



# For Silence (Morgan Cross #11)

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**Category:** Horror

**Description:** Superstar FBI Agent Morgan Cross was at the height of her career when she was framed, wrongly imprisoned, and sent to do 10 hard years in prison. Finally exonerated and set free, Morgan emerges from jail as a changed person—hardened, ruthless, closed off to the world, and unsure how to start again. When the FBI comes knocking, desperately needing Morgan to return and hunt down a killer who seems to be obsessed with drowning, Morgan is torn.

Morgan is not the same person, no longer willing to play by the rules, and will stop at nothing this time. In a non-stop thriller, it will be a deadly cat and mouse chase between a diabolical killer and an ex-con FBI agent who has nothing left to lose—with a new victim's fate riding on it all.

A page-turning and harrowing crime thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured FBI agent, the Morgan Cross series is a riveting mystery, packed with non-stop action, suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night. Fans of Rachel Caine, Teresa Driscoll and Robert Dugoni are sure to fall in love.

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Gina Bellwood's sneakers struck the pavement with a steady beat, her breath forming faint clouds in the crisp night air. The suburban streets of Dallas sprawled around her like a sleeping beast, houses nestled under the watchful gaze of stars twinkling in the vast Texas sky. It was late, but Gina relished these nocturnal runs; they were her respite from the courtroom battles that consumed her days.

She increased her pace, feeling her muscles stretch and warm. The recent trial fluttered through her mind—a father accused, a child silent, a mother insistent. The case had been tangled with inconsistencies, the evidence circumstantial at best. Gina had done what she did best: disentangled the facts, presented a narrative of reasonable doubt. And it had worked. The gavel had fallen, acquitting the man who stood trial for a crime too vile to imagine.

Yet as she ran, