchell and Martinez from two weeks ago.

Elena—Need your insight. Found references to ceremonial site matching Elder Joseph's description. If I'm right, this changes everything we thought we knew about the winter rituals. But something feels off. Signs of recent activity.—SM

Martinez's reply: Be careful, Tracy. Some doors aren't meant to be reopened.

Mitchell's response came hours later: Too late. Already found the entrance. Meeting someone there tomorrow who might have answers. Will update you after.

"That was her last email to me," Martinez said. "I tried calling her the next day, but she didn't answer."

Finn checked the date. "This was five days before she disappeared." He scrolled through more emails, noting Mitchell's increasing paranoia about being followed. "Did she tell you who she was meeting?"

"No. But she was excited. Said they had special knowledge of the site."

"Special knowledge," Finn repeated. The phrasing nagged at him. "What exactly did Mitchell find in those caves?"

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Before Martinez could answer, the front door opened. Sheila entered, her face tight with whatever she'd learned from the ME. Her eyes met Finn's, and he saw the subtle signal there—they needed to talk privately.

"Dr. Martinez," Sheila said. "My deputy will finish getting your statement. But I need to speak with him first."

They stepped onto the back porch, closing the door behind them. Fall sunlight filtered through yellow leaves, casting dappled shadows across Sheila's face as she described Jin's findings.

Finn felt his jaw tighten. "A professional kill. Someone with training."

"And a connection to the old missing hiker case." Sheila's voice was low. "Same method, Jin said. Which means—"

"Our killer's done this before." Finn ran a hand through his hair, processing. "But why make it painless? Why take the time to dress her body?"

"Respect," Sheila said. "Or ritual. Maybe both." She glanced through the window to where Martinez sat ramrod-straight on Mitchell's couch. "What did you get from them?"

Finn showed her the emails. "Mitchell found something in those caves. Something important enough to get herself killed over." He watched Sheila's eyes narrow as she read. "There's more. Martinez is holding something back. The way she talks about Mitchell's research—it's like she's more worried about protecting information than

finding a killer."

Sheila handed the tablet back. "Keep pressing. I need to check on the search teams." She paused, studying his face. "You okay? You've got that look."

"What look?"

"The one you get when something's bothering you but you can't put your finger on it."

Finn smiled despite himself. Sometimes he forgot how well she could read him. "Just thinking about Mitchell's last email. Meeting someone who had 'special knowledge' of the site. Almost sounds like—"

"Like they were waiting for her to find it," Sheila finished. She squeezed his arm. "Be careful with Martinez. If she knows more than she's saying..."

"I know. You be careful, too."

Sheila nodded and headed for her vehicle. Finn watched her go, then turned back to the house. Through the window, he saw Martinez and Bowden in what looked like an intense whispered conversation.

Time to find out what they were hiding.

Inside, Martinez and Bowden fell silent as Finn entered. Their sudden stillness reminded him of suspects in an interrogation room, that moment when they realize they've said too much.

"Let's try this again," he said, remaining standing. His years as a pilot had taught him the value of positioning—how to establish presence without overt intimidation. "You

came here looking for something specific. What?"

Martinez's fingers worried at a silver pendant around her neck. "I told you. The department—"

"Called you to secure sensitive materials. Yes. But you didn't answer my question." He held up Bowden's tablet. "These emails—Mitchell found something that 'changes everything we thought we knew.' What was it?"

"It's not that simple," Martinez said.

"Make it simple."

Bowden shifted uncomfortably. "Dr. Martinez, maybe we should—"

"Be quiet, David." Martinez's voice had an edge Finn hadn't heard before. She turned back to Finn. "Something changed after that last email from Tracy. She called me late at night. Said she needed to verify something, that she'd made a terrible mistake." She paused. "She sounded scared."

"What kind of mistake?"

Martinez shook her head. "She wouldn't say. Just that she had to make it right."

Bowden cleared his throat. "Dr. Martinez..."

She shot him a warning look, but Finn caught it. "David? Something to add?"

The assistant's leg started bouncing again. "It's just... Dr. Mitchell wasn't just researching the sites. She was mapping them. Creating a database of locations, access points. She said it was for preservation, but..."

"But what?"

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"But some of us worried she was going too far. These places—they're sacred. Not meant to be catalogued like museum specimens."

Finn studied Bowden's face. The young man's anxiety seemed genuine, but there was something else there. Something personal.

"You worked closely with Mitchell?" he asked.

"I was her research assistant for two years, before James Cooper."

"And given what you know of Dr. Mitchell and the precautions she took, is it possible someone accessed her work without her knowing it?"

Bowden's eyes darted to Martinez. "Anything's possible, I guess. She was careful, but someone determined enough..."

Martinez's grip tightened on the book. "If someone has her research... her recordings of the oral histories..."

"They'd have locations of sacred sites across the region," Bowden finished quietly.

Finn's phone buzzed—a text from Sheila: Need you at the caves. Now.

"We're not done here," he told Martinez and Bowden. "I'm having officers escort you both to the station. We'll continue this conversation there."

Outside, he called in the request for escorts, then sat in his vehicle for a moment,

thinking. Mitchell had found something in those caves—something that scared her enough to reach out to Martinez. Then she'd gone to meet someone with "special knowledge" of the site.

Someone who'd been waiting for her to find it.

His phone buzzed again. Another text from Sheila: Bring climbing gear.

Whatever the search teams had found, it was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The caves felt different in darkness. Despite his years of combat training, Finn felt a flutter of unease as he checked his harness again before following Marcus Weber down the main passage, their headlamps cutting weak arcs through the blackness. He glanced back at where Sheila stood at the entrance, coordinating with the other teams.

"You sure you don't want to come down?" he asked.

Sheila shook her head. "Someone needs to run point up here. We've got four teams, the coroner's office calling with updates, and Martinez and her assistant to process at the station. Better if I coordinate from above." She didn't add what they both knew—that having the sheriff trapped underground if something went wrong wouldn't help anyone.

"Stay in radio contact," she added, tapping her receiver.

Finn nodded and turned back to Marcus. The descent looked nothing like his F-35 training exercises, but that old familiar tension coiled in his gut—the good kind, the kind that had always kept him alert in the cockpit.

A voice crackled over the radio, unusually hesitant. "Sheriff... Team Two found something. Kelly Bishop's group, in a lower chamber." He paused. "About two hundred feet down. You're going to want to see this yourself." The way he emphasized 'this' made Finn's stomach tighten. He'd heard that tone before—when officers found something they wished they hadn't.

"Guess I'd better check it out," Finn said.

The descent challenged him in ways his flight training never had. Ice made the ropes slick, and twice Finn had to stop to clear his headlamp of moisture. His compass necklace—the one that had saved his life in the air—swung uselessly against his chest as he navigated this underground world.

He thought of Mitchell, making this same journey days ago. Had she known what was waiting for her?

Kelly met them at the bottom of the rope line. Her face was pale in the artificial light, but her voice was steady. "It's through here. We almost missed it."

She led them through a narrow fissure that opened into a smaller chamber. The rest of her team was already there, lights positioned to illuminate what they'd found.

Signs of habitation were everywhere. A sleeping bag tucked into a natural stone alcove. The remnants of a camp stove. Empty protein bar wrappers and water bottles, neatly collected in a plastic bag.

"How long ago was someone here?" Finn asked, examining a makeshift shelf carved into the rock wall. It held basic supplies—matches, batteries, a first aid kit.

"Hard to tell in these conditions," Marcus replied. "The cold preserves everything. Could be days, could be weeks."

Kelly picked up a battery-powered lantern. "The batteries are dead. But it's a high-end model—the kind serious cavers use."

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Finn studied the sleeping area. The bag was military-grade, designed for extreme conditions. A worn paperback lay nearby, its pages stiff with cold. He picked it up carefully—a text on indigenous archaeology.

"Professional," he said quietly. "Someone who knew how to survive down here. Knew what they were looking for."

The camp had been cleared systematically—no personal items left behind, nothing that could identify its occupant. Even the trash had been collected, ready to be packed out.

"They knew we'd find this," Kelly said, voicing what Finn was thinking. "They wanted us to know someone was living here."

"But not who," Finn added. "Then again, there's gotta be plenty of DNA in here. We'll have to pack everything out, get it to the lab." Still, even as he thought this, he knew how long it could take to get results from a lab—weeks, sometimes longer. It was important to do their due diligence, but he wasn't going to cross his fingers about a breakthrough.

His radio crackled. "Finn?" Sheila's voice carried a tension he recognized. "Head back up. Now. Mitchell's ex-husband just surfaced."

The climb back took longer than he wanted, each foot of rope a reminder of how deep they'd gone. When he finally emerged into weak daylight, Sheila was waiting by her vehicle, phone pressed to her ear.

"...need those records as soon as possible," she was saying. "Yes, I understand the warrant process, but— Thank you." She ended the call with barely contained frustration.

"What were you saying about the ex?" Finn asked, stripping off his climbing gear.

"Robert Watson. Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Berkeley." Sheila ran a hand through her hair. "The university confirmed he's been teaching classes there all semester. Including the day Tracy died."

"So he's not a suspect. But why are we just hearing about him now?"

"Because Tracy didn't list him as next of kin. They divorced three years ago, and she went back to her maiden name—Mitchell. The department head only mentioned him when I asked about her personal relationships." Sheila leaned against her vehicle. "But here's the interesting part—her car was found in the university parking lot, packed for her Colorado trip."

"The University of Utah, you mean."

"Right."

Finn frowned, pondering this. "So she was planning to go."

"According to the campus security footage, she loaded her bags Tuesday morning. Then she got a call." Sheila's eyes met his. "Her phone's missing. Probably destroyed. I've got a warrant request in for her records, but..."

"That'll take time we don't have." Finn thought about the camp they'd found below. "The killer was waiting for her. Living down there, watching. But how did they know she'd find this place?"

"Maybe they led her to it." Sheila's voice was quiet. "Those emails Martinez showed you—Mitchell said she was meeting someone with 'special knowledge' of the site."

"But why here? Why the elaborate staging, the clothing?"

Sheila didn't answer immediately. The search teams were emerging from the cave now, their gear caked with ice. Kelly Bishop spoke quietly with Marcus, gesturing toward the entrance.

"The precision of the kill," Sheila said finally. "The camp setup. Whoever did this wasn't just familiar with the caves—they were trained. Professional."

"Military?" Finn suggested, thinking of his own training.

"Maybe."

"We need those phone records," Finn said. "And we need to know more about that meeting she was planning. Someone must have known where she was going."

"Martinez isn't telling us everything." Sheila watched Kelly's team pack up their gear. "And I'm betting Mitchell's ex-husband knows more than he's letting on, too."

"Berkeley's a long drive."

"Too long." She straightened. "But he might not be our best lead anyway. Mitchell was killed here, in territory she was just beginning to understand. But someone else has been here before. Someone who knows these caves well enough to live in them."

"These are all avenues of inquiry," Finn said. "But if there really was an earlier murder, then I think that's our best bet. We need to connect the murders, if we can."

Sheila nodded but said nothing.

They both looked toward the cave entrance, its dark mouth seeming to swallow the afternoon light. Somewhere in that darkness, answers waited. But for now, all they had were questions.

And the growing certainty that Tracy Mitchell's death was just the beginning.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The newscast's blue light flickered across the cabin's pine walls. He sat in an old leather armchair, hands wrapped around a glass of bourbon, still trying to get warm after hours in the caves' perpetual chill. His boots, caked with limestone dust and melting ice, lay by the door where he'd abandoned them.

The local news anchor's voice filled the small space: "Breaking news tonight from Coldwater County, where the body of prominent anthropologist Dr. Tracy Mitchell was discovered in the Wasatch ice caves..."

His fingers tightened around the glass. Too soon. It was too damn soon. The caves were supposed to keep her, embrace her in their ancient silence. The limestone would have gradually claimed her, transformed her over centuries into something permanent, something sacred. That's why he'd chosen that specific chamber, where the mineral-rich water dripped steadily from the ceiling. In time, the cave itself would have turned her to stone.

The bourbon burned his throat as he took another swallow. On screen, footage showed search teams moving in and out of the cave entrance. Their lights bounced off the ice, illuminating the darkness.

His darkness.

"Two spelunkers made the grim discovery yesterday afternoon," the anchor

continued. "After their climbing rope was mysteriously cut, the pair managed to find an alternate route to the surface, where they immediately contacted authorities."

He hurled the glass across the room. It shattered against the river stone fireplace, bourbon spattering the rough surface. Sloppy. He'd been sloppy. If there had just been one of them, he could have handled it. But two...

He hadn't been prepared for two.

The camera panned across the search teams' base camp. Yellow police tape fluttered in the mountain wind. A reporter stood bundled against the cold, gesturing toward the cave entrance behind her.

"The ice caves have a dark history," she said. "In 2019, they were closed to the public after a series of disappearances. Only two bodies were ever recovered..."

He wiped bourbon from his hand, the liquid mixing with melting cave ice still crusted under his fingernails. On screen, they showed a file photo of Tracy. She stood before a rock wall covered in ancient paintings, her face bright with discovery. The image twisted something in his chest.

She'd understood so much, seen so deeply into the old ways. If she'd only stopped there...

"Sources close to the investigation say Dr. Mitchell's body was found wearing traditional indigenous ceremonial garments," the reporter continued. "The FBI has been called in to assist, given the potential cultural significance..."

The FBI. Of course. He should have expected that—anything involving indigenous artifacts triggered federal jurisdiction. Which meant they'd be thorough. Methodical. They'd process every inch of those caves, document every passage, every alcove.

They'd find Kane.

The thought sent a spike of cold fear through him, sharper than any cave chill. He rose, moving to stoke the dying fire. The flames reflected in the fragments of broken glass on the hearth. Like ice crystals. Like the ones that had formed on Tracy's skin while he'd arranged her body, positioned her hands just so, wrapped her in garments she'd spent years studying.

She'd known what those garments meant. In those final moments, when she'd turned her back to him—had she understood? Had she seen it as the honor it was?

The reporter was interviewing someone now, a professor from the university. "Dr. Mitchell was a leading expert in indigenous burial practices," the academic explained. "Her work on preserving oral histories—"

He clicked off the TV, plunging the cabin into firelight-flickered darkness. His hands shook as he gathered the broken glass. Despite all the care he'd taken with Mitchell and Kane, that effort would now be wasted. The police would find Kane, even if it took them months of searching. A body ought to have gone undisturbed for centuries would be dragged back out into the light.

Just like Mitchell's.

He tossed the glass shards into the trash, discouraged. What was he to do now? He couldn't stop them from finding Kane—any attempt to do so would just compromise his identity. He was helpless. All he could do was wait and watch as his work was undone.

Then again, perhaps Kane's body was the perfect distraction. Once they found him—assuming they did—they might grow ever more eager to search the caves in case there were more hidden bodies. But if they didn't immediately get results? How

long would they keep searching?

Everything comes down to money for them, he thought bitterly. They have no vision, no greater purpose.

He, on the other hand, had a grand, world-changing vision. While they searched the ice caves, he would find his next specimen.

And this time, he would hide it much more carefully.

CHAPTER NINE

The county archives smelled of dust and aging paper. Sheila stood at a metal filing cabinet, its drawer pulled out so far it threatened to tip. Late afternoon sun slanted through high windows, catching motes that danced in the air. Her neck ached from hours of poring over old case files.

She pulled out another manila folder and added it to the stack balanced on her arm. The label read: "MISSING PERSONS—KANE, THOMAS R.—CASE #2019-1147." The paper was crisp despite its age, suggesting no one had opened it since it was filed.

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Across the room, Finn sat at a desk scattered with copied reports and grainy photographs. His sleeves were rolled up, and a forgotten cup of coffee sat cold at his elbow. They'd been at this for hours, piecing together what happened to Thomas Kane five years ago.

"Got the original case file," Sheila said, carrying the stack to the desk. Her voice seemed too loud in the hushed space. "Let's see what matches Jin's description of the kill method."

She spread the contents across the desk: photographs of Kane's campsite, his abandoned climbing gear, witness statements from other hikers. The facts were sparse—experienced climber, solo expedition, never emerged from the caves.

"Here's something," Finn said, holding up a photocopy. "Kane wasn't just any climber. He was an anthropologist, specializing in indigenous artifacts."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "Like Mitchell."

"Exactly like Mitchell. He was documenting sacred sites, trying to map their locations." Finn shuffled through more papers. "According to his research proposal, he believed the ice caves connected to older tunnel systems. Something about 'previously undocumented ceremonial chambers.'"

Sheila leaned over his shoulder to read. The proposal was detailed—references to oral histories, geological surveys, even thermal imaging that suggested larger caverns deeper in the mountain. Kane had been methodical, thorough.

Just like Mitchell.

"Did they ever find his research?" she asked. "His notes, his maps?"

"No mention of it here. But get this—his body wasn't the only thing missing. His camera, his notebook, his GPS unit—all gone." Finn looked up at her. "Someone didn't want his findings getting out."

Sheila was about to respond when footsteps echoed in the corridor outside. Heavy, purposeful steps—too many sets to be just a clerk or another deputy. She straightened, her hand instinctively moving toward her weapon.

The door opened, and three people entered. Two men and a woman, all wearing dark suits despite the warm afternoon. The woman led the way, her black hair pulled back severely from her face. She carried herself with the unmistakable authority of a senior agent.

"Sheriff Stone?" The woman's voice was clipped, professional. "I'm Special Agent Diana Walsh, FBI. These are Agents Reeves and Highland." She held up her credentials. "We're here about the Mitchell case."

Sheila nodded. "Yes, I was told to expect you."

Walsh gestured to the papers in front of Sheila. "It appears you're trying to connect Mitchell's death to a previous incident?"

"Just considering every possibility. Being as thorough as we can."

"Of course." Walsh's smile didn't reach her eyes. "But you can leave that to us now. Indigenous artifacts, potential grave sites—this is a federal case now. I'm sure you understand."

Finn stood slowly. "The murder occurred in county territory. That makes it our case."

"A murder involving ceremonial objects stolen from tribal lands," Walsh corrected. "Which makes it ours." She nodded to Agent Reeves, who moved toward the desk. "We'll need copies of everything you've found."

Sheila stepped between Reeves and the files. She didn't like being strong-armed, not when they ought to have been on the same side.

"Dr. Mitchell was killed in my jurisdiction. Her body was found by civilians who were then targeted. That makes this a local homicide investigation."

"Which we'll be happy to coordinate with you on," Walsh said smoothly. "But these files"—she gestured to the Kane documents—"suggest a pattern. One that falls under our purview."

"Because of the artifacts?" Sheila kept her voice level. "Or because you already know what Kane found in those caves?"

Something flickered in Walsh's expression—surprise, maybe, or concern. It was gone so quickly Sheila might have imagined it.

"Kane's disappearance was thoroughly investigated," Walsh said. "If you've found new evidence—"

"What we've found," Sheila cut in, "is a connection between two murders. Both victims were anthropologists studying sacred sites. Both were killed in the same way. Both had their research stolen." She met Walsh's gaze. "So either you take over both cases—including Kane's unsolved murder—or you let us do our job."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Finn tensed beside Sheila.

Walsh studied Sheila for a long moment. "You have good instincts, Sheriff. But you're out of your depth here. These cases... they're part of something larger. Something that requires federal resources and oversight."

"Then enlighten me," Sheila challenged. "What exactly are we dealing with?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss ongoing investigations." Walsh's tone hardened. "But I am authorized to take control of any evidence related to indigenous artifacts or sacred sites. Including these files."

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Sheila felt the familiar burn of anger in her chest—the same feeling she'd had when her mother's case was dismissed. The system protecting itself, closing ranks.

"No," she said quietly.

Walsh's eyebrows rose. "Excuse me?"

"I said no." Sheila straightened to her full height. "You want to take over the Mitchell case? Fine. Get a court order. But Kane's murder happened in my county, under my jurisdiction. Until I have proof these cases are connected, his file stays here."

"Sheriff Stone—" Walsh began, but Sheila cut her off.

"And while you're getting that court order," she continued, "you can explain why the FBI is so interested in a five-year-old missing person's case. One that, according to these records, your office never investigated."

The silence that followed was absolute. Walsh's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. Behind her, Agents Reeves and Highland exchanged glances.

"You're making a mistake," Walsh said finally. "These cases are more complex than you realize."

"Then help me understand," Sheila pressed. "What did Kane find? What was Mitchell looking for? Why are you really here?"

Instead of answering, Walsh reached into her jacket and withdrew a business card.

She placed it deliberately on the desk.

"When you're ready to cooperate," she said, "call me. Until then, remember—anything you find related to sacred sites or ceremonial objects falls under our jurisdiction. Anything."

She turned to leave, her agents falling in behind her. At the door, she paused.

"And Sheriff? Be careful what you go looking for in those caves. Some questions are better left unasked."

The door closed behind them. Their footsteps echoed down the corridor, fading into silence.

Finn let out a breath. "Well, that was subtle."

Sheila picked up Walsh's card, studying the embossed FBI seal. "They knew we'd make the connection to Kane. They were waiting for it."

"Question is, why?" Finn moved to the window, watching the agents cross the parking lot to their vehicles. "And what are they trying to keep us from finding?"

Sheila looked down at the scattered files, at the photographs of Kane's empty campsite. The same questions that had driven him into those caves had led Mitchell to her death. And now the FBI wanted to bury both cases.

"They're protecting something," she said. "Something in those caves that both Kane and Mitchell discovered." She began gathering the files. "And we need to find it before they shut us out completely."

"Where do you want to start?"

Sheila held up a photograph of Kane's last known campsite, the entrance to a cave system visible in the background. But not the main entrance where Mitchell's body was found. This was different, smaller. Hidden.

"We start here," she said. "If Kane found another way into those caves..."

"The FBI might not know about it," Finn finished.

"Exactly." Sheila studied the photo more carefully. "And whatever's down there, whatever got both Kane and Mitchell killed—maybe that's how we find it."

The sun had dipped lower, casting long shadows across the scattered papers. Somewhere in this mass of documents was the truth—about Kane, about Mitchell, about whatever secret was worth killing to protect.

They just had to find it before the FBI stopped them.

Or before whoever was watching from the caves decided they'd learned too much.

CHAPTER TEN

Sheila's phone buzzed as she and Finn loaded the last of the files into her truck. The sun had slipped behind the mountains, painting the sky in deep purples and oranges. Her father's name lit up the screen.

"What's up, Dad?" she asked, leaning against the truck's door.

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Gabriel's voice was rough with fatigue. "Been making calls about Carlton Vance. Not making much progress tracking him down, though. I'm guessing it's a fake name." He cursed under his breath and shook his head. "Can't believe I worked with him for years and never knew that."

Sheila pinched the bridge of her nose. Another thread to pull, another layer of complexity in her mother's case. She wished with all her heart she could focus fully on taking down whoever had ordered her mother's death, but she couldn't just abandon her present investigation.

"I really can't talk about this right now," she said. "I need to stay focused on these ice cave murders, and—"

"Of course," Gabriel said. There was a hint of woundedness in his voice. "I just thought you'd want to be involved."

"I do want to be involved. I wish I could hand this investigation to someone else—"

"No." Her father sighed heavily. "You're the sheriff, and that comes with responsibilities."

What about my responsibilities to family? she wondered. Before she could speak, however, her father continued.

"I'll keep digging and let you know if I come up with something actionable," he said. "In the meantime, how's the case going?"

Sheila took a moment to absorb the sudden shift in topic. "The case? It's gotten interesting, to say the least. The FBI showed up today. They're trying to take over, citing jurisdiction over indigenous artifacts."

Gabriel was quiet for a moment. "That certainly complicates things."

Sheila watched Finn check the truck's back tires, his movements methodical, grounding. "Look, I should get back to it. But as soon as it's wrapped up—"

"We'll keep digging into Vance," Gabriel finished. "Just watch your back, Sheila. And call me if you need anything."

After she hung up, Finn approached, hands in his pockets. "Everything okay?"

"Just talking with Dad about Vance." She straightened, pushing away from the truck. "Right now, we need to find that second cave entrance before it gets dark."

They drove in companionable silence, following county roads that wound higher into the mountains. The photo of Kane's campsite sat on the dashboard, its details burned into Sheila's memory. A different angle on the caves, a hidden approach that might give them answers.

"Walsh wasn't surprised," Finn said suddenly.

"About what?"

"When you mentioned the similar kill methods. She didn't even blink." He turned to look at her. "Almost like she was expecting it."

Sheila's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "The FBI's been sitting on something for five years. Since Kane disappeared." She glanced at him. "What do you want to

bet they've got his research locked away somewhere?"

"If they do, they're not sharing." Finn pulled out his phone, checking a map. "Take the next right. According to Kane's hiking permit, he parked at the Aspen Grove trailhead."

The truck's headlights cut through growing darkness as they turned onto a narrower road. Pine branches scraped against the windows, and patches of early snow dotted the shoulder.

"Jin said the kill method was precise," Sheila said, thinking out loud. "Professional. Someone with training."

"Like federal training?"

She considered this. "Walsh's team didn't feel right. Too aggressive for a cultural artifacts case."

"Could be counter-terrorism," Finn suggested. "If whatever's in those caves is sensitive enough."

The road ended at a small parking area, empty now except for a single Forest Service truck. A trail sign pointed into dense woods, its metal surface reflecting their headlights.

They grabbed their gear—flashlights, climbing equipment, emergency supplies. Sheila checked her weapon, then radioed dispatch to log their location. No sense taking chances, not with a killer still out there.

"The campsite was about a mile in," Finn said, comparing the old photo to their surroundings. "There should be a game trail branching off to the west."

They found it easily enough—a narrow path winding through scrub oak and mountain mahogany. Their flashlight beams bounced off tree trunks, creating shifting shadows that made every movement seem suspicious.

After twenty minutes of hiking, the trail opened onto a small clearing. Sheila stopped, comparing the space to Kane's photograph. The angles matched—the distinctive split boulder, the lightning-struck pine.

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"This is it," she said quietly.

They swept their lights across the clearing. Five years had erased most signs of Kane's camp, but there were still traces—a rusted tent stake, a piece of frayed rope around a tree trunk.

"Over here," Finn called from the clearing's edge. He stood before a narrow fissure in the rock face, partially hidden by brush. "Looks like it goes deep."

Sheila joined him, examining the opening. It was tight—they'd have to go single file—but definitely passable. Cool air flowed from its depths, carrying the mineral smell of limestone.

"Another entrance to the cave system," she said. "One the FBI might not know about."

Finn checked his watch. "Sun's almost down. If we're going in—"

"We have to go now," Sheila finished. She keyed her radio. "Dispatch, this is Stone. We've located a possible second entrance to the ice cave system. Finn and I are going to check it out."

The radio crackled. "Copy that, Sheriff. Want me to send backup?"

Sheila hesitated, remembering Walsh's warning. If they called for backup, word would get back to the FBI. This might be their only chance to find what Kane and Mitchell had discovered.

"Negative," she said. "But log our position. If you don't hear from us in two hours, send a team."

"Copy that. Be careful, Sheriff."

Sheila switched on her headlamp and checked her harness. Beside her, Finn did the same, his movements efficient from years of training.

"Ready?" she asked.

He gave her a slight smile. "After you, boss."

The fissure was a tight fit, but it opened into a larger passage after about twenty feet. Their lights revealed worked stone—old tool marks in the rock, deliberate widening of natural formations.

"Someone improved this entrance," Finn said, running his hand along the wall. "A long time ago, from the look of it."

Sheila examined the floor, finding only the natural accumulation of limestone dust and small rocks. No scuff marks, no signs of recent passage. The air grew colder as they moved deeper, and their lights caught ice formations starting to form along the walls.

"We must be connecting to the main system," Finn said. His voice echoed strangely in the enclosed space.

The passage split, offering three choices. Sheila studied each opening, looking for any sign of disturbance. The right-hand tunnel sloped steeply downward, while the middle passage remained relatively level. The left-hand opening was partly blocked by fallen rock.

"Which way?" Finn asked.

Sheila considered. Kane had been an experienced caver—he would have taken the safest route while exploring. "Middle passage," she said. "Less chance of getting trapped by water or rockfall."

They moved carefully, aware that any sound could travel far in these tunnels. Ice made the footing treacherous, forcing them to test each step. Their lights revealed a progression of formations—delicate stalactites, crystalline flowstone that sparkled like diamond dust.

The passage gradually widened, opening into a small chamber. Unlike the large cavern where they'd found Mitchell, this space felt intimate, almost like a side chapel in an ancient church. Their lights revealed elaborate ice formations along the walls, like frozen waterfalls caught in mid-flow.

Finn's light beam settled on something against the far wall. At first it looked like another ice formation, but as they moved closer, details emerged from the darkness.

A figure sat cross-legged against the rock, dressed in elaborately decorated ceremonial robes. The garments were similar to Mitchell's—richly woven fabric adorned with intricate beadwork and symbols. Ice crystals had formed on the cloth, making it glitter in their lights.

"Kane," Sheila breathed. She approached slowly, her training warring with an instinct to retreat. The scene felt sacred somehow, untouched by time.

The body was remarkably preserved by the cold. Kane's face was peaceful, his eyes closed as if in meditation. His hands rested palm-up on his knees, an attitude of acceptance or offering.

"Just like Mitchell," Finn said quietly. "The ceremonial clothing, the careful positioning..."

Sheila circled the body, noting details. The robes were different from Mitchell's—the patterns suggested a different tradition, perhaps a different tribe. Even the beadwork seemed to tell a story she couldn't quite read.

"Check his neck," Finn suggested.

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Carefully, trying not to disturb anything, Sheila examined the base of Kane's skull. There it was—a single puncture wound, precise and deadly. Just like Mitchell's.

"Same killer," she said, straightening. "Same method. Same... respect."

"Five years apart." Finn's light played across the ice formations. "How many more are down here? How long has this been going on?"

Sheila studied Kane's face, trying to read the story of his death. Had he found what he was looking for? Had he, like Mitchell, understood too much?

A soft sound echoed through the chamber—ice cracking somewhere in the darkness. Both of them froze, listening. The caves seemed to hold their breath.

"We should call this in," Finn said quietly.

Sheila nodded, but something made her hesitate. This chamber had kept its secret for five years. No random spelunker had stumbled upon it. No search party had found it. The killer had chosen this place carefully, buried Kane deep where he wouldn't be found.

Until now.

"How many other chambers are there?" she wondered aloud. "How many other bodies?"

"Let's not find out alone," Finn said. "We need backup. A full evidence team."

She knew he was right, but she couldn't shake the feeling that everything would change once they made that call. The FBI would swarm these caves, take control of both bodies. Whatever answers Kane and Mitchell had died for would disappear into federal evidence lockers.

A deeper crack echoed through the chamber—ice shifting with the mountain's endless movements. Or something else, moving in the darkness beyond their lights.

"Sheila," Finn said softly. "We need to go. Now."

She took one last look at Kane's peaceful face, then keyed her radio. The signal was weak but present. "Dispatch, this is Stone. We've got a 187 in the ice caves. Second victim, preserved. Send Dr. Jin and a full evidence team."

Static crackled, then: "Copy that, Sheriff. Teams en route."

As they made their way back through the tunnels, Sheila couldn't shake the image of Kane's serene expression. He and Mitchell—both killed with precision, both arranged with care, both dressed in ceremonial robes.

But how many others were still hidden in the darkness, waiting to be found?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emergency lights cut harsh shadows across the cave entrance, their rotating beams catching the early evening mist. Sheila stood at the command post, watching teams of FBI evidence technicians file into the caves like ants into a hill. Their white Tyvek suits made them look ghostly in the artificial light.

Agent Walsh had arrived within an hour of Sheila's call, bringing a full federal task force with her. Now she stood with two of her agents, gesturing at a topographical

map spread across the hood of an SUV. Her voice carried on the cold air.

"I want every tunnel mapped, every chamber documented. If there are more bodies down there, we need to find them."

Sheila's jaw tightened. Less than thirty minutes after arriving, Walsh had effectively taken control of both the scene and the investigation. County deputies were relegated to perimeter control while FBI agents swarmed over evidence that rightfully belonged to her department.

She knew Walsh's team was desperate to catch the killer alive—to understand the psychology, prevent future cases. That explained their aggressive takeover attempt. But Sheila couldn't let federal ambition override local investigative work that might catch this killer.

For Sheila, this wasn't about territory or pride. She knew these mountains, knew the people who lived in their shadows. When Mitchell was killed, it was Sheila's department that had interviewed the locals, built relationships with potential witnesses, earned the trust of the community.

But now Walsh's teams were storming in with their federal authority, disrupting those careful connections. They treated her deputies like uniformed security guards, dismissed Dr. Jin's insights. Worse, they were compartmentalizing information, sharing only what they deemed necessary. Sheila couldn't effectively investigate when she was being kept in the dark about evidence found in her own jurisdiction.

She thought of the spelunkers, Kelly and Mike, who had trusted her enough to go back into those caves. What would happen to that trust when federal agents started throwing their weight around? The FBI might have resources and authority, but they lacked the deep understanding of Coldwater County that could make or break this case. And their heavy-handed approach was already closing doors that Sheila had

carefully opened.

Dr. Jin approached from the direction of his vehicle, his silver-streaked hair catching the emergency lights. "Sheriff," he said quietly. "A word?"

She followed him to where his equipment was set up, away from the cluster of federal agents. A portable heater hummed nearby, pushing back the mountain chill.

"Initial examination confirms what we suspected," Jin said. "Same method as Mitchell. Single puncture wound, base of the skull, instant unconsciousness." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "But there's something else. The robes Kane was wearing—they're not just similar to Mitchell's. They're from the same collection."

Sheila frowned. "How can you be sure?"

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"The beadwork patterns. They're complementary pieces meant to be worn together in certain ceremonies. Very rare, very old." He glanced toward the FBI teams. "I've already had three agents try to take custody of them."

"What else?"

"The preservation is remarkable. The cold, the mineral content in the cave—it's like he was placed there yesterday, not five years ago." Jin's sharp eyes met hers. "Sheriff, these caves... they're perfect for preservation. Like a natural freezer."

"A place to store bodies," Sheila said softly. "Keep them intact."

"Exactly." Jin pulled out his tablet, showing her photographs of Kane's robes. "But here's what interests me most—these aren't replicas. They're authentic pieces, probably museum quality. The kind of artifacts that never come up for sale."

"So where did our killer get them?"

Before Jin could answer, Walsh's voice cut through the darkness. "Dr. Jin? We need your preliminary report."

Jin gave Sheila an apologetic look before heading toward the federal command post. She watched him go, noting how quickly Walsh had co-opted every aspect of the investigation.

"Quite an operation they've got going."

Sheila turned to find Finn beside her, his breath visible in the cold air. He held two cups of coffee from the mobile command unit.

"Thanks." She took one of the cups, grateful for its warmth. "Any word from the search teams?"

"They're finding more passages than the old surveys showed. Whole sections that aren't on any map." He paused. "And signs of previous exploration. Old torch marks on the walls, worn paths in the limestone."

"How old?"

"That's the thing—some of them look ancient. Like, centuries old." Finn sipped his coffee. "The FBI's got archaeologists coming in to document everything."

Sheila watched another team of agents gear up for cave entry. They moved with military precision, checking equipment with practiced efficiency. Not typical FBI evidence technicians.

"Those aren't just federal agents," she said quietly.

Finn nodded. "I noticed. Their gear, their movements—they're some kind of tactical unit. Walsh brought in heavy hitters for this."

"The question is, why? What are they expecting to find down there?"

"Sheriff Stone?" A young FBI technician approached, tablet in hand. "Agent Walsh needs to speak with you."

Sheila found Walsh at the cave entrance, surrounded by monitoring equipment. Screens showed live feeds from cameras the teams were setting up underground.

"Sheriff." Walsh's tone was professional but carried an edge. "We need those case files on Kane's disappearance."

"Those files belong to my department."

"This is now a federal investigation. We need everything you have on both victims."

Sheila met the agent's gaze. "Kane was killed in my jurisdiction. Mitchell, too. That makes them my cases."

Walsh sighed wearily. "We've been over this. These murders involve protected artifacts and sacred sites, and that puts them firmly under federal jurisdiction." She stepped closer, lowering her voice. "Don't make this difficult, Sheriff. You're out of your depth here."

"Am I? Or are you worried about what we'll find if we keep looking?" Sheila watched Walsh's expression carefully. "Two bodies, same killer, same burial ritual. How many more are down there, Agent Walsh? How long have you known about these caves?"

Something flickered in Walsh's eyes—anger, or perhaps fear. Before she could respond, shouts erupted from the cave entrance. One of the search teams was emerging, calling for assistance.

"We've got something!" an agent yelled. "Chamber C-7, north tunnel system!"

Walsh turned away from Sheila, already moving toward the commotion. "What did you find?"

The agent pulled off his protective hood, his face pale in the emergency lights. "Another chamber, bigger than the others. There are... markings on the walls. And signs of recent activity."

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"What kind of markings?" Walsh demanded.

"Symbols, painted or carved. They match the patterns on the robes." He hesitated. "And we found fresh candle wax. Someone's been down there recently. Within the last few days."

Walsh was already issuing orders, mobilizing more teams. Sheila watched another FBI vehicle wind its way up the mountain road, its headlights cutting through the growing darkness. There was nothing more they could do here—Walsh's team had effectively taken control of both the scene and the bodies.

"We're spinning our wheels," she said to Finn. "Let's get back to what we know."

They settled into her truck, the heater slowly pushing back the mountain chill. Sheila pulled out her notebook, reviewing their leads.

"Martinez," she said. "Mitchell's colleague. She showed up at the house looking for research materials, but her timing was suspicious."

"And she knew about Mitchell's meeting with someone who had 'special knowledge' of the site." Finn checked his phone. "Martinez and her assistant are still at the station. Deputy Neville's keeping an eye on them."

Sheila started the engine. "What about Mitchell's ex-husband? The professor at Berkeley?"

"Robert Watson. According to the university, he's been teaching all semester." Finn

scrolled through his notes. "But here's something interesting—he specialized in indigenous burial practices before switching to cultural anthropology. Same field Mitchell was working in."

"Could be a coincidence." But Sheila didn't believe in coincidences, not with two bodies in ceremonial robes hidden in the caves. "What about Mitchell's phone records?"

"Still waiting on the warrant." Finn looked up from his phone. "But we've got Mitchell's cloud backup from her research assistant. Could start there, see what she was working on before she died."

Sheila guided the truck down the winding mountain road, away from the chaos of federal vehicles and evidence teams. Her mind kept returning to Kane's peaceful expression, to the careful arrangement of his body. The killer had taken time with both victims, treated them with a kind of reverence.

"The robes," she said suddenly. "Jin said they were from the same collection—meant to be worn together in ceremonies."

"Which means our killer either had access to museum pieces..."

"Or knew where to find authentic artifacts." Sheila tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, thinking. "Mitchell's assistant—Cooper. He said she was documenting unauthorized entries into sacred sites. People moving things around."

"You think someone was stealing artifacts?"

"Or returning them." She glanced at Finn. "What if these caves aren't just burial sites? What if they're storage?"

Finn considered this. "A place to keep sacred objects safe. Hidden."

"Until someone started looking too closely." Sheila turned onto the main highway, heading back toward town. "Mitchell and Kane—they were both documenting these sites, mapping locations that were supposed to stay secret."

"And someone killed them to protect those secrets." Finn was quiet for a moment. "But why dress them in ceremonial robes? Why make them part of whatever they were trying to document?"

Before Sheila could answer, her phone rang. Sarah Neville's number.

"Sheriff," Neville said when Sheila answered. "We've got a problem. Martinez and her assistant—they're gone."

Sheila felt her shoulders tense. "What do you mean, gone?"

"They asked to use the restroom. By the time I checked on them, they'd slipped out the back. But that's not all." Neville's voice dropped. "They left something on the interview room table. An envelope with your name on it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sheila stood in the empty interview room, studying the envelope on the table. It was high-quality paper, cream-colored, with her name written in precise handwriting.

Sarah Neville shifted her weight, her forest-green eyes troubled. "They asked to use the restroom," she said, as if feeling the need to reiterate what had happened. "Martinez's assistant went first, then she followed a few minutes later." She gestured toward the hallway. "By the time I checked, they'd already gone through the emergency exit. No car waiting—they must have called someone."

Sheila glanced at Finn, who stood examining the building's security footage on his phone. "Anything?"

"They split up outside," he said. "Assistant went north on foot, Martinez headed south. Both disappeared into downtown foot traffic."

Sheila turned her attention back to the envelope. It sat perfectly centered on the interview room table, untouched since Martinez left it. The handwriting was steady, deliberate—not the work of someone in a hurry.

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"They planned this," she said quietly. "The escape, the envelope... they wanted us distracted by the caves while they made their move."

"Should I put out an APB?" Neville asked.

Sheila shook her head. "They're long gone. And something tells me those names they gave us won't lead anywhere." She pulled on a latex glove and carefully picked up the envelope. "Let's see what was worth all this theater."

Sheila carefully opened the envelope, mindful of preserving any evidence. Inside was a single sheet of paper and what appeared to be an old photograph.

The letter was handwritten in the same precise script:

Sheriff Stone,

I apologize for our abrupt departure, but there are people who would prefer we not have this conversation. My assistant and I have spent years working to protect and preserve indigenous artifacts from those who would exploit them. We are not your enemies.

Tracy Mitchell was my friend. When she contacted me about her discovery in the caves, I warned her to be careful. There are private collectors who will go to any lengths to acquire sacred objects. Some have connections to federal agencies, which is why I cannot stay to answer your questions.

The photograph enclosed shows a ceremonial gathering from 1922. Note the robes

worn by the tribal elders. They match the ones found on Dr. Mitchell and, I suspect, on Thomas Kane.

These garments were stolen from the tribal museum in Window Rock in 1976. We've been tracking them ever since, trying to prevent their sale on the black market. Your killer isn't just staging murders—they're using actual ceremonial objects that were meant to be returned to the tribes.

I have to protect my sources within the indigenous communities. That's why we left. But please understand—Tracy was killed because she found something in those caves that someone wants to keep hidden. Not just artifacts, but something more.

Be careful whom you trust.

- Elena Martinez

Sheila studied the photograph. It was sepia-toned but clear, showing a group of tribal elders in elaborate ceremonial dress. The robes were unmistakable—the same intricate beadwork, the same patterns they'd seen on Mitchell and Kane.

"She's not running from us," Finn said quietly. "She's running from whoever killed Mitchell."

"And protecting her contacts in the tribal communities." Sheila set down the letter. "She thinks this is about stolen artifacts."

"But that's not all it is, is it?" Neville had moved closer, reading the letter over Sheila's shoulder.

"No." Sheila picked up the photograph again. "Martinez is right about the robes being stolen. But why would our killer use them? Why take that risk?"

Finn leaned against the interview table. "Because they mean something. The robes, the ceremonial placement of the bodies—it's all part of whatever Mitchell and Kane discovered."

Sheila gathered the evidence materials and headed for her office, Finn following. The station hummed with late evening activity, but her mind was focused on one detail—ceremonial robes stolen in 1976 had somehow ended up on two murder victims decades later.

She settled behind her desk and opened her laptop. "If these robes were stolen from Window Rock in '76, there should be a record."

"I'll check old newspaper archives," Finn said, taking a seat across from her. "Someone must have covered the theft."

They worked in comfortable silence, broken only by keyboard clicks and the occasional rustle of paper. Outside her office window, darkness had settled over Coldwater, street lights casting pools of yellow on empty sidewalks.

"Here's something," Finn said after twenty minutes. "Navajo Times, August 1976. 'Sacred Objects Stolen from Tribal Museum.'" He turned his screen so she could see. "It wasn't just the robes—they took an entire collection. Ceremonial masks, beaded garments, ritual objects. The article says they were being prepared for a special exhibition on winter ceremonies."

"Any suspects?"

"Nothing concrete. But there's a quote from the museum curator about private collectors showing unusual interest in the winter ceremony items just before the theft."

Sheila leaned back, thinking. "Martinez mentioned private collectors. Said some had federal connections."

"Which might explain Walsh's involvement." Finn scrolled through the article. "Look at this—the FBI's art crime team investigated, but the case went cold. No arrests, no recoveries."

"Until now." Sheila pulled up a database of art and antiquities dealers. "These robes had to surface somewhere in the last forty-plus years. Someone had to handle them, transport them, store them."

"That's a lot of ground to cover."

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"Then we start with what we know." She turned her screen to show him. "High-end dealers who specialized in indigenous artifacts in the '70s and '80s. Most of them operated out of major cities, but some had connections to smaller regional markets."

"Including here in Utah?"

"Four dealers worked this territory." Sheila brought up their records. "Two are dead, one's in prison for fraud. But the fourth..." She paused, studying the information. "Richard Keeling. Ran a gallery in Salt Lake City until 1990. Still alive, lives outside Moab."

Finn checked his watch. "It's late, but we could drive out first thing tomorrow. See what he remembers about the Window Rock theft."

Sheila was already reaching for her phone. "Or we could call him now."

"At this hour?"

"People tend to be more honest when you catch them off guard." She dialed the number listed in the database, putting it on speaker.

The phone rang four times before a man answered, his voice rough with age. "Hello?"

"Mr. Keeling? This is Sheriff Stone from Coldwater County. I apologize for calling so late, but I'm hoping you can help me with a case involving some stolen artifacts from the 1976 Window Rock theft."

A long pause. Then: "That was a long time ago, Sheriff."

"The robes that were stolen—ceremonial garments used in winter rituals. Did you ever come across them? Maybe hear rumors about who might have acquired them?"

Another pause, longer this time. When Keeling spoke again, his voice had changed. "Why are you asking about this now? After all these years?"

"Because those robes have surfaced in my jurisdiction. On murder victims."

The silence that followed was heavy with unspoken knowledge. Sheila glanced at Finn, who nodded encouragingly.

"Mr. Keeling?"

"I can't... I can't talk about this on the phone." His voice had dropped to nearly a whisper. "But I remember those robes. The patterns, the beadwork—they were extraordinary. Part of a matched set used in the most sacred ceremonies."

"Do you know who bought them?"

"Sheriff, you don't understand. Those robes were never meant to be bought or sold. They were... protected. By people who understood their power."

"What people, Mr. Keeling?"

"I'll tell you what I know. But not like this. Come to Moab tomorrow. Alone."

"Tomorrow's too late. This is urgent."

There was a long pause. Then Keeling finally sighed. "Alright. Tonight, then." He

rattled off an address, then added, "And Sheriff? Be careful who you share this with. Some people have spent decades keeping these secrets."

The line went dead.

Sheila sat back, processing. "Well, that was interesting."

"You think he's legitimate?" Finn asked.

"I think he knows something." She started gathering her things. "And right now, he's our best lead to understanding why someone would kill two people and dress them in stolen ceremonial robes."

"You're not really going alone."

"No." She smiled slightly. "But Keeling doesn't need to know that."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dr. Rachel Harper sat in her office at the University of Utah, surrounded by stacks of interview transcripts. The digital clock on her desk read 8:47 PM, but she barely noticed the late hour. She was close to something—a pattern in the data she'd been collecting for months.

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Her current research focused on how isolated communities adapted to rapid technological change. The premise had seemed straightforward when she'd started: document how small Utah towns were handling the influx of remote workers and tech companies. But the more people she interviewed, the more she uncovered a deeper story about resistance, adaptation, and the tension between preservation and progress.

She pushed back from her desk and stretched, her shoulders protesting hours of hunched typing. At forty-two, Rachel wasn't old, but days spent conducting interviews followed by nights of transcription were taking their toll. Her dark hair, streaked with early gray that she refused to cover, had escaped its loose bun, and her reading glasses sat forgotten atop her head.

The office walls were covered in maps marking her interview sites—tiny towns scattered across Utah's vast landscapes. Sticky notes created constellations around each location, capturing key quotes and observations. To anyone else, it might have looked chaotic, but to Rachel, it was a careful documentation of communities in transition.

Her phone buzzed—a text from her husband, Mark: Dinner's in the oven. You coming home tonight or should I send a search party?

Rachel smiled, typing back: Almost done. Promise. Just need to finish this section.

The truth was, she could have gone home hours ago. But here, surrounded by her research, she felt energized. The stories she was collecting mattered—stories of ranchers learning to code, of traditional craftspeople selling globally through e-commerce, of young people returning to their hometowns armed with degrees and

startup dreams.

This was why she'd become a sociologist—to understand how communities evolved, how they held onto their identity while embracing change. Her colleagues sometimes teased her about her enthusiasm for what they saw as a niche topic, but Rachel knew she was documenting a crucial moment in these towns' histories.

Her computer chimed with an incoming email. Probably another student asking for an extension on their midterm paper. Instead, she found herself staring at a message from an unfamiliar address:

Dr. Harper,

My name is Dr. Nathan Angel. I'm an archaeologist currently studying cave systems in Utah for evidence of ancient human habitation. Your work on rural communities and cultural preservation has come highly recommended.

I've made a discovery that I believe will be of great interest to your research. It concerns how certain communities have maintained cultural continuity over extremely long periods. However, the sensitive nature of this finding requires discretion.

Would you be willing to meet to discuss this in person? I apologize for the late hour, but timing is crucial.

Best regards,

Dr. Nathan Angel

Department of Anthropology

University of Colorado

Rachel frowned, checking the email header. It had come through the University of Colorado system, which meant Angel had legitimate academic credentials. Still, something about the message made her uneasy. The vague description, the emphasis on discretion, the urgency.

Her phone rang, making her jump. Unknown number.

"Dr. Harper? This is Nathan Angel. I sent you an email just now."

His voice was pleasant, professional—a slight Midwestern accent softening his words. He sounded older, maybe in his sixties.

"Yes, I was just reading it," she said, surprised by the sudden call. Was he just impatient? Eager to share whatever he'd discovered?

"You mentioned a discovery?" she asked.

"Yes. One that I believe bridges our research interests. I've found evidence of continuous cultural practices in certain cave systems—practices that appear to have survived despite enormous social changes in the surrounding communities."

Rachel sat up straighter. This was exactly the kind of cultural resilience she studied—how traditions persisted in the face of change.

"What kind of evidence?" she asked.

"I'd rather not discuss specifics over the phone. There are... complications. Issues of site preservation and cultural sensitivity. But I could show you tonight if you're willing. I'm at a research station about forty minutes from the university."

Warning bells rang in Rachel's mind. Meeting a stranger at night? Driving to an unknown location?

"Dr. Angel, while I'm interested in your research, perhaps we could meet tomorrow during business hours?"

"I understand your hesitation," he said quickly. "But I've been following your work on adaptive traditions in isolated communities. This site... it demonstrates exactly what you've been documenting. How certain practices can remain hidden yet vital, even as the world changes around them."

Rachel glanced at her wall of maps, at the patterns she'd spent months trying to understand. If Angel had found physical evidence of cultural continuation...

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"Would you be comfortable meeting somewhere public first?" she asked.

"Of course. There's a bar just off Route 40, the Coyote Run. I could meet you there in an hour, then show you the site. It's only fifteen minutes from there."

Rachel considered. The Coyote Run was usually busy even late. She could assess Angel in person before deciding whether to visit his research station.

"Let me check something first," she said. "Can I call you back at this number?"

"Certainly. But please, don't discuss this with anyone else yet. The site's security is paramount until we can properly document everything."

After hanging up, Rachel quickly searched for Dr. Nathan Angel. His university profile appeared—silver-haired, distinguished-looking, impressive publication record in cave archaeology. Everything seemed legitimate.

She called Mark.

"Hey, stranger," he answered. "Finally coming home?"

"Actually..." She explained about Angel's call and the potential significance for her research. "I know it's late, but this could be important data for my project."

Mark was quiet for a moment. "You're meeting a stranger at night?"

"At the Coyote Run first. I'll have my location sharing turned on, and I'll text you his

license plate when I see his car." She paused. "This is exactly what I've been looking for, Mark—evidence of how communities maintain traditional practices even during periods of rapid change."

"Just... be careful, okay? Call me when you get there and again when you're heading to the research station."

"Promise." She started gathering her things. "And Mark? Thanks for understanding."

After hanging up, Rachel checked her phone's location sharing, making sure Mark could track her movements. She also texted her research assistant, Emma: Meeting a Dr. Nathan Angel about possible cave artifacts. If you don't hear from me by midnight, call the police. Also, here's Dr. Angel's contact information.

She was just being cautious, she told herself. But something about Angel's insistence on secrecy nagged at her. Still, this was the kind of discovery that could significantly impact her research. Worth a careful look, at least.

She pulled on her coat and gathered her research materials—notebook, recorder, camera. The interview transcripts could wait. Tonight might bring an unexpected breakthrough in understanding how communities preserved their most important traditions, even in an age of rapid change.

That was too good an opportunity to pass up.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The moon was high above the red cliffs when Sheila turned her truck onto a narrow dirt road outside Moab. Richard Keeling's address led them deep into canyon country, where towering sandstone walls caught the moonlight like burning coal.

Finn studied a map on his phone. "About two miles ahead. Property records show he owns twenty acres out here."

They'd left Coldwater immediately after Sheila's call with Keeling. The three-hour drive had given them time to research Keeling's history—decades of legitimate dealings in Southwest art, followed by a sudden retirement in 1990. No criminal record, but several contacts with law enforcement regarding questionable artifacts.

The dirt road wound between rust-colored rock formations until it ended at a low adobe house. A covered porch wrapped around two sides, its posts weathered by decades of desert wind. An ancient Land Rover sat in the carport, coated in red dust.

"Nice place to hide," Finn commented as they parked.

"Or to keep secrets." Sheila stepped out of the truck, taking in the property. Despite the late hour, lights glowed behind the house's windows.

Before they reached the porch steps, the front door opened. Richard Keeling stood in the doorway, tall and lean despite his age. His white hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and his weathered face suggested years spent in the desert sun.

"Sheriff Stone," he said, his voice the same rough baritone from the phone. His eyes moved to Finn. "I thought I said come alone."

"Deputy Mercer goes where I go." Sheila kept her tone neutral but firm. "Especially when discussing murder cases."

Keeling studied them both for a long moment, then stepped back from the door. "Better come inside then. Coffee's hot."

The interior of Keeling's house was surprisingly modest, given his years in the high-

end art market. Simple furniture, Navajo rugs on the floor, local landscape paintings on the walls. But Sheila's attention was drawn to the books—hundreds of them filled floor-to-ceiling shelves, many focused on indigenous art and artifacts.

Keeling moved to the kitchen. "How do you take it?" he asked, reaching for coffee mugs.

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"Black is fine," Sheila said. She remained standing while Finn positioned himself near the door.

The old dealer poured three cups, his hands steady despite his age. "The robes you asked about," he said, setting the mugs on a small table. "I need to know exactly how they turned up."

"Two bodies," Sheila said. "Both dressed in ceremonial robes, arranged in specific positions. Our medical examiner confirmed the clothes are from the Window Rock collection."

Keeling sank into a chair, his face tight. "Both victims... were they found in caves?"

Sheila exchanged a glance with Finn before answering. "Yes. Did you see it on the news?"

"No, actually, I didn't."

"Then how did you know?"

"Because that's where they were meant to be." Keeling took a sip of coffee, gathering his thoughts. "Those robes—they weren't just ceremonial garments. They were part of a specific ritual. A way of returning the dead to sacred spaces."

"Who would know about these rituals?" Finn asked. "Besides the tribes themselves?"

"That's the thing about private collectors," Keeling said. "Some of them don't just

want the objects. They want the knowledge that goes with them. The meaning. The power." He stood and moved to one of the bookshelves, pulling out a worn leather journal. "After the Window Rock theft, I kept records of everyone who showed serious interest in the winter ceremony items. Not just the buyers—the scholars, the researchers, anyone who asked too many questions."

He opened the journal, its pages filled with neat handwriting. "I started hearing rumors. The collection hadn't just been stolen—it had been commissioned. Someone with deep pockets and specific interests."

"Do you have a name?" Sheila asked.

Keeling shook his head. "Never got that far. But I tracked the middleman—an antiques dealer named Matthew Vale. He worked out of Seattle, specialized in private sales to serious collectors." He looked up at Sheila. "The kind of people who build secret rooms to house their collections. Who spend years studying the meaning behind each piece."

"Where is Vale now?"

"Dead. Car accident in '92. But he kept records, too. Detailed ones. The FBI seized most of them, but I heard he had a private storage unit in Seattle. Never found by the authorities."

"You think his records are still there?" Sheila asked.

"If they are, they'd tell you exactly who bought those robes." Keeling closed his journal carefully. "Vale documented everything—names, dates, prices. He was paranoid about getting cheated by his wealthy clients."

"Why are you telling us this?" Finn asked. "After all these years?"

Keeling was quiet for a moment, staring into his coffee. "Because those robes... they were never meant to leave tribal hands. Using them the way your killer has—it's not just murder. It's desecration." He looked up at Sheila. "And whoever's doing this understands exactly what these garments mean. Their spiritual significance. The proper way to arrange them."

"Someone who studied the rituals," Sheila said.

Keeling stood slowly. "Vale's storage unit was in his wife's maiden name. Margaret Kessler. Unit 23 at Westlake Security Storage." He moved to a desk and wrote down an address. "If those records still exist, that's where you'll find them."

Sheila took the paper, studying the neat handwriting. "Thirty years is a long time. Who's been making the payments?"

Keeling shook his head. "Don't know." He walked them to the door, then added quietly, "Be careful, Sheriff. The kind of people who collect these objects—they don't just collect things. They collect secrets."

The moon was at its zenith as they walked back to Sheila's truck, painting the cliffs gray. But she barely noticed the beauty around them, her mind already racing ahead to Seattle.

And whatever secrets Vale's records might reveal.

"Seattle's at least a twelve-hour drive," Finn said as they pulled away from Keeling's house. "Not counting stops."

"We're not driving to Seattle." Sheila guided the truck back onto the main road. "Not with an active killer who might strike again."

"We could send someone."

"And risk the FBI finding out?" She shook her head. "Walsh's team is watching every move we make. If those records exist, they'd get there first."

Finn was quiet for a moment, thinking. "I know someone in Seattle PD. Detective I worked with on a case last year. She could check it out quietly, send us whatever she finds."

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"You trust her?"

"Yeah. Maria Suarez. Good investigator, knows how to be discreet." He pulled out his phone. "Want me to make the call?"

Sheila considered this as they wound through the red rock canyons. They needed those records—if Vale had documented the sale of the ceremonial robes, it could lead them to their killer. But every hour spent waiting for information from Seattle was another hour someone else might die.

"Make the call," she said finally. "But tell her we need this fast. And tell her to be careful. These aren't ordinary storage records she's looking for."

As Finn made the call, Sheila thought about what Keeling had said. These people are patient. They think in decades, not days. Their killer had been planning this for years, collecting sacred objects, studying ancient rituals.

The question was: who would be next?

Finn ended his call with Detective Suarez and immediately checked his email. "Phone records just came through for both victims," he said. He started scrolling through the documents on his phone. "Give me a minute to compile the data..."

They were passing through a stretch of empty desert, red rocks giving way to sage-dotted plains. The night air was cool and dry.

"Here we go," Finn said after a few minutes. "Mitchell received a call at 9:47 AM on

the day she disappeared. Number traces to a burner phone, activated that morning, deactivated that night." He continued scrolling. "And Kane... similar pattern. The call came in at 2:15 PM the day he went missing. Different burner phone, same one-day usage."

"The killer called them directly," Sheila said. "Lured them out there."

"And they went willingly." Finn looked up from his phone. "Which means the killer knew exactly what to say to get their attention. Something about the caves, something that would appeal to their research interests."

Sheila's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "And now we've got the FBI crawling all over the cave system. Twenty-four-hour surveillance, restricted access."

"You think we've lost our chance to catch them?"

"The killer's not going to risk going back there. Not with that kind of presence." She stared at the empty road ahead. "If they have other bodies hidden in those caves, we'll probably find them. But the killer..."

"They'll just disappear," Finn finished. "Like those burner phones."

They drove in silence for a moment, both considering the implications. Their killer had been meticulous, patient. They'd studied their victims, understood their passions, used that knowledge to draw them out. And now, with their sacred burial ground compromised...

"What if they're not done?" Sheila said suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"These murders—they're ritual. Ceremonial. If we've blocked access to their chosen site..."

"You think they might choose a new location?"

Sheila nodded slowly. "We need to look at other cave systems in the region. Anywhere that might have similar spiritual significance."

"I'll make some calls," Finn said, already dialing. "See what the Forest Service knows about other cave networks in the area."

But Sheila couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time. Somewhere out there, their killer was watching, planning, perhaps already selecting their next victim.

And this time, they'd be looking for a new place to complete their ritual.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Coyote Run's neon sign cast a blue glow across the crowded parking lot as Rachel pulled in. Her headlights swept past dozens of vehicles before she found a spot near the entrance. Country music and laughter spilled out each time the door opened, and she could see the packed bar through the windows, patrons crowded around high-top tables and pressed against the long wooden counter.

She checked her phone: 10:12 PM. Two texts from Mark:

Made it there yet?

And five minutes later: Starting to worry. Call me when you arrive.

She quickly typed back: Just got here. Place is packed. Lots of witnesses. Will update you after I meet him.

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Don't forget to send the license plate, Mark texted back.

As soon as I know which vehicle he drives, she thought.

The bar's heavy door opened to a wall of sound—clinking glasses, overlapping conversations, and Luke Combs on the jukebox. The bartender, a young woman with vibrant purple hair, looked up from mixing a drink. "What can I get you?" she called over the noise.

"Just meeting someone," Rachel replied, scanning the crowded space. A group of men in flannel shirts played pool in the corner while locals occupied most of the barstools.

The door opened again behind her, letting in another blast of cool air. Rachel turned to find a man entering—silver-haired, dressed in khakis and a blue Oxford shirt beneath a well-worn field jacket. He matched the faculty photo she'd found online, though he seemed smaller in person, less imposing.

"Dr. Harper?" His smile was warm, academically distracted. "Nathan Angel. Thank you for meeting me on such short notice."

His handshake was firm but not aggressive. Everything about him seemed calculated to put her at ease—the slight stoop of his shoulders, the way he gestured toward a recently vacated booth in the corner. "Can I get you something? They make an excellent Old Fashioned."

Rachel found herself relaxing slightly. He reminded her of several senior faculty

members she knew—brilliant but slightly scattered, more comfortable with artifacts than people. "Just a club soda," she said. "I'm driving."

While Angel ordered their drinks, Rachel messaged Emma: Meeting started. Dr. Angel seems legitimate. Will update in an hour.

Angel returned with their drinks. "I apologize again for the late hour," he said, settling into the chair across from her. "But when I read your paper on adaptive traditions in isolated communities, I knew I had to reach out. Your framework for understanding how practices persist despite external pressures—it's exactly what I've been trying to articulate in my own research."

Rachel wrapped her hands around the cool glass. "You mentioned finding evidence of continuous cultural practices?"

"Yes." He leaned forward slightly, his eyes brightening with academic enthusiasm. "You see, most archaeologists focus on change—how cultures evolve, adapt, disappear. But what I've found suggests something remarkable: traditions that have remained essentially unchanged for thousands of years."

"In the cave systems you're studying?"

"Precisely." He pulled out a small notebook, flipping it open to reveal careful sketches of what appeared to be rock formations. "These caves—they're natural preservation chambers. The mineral content, the constant temperature, the isolation from outside influences... they're perfect for maintaining both physical artifacts and cultural continuity."

Rachel listened, absorbed. This was right up her alley.

"Your methodology for tracking generational changes in linguistic patterns is

fascinating," Angel said, gesturing with his drink. "Particularly your focus on how certain phrases persist even as the language around them evolves. Have you considered applying that same framework to ritual practices?"

Rachel leaned forward. "Actually, yes. I've been documenting how certain families maintain traditional ceremonies even after moving to urban areas. The core elements remain remarkably stable."

"Even when they've lost the original context?"

"Especially then." Rachel pulled out her notebook, flipping to a recent interview transcript. "I spoke with a woman in Cedar City whose family has performed the same blessing ritual before major life events for at least six generations. They've lost the meaning of some of the words, but the rhythm, the gestures—they're identical to recordings from the 1940s."

Angel's eyes lit up. "That's exactly what I'm seeing in the archaeological record. These repeated patterns, preserved not just in artifacts but in the way spaces were used." He sketched something in his notebook—a series of concentric circles. "Traditional knowledge encoded in the landscape itself."

"Through intentional marking?" Rachel asked as she studied his drawing.

"Sometimes. But more often through the repeated performance of certain actions. The way people moved through spaces, the positions they took during ceremonies." He added details to his sketch—small figures arranged around the circles. "The body remembers what the mind forgets."

Rachel felt her pulse quicken with academic excitement. This aligned perfectly with patterns she'd been tracking in modern communities—muscle memory preserving traditions even when their original meaning had been lost.

"I've been trying to document similar patterns in how modern families arrange their living spaces," she said. "There's this family in Moab—three generations living together. Without realizing it, they've organized their home almost exactly like their ancestors' hogans, down to the placement of the main entrance and where they eat meals."

"Despite having no direct knowledge of those traditional layouts?"

"Exactly." Rachel pulled out her phone, showing him a diagram she'd made. "See how the sleeping areas maintain the same directional alignment? Even though they're in a suburban ranch house?"

Angel studied the image, nodding slowly. "Remarkable preservation of spatial patterns." He glanced at her notebook. "May I?"

Rachel handed it over, watching as he flipped through her interview notes. His questions were precise, thoughtful—exactly the kind of academic discourse she'd been missing in her department, where her colleagues often dismissed the significance of these subtle cultural continuities.

Her phone buzzed: Mark again. How's it going? Is he a total creep?

She typed back quickly: No, everything's fine. Fascinating discussion about preservation of cultural practices. Will head to research site soon.

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"Everything alright?" Angel asked.

"Sorry about that." She put the phone away and smiled apologetically. "My mother would strangle me—she always had a thing about using the phone in front of other people."

Angel closed his notebook. "We should probably head out to the site if we're going to see it tonight. The lighting conditions are actually perfect right now for viewing some of the formations I've documented."

Rachel glanced at a nearby clock: 10:41 PM. The bar around them was showing no signs of slowing down. "How far is it?"

"Fifteen minutes by car, then a short walk." He gathered his things. "I know it seems unusual, visiting a site at night. But some things really can't wait."

Rachel hesitated. Angel had proved to be exactly what he'd claimed: a legitimate researcher with interesting findings relevant to her work. His faculty credentials had checked out. They'd had an engaging academic discussion. And yet...

"We could wait until morning," she suggested. "Better visibility."

"Of course." His smile was understanding. "Though I should mention—I'm heading to a conference in Denver tomorrow. I won't be back for two weeks. And what I've found... well, I think it could significantly impact your current research direction. But I completely understand if you'd prefer to wait."

Rachel thought about her wall of maps, the patterns she'd been trying to understand. If Angel had found physical evidence of cultural continuation...

"Where exactly are we going?" she asked.

"There's an old forest service road off Highway 40, just past mile marker 23. You can follow me there."

Rachel nodded. As she followed Angel out, she quickly sent Mark the details of the location, adding: Following Dr. Angel to research site. Will call when heading home.

As they walked to their cars, Angel talking enthusiastically about preservation techniques in limestone caves, Rachel felt a mixture of academic excitement and lingering caution. But she'd taken precautions—she'd shared her location and documented Angel's identity, and multiple people knew where she was.

Sometimes academic research required stepping outside normal comfort zones. And the possibility of finding evidence that supported her theories about cultural resilience...

She followed Angel's Subaru out of the parking lot, pausing to take a quick picture of the Subaru's license plate—UTX-247—and send it to her husband before following the other car onto the road. The bar's lights disappeared behind them as they headed into the darkness beyond the city's edge.

The headlights of Angel's Subaru cast long shadows through the pines as Rachel followed him onto the forest service road. Gravel crunched beneath her tires, and branches scraped against her car's sides. Her phone showed one bar of service—enough to maintain location sharing, but barely.

The road wound deeper into darkness. Rachel checked her rearview mirror

frequently, though she wasn't sure what she expected to see. The night pressed close around her car, and the trees seemed to swallow her headlights.

After about ten minutes, Angel's brake lights flashed. He pulled onto a wide shoulder where the road curved around a limestone outcropping. Rachel parked behind him, leaving enough space between their vehicles to maneuver if needed.

Angel was already out of his car, shrugging on a backpack. "The path starts just over here," he called, his voice carrying in the still night air. He clicked on a powerful flashlight, illuminating a narrow trail leading into the trees.

Rachel grabbed her own pack, making sure her phone was easily accessible in its side pocket. She'd brought her digital recorder too, though she wasn't sure why. Maybe to document whatever Angel wanted to show her, or maybe just because it was part of her standard research kit.

"The cave entrance is about a quarter mile ahead," Angel said as they started walking. His manner remained professionally enthusiastic, like a curator leading a private museum tour. "What's fascinating is how the indigenous populations used these natural formations. They understood the preservative properties of limestone caves centuries before Western science documented them."

Rachel followed, noting how easily Angel moved along the rough trail. For an older academic, he seemed remarkably comfortable in the wilderness. "How did you find this particular site?" she asked.

"Oral histories, mainly. Local elders mentioned a place where 'the old ones sleep.' Most researchers assumed it was metaphorical." He paused to shine his light on a rock formation. "But I've spent decades studying these patterns. Learning to read the landscape the way they did."

Something about his phrasing made Rachel pause. "I thought you were based at the University of Colorado?"

"Oh, I am now. But I've worked all over the Southwest." He continued walking, his voice drifting back. "You have to understand, Dr. Harper—some knowledge takes years to acquire. Generations, even. The people who lived here, they understood things we're only beginning to grasp."

Her phone buzzed. Mark again: Getting worried. How much longer?

Before she could reply, Angel spoke again. "The preservation in these caves is remarkable. The combination of mineral content and constant temperature... bodies can last thousands of years, virtually unchanged."

Rachel looked up sharply. "Bodies?"

"Yes." Angel had stopped walking. He stood several paces ahead, his flashlight beam pointing down the trail. "That's what I found, you see. A perfect specimen. Preserved in the ice and limestone. And when I extracted it..." He trailed off.

Rachel shivered. "Dr. Angel?"

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"It spoke to me." His voice had changed, becoming almost dreamy. "Told me about the others. The ones who wait in the deep places, in caves we've forgotten. They remember everything, you see. Every story, every ceremony, every secret."

Rachel took a step backward. Her hand found her phone, but before she could pull it out—

"They've been so patient," Angel continued, turning around. "Waiting for someone who understood. Who could help them return."

As her unease deepened, she glanced over her shoulder, measuring the distance back to her vehicle. She felt an insane urge to just start running, but she told herself that was foolish. This Dr. Angel might be a little unhinged, but surely there was no real danger—

She cried out, and something sharp pierced the base of her skull. Her last thought before darkness took her was of Mark, waiting at home with dinner in the oven.

Then nothing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"The storage unit records go back to 1992," Deputy Sarah Neville said, spreading manila folders across Sheila's desk. Outside the office windows, Coldwater slept under a moonless sky. "You were right—Matthew Vale's widow kept paying the fees through an automatic withdrawal. Unit's still active."

Sheila leaned forward, examining rental agreements and payment records illuminated by her desk lamp. Beside her, Finn flipped through the older documents.

"Here's something," he said. "Three months after Vale's death, someone accessed the unit. Used the secondary key code."

"Vale's records would have been valuable," Sheila said. "Lists of collectors, sale prices, locations of artifacts. The kind of information that could make someone rich—or dangerous."

"Or both," Finn added. He held up a visitor log. "Look at this pattern. Every few years, same access code. Always late at night. Last entry was six months ago."

Sheila's phone buzzed. She didn't recognize the number, but her instincts told her it might be important.

"Sheriff Stone," she said, clearing her throat.

"This is Mark Harper." A pause.

"Mr. Harper?" Sheila asked. "You still there?"

"Yes." His voice was shaky, tight with worry. "Listen, my wife Rachel—she went to meet someone about her research. She's a sociologist, you see." He paused, as if unsure how to go on. "Anyway, she's not answering her phone, and her location sharing stopped updating twenty minutes ago."

Sheila frowned. "Who was it she was supposed to meet?"

"A Dr. Nathan Angel from the University of Colorado. My wife's been researching how small communities preserve their traditions, especially in isolated areas." His

voice steadied slightly as he focused on the details. "This Angel fellow—he emailed her tonight, said he'd found evidence of some ancient cultural practices in local cave systems. Said it was exactly what she'd been studying."

Sheila gestured for Finn to pull up the University of Colorado website. "Did your wife verify his credentials?"

"She did. Found his faculty profile, publication history, everything. The email even came through the university system."

Finn was already typing. "Found him," he said, turning his monitor. "Department of Anthropology. Impressive CV."

Sheila studied the distinguished-looking man on the screen. "Run him through our system."

Finn's fingers moved across the keyboard. His expression changed. "That's weird. No DMV record, no property records, no tax records—nothing. And look at this." He pulled up the faculty profile again. "Publications are all listed, but when I search for the actual papers..." He shook his head. "They don't exist."

"Someone created a digital facade," Sheila said. "Good enough to fool an initial check, but it doesn't go deep." She turned back to the phone. "Did she tell you anything specific about his research?"

"Just that he was an archaeologist studying cave systems. She was excited—said it could be important data for her project." Mark took a shaky breath. "She texted when she got to Coyote Run, said she'd update me after meeting him. Then another text saying she was following him to some research site. Forest service road off Highway 40, past mile marker 23."

Sheila's hand tightened on the phone. The pattern was too familiar—an academic lured out by the promise of significant research findings, a location near cave systems, a supposed expert who understood their work.

"Her research," Sheila pressed, "was it about how traditions survive over time?"

"Yes. She's been interviewing people in small towns across Utah, documenting how they maintain their cultural practices despite all the changes happening. She's particularly interested in religious and ceremonial traditions." He paused. "Sheriff, please tell me I'm overreacting here."

Sheila was already grabbing her keys. "Mr. Harper, stay home in case she contacts you. We're heading out now. Did she tell anyone else about this meeting?"

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"Her research assistant, Emma. Said she'd call the police if she didn't hear from Rachel by midnight."

"Text me Emma's number. And Mr. Harper? You did the right thing calling."

She ended the call and turned to Finn, who was shaking his head. "He's a slippery one, this guy we're after."

"Mitchell, Kane, and now Rachel Harper." Sheila checked her weapon. "All academics studying how traditions persist in isolated communities. All drawn to cave systems by someone who'd studied their research."

"The question is," Finn said, "where is he planning to kill her? What's out on that service road?"

"The service road isn't on any of our maps," Finn said, studying his phone as they sped down Highway 40. The headlights cut through darkness thick with pine shadows. "But Rachel's location sharing last pinged here." He pointed to a spot on the screen. "Just past mile marker 23."

Sheila pressed the accelerator harder. They'd called for backup, but the nearest units were at least thirty minutes out. Every minute that passed was another minute Rachel could be...

Her jaw tightened. No. Not this time.

The mile markers flashed by: 21... 22...

"There," Finn said suddenly. "Gravel turnoff."

Sheila slowed just enough to make the turn safely. The truck's suspension protested as they bounced down the rough forest service road. Their headlights caught glimpses of dense underbrush and limestone outcroppings.

"Stop," Finn called out. "Tracks."

Fresh tire marks cut through gravel still damp from yesterday's rain. They led around a bend where the road widened into a small turnaround area. Two vehicles sat empty: Rachel's sedan and a green Subaru.

Sheila killed the engine but left the headlights on. They approached Rachel's vehicle carefully, weapons drawn.

Finn peered through the windows with his flashlight. "Nothing obvious inside. Looks clean."

Sheila radioed in the plate number to dispatch. She was just finishing up when she heard Finn say her name.

"Sheila." His voice was tight. He stood near a metal sign half-hidden by brush, shining his flashlight on faded text: "CAUTION—CAVE SYSTEM AHEAD. NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY."

"How far?" Sheila asked, ignoring the sinking feeling in her chest.

"Quarter mile, maybe less." He studied the ground. "Two sets of footprints, heading that way."

Sheila radioed their location to dispatch, then checked her gear. Backup was still too far out, but Rachel might still be alive. The killer had a ritual to complete—the ceremonial robes, the precise positioning. Those things took time.

Unless he'd already...

A branch snapped in the darkness beyond their lights. Both of them froze, listening. The night seemed to hold its breath.

"We go in quiet," Sheila said softly. "He might still be down there with her."

They followed the footprints, moving as silently as possible along a narrow trail. Their lights caught glimpses of worked stone—old trail markers, steps carved into rock. Someone had improved this path, long ago.

The cave entrance was smaller than that of the ice caves, but the air flowing from it carried the same mineral chill. Sheila paused at the threshold, listening. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness. And something else—a sound like fabric rustling?

They descended carefully, testing each step. The passage twisted, then opened into a larger chamber. Limestone formations glittered in their light beams. The air grew colder.

"There," Finn whispered, pointing.

A tunnel branched off to their right, sloping downward. Fresh scuff marks scored the dusty floor.

They followed the marks deeper into the earth. The cold intensified, and their breath began to fog. Another chamber opened before them, this one smaller, more intimate.

Like a chapel carved by water and time.

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Sheila's light found her first—Rachel Harper, arranged with terrible care against the far wall. She wore ceremonial robes, their beadwork catching the light like fallen stars. Her hands were folded in her lap, her head tilted slightly as if in contemplation.

But her skin was still warm.

"Finn," Sheila breathed. "She hasn't been dead more than an hour."

A pebble clattered somewhere in the darkness behind them.

Someone else was still in the cave.

Sheila and Finn swept their lights methodically through the chamber, checking every alcove, every shadow. The killer had to be here somewhere—someone had moved through these passages just minutes ago. But the cave offered only silence broken by the steady drip of water.

"We need backup," Sheila said quietly. "And Jin needs to see her before she gets too cold."

She checked her phone—no service this deep. "Let's head back toward the entrance, call it in."

They moved carefully through the tunnels. The temperature seemed to be dropping even further, as if the cave itself was trying to preserve its latest victim.

They were halfway to the entrance when they saw it—a shadow moving ahead of

them, a figure racing through the beam of their lights.

"Police! Stop!" Sheila shouted, but the figure was already disappearing around a bend.

They gave chase, their footsteps echoing off stone walls. The tunnel narrowed and they were forced to run single file. Finn's light caught glimpses of their quarry—a man in dark clothing, moving fast. He reached the cave entrance several seconds ahead of them, disappearing into the night.

They emerged from the cave in time to see him sprinting toward the parked Subaru. The car's lights flashed as the killer unlocked it. By the time Sheila and Finn reached their truck, the Subaru was already moving, gravel spraying as it accelerated down the service road.

Sheila threw the truck into gear and grabbed her radio. "Dispatch, this is Stone. 10-80 in progress, heading east on Forest Service Road 177 toward Highway 40. Suspect is driving a green Subaru, Utah plate Victor-Charlie-Seven-Four-Nine-Eight. The suspect is wanted for homicide. All units respond."

The truck's tires found purchase on the gravel as they gave chase, their headlights illuminating the cloud of dust kicked up by the car ahead. The killer had maybe fifteen seconds on them—close enough to follow, far enough to make stopping him difficult.

"Highway 40 is three minutes ahead," Finn said, checking the map on his phone. "Highway Patrol's setting up spike strips at the intersection."

Sheila pressed the accelerator harder, but the rough road made pursuit dangerous at higher speeds. The killer seemed to have no such concerns—the Subaru bounced and slid around curves with reckless speed.

They were gaining slowly when the killer's brake lights suddenly flashed. He yanked the car hard to the right, onto what looked like an old logging track.

"Don't lose him!" Finn said. Sheila was already turning to follow, their truck's suspension protesting the sharp movement.

The logging track was even rougher than the service road. Tree branches scraped against their windows as they pursued the killer deeper into the forest, away from their backup, away from the highway where Highway Patrol waited.

The green Subaru's taillights glowed like demon eyes in the darkness ahead, weaving through the narrow logging track. Sheila kept pace, slowly closing the distance. The truck's powerful engine gave them an advantage on the rough terrain.

"He's running out of road," Finn said, gripping the dashboard as they bounced over another rut. Their headlights illuminated a wall of pines ahead where the track appeared to end.

But then the Subaru's brake lights flashed. The vehicle fishtailed violently, kicking up gravel and pine needles. For a moment, Sheila thought he'd lost control.

"Sheila!" Finn's warning came just as she realized what was happening.

The Subaru had spun completely around and was now accelerating straight toward them, its headlights blinding. The killer had turned this into a deadly game of chicken.

Through the glare, Sheila caught a glimpse of movement—the driver's door opening. A dark figure leaped from the vehicle, rolling into the underbrush as the Subaru continued its trajectory, now a three-thousand-pound missile hurtling toward them with no one at the wheel.

Time seemed to slow. Sheila's training took over. She cranked the wheel hard to the right, but the truck's tires lost traction on the loose gravel. They slid sideways, the world tilting as the right wheels left the ground.

"Hold on!" she shouted.

The truck crashed through the understory, small trees snapping under its weight. Behind them, the Subaru roared past, metal screaming as it slammed into the larger pines they'd narrowly avoided.

They came to rest at an angle, the truck's front end buried in brush. Steam hissed from somewhere under the hood. The impact had been violent enough to deploy the airbags, which now deflated slowly in the beam of their one remaining headlight.

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"Finn?" Sheila's voice was hoarse. "You okay?"

"Yeah." He was already unclipping his seatbelt. "Just bruised. You?"

She did a quick self-assessment. Everything hurt, but nothing seemed broken. "I'm good. We need to—"

An explosion behind them cut her off—the Subaru's gas tank igniting. Orange light filled the forest as flames climbed into the canopy.

They scrambled out of the truck, weapons drawn. But the killer had too much of a head start. In the chaos of the crash and fire, he could have gone in any direction.

Sirens wailed in the distance—their backup finally arriving. Sheila grabbed her radio, trying her best to recall the brief glimpse she'd caught of the man.

"Dispatch, suspect is on foot. Adult male, medium build, brown hair. Armed and extremely dangerous. Last seen entering woods north of Forest Service Road 177, approximately two miles east of the cave entrance. We need K-9 units and air support."

She turned to Finn, who was examining the burning Subaru from a safe distance. "Anything?"

"Look at this." He pointed his light at fresh scratches on the rear bumper. "Paint transfer. Dark blue. He must have switched vehicles recently."

The first Highway Patrol units arrived, lights painting the trees in red and blue. Sheila quickly organized search teams—the killer couldn't have gotten far on foot, not in this terrain. But as she directed officers into the woods, she couldn't shake the feeling that he was still watching.

The flames from the Subaru cast writhing shadows through the trees as more units arrived. Soon the woods would be crawling with officers and K-9 teams. But Sheila's gut told her that finding him wouldn't be easy.

"Sheriff?" A young deputy approached. "We found fresh tracks heading north. Looks like he's making for the ridgeline."

Sheila nodded. "Set up a perimeter. I want every trail, every access road covered. And get me satellite images of this area—I need to know what's up on that ridge."

The killer might have escaped for now. But as the saying went, he wasn't out of the woods yet.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

His lungs burned as he crashed through the underbrush, branches whipping against his face. Blood trickled from where he'd hit the ground after leaping from the Subaru, but the pain barely registered. Decades of careful planning, of patient preparation, all unraveling because he'd been careless with Harper.

He should have taken her phone before they left the bar. Should have realized she was texting someone details that would allow the police to find them quickly. Amateur mistakes—the kind he hadn't made with Mitchell or Kane. But he'd been rushed, desperate to continue his work after the FBI had contaminated his sacred space in the ice caves.

The sound of sirens echoed through the forest behind him. They'd be organizing search teams now, setting up a perimeter. He needed to think, to plan, but his mind kept returning to that first cave, to the moment that had changed everything.

He'd found the frozen one three years ago, perfectly preserved in a chamber deep beneath the mountains. At first, he'd thought it was just another Ice Age hunter, like others discovered in glaciers and permafrost. But something about the clothing, the artifacts with the body—they didn't match any known civilization.

The decision to carefully thaw the remains had been scientific, methodical. He'd documented everything, following proper archaeological protocols. But then the dreams had started. The frozen one speaking to him, showing him glimpses of a society that had existed long before recorded history. A people who had understood things modern humans had forgotten.

"They preserved their wisest ones," the frozen one had told him. "Not just their bodies, but their knowledge, their consciousness. The cold and the minerals in the caves created perfect vessels, waiting to be awakened when they were needed."

He'd thought he was losing his mind at first. But then he'd found the references in old tribal stories—tales of caves where "the old ones sleep," of ancient wisdom preserved in ice and stone. The same stories Tracy Mitchell had been documenting, though she hadn't understood their true significance.

Thomas Kane had come closest to understanding. He'd recognized the patterns in the ceremonial robes, seen how they matched the clothing on the frozen one. But Kane had wanted to publish, to expose everything. He couldn't see that some knowledge needed to be protected, preserved until humanity was ready.

A branch snapped underfoot as he scrambled up a steep incline. The ceremonial robes were crucial—they weren't just clothing, but conductors, prepared with specific

minerals that helped preserve consciousness. He'd spent years acquiring the pieces from the Window Rock collection, learning their significance. Matthew Vale's records had led him to the private collectors who'd bought them, and his federal credentials had helped him recover them, piece by piece.

Mitchell had nearly ruined everything when she'd started connecting the sites to modern tribal lands. She'd been going to the tribal council, planning to have the caves declared protected sites. That would have brought oversight, regulations, endless archaeological surveys.

And now Harper... her work on cultural preservation had made her perfect. She would have understood, eventually. Would have seen why certain knowledge needed to be preserved this way.

The distant baying of dogs interrupted his thoughts. They were deploying K-9 units faster than he'd expected. He paused, listening. The dogs were still far behind him, but getting closer. He needed to reach the ridgeline—and fast.

Humanity was moving too fast, changing too quickly. Critical knowledge was being lost with each generation. But if he could preserve the right minds, create vessels of consciousness like the frozen one... future civilizations would have guides, teachers who understood the old ways.

The dogs' barking grew louder. They had his scent now.

He reached the top of the incline and stopped, his breath catching. Below him, barely visible in the darkness, was the railroad line he'd noted during his preparation. The old freight line that connected mining operations in the mountains.

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And right on schedule, he heard the distant rumble of an approaching train.

Sometimes, the old ways were still the best ways to disappear.

The freight train's headlight appeared around a bend, its beam cutting through lingering darkness. He checked his watch—12:47 AM. The mining trains always ran on schedule, carrying ore from the mountain operations down to the processing plants in the valley.

The dogs sounded closer now. He could hear voices, too—search teams coordinating their movements through the woods. They'd expect him to head deeper into the wilderness, but he hadn't survived this long by being predictable.

He moved carefully down the steep embankment toward the tracks, his boots finding purchase on loose shale. The train was moving slowly, laboring up the grade. Its wheels screamed against the rails as it took the curve, cars swaying with the weight of their cargo.

The dogs' barking changed pitch—they'd picked up his fresh trail. But it would take them precious minutes to navigate the dense underbrush he'd just pushed through. By then...

The locomotive passed his position, followed by a series of hopper cars filled with ore. He counted them, remembering the train's usual configuration. Near the middle would be...

There. A string of empty box cars, their doors partially open for ventilation. The

train's speed here couldn't be more than fifteen miles per hour. Child's play.

A shout went up behind him—someone had spotted his movement through the trees. He didn't look back. Instead, he broke into a run parallel to the tracks, matching the train's speed. His legs burned with exhaustion, but adrenaline drove him forward.

Flashlight beams cut through the trees above him. A voice on a megaphone: "Police! Stop where you are!"

He reached for the ladder on the nearest box car, his fingers finding cold metal. He pulled himself up just as gunshots cracked through the air. But he was already rolling inside the car, concealed by shadows and the growing distance.

The train picked up speed as it crested the ridge. Through the open door, he watched flashlights and emergency vehicles become distant points of light, then vanish altogether. The dogs' barking faded beneath the rhythm of wheels on rails.

He sat back against the car's metal wall, finally allowing himself to breathe. His clothes were torn, his body battered from the escape through the woods. But his pack was intact, and with it, the last set of ceremonial robes.

The frozen one's words echoed in his mind: "There will be others who understand. Who see the importance of preserving wisdom."

He would find them. And next time, he would be more careful.

The train rolled on through the darkness, carrying him toward distant mountains. Toward new caves, new opportunities to continue his work. The police would contact the engineer, get the train to stop, but by then he would be long gone, lost to the wilderness. He would go back to planning and preparing.

After all, there were so many brilliant minds out there waiting to be preserved.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sheila stared at the freight train's long line of cars, now stopped on a siding near the town of Helper. Red and blue lights from a dozen law enforcement vehicles painted the steel containers in alternating colors. The train hadn't been easy to stop—it had taken multiple calls up the chain of command, finally reaching a Union Pacific executive who had the authority to halt a cargo run.

But those precious minutes of bureaucracy might have cost them everything.

"How long between when we lost him and when the train stopped?" she asked Finn, who was coordinating with railway police.

"Forty-three minutes," he said. "Train was doing about thirty-five through the mountains. That's..." He did the quick math. "About twenty-five miles of track he could have jumped from."

Twenty-five miles of remote mountain terrain, filled with ridges, valleys, and dense forest. The killer could be anywhere by now.

Teams of officers moved systematically through the train cars, checking every possible hiding space. Their flashlight beams swept across steel walls and cargo containers, but Sheila already knew they wouldn't find him. He was too smart to have stayed on the train.

Her radio crackled. "Sheriff? We found something in one of the box cars."

She and Finn made their way to the car in question, where a deputy was photographing scuff marks on the floor.

"Fresh marks," the deputy said. "And this." He held up a scrap of dark fabric, snagged on a rough edge of the door frame.

Sheila examined the tear pattern. "He entered here. The question is, where did he leave?"

"We've got railway police checking all the access points along the route," Finn said. "Places where the track runs close to roads or trails."

But Sheila knew it was too late. The killer wouldn't exit near any known access point—he'd know they were expecting that.

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Finn's phone rang as they watched railway police searching along the tracks. He stepped away from the noise of the search teams, checking the caller ID.

"Maria? Tell me you found something." He put the phone on speaker.

"Your storage unit tip paid off," Detective Suarez said. "I'm standing in it right now. Finn, this place is like a research library. Vale wasn't just documenting sales—he was studying these artifacts, especially anything related to preservation ceremonies."

"What kind of preservation?"

"The ceremonial robes from Window Rock? They weren't just valuable pieces. They were treated with specific mineral compounds. Vale documented everything—the compositions, the ceremonial arrangements, even which cave formations were considered most effective for preservation."

Finn caught Sheila's eye and motioned her over.

"The robes that were stolen," Suarez continued, "Vale tracked them through multiple private collectors. But here's what's interesting—Mitchell contacted Vale's widow a few months ago, asking about caves where ceremonial items had been found. She was investigating unauthorized access to sacred sites."

"Did she find who was behind it?" Sheila asked.

"If she did, it's not here. But someone's been through these files recently. There are gaps in Vale's cataloging system, missing documents. Very precisely

removed—whoever did it knew exactly what they were looking for."

Headlights swept across them as a line of black SUVs pulled into the rail yard. Agent Walsh stepped out of the lead vehicle.

"Maria," Finn said quickly, "secure everything. Photograph all documents, catalog any gaps in the records."

"Already on it. I've got two of my best evidence techs here."

Finn ended the call as Walsh approached. The FBI agent's expression was tight, controlled.

"Agent Walsh," Sheila said. "Long drive from Salt Lake."

"We need to talk." Walsh's eyes flicked to the phone in Finn's hand. "About Vale's records."

Sheila crossed her arms. "What do you want?"

"Information. What exactly do you know?"

"Why don't you tell me what's really going on with the FBI's interest in these caves? Why you've been watching them since Kane disappeared?"

They studied each other in the predawn darkness. Finally, Walsh sighed. "Your station. One hour."

Sheila's office felt too small, with Finn leaning against the frame of the door and

Walsh sitting across from her desk. Two cups of gas station coffee sat cooling between her and Walsh. The sun was just starting to peek through the blinds.

"What I'm about to tell you," Walsh said, opening a manila folder, "is classified. But you've earned the right to know." She slid a photograph across the desk—an old excavation site, a body preserved in ice. "This was found in 1989, in a cave system in Montana. Perfectly preserved, wearing ceremonial robes similar to the ones on your victims."

"You've seen this before," Finn said. It wasn't a question.

"We've been tracking cases like this since 1989," Walsh explained. "Three other incidents where disturbed individuals found preserved bodies in caves and developed fixations about preservation. Each killer used ceremonial artifacts, chose academic victims. But we've never caught one alive—they've always killed themselves or died during capture attempts. That's why we're so interested in this case."

"Our killer found one of these bodies."

"Yes. And became obsessed with the preservation process. It seems he believes he's creating a... library of human consciousness. Freezing brilliant minds at their peak." Walsh looked tired. "We've been trying to keep this quiet. If word got out about these preservation sites, every amateur archaeologist and treasure hunter would be tearing apart sacred caves."

"A library of human consciousness?" Sheila leaned forward, brow furrowed. "What exactly do you mean by that? How do you know what he believes?"

"From a journal we recovered at a previous scene," Walsh explained. "That particular killer was convinced that these caves could somehow preserve not just bodies, but knowledge, consciousness itself. I'm guessing the person you're after has a similar

motive."

"You could have told me this earlier."

"We needed to verify the connection first. The mineral traces Dr. Jin found on the robes—they match samples from other sites. Your killer isn't just copying an ancient ritual. He's trying to perfect it."

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Sheila absorbed this. Finally, pieces were falling into place—the killer's obsession with academics, the precise positioning, the careful selection of caves.

"Vale's records," Sheila said. "What do they tell us?"

"He documented the private collectors who bought pieces of the Window Rock collection. One of them was particularly interested in preservation ceremonies—spent years studying the mineral properties of ceremonial textiles." Walsh pulled out another document. "A Dr. James Whitman. Anthropology professor at Berkeley until 2021. Disappeared after leading an expedition to study cave formations in Utah."

"He found a preserved body," Sheila said, understanding dawning on her. "And it changed him."

"We think so. His research notes show an increasing obsession with preservation techniques. He believed these ancient cultures had discovered a way to maintain consciousness through specific combinations of minerals, cold, and ceremonial practices."

"Whitman is our killer."

Walsh nodded. "His knowledge of cave systems, his academic background, his access to ceremonial artifacts—it all fits. We've been tracking his movements, but he's careful. Changes vehicles, uses elaborate disguises."

"Until now," Sheila said. "He's getting sloppy. Desperate."

"Because we've contaminated his sacred spaces. The FBI's presence in the ice caves forced him to find new locations. Rush his preparations."

Sheila thought of Rachel Harper, how quickly the killer had moved to take her. "So what's the plan?"

"We've identified other academics who match his victim profile. People studying cultural preservation, indigenous ceremonies. We're monitoring them, but he's already proved he can get to protected targets."

"He'll need a new location," Sheila said. "Somewhere cold, isolated, with the right mineral content."

Walsh pulled out a map. "We've identified three possible cave systems that match his requirements. All within a day's drive of where he abandoned the train."

"That sounds promising," Finn said.

Walsh spread her hands across the map, her expression shadowed in the harsh office lighting. "Unfortunately, these caves span hundreds of miles of wilderness. Some haven't been properly surveyed since the 1950s. The mineral content matches what Whitman needs, but actually finding him..." She shook her head. "It would be like looking for a ghost in a graveyard."

"There must be something more we can do," Sheila pressed. "Some way to track him, predict where he'll go next."

"Whitman's spent years studying these systems." Walsh gathered her papers with precise movements. "For now, all we can do is protect potential targets and wait for him to make a mistake."

"Like he did with Rachel Harper?" Sheila's voice carried an edge that made Walsh pause. "How many more bodies are we willing to risk while we wait?"

"I understand your frustration, Sheriff. But Whitman's too smart to leave us an easy trail. He's been planning this for years—the ceremonial robes, the preservation techniques, the cave locations. Everything carefully chosen." Walsh stood, straightening her jacket. "We'll keep you updated on any developments."

After Walsh left, silence settled over the office like a heavy blanket. Sheila stayed at her desk, staring at crime scene photos spread across its surface—Mitchell's body arranged with ceremonial precision, Kane preserved in his icy chamber, Rachel Harper's life cut tragically short.

"What are you thinking?" Finn asked from where he leaned against the filing cabinet.

"I'm thinking about patterns," Sheila said slowly. "How Whitman chooses his victims. The way he studies them first, learns their research, knows exactly what to say to draw them out."

"Academic loners," Finn said. "People whose work isolates them. Makes them vulnerable."

"And driven by curiosity." Sheila picked up Mitchell's preliminary autopsy report. "He offers them something they can't resist—evidence that supports their theories, validates their research."

Sheila's office felt like a confessional in the early morning light, crime scene photos spread across her desk like tarot cards telling a dark future. She rubbed her tired eyes, the weight of three murders pressing down on her shoulders.

"Let's lay it out," she said to Finn. "All of it. From the beginning."

Finn settled into the chair across from her, his face etched with exhaustion. "Okay. We know Whitman found a preserved body in a cave system years ago. Someone ancient, frozen in ceremonial robes. The discovery changed him."

"It became an obsession," Sheila continued, sorting through the photos. "He believed these caves weren't just burial sites—they were preservation chambers. Places where ancient cultures maintained not just bodies, but consciousness itself."

"The robes were key," Finn added. "Not just ceremonial clothing, but specially prepared garments. Treated with specific minerals that supposedly helped with the preservation process."

He picked up one of Dr. Jin's reports. "That's why he spent years tracking down pieces from the Window Rock collection. These weren't just valuable artifacts—they were tools for his mission."

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Sheila nodded, morning sunlight catching the silver in her hair. "He saw himself as a preservationist. Choosing brilliant minds—researchers who studied how cultures maintain their traditions through time. Kane, Mitchell, Harper—they all focused on cultural preservation, on understanding how ancient knowledge survives."

"But he didn't just kill them." Finn's voice was quiet. "He thought he was... saving them. Preserving their consciousness at its peak, using the same methods he believed ancient cultures had perfected."

"The mineral content in the caves, the precise temperature, the ceremonial arrangements—everything had to be perfect." Sheila spread out the victims' academic papers. "He studied them first. Learned their work, understood their passions. Then offered them exactly the kind of discovery they couldn't resist."

"Evidence that would validate their research," Finn said. "Proof that ancient traditions could survive unchanged, passed down through generations."

The office fell silent as they considered the twisted logic of it all. Outside, Coldwater stirred to life, unaware of the darkness that had taken root in their mountain caves.

"The FBI's been watching these preservation sites for decades," Sheila continued. "Other bodies found, other killers obsessed with the same ritual. But Whitman's different. More methodical, more dedicated to the authenticity of the process."

"Until we forced him to rush," Finn added. "Contaminated his sacred space in the ice caves. Made him desperate enough to grab Rachel Harper without proper preparation."

Sheila stood, moving to her evidence board. "He believes he's creating some kind of... library of consciousness. Preserving minds that understand the importance of cultural memory. Each victim is carefully chosen for their insight into how traditions endure."

"And arranged in ceremonial robes, positioned according to ancient burial practices." Finn joined her at the board. "Complete with the mineral treatments he thinks will maintain their consciousness through time."

"A killer who sees himself as a curator," Sheila said softly. "Selecting brilliant minds to guide future generations. Using methods he learned from a frozen body in a cave—methods he's spent years trying to perfect."

The sun climbed higher, painting the mountains beyond her window in shades of promise and threat. Somewhere in those peaks, James Whitman was planning his next preservation, choosing another mind to add to his frozen collection.

"That's why the FBI can't stop him," Sheila said. "They're treating him like a standard serial killer, but he doesn't think like one. He sees himself as a guardian of ancient wisdom, ensuring certain kinds of knowledge survive."

"By turning researchers into ceremonial sacrifices," Finn added grimly. "Preserved in caves like the ones they spent their lives studying."

Sunlight spilled across Sheila's desk like liquid gold, catching dust motes that danced in the air between her and Finn. The silence felt heavy, charged with the weight of possibilities just out of reach.

"We could recheck Vale's connections," Finn suggested, his voice carrying the weariness of too many dead ends. "Or track Whitman's movements before he went off the grid. Maybe there's something we missed."

But Sheila barely heard him. Her mind kept circling back to the victims, to the terrible precision with which Whitman had arranged their bodies. The ceremonial robes, the careful positioning—everything a twisted reflection of ancient wisdom he'd learned from a frozen corpse in a cave.

"The storage unit records," Finn continued. "Or Keeling's old contacts. Someone must have helped Whitman acquire those artifacts..."

"It's not enough," Sheila said quietly. The mountain peaks beyond her window seemed to mock her with their ancient silence, their countless hidden caves. "He's always one step ahead, Finn. While we chase paper trails, he's already choosing his next victim."

She stood, needing to move, to escape the confines of her office with its crime scene photos and unanswered questions. The weight of three deaths pressed down on her shoulders—Kane, Mitchell, Harper. Each one carefully selected, studied, preserved in chambers of ice and stone.

"I need some air," she said. "Need to clear my head."

Finn watched her with understanding in his tired eyes. "Want company?"

She shook her head. "No. I think I need to be by myself."

The words hung in the air between them. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" Finn asked quietly. "Given what happened with your truck?"

He was referring to the man who had hijacked her truck just a few days ago, but not before threatening both her father's life and Star's if she didn't stop investigating the same departmental corruption her mother had started looking into—and been killed over.

"I'll be careful," she said. "I'll check my vehicle, make sure nobody's following me. They won't sneak up on me again."

Finn looked clearly uneasy about this, but he didn't argue.

"You be careful, too," Sheila said. "Until this whole situation's settled, we all need to stay on our toes."

Finn nodded. "Roger that."

Sheila gathered her keys and went out, hoping that a little fresh air would clear her head.

Hoping the case wasn't as bleak as it felt at the moment.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sheila drove through Coldwater's quiet streets, squinting against the sunlight. She had no destination in mind, just the need to move, to escape the suffocating weight of case files and crime scene photos. The truck seemed to have a mind of its own, carrying her past familiar landmarks—the high school where she'd trained after classes, her father's gym where she'd learned to fight, the diner where she and Natalie used to share pie and secrets.

The cemetery appeared ahead, its wrought iron gates catching the light like ancient sentinels. She hadn't planned to come here, but something in her had known all along where she was headed. The truck's tires crunched on gravel as she turned into the entrance, following the winding path up the gentle slope where generations of Coldwater's dead kept their silent vigil.

Here, among the weathered headstones and whispering pines, both her sister and mother rested. Their graves lay side by side—Natalie's marker still bright and new, Henrietta's worn by a decade of mountain winters. Sheila hadn't visited in weeks, and she felt a pang of guilt at the realization, even though she knew neither her mother nor her sister would've held it against her.

She parked the truck and sat for a moment, watching early morning shadows stretch across the carefully tended grass. Up here, the mountains filled the horizon. The day was beginning to warm, but Sheila felt a deeper chill—the kind that came from knowing a killer walked free while she chased leads that led nowhere. The kind that whispered of more victims to come, more bodies arranged with ceremonial precision in chambers of ice and stone.

She reached for her door handle, drawn to the quiet wisdom that sometimes found her here, among the memories of those she'd lost.

The grass was still damp with morning dew as Sheila made her way up the gentle slope. Granite markers caught the early light, casting long shadows across carefully tended plots where Coldwater's dead kept their endless vigil. The mountains loomed behind her, ancient and indifferent, hiding their caves like dark secrets.

She stopped between the two graves, her mother's weathered stone on her left, Natalie's newer marker on her right. Someone—her father, probably—had left fresh flowers on both. The bright petals seemed almost garish against the somber granite.

"Hey, sis," she said softly. "Mom." The words felt strange in her mouth, like pebbles. "Sorry, it's been a while."

The morning breeze stirred her hair, carrying the scent of pine and mountain sage. Below, Coldwater was coming fully awake, but up here the silence held steady, broken only by the occasional call of a morning bird.

"I could use some advice," she continued. "About keeping people safe." Her throat tightened. "I've got this kid now—Star. She's fourteen, tough as nails on the outside, but..." She thought of Star's vulnerability, hidden beneath layers of defensive armor. "She trusts me to protect her. And Dad's involved now, too, helping me dig into Mom's case. Then there's Finn..."

She trailed off, remembering the man who'd been in her truck, warning her to back off or risk those she loved. The threat had been clear—keep pushing, and someone would pay the price.

"How did you do it, Mom? Balance the truth against the cost?" Her mother had died for investigating corruption, leaving behind a family that would never fully heal.

"And Natalie... you always tried to protect everyone. You looked after me so much after Mom died. And then I was the very reason you got shot, the very reason you ended up in that wheelchair and..."

An image flashed in her mind: Natalie's lifeless body lying on the floor of her cabin, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Sheila pushed it away.

"I've got two cases now," she said, sinking to sit cross-legged between the graves. "A killer who turns people into frozen exhibits, and a department rot that goes back decades. And in both cases, other people's lives are in my hands." Her voice cracked slightly. "If something happened to Star, or Dad, or Finn... because of choices I made..."

The thought coiled in her chest like barbed wire. She could handle her own risks—had accepted them when she took the badge. But the people she loved hadn't signed up for this. They were vulnerable because of her, because she couldn't let sleeping dogs lie.

"I don't know how to protect them all," she whispered. "How to solve these cases without..." She gestured helplessly at her mother's grave. "Without history repeating itself."

The mountain breeze picked up, rustling through late autumn leaves. No answers came—they never did. But something about being here, between her sister and mother, helped settle her thoughts. Both of them had faced impossible choices. Both had paid terrible prices for their courage.

But they had never backed down. Never chosen comfortable lies over dangerous truths.

A raven landed on Natalie's headstone, its black feathers catching the light like

polished obsidian. Sheila watched it tilt its head, studying her with one bright eye as if measuring the weight of her troubles. The mountain wind carried whispers of pine and sage, and somewhere in the distance, a church bell marked the hour.

Her gaze drifted to her mother's grave, to the dates etched in weathered granite. Henrietta Stone had died protecting truth, had sacrificed everything to expose corruption. And now Sheila sat between these monuments to courage, paralyzed by fear of what might happen to those she loved.

The raven shifted, adjusting its grip on the stone. Something about its patient watchfulness reminded her of Whitman—how he studied his victims, learning their passions, their weaknesses. He chose them carefully, drawn to their understanding of preservation, of how knowledge endured through time.

"He waits," she said softly, the words carried away by the mountain breeze. "Studies them. Learns exactly what kind of discovery would make them take risks."

The thought settled like frost on granite. Whitman didn't just kill his victims—he seduced them with the promise of academic validation. Kane, Mitchell, Harper—each one drawn out by the possibility of finding evidence that would prove their theories correct.

"He's patient," she continued, the pieces clicking into place. "Methodical. But what if..."

The raven cocked its head, and Sheila felt a familiar tightness in her chest—the same feeling she'd had before major kickboxing fights, when everything narrowed to a single point of clarity.

"What if we didn't wait for him to choose?" The words tasted dangerous, like copper and adrenaline. "What if we gave him the perfect target? Someone whose research

aligned exactly with his mission?"

She stood slowly, brushing grass from her jeans. The mountains loomed beyond the cemetery, their caves holding secrets in chambers of ice and stone. But for the first time since Rachel Harper's death, Sheila felt something other than helpless rage.

"It would have to be someone trained," she told the graves. "Someone who understood the risks, who could handle themselves if things went wrong." Her hand brushed her weapon unconsciously. "Not an innocent academic he could easily overpower."

The raven launched itself into the morning sky, a dark shadow against the rising sun. Sheila watched it disappear toward the mountains, thinking of how Whitman had studied his victims, how he'd learned their work well enough to offer exactly the right bait.

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"I'd be endangering someone," she admitted to the silent stones. "Asking them to walk into danger." Her throat tightened. "But if we don't stop him..."

She let the thought hang unfinished. More bodies would follow. The cycle would continue until someone forced Whitman's hand, made him reveal himself.

"Sometimes," she said softly to her mother's grave, "the only way to protect people is to take the fight to the enemy." She turned to Natalie's marker. "And sometimes the hardest part is asking others to share that risk."

The mountain wind picked up, carrying the scent of coming winter. Somewhere in those peaks, Whitman was already planning his next preservation. But this time, Sheila intended to choose his target for him.

She touched both headstones gently before walking back to her truck, her steps carrying new purpose. The idea was dangerous, potentially unethical. But as she drove down the winding cemetery road, she knew it was their best chance to end this.

They would create the perfect target—an academic studying preservation techniques, someone whose research would be irresistible to Whitman. But unlike his previous victims, this one would be ready for him.

The only question was: who would be willing to play bait for a killer who turned people into frozen exhibits?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Finn's morning coffee had gone cold, untouched on his desk as he stared at the evidence board. Dawn painted the sheriff's department in pale gold, but his mind was still working through the shadows of possibilities. Walsh's files lay spread before him—geological surveys, cave locations, victim profiles that seemed to mock their inability to prevent the latest death.

The sound of boots on linoleum made him look up. Sheila stood in the doorway, something in her posture suggesting both exhaustion and resolution. Mountain light caught the silver in her hair, reminding him of mineral formations in Whitman's caves.

"I've been thinking," she said, closing the door behind her.

"Dangerous habit." He studied her face, reading the familiar signs of a plan taking shape. "Cemetery help clear your head?"

"Maybe." She moved to the evidence board, her fingers trailing across photos of the victims—Kane, Mitchell, Harper. "We've been looking at this wrong."

"How so?"

"We're trying to predict where he'll strike next. What cave system he'll choose." She turned to face him. "But the caves are secondary. It's the victims that matter—finding the right minds to preserve."

Finn felt tension gather between his shoulders. "You have an idea."

"We create the perfect target. Someone whose work aligns exactly with what Whitman's trying to achieve. Research into cultural preservation, traditional knowledge..." She paused, watching his reaction. "Someone he won't be able to resist."

"Using a researcher as bait." The words felt heavy in the quiet office. "That's risky, Sheila. Look what happened to Harper."

"Not a real researcher." Her voice carried steel beneath its surface. "Someone with training. Someone who can handle themselves if things go wrong."

Understanding dawned like the sun climbing Coldwater's mountains. "An undercover operation."

"We build the perfect academic profile. The right publications, the right research focus. Make our candidate irresistible to him." She moved to his desk, picked up his cold coffee. "But this time, when he makes contact..."

"We'll be ready." Finn stood, energy replacing his earlier fatigue. "It could work. But we'd need someone who could sell it completely. The academic language, the research methodology..."

"I know." Sheila set the coffee down, turned back to the evidence board. "And they'd have to understand the risks. Whitman's smart, patient. He'll study them before making contact."

Morning light streamed through the office windows, warming the room. Outside, Coldwater was fully awake now, unaware of the trap being planned in the quiet of the sheriff's department.

"Walsh won't like it," Finn said quietly.

"Walsh wants to wait until Whitman makes a mistake." Steel crept back into Sheila's voice. "I'm done waiting for more bodies to show up in those caves."

Finn watched Sheila move through motes that danced in the sunlight, her shadow

stretching across the evidence board where victims' faces stared back with frozen serenity. The office felt charged with dangerous potential, like the air before a mountain storm.

"We'd need to be thorough," he said, his voice cutting through layers of golden light and unspoken risks. "Create a complete academic history. Publications, conference presentations, a digital footprint he can verify."

"Everything has to be perfect." Sheila's fingers traced the edge of Rachel Harper's photo, lingering on the last victim they'd failed to save. "He'll research everything—dissertation committee, grant applications, even social media presence."

Morning traffic hummed beyond their windows, the sound of a world moving forward while they planned to trap a killer who turned people into frozen exhibits. Each passing minute felt weighted with urgency, with the knowledge that somewhere in the mountains, Whitman was already hunting his next preservation subject.

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"There's something else," Finn said, watching Sheila's reflection ghost across the window glass. "Whoever does this... they'll have to understand his mindset. Really understand it. He doesn't see himself as a killer."

"He's a curator," Sheila finished. "Preserving minds he thinks are worthy, using methods he learned from that first frozen body." She turned from the window, her face caught between shadow and light. "Our candidate will need to share his passion for preservation. If he reaches out by phone, as he's done so far, his mark will have to convince him they understand the importance of what he's doing."

The implications hung in the air between them like smoke—they would be asking someone to walk into darkness, to dance with a killer who saw murder as sacred duty. The room felt smaller suddenly, pressed in by the weight of what they were planning.

"If this goes wrong..." Finn let the thought trail off, but Sheila's eyes met his with familiar determination.

"If we do nothing, more bodies will show up in those caves. More minds 'preserved' in chambers of ice and stone." Her voice carried the steel edge he recognized from her fighting days. "At least this way, we choose the ground."

Finn leaned against his desk, arms crossed, a familiar crease of worry between his eyes.

"We'd need someone who could convince him," he said. "Someone who understands both academic research and law enforcement procedure. That's a narrow field."

Sheila stood before the evidence board, studying the faces of Whitman's victims.

"I could do it," she said quietly.

The words landed between them like stones in still water. Finn's posture shifted, tension gathering in his shoulders. "No."

"Think about it." She turned to face him, her body outlined against the photos of the dead. "I'm a quick study. Whatever academic jargon I need to know, I can figure it out."

"Sheila—"

"And I've got law enforcement training. Combat experience. If something goes wrong—"

"If something goes wrong, you'll end up like them." He gestured toward the board, toward faces forever frozen in chambers of ice and stone. "You're not invincible, Sheila."

Silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken fears. Outside, a siren wailed in the distance—a reminder of the world they were sworn to protect. Sheila moved to the window, watching morning traffic flow through Coldwater's streets like a river of normality they couldn't quite touch.

"Someone has to stop him," she said finally, her voice carrying the weight of every victim they'd failed to save. "And I won't ask anyone else to take risks I'm not willing to take myself."

"You're the sheriff," Finn countered, but his tone had softened. "This department needs you. Star needs you."

"Star needs to live in a world where killers like Whitman can't just keep taking people." She turned back to him. "I can do this, Finn. I can make him believe I understand his mission. Besides, who else is going to do it?"

Finn moved slowly away from his desk, his shadow stretching across crime scene photos like a man testing ice over deep water. The office hummed with early morning quiet, broken only by the distant sound of deputies arriving for their shift, unaware of the weight of decisions being made in this sunlit room.

"Even putting aside my concerns for your safety," Finn said, "there are other problems."

"Such as?"

"The fake I.D. our killer created—that was well done. This guy's an expert in his field, so he's going to be familiar with his peers. If we try to create an academic profile out of nowhere, he'll sniff it out."

Sheila was silent for a few moments. He had a point.

"I get the impression you have a better idea," Sheila said.

"What about James Cooper?" he said finally, his voice carrying the careful tone of someone offering an alternative to catastrophe. "Mitchell's research assistant."

Sheila turned from the window, her face caught between shadow and light. "Cooper?"

"Think about it. He knows Mitchell's work intimately—the methodology, the terminology. He could speak about preservation techniques in a way that would feel authentic to Whitman. And more than likely, he's already on Whitman's radar."

Sheila's eyes drifted to Mitchell's photo on the evidence board. "Cooper's already part of the academic world. His credentials would hold up to scrutiny."

"More than that." Finn moved to join her at the board, their shadows merging across faces of the dead. "If he made a public statement about continuing Mitchell's work, about not letting her death be in vain..." He let the implication hang in the air between them.

"He'd be the perfect target," Sheila finished softly. "Young, passionate, already connected to one of Whitman's victims. Determined to carry on research that Whitman considers sacred."

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The office fell quiet as they considered the possibility. Outside their window, Coldwater stirred to full wakefulness.

"Cooper would be more believable than me," Sheila admitted, something unclenching in her chest. "Whitman would see him as a natural successor to Mitchell's work, someone who truly understands what was lost when she died."

"And he's young enough, idealistic enough, that Whitman might see him as someone worth preserving." Finn's voice carried the weight of what they were considering—using Cooper as bait for a killer who turned people into frozen exhibits.

"If something goes wrong..." Sheila began. A few moments ago, she'd been more than ready to take the risks on herself. But asking someone else to sign up for those same risks was a different matter entirely.

Sheila studied Mitchell's photo, remembering Cooper's devastation when he'd learned of her death. "He loved her work," she said quietly. "Believed in what she was trying to preserve."

"Enough to risk becoming Whitman's next preservation subject?"

Sheila considered the magnitude of what they would be asking. Cooper was barely out of graduate school, his whole academic career ahead of him. But he was also their best chance to stop Whitman.

"Only one way to find out," she said, reaching for her keys.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"Hell no!" Cooper said, pushing back from his desk so violently that papers scattered across his cramped university office like startled birds. Light filtering through venetian blinds striped his face in bands of shadow that emphasized the fear in his eyes.

Sheila stayed where she was, leaning against a bookshelf lined with anthropological texts and carefully labeled binders—Mitchell's research, preserved with an assistant's devotion. The small office smelled of old coffee and printer ink, the familiar perfume of academic dedication.

"Just hear us out," she said quietly. Beside her, Finn remained silent, his presence solid and steady against the waves of Cooper's panic.

"Hear you out? You want me to basically announce myself as bait for a serial killer." Cooper's voice cracked slightly, betraying his youth. His laptop cast blue light across scattered papers—drafts of articles he'd been working on, attempts to continue Mitchell's work even after her death. "A killer who arranges his victims in ceremonial robes and freezes them in caves."

"We would have eyes on you the whole time," Finn said. "Every precaution, every safeguard."

Cooper laughed, a brittle sound that seemed to shatter against the office walls. Outside his window, students crossed the quad in carefree groups, their normalcy a stark contrast to the tension filling this small academic space.

"Dr. Mitchell trusted me with her research," he said, his voice dropping to almost a whisper. "Asked me to protect her work, not die for it."

Sheila moved closer to his desk, sunlight catching the silver in her hair. "Don't you see? IT has to be you, James. You understand what she was trying to preserve. The importance of protecting traditional knowledge."

Cooper's eyes drifted to a framed photo on his desk—Mitchell at a dig site, her face alight with discovery. The same passion for preservation that had ultimately led to her death.

The silence stretched between them, charged with the weight of what they were asking—for him to walk willingly into darkness, to become bait for the killer who had stolen his mentor's life.

"You don't understand," Cooper said finally. "I see her every night in my dreams. The way they found her, arranged like some kind of... specimen." His fingers traced the edge of Mitchell's photo, trembling slightly. "Like she was just another artifact to be preserved."

Sheila moved closer, her shadow merging with the striped patterns on his desk. "And now we're offering you the opportunity to give her justice. To put a stop to this."

"You really think he'll buy it? Just because I was her assistant?"

"He'll buy it because you understand what she was trying to protect," Sheila said. "The importance of preserving traditional knowledge. Of keeping certain wisdom alive."

Silence filled the office again, broken only by the distant sound of a campus bell marking the hour. Cooper's eyes drifted to Mitchell's photo, to the passion in her face as she examined ancient artifacts. The same passion that had drawn Whitman's attention.

"If I did this," he said finally, each word careful as footsteps on thin ice, "what exactly would you want me to do?"

"Make a public statement," Finn explained. "About continuing her work. About not letting her death stop the research she believed in."

"Bait for a killer who turns people into frozen exhibits." Cooper's hands splayed across his desk, pressing against papers filled with Mitchell's methodology, her insights, her dreams of preservation. "And if he takes it? If he comes for me?"

"We'll be there," Sheila promised. "Every step. Every moment. You won't face him alone."

Cooper stared at Mitchell's photo for a long moment, his reflection ghosting across the glass like a man balanced on the edge of a decision that could cost him everything.

"She believed some knowledge was worth dying for," he said finally, his voice steady despite the fear evident in his eyes. "That preserving certain truths mattered more than personal safety." He looked up at Sheila, sunlight catching tears he refused to let fall. "I always thought that was academic bravery. Until he killed her for it."

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The office held its breath, waiting for his decision. Outside, life continued its normal rhythm, but in here, time seemed suspended between heartbeats.

"I'll do it," Cooper said softly, his hand still resting on Mitchell's photo. "Not because I'm brave. But because she'd want her death to mean something. To help stop him."

Sheila nodded slowly, understanding the weight of what he was agreeing to. "We'll start planning immediately."

He looked up at them. "Just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"When you catch him? Make sure he knows that knowledge isn't preserved by killing the people who study it."

The light of the rising sun crept across Cooper's back yard like a cautious animal, casting long shadows from the scattered research papers that covered his patio table. The mountains loomed behind him, a dark wall holding secrets in chambers of stone and ice. He hunched over his laptop as he tried to find words that would draw a killer's attention.

"Not too academic," Sheila said from where she sat across from him, steam rising from her coffee cup like morning mist. "Make it personal. About Mitchell."

Cooper nodded, though his hands still trembled slightly. They'd been at this for hours, crafting the perfect statement—one that would catch Whitman's eye without seeming artificial. The air held a bite of coming winter, and somewhere in the distance, a mourning dove called out to the breaking day.

"What about this?" He cleared his throat, reading from the screen. "'Dr. Mitchell understood something fundamental about how knowledge survives through time. Her work wasn't just about documenting traditions—it was about protecting wisdom that modern society has forgotten how to value.'"

Finn emerged from the house with fresh coffee. "Good. Now make it about continuing her mission."

Cooper's fingers moved across keys, dancing with possibilities that could cost him his life. The mountains watched with ancient indifference as another piece of their trap took shape in the growing light of dawn.

Sheila's phone began to ring. It occurred to her that it had rung earlier, but she'd barely noticed because she'd been so focused on coaching Cooper.

"I need to take this," she told Finn and Cooper, suspecting it could be important. She moved toward the garden gate where autumn leaves gathered in copper drifts against weathered wood.

"Sheriff Stone," she answered, her voice carrying professional neutrality despite the unease crawling up her spine.

"You don't know me." The man's voice was smoke over gravel, each word measured with careful intent. "But I'm an old friend of your father's. We need to talk."

Wind stirred the leaves at her feet, sending them dancing like fragments of scattered

thoughts. Behind her, she could hear Cooper and Finn still discussing the statement, their voices muffled by distance and growing tension.

"About what?"

"Things it wouldn't be wise to say over the phone."

The mountains loomed beyond Cooper's yard, holding secrets in their ancient stone. Sheila's hand tightened on her phone. "Who are you?"

"I told you, I'm a friend of your father's."

"Does he know you're calling?"

A pause. "He knows."

"At least give me your name," Sheila said.

"I'll do you one better. Let's meet face to face."

"Where?"

"I'll text you the address."

Sheila had a bad feeling about this. "Why all the cloak and dagger?" she asked.

"Do I really have to spell it out? I'm putting my neck on the line for you. If they find out, I'm even having this conversation with you..."

"Who? If who finds out?"

"Goodbye, Sheriff Stone. I'll text you that address."

The line went dead, leaving Sheila alone with her growing unease. A few moments later, a message came through, the address of a farmhouse on the edge of the county. Sheila looked it up on her phone and discovered it was for sale—had been for months. It was rundown, and the description indicated the house would probably need to be razed.

An interesting place to choose for a meeting.

Sheila tried her father's number, but he didn't answer. She tried again, growing increasingly uneasy, but still there was no response. His voicemail clicked on.

"Hi, Dad," she said. "Call me when you get this. Bye."

She stared at the mountains, their peaks sharp against the autumn sky.

"Everything alright?" Finn asked, startling her.

"You know," she said, "I really have no idea."

She needed to get to that farmhouse, needed to figure out what this 'friend' of her father's wanted—and why her father wasn't answering his phone.

But first, she had a killer to catch.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Whitman watched as students gathered around the university steps for what the press release had called "an important announcement regarding Dr. Tracy Mitchell's research." He stood at the edge of the crowd, a ghost among the living, maintaining a careful distance.

He'd been monitoring academic message boards, conference schedules, and department newsletters—his usual methods for identifying potential minds worth preserving—when Cooper's press announcement caught his attention. The young researcher's determination to honor Mitchell's legacy had struck a chord that resonated like crystal struck by winter wind. He knew it was dangerous showing up at such an event, but he couldn't resist.

James Cooper appeared exactly as expected—young, earnest, slightly rumpled in the way of dedicated academics who forgot to look in mirrors. The podium dwarfed him, but there was something in his posture that spoke of determination beneath the nervous energy. Just like Tracy had been, all those months ago, when he'd first studied her from similar shadows.

"Dr. Mitchell understood something fundamental about how knowledge survives through time," Cooper began, his voice carrying across the hushed gathering. "Her work wasn't just about documenting traditions—it was about protecting wisdom that modern society has forgotten how to value."

Whitman shifted slightly, adjusting the baseball cap that helped him blend with the crowd of students and faculty. The air held the bite of coming winter, reminding him of chambers deep beneath the mountains, where temperatures remained constant and mineral-rich water worked its patient magic.

Cooper's words continued to flow, passionate despite his obvious nervousness. "I've

spent the past weeks reviewing her research notes, her theories about cultural preservation. And I've come to understand that her work can't end with her death. These traditions she studied—they're like delicate threads connecting us to ancient wisdom. If we don't preserve them..."

Yes, Whitman thought, warmth spreading through his chest. You understand. Just like she did.

The federal presence was obvious, if you knew where to look. Agent Walsh stood near the building's entrance, trying too hard to appear casual. Two others—probably tactical team members—lounged on a bench, their attention too focused for genuine relaxation. They were watching for him, expecting him to appear like some movie villain to snatch their bait in broad daylight.

Amateur theatrics. True preservation required patience, preparation, proper conditions. The ice caves had been perfect until they contaminated them with their clumsy investigations and evidence markers. But there were other chambers, other spaces where mineral content and constant temperatures could maintain consciousness through ages.

"Dr. Mitchell believed that certain knowledge was worth protecting at any cost," Cooper said, his voice growing stronger. "She understood that some wisdom can't be preserved in books or databases. It has to be maintained through living tradition, through people who truly understand its value."

He felt it then—that familiar resonance, like a tuning fork struck against stone. Cooper wasn't just speaking Mitchell's words; he understood them. Believed them. The young man's passion radiated across the gathering like heat shimmer, making the federal agents fade to insignificance.

So young, he thought. So perfectly aligned with the work. What insights could be

preserved, protected, maintained in crystal clarity through centuries?

The frozen one's words echoed in his memory: "Choose carefully. Only those who truly understand the importance of preservation. Only those whose minds are worthy of surviving through time."

Cooper was still speaking, but he had heard enough. The young researcher's dedication to Mitchell's work, his understanding of what had been lost with her death—these were signs he had learned to read over years of patient observation.

He pulled a burner phone from his pocket as he drifted away from the crowd. The number was already programmed in, ready to make first contact. But not yet. There were preparations to make first, conditions to verify.

Dr. Ethan Banner's credentials were carefully crafted—a respected archaeologist specializing in preservation techniques, current visiting scholar at a small college in Oregon. The digital trail was thorough enough to withstand scrutiny without being so perfect it would raise suspicion. He had used variations of this identity before, tweaking details to match his targets' interests.

The mountains rose beyond the campus like ancient guardians, their peaks catching the afternoon light like blade edges. Somewhere in their depths, chambers waited—perfect combinations of mineral content and temperature, spaces where consciousness could be maintained unchanged through centuries of darkness.

Soon, he promised the distant peaks. Soon, we'll add another vessel of wisdom to the collection. Another mind preserved against the rushing tide of forgetfulness. And with any luck, this one won't be disturbed.

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He took one last look at Cooper, who was still speaking with passionate intensity about continuing Mitchell's work. The federal agents remained obvious in their watchfulness, and they would no doubt be ready to pounce as soon as he set up a meeting with Cooper.

No matter. He was nothing if not adaptable.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Evening draped itself across Cooper's office like a tired animal, shadows pooling in corners where stacks of research papers created tiny paper mountains. The autumn air carried a bite of winter through the partially open window, stirring loose pages with ghostly fingers.

Cooper sat hunched over his laptop, the screen's blue glow painting his face in electronic twilight while Sheila and Finn maintained their quiet vigil.

Several hours had passed since his public statement—a long time to be continually refreshing an inbox, searching for a message from a serial killer. As much as Sheila reminded herself she needed to be patient, she found herself wondering what they would do if Whitman didn't take bait.

Had he sniffed them out?

"Maybe he's not interested," Cooper said, his voice carrying the strain of constant tension. A coffee cup sat cold and forgotten at his elbow, one of many that had marked the hours.

"He's interested," Sheila said from where she leaned against a bookshelf. "He's just being careful. Taking time to study you, like he did with the others."

The office felt smaller in the growing darkness, as if the weight of what they were attempting had physically compressed the space. Finn stood by the window, his silhouette sharp against the dying light. Beyond him, campus buildings cut black shapes against a purple sky, their windows beginning to glow like tired eyes.

Cooper's phone rang.

The sound sliced through the quiet like a blade, making them all jump. An unknown number flashed on the screen.

"Remember," Sheila said softly as Cooper's hand hovered over the phone. "If it's him, let him lead the conversation. Show interest, but don't seem too eager."

Cooper nodded, his throat working as he swallowed. He pressed the speaker button, his finger trembling slightly.

"James Cooper speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Cooper." The voice carried the measured confidence of academia, each word carefully chosen. "This is Dr. Ethan Banner from Pacific Coast University. I hope I'm not calling too late."

Sheila and Finn exchanged glances. They'd known this moment would come, had prepared for it, but the reality of hearing Whitman's voice—so calm, so professional—sent ice through Sheila's veins.

"Not at all," Cooper managed, his voice steadier than his hands. "What can I do for you, Dr. Banner?"

"I watched your statement about continuing Dr. Mitchell's work. Her research on preservation techniques has always fascinated me, particularly her theories about how certain knowledge survives through time." A pause, weighted with careful consideration. "I'm curious—have you had a chance to review her notes on mineral content in preservation chambers?"

Cooper's eyes darted to Sheila, who gave an almost imperceptible nod. They'd prepared for this, rehearsed the academic dance that would draw Whitman deeper.

"Actually, yes," Cooper said. "She'd been documenting unusual mineral compositions in several cave systems. The combinations seemed significant, though she never got to complete her analysis."

"Fascinating." The word carried genuine enthusiasm. "You know, I've been studying similar phenomena in caves along the Pacific coast. The mineral content, the constant temperatures—they create perfect conditions for preservation. Not just of artifacts, but of knowledge itself."

Finn moved silently to Cooper's desk, his notebook ready. Every word Whitman spoke could help them understand his patterns, predict his next move.

"That's exactly what Dr. Mitchell believed," Cooper said, warming to the conversation despite his fear. "That certain environments could maintain not just physical artifacts, but the wisdom they represented."

"Would you be interested in comparing notes?" Whitman's voice carried the careful eagerness of a spider testing its web. "I'm actually in Utah now. Perhaps we could meet to discuss our research."

The trap was baited, the hook set. Cooper looked to Sheila again, his face pale in the laptop's glow.

"I'd like that," he said. "Dr. Mitchell always said sharing knowledge was crucial to preservation."

"Indeed she did." Something darker crept into Whitman's tone, like shadows deepening at dusk. "I'll shoot you an email. We have much to discuss, Mr. Cooper. Much to preserve."

The line went dead, leaving them in silence, broken only by the soft whir of Cooper's laptop fan. Minutes stretched like pulled taffy until Cooper's email chimed.

His hands shook as he opened the message. "He wants to meet tonight. Says he's found something in the geological surveys that matches Dr. Mitchell's notes perfectly. Wants to show me before he flies back to Oregon tomorrow."

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Sheila moved closer, reading over his shoulder. The email was perfectly crafted—professional enthusiasm masking deadly intent. A location just outside the city, private enough for academic discussion. Time suggested: 11 PM.

"Letting you see it in darkness," Finn said quietly. "When the formations are most visible by lamplight."

Cooper's face had gone ashen. "It's happening so fast."

"That's good," Sheila said, though her own pulse raced with the accelerated timeline. "He's eager, less careful. Gives us an advantage. We'll go over some self-defense techniques just to be extra cautious."

"Is that really necessary?" Cooper asked, looking worried.

"Standard procedure," Sheila said. The truth, though, was that nothing about this was standard.

As she met Finn's eyes across the darkened office, she saw her own concern mirrored there. They'd expected more time to prepare, to set up surveillance and backup. Now, they had less than four hours to prepare Cooper and turn this meeting into a trap that would catch a killer.

Outside, night pressed against the windows like black velvet, and somewhere in that darkness, Whitman was preparing his next preservation. The question was: whose plan would prevail?

The limestone cliffs loomed against starlight like ancient sentinels, their faces scarred by shadow and geological time. Sheila pressed herself deeper into her hiding spot among the rocks, every muscle tensed as she watched Cooper's lone figure move through the darkness below. The wire he wore transmitted his breathing—too fast, too shallow, but steady enough to suggest he was holding it together.

They'd chosen to keep the FBI out of this operation. Walsh's team would have insisted on a full tactical response, flooding the area with agents and equipment. But Whitman was too careful, too attuned to the rhythms of prey and predator. He'd spot a major operation from miles away. Instead, Sheila had selected just four of her most trusted deputies, positioning them carefully around the meeting point. Finn maintained radio contact from a concealed position on the opposite ridge.

The night air carried the mineral scent of the caves, a reminder of what waited if they failed. Somewhere in this darkness, a killer prepared to add another mind to his frozen collection.

A beam of light cut through the darkness—headlights approaching along the access road. Sheila's hand tightened on her weapon as a dark sedan pulled into view, its engine dying to silence that felt absolute.

Where had he gotten this vehicle, since his Subaru had burned up? Was he just skilled at stealing cars?

"Dr. Banner?" Cooper's voice carried clearly through the wire, betraying only the slightest tremor.

"Mr. Cooper." The measured academic tone they'd heard on the phone came through faintly as a figure stepped from the car. "Thank you for meeting me so late. Some

things are best observed in darkness."

Sheila could just make out their silhouettes as Banner led Cooper toward the cliff face, his flashlight beam dancing across limestone. Their voices carried clearly through the wire:

"I found something remarkable in these formations," Banner was saying. "Something that changed everything I thought I knew about preservation." His voice took on an almost dreamlike quality. "Have you ever wondered why certain cultures chose caves for their most sacred rituals?"

"Dr. Mitchell had theories about that," Cooper replied, playing his part perfectly despite the fear Sheila could hear beneath his words.

"Theories, yes. But I found proof." Banner's flashlight swept across the rock face. "Three years ago, in a chamber much like this one, I discovered him. Perfectly preserved in ice and mineral deposits. The frozen one."

Sheila's breath caught. This was it—the origin of his obsession.

"At first I thought he was just another Ice Age hunter," Banner continued, his voice taking on an unsettling intensity. "But then he spoke to me. Showed me things about civilizations lost to time. About how certain knowledge could be preserved, maintained unchanged through centuries of darkness."

Through the wire, Sheila heard Cooper's breathing quicken. "He... spoke to you?"

"They preserved their wisest ones," Banner said, moving closer to Cooper. "Not just their bodies, but their consciousness. The minerals in these caves, combined with the constant cold..." His voice dropped to an almost tender whisper. "They create perfect vessels, waiting to be awakened when humanity is ready for their wisdom."

Sheila watched the two begin moving. Almost time. They just had to wait until Banner and Cooper got a little closer, stepping into the pinch point where she and Finn were waiting opposite two other officers—

Suddenly, Banner's arm shot out, wrapping around Cooper's throat. The flash of a blade caught starlight. "I know you're out there," Banner called, his voice hardening. "Show yourselves, or he dies right here."

"Damn it," Sheila muttered. Through her scope, she could see the knife pressed against Cooper's jugular. No clean shot.

"You have thirty seconds," Banner called. "Clear out. All of you. Or we find out how quickly someone can bleed out in the cold."

"Dr. Banner," Sheila called back, keeping her voice steady. "You know we can't do that."

"Then his death is on your hands."

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Cooper's breathing came rapid and shallow through the wire. Sheila watched his hands, remembering how they'd practiced this—the self-defense moves she'd taught him, just in case.

"The frozen one showed you the way, didn't he?" Sheila said, trying to keep Banner talking. "Showed you how to preserve knowledge through time."

"Don't mock me. You're not a believer."

Come on, James, Sheila thought, creeping closer, keeping the pair of men in her sights. You're gonna have to help me out.

"It's going to be alright, James," she called. "Just remember what we talked about."

"Don't play games!" Banner shouted. "I'll kill him—you know I will!"

"You're okay, James," Sheila continued, ignoring Banner. "Just stay calm and stick to what we talked about."

"What the hell are you—" Banner began, but before he could finish, Cooper attacked just as Sheila had taught him to do: elbow to solar plexus, heel to instep, twist away from the blade. Banner staggered, his grip loosening just enough. Cooper broke free and dove aside.

Sheila fired, but Banner was already running for the cave entrance, disappearing into darkness.

"All units converge!" Sheila's voice carried rage and command in equal measure as she gave chase, her flashlight beam bouncing wildly across uneven ground. "Suspect heading east into the cave!"

The cave mouth swallowed Sheila like a cold throat, darkness rushing in to replace starlight. Her flashlight beam caught crystalline formations that sparkled like frozen tears, while her boots crunched against limestone grit that had waited eons to record her passage. Somewhere ahead, Banner's footsteps echoed off ancient stone, each sound multiplied by the cave's acoustics until it seemed like a dozen men fled through the darkness.

But Sheila knew better. She'd studied his patterns, walked through the chambers where he'd left his frozen offerings to time. The mineral tang in the air grew stronger as she pushed deeper, reminding her of other caves, other victims arranged with ceremonial precision in spaces chosen for their preservative properties.

"Dr. Banner," she called, letting her voice carry through the tunnels. The cave caught her words and threw them back, distorted by stone and distance. "Or should I call you Professor Whitman? James Whitman, from Berkeley?"

The footsteps ahead faltered for just a moment.

"I've seen your work," she continued, ducking under a low arch that sparkled with moisture. "The care you take with each preservation. The attention to mineral content, to temperature, to ceremonial positioning." Her flashlight beam caught a fork in the passage. Without hesitation, she took the right branch—the one that led deeper, colder. "The frozen one taught you well, didn't he?"

"You don't understand." His voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, the cave's acoustics making location impossible. "This isn't about death. It's about preservation. Protection."

Sheila moved carefully now, testing each step. The temperature had dropped significantly, her breath visible in the flashlight's beam. Ice formations grew more numerous, more elaborate, like frozen waterfalls caught in mid-flow.

"I understand more than you think," she called back. "You're creating vessels—maintaining consciousness through time. Preserving minds you think are worthy of surviving centuries." She swept her light across crystalline walls that caught and fractured the beam into a thousand points of cold fire. "But tell me, Professor—did the frozen one really speak to you? Or was that just the isolation, the thin air, the desperate need to believe your work had meaning?"

A laugh echoed through the darkness—bitter, hollow, touched with something that might have been grief. "You think I'm insane. That I imagined it all." His voice was closer now. "But you've seen the chambers. The mineral content, the perfect conditions. Ancient wisdom preserved in ice and stone, waiting for those who understand."

Sheila moved faster, more confident now. The air grew colder with each step, carrying that specific mineral scent she'd come to associate with his work. Up ahead, a larger chamber opened like a mouth full of crystal teeth.

She knew, with the certainty that came from understanding predators, that he would be there. In the coldest chamber, where mineral-rich water had worked its patient magic for millennia. The perfect place for his next preservation.

The perfect place to end this.

"I've seen the chambers," she said, her voice carrying into darkness thick with ancient silence. "I've seen what you've done to them. Kane. Mitchell. Harper. Minds worthy of preservation, you said. But tell me, Professor..." She paused at the chamber's entrance, ice crystals catching her light like fallen stars. "What makes you worthy of

choosing?"

No answer.

The cave's darkness pressed against Sheila's senses like velvet soaked in ice water. Her flashlight beam caught crystalline formations that seemed to twist and dance at the edge of vision, their facets holding secrets older than human memory. The silence felt absolute, broken only by the steady drip of mineral-rich water that had shaped these chambers through geological time.

"Professor?" Her voice scattered off ancient walls, returning as whispers of itself. Each step carried her deeper into the consuming cold, into spaces where the air itself felt thick with age and mineral tang.

The great chamber opened before her like a cathedral carved by patient water, its ceiling lost to darkness despite her light. Ice formations caught her beam and shattered it into countless points of cold fire, creating an illusion of stars trapped in stone. The temperature here had dropped significantly—this was where the cave's breath pooled, where winter never surrendered its hold.

Her light found him at last, and the sight stole her breath more surely than the chamber's chill. Whitman knelt in the center of the space as if in prayer, ceremonial robes flowing around him like frozen wings. The garments' intricate beadwork caught her light and threw it back in patterns that spoke of ancient wisdom and terrible purpose. His face held the serene acceptance of a man who had found his destiny in darkness.

"You can still walk away, Sheriff." His voice carried the weight of centuries. "Let me complete the cycle here, where the minerals sing in the stone." He spread his arms, the robes rippling like water turned to crystal. "I promise I'll stay, let the cold take me slowly. Future generations will find me, understand what I've learned. The frozen

one's wisdom will live on through time itself."

"You need help, Professor." Sheila kept her weapon trained on him, though her hands ached with cold that seemed to seep into her bones. "This isn't preservation—it's illness. The voices you heard, the wisdom you think you're protecting... it's delusion born of isolation and thin air."

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"Delusion?" He withdrew something from the robes—a bone awl. "I've preserved minds that understood the importance of cultural memory. Kane, Mitchell, Harper—they'll guide future civilizations when humanity is ready to hear their wisdom."

The awl moved to his own neck with the practiced grace of ceremony. "Now it's my turn to join them, to add my understanding to the library of frozen consciousness. The mineral content here is perfect—better even than the chamber where I found the frozen one. My preservation will be absolute."

"The frozen one chose you to carry on this work," Sheila said quickly, playing to his delusions while inching closer. "To preserve knowledge that humanity wasn't ready for. But what if you're meant to do more than just join the others? What if you're meant to guide future generations to them?"

The awl dipped lower as confusion warred with conviction on his face. "Guide them?"

"You alone understand the importance of these preservation chambers. The mineral content, the exact temperatures needed." Another careful step closer. "If you damage your brain now, who will show them the way?"

His grip on the awl loosened just slightly—a moment of hesitation that contained universes of doubt. Sheila moved with the fluid grace of a fighter, her body remembering lessons learned in darker places than this. The awl clattered against stone as she struck, spinning away into shadows while they grappled on the chamber floor.

Whitman fought with the strength of madness, but Sheila had the weight of justice and training behind her. The ceremonial robes tangled around them as they struggled, beadwork catching the dropped flashlight's beam and throwing fractured patterns across the chamber's crystalline walls.

Footsteps thundered through the cave system—Finn and the others, following her trail into darkness. Their lights joined hers, turning the chamber into a chaos of shadow and brilliance as they helped subdue the struggling killer. The ceremonial robes spread across the chamber floor like spilled ink, their patterns now just evidence rather than sacred vestments.

"You don't understand," Whitman gasped as they secured his hands. "The frozen one chose me. Showed me the way... showed me how knowledge could survive unchanged through centuries of darkness."

"The only thing showing you the way now," Sheila said as they pulled him to his feet, "is a road back to reality."

The gathered lights caught his face—a man lost between delusion and despair, his grand mission of preservation ended in a chamber that would hold neither his body nor his twisted wisdom. The ceremonial robes hung heavy with defeat as they led him away, his whispers about ancient knowledge fading into echoes that the cave would hold forever.

Behind them, water continued its patient work, mineral-rich drops falling like time itself into darkness that had waited eons for this moment and would wait eons more for whatever came next. The chamber's cold seemed to follow them out, as if the cave itself understood that this story of preservation and madness had finally reached its end.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The sheriff's department interview room felt too small for the weight of what they'd uncovered. Crime scene photos covered one wall—Kane, Mitchell, and Harper in their ceremonial robes, arranged in chambers of ice and stone. The opposite wall held images from Whitman's cabin: shelves of anthropological texts, detailed maps of cave systems, and notebooks filled with careful documentation of mineral content and temperature readings.

Discovering his cabin hadn't been easy. After finding a gas station receipt in his pocket, they'd accessed the camera footage from the gas station, which showed him heading west on Sheen Street. Just down the road from the gas station was a bank, but Whitman didn't reach the bank until several hours later, which suggested he may have stopped at a property between those two locations. There were only a few options, among them an off-grid cabin set well back from the road—a cabin that had been rented out to someone matching Whitman's description.

"The delusion appears to have started three years ago," Dr. Helen Kravitz said, arranging her case notes on the table. The department's consulting psychiatrist had just finished her initial evaluation of Whitman. Beyond the room's windows, the late night had become early morning, though none of them felt ready for sleep. "He was already unstable—isolated, obsessive, prone to finding patterns that weren't there. The high altitude, thin air, and extended solitude in the caves created perfect conditions for a psychotic break."

"And the frozen body he found?" Sheila asked. She still wore the clothes from their confrontation in the cave, though she'd wrapped herself in a borrowed sheriff's department jacket to ward off lingering cold.

"A real archaeological discovery," Finn said from where he stood examining a map of cave systems. "We found his original documentation. An Ice Age hunter, perfectly preserved in a mineral-rich chamber. But the voice Whitman heard?" He shook his head. "That's where reality ended and delusion began."

"His background gave him the perfect framework for the delusion," Kravitz added. "Decades studying preservation techniques, specializing in how ancient cultures maintained their traditions through time. When he found that frozen body, his mind created a narrative that matched his obsessions."

Sarah Neville entered, carrying a stack of files they'd found in Whitman's cabin. "These go back thirty years," she said, spreading them across the table. "Journal articles about mineral preservation, indigenous ceremonies, cave archaeology. He was building toward this long before he snapped."

"The robes were key," Finn said, picking up one of the files. "We found Vale's complete records in that storage unit. Whitman spent years tracking down pieces of the Window Rock collection, studying their mineral content. He believed they were specially treated to help preserve consciousness."

Sheila moved to examine the crime scene photos, seeing them with new understanding. "So when he found that frozen body..."

"Everything aligned," Kravitz finished. "His research into preservation, his obsession with maintaining ancient wisdom, his isolation in the caves—it created a perfect storm. The delusion gave him a mission: preserve minds he deemed worthy of surviving through time."

"We found his criteria," Neville added, holding up a notebook filled with Whitman's handwriting. "He monitored academic publications, looking for researchers studying cultural preservation. People who understood the importance of maintaining traditional knowledge."

"Kane was first," Finn said, touching the earliest crime scene photo. "He found something in Whitman's caves—probably evidence of the original frozen body. But instead of seeing it as the archaeological discovery it was..."

"Whitman saw him as the first mind worthy of preservation," Sheila finished. "Then Mitchell, documenting sacred sites. And finally Harper, studying how isolated communities maintain their traditions."

"The ceremonial arrangement, the temperature control, the attention to mineral content—it was all part of his mission," Kravitz said. "In his mind, he wasn't killing them. He was ensuring their wisdom would survive unchanged through centuries."

Neville picked up another file. "We found his research notes from Berkeley. Before he vanished in 2021, he was already showing signs of instability. Obsessing over preservation techniques, convinced that modern society was losing crucial knowledge."

"Then he found that frozen body," Finn said quietly. "And everything he'd been thinking crystallized into certainty."

The room fell silent as they absorbed the weight of it all. Outside, the first hint of dawn began to lighten the sky, though true morning still felt distant.

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"What about the caves where we found Kane and Mitchell?" Sheila asked. "How long had he been using them?"

"Years," Neville said, consulting another file. "He mapped the entire system, studied mineral content and temperature variations. Created perfect preservation chambers." She paused. "We found more preparations in other cave systems. He was planning for decades of work."

"A library of consciousness," Kravitz said. "That's how he saw it. Each victim carefully chosen, perfectly preserved, waiting to share their wisdom with future generations."

Sheila stared at the photos, at faces forever frozen in chambers of ice and stone. They had their answers now—the how and why of Whitman's descent into murderous delusion. But those answers couldn't bring back the lives he'd taken in his twisted mission of preservation.

"What happens to him now?" she asked quietly.

"Psychiatric evaluation," Kravitz replied. "Treatment. He'll likely never be free again, but maybe we can help him find his way back to reality."

Light began to seep through the windows, painting the crime scene photos in shades of dawn. Somewhere in a secure facility, James Whitman waited in darkness, his mission of preservation ended in a chamber that would hold neither his body nor his madness.

As the others finally went home, leaving case files and crime scene photos scattered across the interview room like fragments of a nightmare, Sheila stood at the window, watching dawn paint the mountains in shades of promise and threat. Behind her, Finn gathered empty coffee cups—evidence of their long night of piecing together Whitman's descent into murderous delusion.

"You should get some rest," he said softly.

"So should you." She turned from the window, weary to the bone. The fight with Whitman in the cave seemed like days ago rather than hours. "I can't believe we actually caught him."

"We did." Finn moved closer, his presence steady and grounding. "It's over."

But even as he said it, something nagged at Sheila's tired mind. A memory surfaced through layers of exhaustion—the strange phone call she'd received about her father.

"My father," she said suddenly. "That call I got—someone claiming to be his friend."

She pulled out her cell phone again, trying her father's number. It rang several times before going to voicemail. The familiar gruffness of his recorded voice sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with lingering cold from the cave.

"He's not picking up." She looked at Finn, worry cutting through her exhaustion. "Something's wrong. Dad always answers, or at least calls back quickly."

"Even this early?"

"He's an early riser. This isn't like him."

"When was the last time you spoke to him?"

"Yesterday morning, I think?" She ran a hand through her hair, thinking. "He was going to keep digging into Carlton Vance, see if he could track him down."

Finn straightened, fatigue falling away as he caught her concern. "You want to check his house?"

"Yeah." She was already moving, gathering her jacket. "I know we're both exhausted, but..."

"But it's your father," Finn finished. "Come on. I'll drive."

The sun had fully cleared the mountains as they headed for Gabriel's house. Sheila stared out the window, her mind racing with possibilities she didn't want to consider.

"Tell me about the call again," Finn said as they turned onto the road leading to her father's place. "The one from his supposed friend."

"He wouldn't give his name. Said he had information, but couldn't discuss it over the phone." She rubbed her tired eyes. "Gave me an address—some abandoned farmhouse on the edge of the county."

"Sounds like a setup."

"Yeah." She watched familiar landmarks slide past, each one bringing them closer to answers she wasn't sure she wanted. "But for what?"

Gabriel's house sat silently, the mountains rising behind it like weathered guardians. His truck stood in the gravel drive exactly where it always did, and nothing seemed immediately out of place. But something about the stillness felt wrong to Sheila—a silence too complete for a house that should have held her father's presence.

"His truck's here," Finn said quietly, drawing his weapon as they approached the front door.

"And his gym bag's on the porch," Sheila added, unholstering her own gun. The worn duffel sat propped against the wall where Gabriel always left it after training. "He made it home at some point."

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The door was unlocked. It swung open at her touch, revealing the familiar interior wrapped in morning shadows. Everything looked normal at first—Gabriel's boots by the door, yesterday's coffee cup on the kitchen counter, his reading glasses folded beside the morning paper.

Then she saw it. The chair is lying on its side in the living room. The lamp knocked off the side table, its shade cracked. Most telling of all—the faint scuff marks on the hardwood floor, like someone had been dragged.

"Sheila." Finn's voice was tight with controlled tension. "Over here." He stood by the overturned chair, his flashlight beam illuminating a harsh truth—a smear of blood on the wall. Not enough blood to suggest a fatal wound, but enough to confirm their fears: Gabriel had been taken, and he hadn't gone quietly.

Her world narrowed to that small stain of red, everything else fading to background noise. She forced herself to focus, to think like a sheriff rather than a daughter. "Check the rest of the house," she managed.

They moved through the rooms carefully, but she already knew they wouldn't find him. Gabriel was gone. Only signs of struggle remained—a broken glass in the kitchen, papers scattered across his desk, a picture frame knocked askew. The photo within showed a younger Gabriel teaching a teenage Sheila proper kickboxing stance, both of them grinning at the camera.

"His phone's here," Finn called from the kitchen. "And his wallet. Keys too."

Sheila stood in her father's living room, sunlight streaming through windows that had

witnessed violence just hours before. The silence felt oppressive now, heavy with implications she didn't want to face.

"The caller," she said, her voice tight. "The one who wouldn't give his name. This is why Dad wasn't answering his phone." Her hands clenched into fists. "They took him."

"We'll find him." Finn's voice carried quiet certainty as he pulled out his phone to call it in.

But Sheila barely heard him. She was staring at the blood on the wall, at the signs of her father's struggle against unknown attackers. Gabriel Stone was one of the toughest men she knew. It would have taken several people to subdue him.

And somewhere out there, those same people were holding him for reasons she could guess all too well. Her father was missing, taken by people who wanted to stop their investigation into her mother's murder.

And Sheila knew exactly where they were waiting for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

"Thanks, Bo," Sheila said. "With any luck, this will all be over soon."

She hung up the phone and let out a deep sigh.

"Everything okay with Star?" Finn asked.

Sheila nodded. "She's as restless as a tiger in a zoo, but he'll keep her safe."

Thus assured about Star's safety, Sheila turned her attention to the abandoned

farmhouse before her, which squatted against the morning sky like a wound in the landscape, its weathered boards and broken windows testament to years of neglect. She and Finn were concealed in a copse of scrub oak, the rising sun at their backs painting long shadows across overgrown fields.

"No signs of current activity," Finn said quietly, lowering his binoculars. "But those tire tracks by the side door are fresh. Someone's been here recently."

Sheila studied the building through her own binoculars, cataloging details with desperate intensity. A rusted tractor sat half-hidden behind the house, brown weeds growing through its chassis. The front porch had partially collapsed, forcing anyone entering to use the side door—creating a natural bottleneck. Perfect for an ambush.

"They're smart," she said. "Choosing a place with clear sight lines, only one viable entrance." She shifted position slightly, branches crackling beneath her.

"Which is exactly why we need backup." Finn's voice carried the weight of worry—not just for Gabriel, but for her. "This has trap written all over it, Sheila. That call, the address... they knew you'd come."

"Of course they knew." She lowered the binoculars, her jaw tight. "They took him because of me. Because I wouldn't let Mom's case rest."

"All the more reason not to walk into their trap alone."

"You think I don't know that?" Her voice cracked slightly. "But if we bring in a tactical team, create a perimeter—what happens to Dad? They'll see us coming, Finn. And people willing to kill a sheriff over old secrets won't hesitate to kill their hostage."

Finn was quiet for a moment, watching a crow circle overhead. When he spoke again,

his voice was gentle but firm. "They might not even have him here. This could just be where they plan to take you out."

"Maybe." Sheila's hands tightened on the binoculars until her knuckles went white. "But if there's even a chance..."

"Then we need to be smart about this. Your father wouldn't want you walking into an ambush."

"My father wouldn't be in this situation if I hadn't pushed so hard to solve Mom's murder." The words tasted bitter, like copper and regret. "He told me to be careful, that these people would do anything to keep their secrets buried. But I couldn't let it go."

Tears gathered in her eyes. "He tried to warn me," she continued. "Said some questions were too dangerous to ask." She met Finn's eyes. "But I kept asking anyway. And now they have him."

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"Sheila." He touched her arm gently. "We will find him. But getting yourself killed won't help anyone."

She looked back at the farmhouse, its broken windows staring like empty eyes across the overgrown fields. Somewhere in there—or somewhere else entirely—her father was being held by people who had already proven they would kill to keep their corruption hidden.

"I can't wait for backup," she said finally. "Can't risk them moving him, or worse." She turned to Finn, her face set with the same determination he'd seen before her biggest fights. "But I'm not asking you to come with me."

"Like hell you're not." His voice carried equal parts exasperation and loyalty. "You really think I'd let you do this alone?"

"Finn..."

"No. Do you want to go in there? Fine. But we do it together, and we do it smart." He pulled out his phone. "At least let me tell Sarah where we are. If things go wrong..."

Sheila nodded slowly. "Okay. But give us an hour before she moves in. If Dad's in there, we need time to get him out."

They studied the farmhouse in silence for several moments. Somewhere inside that hollow shell of a building, answers waited. The question was: would they survive learning them?

"Ready?" Finn asked softly.

Sheila checked her weapon one last time, thinking of her father, of all the times he'd been there for her. Now it was her turn.

"Ready."

The stillness pressed against them like a physical thing as they moved through tall grass toward the farmhouse. Their approach kept them in the shadow of an old equipment shed. The grass whispered beneath their careful steps, crickets falling silent as they passed.

Reaching the side of the house, they pressed against weathered boards still cool from night air. The side door stood fifteen feet away, its frame warped with age and weather. Sheila caught Finn's eye and gestured—she'd go high, he'd go low.

Paint flakes crumbled beneath her fingers as they edged along the wall. Every sense strained for signs of movement, for any indication they weren't alone. A crow called somewhere distant, the sound emphasizing the unnatural quiet around the farmhouse.

The door's hinges looked rusty, likely to squeal. Sheila tested the handle with infinite patience, feeling the mechanism's resistance. It turned. Unlocked.

She met Finn's eyes again. Too easy? Or exactly what they'd expected to find?

The door opened with only the faintest whisper of wood against wood. Stale air washed over them, carrying the scent of abandonment. They moved inside like smoke, clearing the small mud room.

The kitchen beyond bore signs of recent use—fresh boot prints in decades of dust, a cabinet door left slightly ajar. Light filtered through filthy windows, painting patterns

across a scarred linoleum floor. Every surface held a thick layer of grime except for one chair, pulled away from the table. Recently used.

Finn gestured toward the front room. More boot prints led that way, along with something else—a darker trail, like something wet had been dragged across the floor.

Sheila's throat tightened as she recognized what it probably was. Blood.

They moved forward, sweeping each corner, each shadow. The front room opened before them, revealing an old sofa sitting against one wall, its fabric rotted by time and weather. More chairs had been arranged facing it, their positions suggesting an interrogation setup.

Dark stains marked the floor near the chairs. Fresh stains.

A floorboard creaked overhead.

They both froze, weapons trained toward the ceiling. Another creak—deliberate this time. Someone moving above them.

Sheila's eyes found the staircase leading to the upper floor. More blood drops marked the steps.

She took a step toward the stairs, but Finn's hand caught her arm. His eyes carried a clear message: This is exactly what they want.

She nodded slightly. I know.

They moved toward the staircase together, every board beneath their feet a potential betrayal. The blood drops led upward into shadow.

Sheila took the first step, testing her weight against aged wood. No sound. She moved higher, Finn close behind, both of them pressed against the wall where the boards would be most stable.

Another creak from above, closer now.

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Pale light filtered through broken windows at the top of the stairs, casting strange shadows across walls stained by years of neglect. The blood trail continued, turning left at the landing. Sheila paused at the top step, listening. Nothing but the hollow sound of wind through empty rooms.

There was a door on the right. Sheila quietly tried the handle, but it was locked. She considered kicking it open, but the blood trail led to the master bedroom at the end of the hall.

That was her priority.

Sheila's hands felt slick on her weapon as she and Finn approached the master bedroom. The door stood partially open, darkness beyond holding answers she wasn't sure she wanted. She met Finn's eyes. He nodded.

The door opened with painful slowness. Light from the hall spilled across bare floorboards, illuminating more chairs arranged in that same interrogation setup. Blood stained the seat of one. Brass casings caught the light, scattered near the wall like fallen coins.

The room was empty.

"That's far enough, Sheriff Stone."

The voice came from behind them.

They spun, but too late. The muzzles of three rifles pointed at them from the hallway.

The men must have been hiding in the locked room, waiting for Sheila and Finn to pass.

Sheila inwardly cursed herself for not clearing that room. Her worry for her father had clouded her judgment, compromised her training. Was he already dead?

"Weapons on the floor," the voice commanded. "Slowly."

Sheila's mind raced, calculating angles, possibilities.

"Now, Sheriff. Unless you want to make this harder than it needs to be."

She set her weapon down, watching Finn do the same from the corner of her eye. Three men in dark clothing advanced into the room, their faces hidden by ski masks.

"Where's my father?" Sheila demanded, trying to keep her voice steady.

"He's alive." The speaker seemed to be in charge. "For now. Which is more than I can say for you two if you don't cooperate."

"You really think you can kill a sheriff and her deputy without consequences?"

"Wouldn't be the first time someone died investigating things they shouldn't." The rifle gestured toward the master bedroom. "Move."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The master bedroom's floorboards creaked beneath their feet as they were forced inside. Late morning light filtered through windows hazed by decades of grime, catching dust motes that danced like falling ash. The leader moved into the room behind them, rifle steady.

"Turn around," he commanded. "Slowly."

The accent hit Sheila like a physical blow—that same lilting Irish inflection she'd heard in her truck just days ago, when a stranger had slipped into her backseat and threatened everyone she loved.

Her hands clenched involuntarily as she turned. The ski mask couldn't hide the coldness in his eyes, the professional detachment of someone accustomed to violence. This was the man who'd threatened Star, who'd promised to kill her father if Sheila didn't back off.

And now he had Gabriel. Was Star safe? Surely Bo Pratz wouldn't let anyone near her. Then again, he was only one man.

"You," she said, voice tight with fury. "The one from my truck."

"Ah, you remember." His tone carried a hint of amusement beneath that deadly calm. "I did warn you, Sheriff. Told you what would happen if you kept pushing." The rifle barrel never wavered. "But you just couldn't let it go, could you?"

"Where's my father?"

"Worried about him now? Should've thought of that before you started digging into things that don't concern you."

"Like Carlton Vance? Who is he?"

The man gestured to one of his men. "Check them for backup weapons. Phones too."

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Rough hands patted them down, removing Sheila's backup piece from her ankle holster, Finn's from his belt. Their phones followed, tossed carelessly into a corner.

"Your father's stubborn," the Irishman continued. "Hasn't told us what we need to know yet. Maybe you'll be more cooperative."

Sheila's mind raced, cataloging details even as rage burned in her chest. Three men in the room. At least one more somewhere in the house, probably watching the perimeter. All armed with rifles—professional gear, not hunting weapons. These weren't local thugs. They were experienced, dangerous.

The Irishman moved closer, rifle trained on Sheila's chest. "Your father's been quite stubborn about Detective Thompson's old files." His accent made the words sound almost musical, a deadly lullaby.

Sheila knew he was talking about the detective who had been investigating departmental corruption before his mysterious disappearance. Internal Affairs had then handed the case to her father. The rest was history.

"We know your mother found them," the Irishman continued. "And now you've been asking the same questions she did."

"The payments," Sheila said. "Money moving through the department. That's what Thompson was investigating before he disappeared."

"Smart girl." He gestured toward one of the chairs with his rifle. "Sit."

"Those files implicated someone powerful," she continued, remaining standing. "Someone who could make a detective disappear without consequences. Someone who could order a hit on my mother and have it covered up for a decade."

The Irishman's eyes crinkled behind his mask—a smile without humor. "And yet here you are, still digging. Just like Detective Thompson. Just like your mother." He moved even closer. "Your father understood, after your mother died. Knew when to let sleeping dogs lie. But you... you just couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"The money," Sheila pressed. "Where was it coming from? What's Meridian Holdings?"

"Sit down, Sheriff Stone." The rifle nudged her chest. "We have some things to discuss about the importance of family. About what happens to people who don't know when to stop asking questions."

"Was it drug money?" She ignored the rifle. "Or something bigger? Must have been significant to justify killing a detective."

"Last warning." The accent thickened with threat. "Sit. Or we start with your deputy here."

One of the other men pressed his rifle against Finn's temple. She had no choice. She sat.

"Good." The Irishman pulled another chair close, sitting across from her while keeping the rifle trained at her chest. "Now then. Who else knows what you've been investigating?"

"Nobody."

"See, I don't believe that. Your father's been asking questions about Carlton Vance. Making calls. Who's he been talking to?"

Sheila's pulse quickened. They knew about Vance. About her father's attempts to track him down.

"I told you. Nobody else knows."

"What about Meridian Holdings?" The name hung in the air like smoke. "Who else have you told about it?"

She kept her face carefully blank, though her mind raced. They were worried—worried enough to grab her father, to set this trap. Which meant she and Gabriel had been getting close to something important.

"Last chance, Sheriff." The Irishman nodded to one of his men, who produced a set of pliers. "Who else knows?"

Finn tensed beside her as the man approached him with the pliers. His eyes met hers, steady despite what was coming.

"Wait." Sheila's voice cracked. "Just... wait."

"I'm not a patient man, Sheriff Stone." The Irishman leaned forward. "And my employers are even less patient. So let's try again. Who else knows about Vance? About Meridian Holdings?"

The man with the pliers grabbed Finn's hand, forcing his fingers straight.

"Nobody knows!" The words burst from her. "I swear. We've been careful, kept everything between us."

"You're lying." The Irishman's voice carried absolute certainty. "Your father's been making calls, reaching out to old contacts. Names keep coming up—people who shouldn't be mentioned. We need to know who he's talked to."

The pliers touched Finn's index finger.

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"Start with the thumbnails," the Irishman said casually. "More nerve endings."

"Please," Sheila said, her voice raw. "I swear we haven't told anyone else. Just Finn, and only because I trust him with my life."

The pliers hovered over Finn's nail. Sweat beaded on his forehead, but he remained silent, stoic.

"Dad was careful," she continued. "We both were. We knew what happened to people who talked about this."

The Irishman studied her for a long moment, his eyes cold behind the mask. Finally, he nodded, and the man with the pliers stepped back.

"I believe you," he said quietly. "Your father's not stupid. He learned that lesson with your mother." He stood, adjusting his grip on the rifle. "Finish it," he told one of his men. "Make it clean."

Ice flooded Sheila's veins. This was it—they were going to die here, in this dusty room that already held too much violence.

"Wait," she called as he turned to leave. "Why? Why did Mom have to die?"

He paused in the doorway, considering. "Your mother was an accountant. Good with numbers. She started tracking discrepancies in the department's finances—money from drug seizures, federal grants, asset forfeitures. Millions disappearing over decades." He turned back slightly. "But it wasn't just the money. It was where it

went."

"Meridian Holdings," Sheila said softly.

"A shell company. But look deeper and you find something bigger—judges taking bribes to dismiss cases, politicians ensuring certain investigations go nowhere, evidence disappearing from lockup. A whole system, carefully built over thirty years." His accent made the words sound almost poetic. "Your mother followed the money. Found names that should've stayed buried."

"So you sent Eddie Mills to kill her."

"Had to be someone outside the department. No connections. Just a man who needed money and had a grudge against cops." He shrugged. "Simple, clean. Until you started digging."

"You're the one who ordered it." The words felt like ash in her mouth. "You gave Mills the order to kill my mother."

"Nothing personal, Sheriff. Just business." He started to turn away again. "Your mother couldn't let it go. Just like you."

"And now what? You kill us too?"

"Like I said—nothing personal. But systems only work when the right people stay quiet." He nodded to his men. "Goodbye, Sheriff Stone."

"Wait." Sheila's voice cracked. "My father. Where is he?"

The Irishman paused in the doorway. "You'll see him soon enough." The words carried finality, a death sentence wrapped in soft accent.

"No." The word came out as barely a whisper. "You didn't..."

But he was already gone, boots echoing down the hall, leaving his men to finish their work. Sheila found Finn's hand, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers. His fingers squeezed once—a final gesture of comfort, of solidarity.

She thought of Star, who would now lose another guardian. Of her mother, waiting in that cold ground. Of her father, who had died trying to protect her from the very secrets that would now kill her too.

The rifles' mechanisms clicked as rounds were chambered.

Then came the sound of breaking glass from somewhere below, sharp and sudden in the dusty silence. Sheila's breath caught. Every muscle in her body tensed, straining to hear more.

For a long moment, no one moved. Even the armed men seemed frozen, heads cocked slightly as they listened.

Another sound drifted up from below—something heavy shifting against floorboards. It could have been the old house settling, but Sheila knew better. Someone else was down there. But friend or foe? Either way, the tension in the room had shifted. Their executioners' attention was split now, their confidence shaken by this unknown factor.

One of the masked men glanced at his partner. "Check it," he ordered, keeping his rifle trained on Sheila and Finn.

The second man disappeared down the stairs, his footsteps fading into silence. Sheila held her breath, every muscle coiled with tension. The remaining gunman shifted his weight nervously and moved his rifle between her and Finn as he tried to cover them

both.

The sound of impact echoed up from below—a body hitting something solid. Then came the unmistakable sounds of hand-to-hand combat: grunts of effort, the thud of fists finding flesh, furniture splintering.

Their guard's attention wavered, his head turning slightly toward the noise. The rifle barrel dipped a fraction of an inch.

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"To hell with this," he muttered. The weapon swung toward Sheila's head, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Finn moved like lightning. He launched himself forward, driving his shoulder into the man's midsection. The rifle discharged, the round punching through the ceiling as they went down in a tangle of limbs.

Sheila was already moving. Her kickboxing training took over—muscle memory built through thousands of hours in the ring. As the man pushed Finn off and rose, Sheila drove her knee into the gunman's kidney. The man gasped, his grip on the rifle loosening.

Finn wrenched the weapon away, but the masked man pulled a knife from his belt. The blade slashed through air where Finn's throat had been a moment before.

Sheila caught the man's knife hand, twisting in a joint lock she'd learned from her father. Bone and tendon strained against the hold. The knife clattered to the floor.

But their attacker was skilled, professional. He dropped his weight suddenly, breaking her grip, then drove an elbow toward her face. Sheila barely managed to slip the strike.

The three of them grappled, each seeking an advantage. The man's training showed in his movements—military or special forces background. But he was facing two skilled opponents, and Sheila's years of competition fighting gave her an edge in close quarters.

She saw an opening and took it. Her right hook connected with surgical precision, snapping the man's head back. Finn followed with a knee strike that drove the air from their attacker's lungs.

The masked man stumbled backward, hit the wall hard. Before he could recover, Sheila stepped in with a combination she'd drilled countless times: left jab, right cross, left hook. Each punch landed clean. The man's knees buckled and he tumbled to the floor, unconscious.

Sheila and Finn stood panting in the sudden quiet, adrenaline singing through their veins. The sounds of fighting from below had stopped.

Footsteps on the stairs. Slow, uneven. Limping.

Sheila grabbed the fallen rifle, turning toward the door. Finn retrieved the knife, ready for whatever came next.

A figure appeared in the doorway, leaning heavily against the frame. Blood soaked one leg of his pants, and his face was a mess of cuts and bruises from what had clearly been a brutal interrogation.

"Dad?" Sheila's voice cracked.

Gabriel Stone managed a pained smile. "Hey, kid." Then his leg gave out.

Sheila caught him before he hit the floor. The bullet wound in his thigh was still bleeding, and his skin felt cold and clammy—early signs of shock.

The sound of an engine roaring to life cut through the morning air. Tires squealed on gravel.

"The Irishman," Sheila said, moving to the window. She caught a glimpse of a black SUV fishtailing onto the access road, disappearing into a cloud of dust.

He was getting away. The man who'd ordered her mother's death, who'd nearly killed her father, was escaping.

But as she looked at Gabriel's battered face, at the blood seeping through his pants, she knew pursuit would have to wait. Her father needed medical attention. Now.

"Finn, call it in," she said, already pulling off her belt to make a tourniquet. "We need medics. And backup."

"On it." He pulled out the phone they'd retrieved from their unconscious attacker.

Gabriel's hand caught Sheila's wrist as she worked. "Go," he said, struggling to get the word out. "You have to... you have to..."

"Just relax, okay? I'm not leaving you to bleed out."

His grip tightened despite his weakness. "That man... he's the key. He knows..." Gabriel swallowed hard and closed his eyes, clearly in pain.

Sheila felt a flutter of fear. "Stop talking, Dad. I'm staying with you."

Gabriel suddenly shoved her with surprising strength, his face contorting with both pain. "Go!" he croaked. "He's... he's..." He closed his eyes, and for a moment Sheila thought he'd passed out. Then he opened his eyes again and fixed her with an earnest stare.

"Please," he said.

Sheila wished she could be in two places at once.

"Sheila," Finn said gently, touching her arm. "I've got him."

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Sheila stared at her father, whose eyes willed her to leave and go after the Irishman. She hated everything about this, and she knew that if she left now and her father didn't make it, she would never forgive herself.

If, on the other hand, she let the Irishman get away, which might prevent her from ever getting to the bottom of what happened to her mother...

"Okay," she said, gazing hard into her father's eyes. "But don't you dare die on me."

He blinked hard in acknowledgment. She squeezed her father's hand once, then rose. The unconscious gunman's keys lay where they'd fallen during the fight.

"Out back," Gabriel croaked. "Car..."

Sheila grabbed the keys, already moving.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Sheila burst out of the farmhouse into blinding light. The Explorer sat behind the building, its engine still warm. She threw herself behind the wheel, jamming the key into the ignition. The engine roared to life.

Gravel sprayed as she accelerated toward the access road. Dust still hung in the air from the Irishman's escape, marking his trail like bread crumbs. He had maybe a two-minute head start.

The Explorer's suspension protested as she hit the main road at speed, tires fighting

for grip on the turn. She spotted his vehicle far ahead—a black SUV cresting a rise before disappearing.

Her hands tightened on the wheel. This man had ordered her mother's death. Had nearly killed her father. Had spent decades protecting a system of corruption that had let drug traffickers walk free, sent innocent people to prison, and lined the pockets of corrupt officials with millions in seized assets—destroying countless lives in the process.

He wasn't getting away. Not this time.

The road unwound before her like a serpent, all blind curves and sudden rises. The Explorer's engine screamed as she pushed it harder, eating up the distance between them. Her pursuit training kicked in—anticipating his moves, watching for opportunities.

There—his SUV appeared again, closer now. She'd gained ground on that series of curves, her competition driving giving her an edge. He was good, but she was better.

The Irishman's vehicle swerved suddenly, taking a forestry road that cut up into the mountains. Sheila followed. Trees closed in on both sides, branches scraping against metal as the road narrowed.

Her quarry was getting desperate. These roads were a maze, easy to get lost in. But they also had fewer escape routes. If she could just stay with him...

The SUV fishtailed on a sharp turn, kicking up a cloud of dust and pine needles. Sheila pressed the accelerator harder, closing the gap. She could see him now through the rear window, his face in the mirror as he realized she was gaining.

The road grew steeper, rougher. The chase had become a game of skill and nerve,

each curve a test of who would break first.

Sheila didn't intend to break at all.

The chase wound higher into the mountains, each turn bringing them closer to disaster. The Irishman took a curve too fast, his SUV's back end sliding toward the drop-off. Rocks clattered into the void, but somehow he maintained control.

Sheila stayed with him. She knew these roads—had driven them countless times during searches and pursuits. The Irishman might be professional, but this was her territory.

Up ahead, the road split. One branch continued climbing while the other curved back toward the valley. The Irishman's brake lights flashed as he approached the fork, trying to decide.

Sheila saw her chance.

She accelerated hard, closing the final distance between them. The Irishman started to take the higher road, then changed his mind at the last second. The maneuver cost him speed and stability.

Their vehicles touched—just a tap, metal kissing metal at forty miles per hour. The Irishman's SUV shuddered, its tires losing purchase on loose gravel. He overcorrected, fighting for control.

The guard rail never stood a chance.

Metal screamed as his vehicle broke through, but instead of plunging into the void, it rolled down a steep embankment. The SUV tumbled once, twice, before coming to rest against a stand of pines thirty feet below the road.

Sheila slammed the Explorer into the park and drew her recovered weapon. Steam rose from the Irishman's crumpled vehicle, its windows shattered. No movement inside.

She worked her way down the slope carefully, boots sliding on snow. The SUV's frame had buckled from the impact, its doors crushed. But the driver's side window was completely gone.

Blood marked the shattered steering wheel. The Irishman was nowhere to be seen.

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A broken trail through the underbrush showed where he'd dragged himself away from the wreck. More blood stained leaves and rocks—he was hurt, but still mobile.

And still dangerous.

Sheila followed the trail, weapon ready. The ground grew steeper, forcing her to pick her way between granite outcroppings. The Irishman was heading for a box canyon—either he didn't know the terrain, or he was setting up an ambush.

Either way, this would end here.

A twig snapped somewhere ahead. She pressed herself against a boulder, listening. Nothing but wind through pine needles and the distant cry of a hawk.

The blood trail ended at a jumble of fallen rocks. Perfect cover for an ambush. Sheila studied the terrain, looking for another approach. There—a game trail that would let her circle behind his position.

She began picking her way along the narrow path, every sense straining for signs of movement. The Irishman was injured, probably desperate. That made him unpredictable.

A pebble clattered down the slope behind her.

She spun, but too late.

The Irishman hit her like a freight train, sending them both tumbling down the rocky

incline. Her weapon went flying as they grappled. Despite his injuries, his grip was like iron as they rolled to a stop on a narrow ledge.

Blood ran down his face from a gash in his forehead. His mask was gone, revealing features sharp as broken glass. One arm hung useless, probably broken in the crash.

But his good hand held a knife, which she was desperately holding at bay as he leaned down on her.

"Should've let it go, Sheriff," he gasped, using all his weight to force the knife down, closer and closer to her throat.

The ledge crumbled slightly beneath them, distracting the Irishman for just a moment. Harley kicked him, pushing him away. She crawled back, and they both rose to their feet.

Then the Irishman came at her again.

Despite his wounds, he knew how to fight. His strikes were precise, economical, the clear results of many hours of training. But Sheila was no slouch herself. She had spent her life in rings and dojos, learning the language of combat from masters like her father.

She caught his knife hand in a joint lock, just as she had with his man in the farmhouse. This time, she didn't let go. Bone and tendon reached their limits. The knife fell, clattering into the abyss below.

A headbutt caught her by surprise, sending her stumbling backward. The ledge crumbled at her heel, rocks tumbling into empty space. The Irishman pressed his advantage as he tried to shove her over the edge.

Sheila was ready, however. She ducked, driving her fist into his ribs. As he staggered, she followed with a combination that would have made her father proud. The Irishman went down hard, blood spraying from his nose.

She pinned him against the rock face, forearm across his throat.

"Carlton Vance," she growled. "Who is he?"

The Irishman laughed, blood staining his teeth. "After all this, that's what you want to know?"

"Tell me."

"Vance was Internal Affairs, back when the system was first being built. He saw what was happening—judges taking bribes, evidence disappearing, drug money vanishing between seizure and processing. But instead of fighting it..." He coughed, spitting blood. "He decided to manage it. Make it efficient. Professional."

"He was dirty from the start?"

"He was smart. Created Meridian Holdings as a shell company to move the money. Set up the whole structure." Another wet laugh. "Your father, that old pitbull, worked under him in IA. He realized your mother was asking the wrong people the wrong questions, so he sent Eddie Mills to keep her quiet."

"And Tommy? Vance sent him to kill me?"

"Had to tie up loose ends. You were getting too close, asking too many questions. Just like Thompson did. Just like your mother."

"Where's Vance now?"

"Gone. Retired to some island with no extradition. But the system he built?" The Irishman's eyes gleamed with something like pride. "That lives on. Too big to fall now. Too many powerful people involved."

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"We'll see about that." She shifted her grip, preparing to drag him back to the road. "Come on. There's a prison jumpsuit with your name on it."

His good hand suddenly caught a loose rock. "Like hell there is," he said. He swung the rock at her head. But Sheila had been ready for one last attempt. She caught his wrist, using his own momentum to slam his hand against the cliff face. The rock fell from nerveless fingers.

He lay back and laughed mirthlessly. "Just kill me, why don't you? Tell them we fought, and I took a little tumble over the cliff. My life's over anyway."

She studied him, her eyes narrowing. "You never told me your name."

He stared back at her, saying nothing.

She thought of something he'd said earlier: Your father, that old pitbull. Hadn't that been Gabriel's nickname in I.A.? The Pitbull?

"You're Carlton Vance, aren't you?" she asked. The pieces were clicking into place—his intimate knowledge of the department's history, the way he spoke about building the system, even his tactical training. He wasn't just enforcing Vance's will; he was Vance himself, the architect of decades of corruption. His Irish accent was probably as fake as his current identity.

Had Gabriel recognized him? He must have—he'd worked with Vance for years. Perhaps it hadn't crossed his mind to tell Sheila, though—he'd been trying not to go into shock, after all.

The Irishman grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about. Like I said, Carlton Vance retired to some island. My name's Toby Fitzgerald."

"Sure you are," she murmured.

He stirred, groaning. "Come on, then. Just finish this. I've had a good run. Don't tell me you don't want to see dead."

"This might come as a surprise to you," she said, "but I'm not like you." She rolled him over onto his stomach, despite his protests, and cuffed him.

"You're going to face justice," she said. "Tell a jury exactly what you did. Every murder, every cover-up."

"The other will never let that happen." He didn't resist as she pulled him to his feet. "The system protects its own."

"Maybe." She started guiding him carefully back up the slope. "But the system's never dealt with someone like me before."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The smell of antiseptic competed with the smell of flowers, creating an odd cocktail of scents. Gabriel Stone lay propped against white pillows, his weathered face marked by cuts and bruises that stood out starkly against bleached sheets. Tubes snaked from his arm to hanging bags of fluids and antibiotics.

Sheila sat in the visitor's chair beside him, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. The bullet wound in his thigh had been cleaned and stitched, though the doctors said he'd likely walk with a limp for several months. Better than not walking at all.

"You should be sleeping," she said softly.

"Too much to talk about." His voice was rough, scraped raw by hours of interrogation before she'd found him. "You got him?"

"Yeah." She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "The man who ordered Mom's death. The one who's been protecting this corrupt system for decades." She studied her father's face. "Carlton Vance."

Gabriel nodded slowly, his face showing no surprise. "I would have told you before you went after him, but it took all I had just to convince you to go after him. His identity didn't seem quite so important at the moment."

"He's calling himself Toby Fitzgerald now. Claims Vance retired to some island paradise. But the way he talked about the department, about how the system was built..." She shook her head. "He knows too much. Things only someone on the inside would understand."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the soft beep of medical monitors. Outside the window, afternoon sunlight painted Salt Lake City in shades of gold and shadow.

"I should have told you sooner," Gabriel said finally. His voice carried the weight of decades of regret. "About Vance. About everything."

"Then tell me now."

He shifted against the pillows, grimacing at the movement. "I worked under him in Internal Affairs. Back when it all started. He seemed like this crusader for justice—investigating corrupt cops, building cases against dirty judges." A bitter laugh escaped him. "It took me too long to realize he wasn't fighting corruption. He

was organizing it."

"Meridian Holdings," Sheila said. "The shell company he created to move the money."

"That was just the start. Drug seizures, evidence tampering, witness intimidation—he turned it all into a system. Professional. Efficient." Gabriel's jaw tightened. "By the time I understood what was happening, I was already compromised. He made sure of that."

"What do you mean?"

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"Little things at first. Losing evidence that would hurt certain cases. Overlooking disciplinary issues for officers who played along." He wouldn't meet her eyes. "Then bigger things. Money started appearing in my account—'bonuses' I couldn't explain. By the time your mother started asking questions..."

"You were trapped."

"I tried to warn her. Told her to drop it, that some things were better left alone." His voice cracked. "But she was like you. Couldn't let injustice stand, no matter the cost."

"So when Vance sent Eddie Mills..."

Tears gathered in his eyes. "I had no idea about that. You have to believe me."

Sheila took his hand, feeling the tremors that ran through him. "I believe you."

"Everything I did was to protect all of you." He grunted and shook his head sadly. "Fat lot of good it did. Your mother and Natalie died anyway. And now they almost killed you, too." His fingers tightened around hers. "I'm so sorry, kid. For all of it."

They were both silent for several moments.

"You never told me how you got free," Sheila said. "When you came to help Finn and me."

Gabriel's lips curved in a grim smile. "Old sheriff's trick. When they took me out to execute me, Vance couldn't do it himself—too much history between us, I guess. Sent

one of his men instead." He shifted against the pillows, wincing. "The guy wasn't expecting me to know how to slip flex cuffs. Something I learned back in '82, working a case with the FBI. You hook your thumb just right, create a weak point..."

"And then?"

"Then I waited until he was positioned between me and his backup. Basic hostage situation control—never let a suspect use your own people as cover." He coughed, grimacing. "When he got sloppy with his position, I moved. Got his weapon, managed to take out his partner. After that, I just had to make it up to where they were holding you and Finn."

"You skipped over the part about you getting shot in the thigh."

He shrugged one shoulder. "A minor technicality. You really think I'd let a bullet stop me from protecting my little girl?"

Sheila smiled and felt tears gathering in her eyes. Before she could say anything, however, a knock at the door distracted her. Finn stood in the doorway, his face bright with barely contained excitement.

"Tommy's awake," he said without preamble. "And he's ready to talk."

Sheila felt her father's hand tighten. "The department plant? He's out of the coma?"

"Came to about an hour ago. Doctor says his cognitive function appears normal." Finn moved into the room, closing the door behind him. "The first thing he did was ask for protective custody. Says he'll tell us everything—who ordered him to kill you, how deep the corruption goes, all of it."

"Does anyone else know he's awake?" Gabriel asked.

"Just his doctor and two deputies I trust. Sarah's with him now." Finn pulled out his phone, showing them a video. On the screen, Tommy lay in his hospital bed, pale but alert. His voice was weak but clear as he spoke to the camera: "I, Thomas James Weber, being of sound mind, want to make a full statement about corruption in the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department..."

"He's scared," Sheila observed, watching Tommy's face on the screen. "Really scared."

"Should be," Gabriel said. "The people he's about to expose—they don't take kindly to loose ends."

"That's why he's smart to talk now," Finn said. "His statement is already being recorded and secured in multiple locations. Even if something happens to him..."

"The truth still comes out." Sheila felt hope rising in her chest—dangerous, fragile hope. "With his testimony..."

"We can bring down the whole system," Gabriel finished. "Not just the foot soldiers, but everyone. The judges, the prosecutors, all of them."

"There's something else." Finn's eyes gleamed. "He says he can prove Vance ordered both Thompson's murder and your mother's. Says he has documentation going back decades—meticulously kept records of every bribe, every coverup, every case that was buried. Names, dates, dollar amounts. He even has recordings of meetings where judges and prosecutors openly discussed which cases to bury. The kind of evidence that not even the most expensive lawyers can explain away."

Sheila sank back into her chair, exhausted. After all these years of chasing shadows, of watching killers walk free while good people died... Finally, they had what they needed. Real evidence. Testimony from someone on the inside.

"We'll need to move fast," Gabriel said. "Once word gets out that Tommy's talking..."

"Already on it," Finn assured him. "Sarah's coordinating with the FBI—not Walsh's team, but agents we trust. Tommy's being moved to a secure location tonight. Federal marshals will handle protective custody."

Finn's smile carried fierce satisfaction. "They can't bury this one, Gabe. Not this time."

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Sheila watched her father absorb this, seeing decades of guilt and fear begin to lift from his shoulders. "Mom would be proud," she said softly. "Of both of us."

Gabriel's eyes filled with tears he didn't try to hide. "She always believed the truth would come out eventually. That justice was worth any price." He squeezed her hand. "Looks like she was right."

"Justice is coming," Sheila agreed. "For Mom, for Thompson, for everyone they've hurt." She looked at Finn. "How soon can we take Tommy's full statement?"

"As soon as you're ready. He's asking for you specifically—says he wants to tell you everything face to face."

She stood, checking her weapon out of habit. "Then let's not keep him waiting. Dad, you rest. Let the doctors do their job."

"Be careful," Gabriel said. "Even with Tommy's testimony, these people are still dangerous."

"I know." She bent to kiss his forehead. "But they're not as dangerous as the truth. And that's all coming out now."

She left her father's room with Finn beside her, their steps carrying new purpose. Outside, afternoon sunlight painted Salt Lake City in shades of gold and promise. Somewhere in a secure hospital room, a man waited to tell the truth that would bring down decades of corruption.

It wasn't over yet. But for the first time since losing her mother, Sheila felt the balance shifting. Justice wasn't just possible now—it was inevitable.

Time to hear Tommy's story. Time to gather the final pieces of evidence.

Time to bring it all into the light.

EPILOGUE

Spring sunlight spilled across Sheila's backyard like honey, catching the frost that sparkled on fallen leaves. The mountains rose behind her house, their peaks still dusted with winter's snow. But that snow would be gone soon. Winter was fading, and spring was here, full of promise and new life.

A fire pit crackled nearby, pushing back the March chill as voices and laughter filled the crisp air. Gabriel stood at the grill, arguing good-naturedly with Deputy Baxter about the proper way to cook steaks. Gabriel's limp was barely noticeable now as he gestured with his tongs, though he still used a cane for longer walks. Six months of physical therapy had worked wonders, as had the lifting of decades of guilt and secrets.

Star sat cross-legged on the deck, working on an art project with Sarah Neville's help. The girl had bloomed in the past months, her initial wariness replaced by quiet confidence. She'd made honor roll last semester, joined the debate team, started taking kickboxing classes at Gabriel's gym. The change in her was remarkable.

"You're hovering," Finn said, appearing at Sheila's side with two cups of hot chocolate. Steam rose from the mugs like spirits in the autumn air.

"Just taking it all in." She accepted the hot chocolate, breathing in its warmth. "Sometimes I still can't believe how much has changed."

And it had changed—dramatically. Tommy's testimony had blown the corruption case wide open. He'd provided documentation going back twenty years, naming names, detailing bribes and coverups. Three judges had been indicted. A dozen officers faced charges. The FBI's anti-corruption task force had set up a permanent office in Salt Lake City to handle the ongoing investigations.

Carlton Vance—still insisting his name was Toby Fitzgerald—sat in federal custody, facing multiple murder charges. Tommy's testimony had given prosecutors everything they needed. Detective Thompson's murder. Henrietta Stone's death. Decades of orchestrating a system of corruption that had undermined justice across three counties.

"Dad seems happy," Sheila said, watching Gabriel demonstrate proper grilling technique to an amused Baxter. "More relaxed than I've seen him in years."

"Having the truth out helps," Finn replied. "Not having to carry those secrets anymore."

He was right. Gabriel had provided his own testimony about his years in Internal Affairs, about the slow corruption of a system he'd once believed in. His cooperation, combined with his efforts to protect evidence after Henrietta's death, had earned him immunity. More importantly, it had earned him peace.

Star's laughter drifted across the yard as Sarah said something that made them both grin. The girl had grown close to the deputy over the past months, finding in her a mentor and friend. She'd even started talking about studying criminal justice in college—though she was quick to add that she planned to focus on reforming the system, not just enforcing it.

"You know," Finn said casually, "there's still room for one more bedroom. If we wanted to add on to the house."

Sheila turned to study his face. "Are you asking what I think you're asking?"

"Maybe." He shrugged, but his eyes held hers. "We're practically parents already. What's one more kid in the house?"

"A lot of responsibility, that's what it is."

"And fun. Don't forget that part." His smile carried equal parts confidence and vulnerability. "Would it help if we made things between us more... official?"

Before she could respond, Gabriel called out: "If you two are done making eyes at each other, these steaks aren't going to eat themselves!"

They gathered around the patio table—family by blood and by choice. Sarah had brought her famous potato salad. Star set out the plates and silverware with dutiful attention. Gabriel said grace, his voice carrying gratitude that had nothing to do with food.

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Sheila looked around the table at these people she loved. At her father, finally free of old guilt. At Star, growing into herself with each passing day. At Sarah, who had become such an integral part of their strange family. At Finn, whose quiet strength had helped her through the darkest days.

"Yes," she said suddenly.

Finn paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "Yes, what?"

"Yes to adding on to the house. Yes to making this... official." She smiled. "Yes to all of it."

Understanding dawned on his face, joy replacing confusion. Before he could respond, Star spoke up: "Does this mean I get to help plan the wedding?"

Laughter erupted around the table—warm, genuine, healing. Gabriel raised his glass in a toast. "To family," he said. "And to justice finally served."

"To justice," they echoed.

Above them, the mountains stood silent against the spring sky, no longer holding dark secrets in chambers of ice and stone. Wind stirred the fallen leaves, carrying away the last whispers of old grief and corruption. Everything that had been hidden was now in the light.

And in that light, surrounded by love and laughter, Sheila Stone finally felt at peace.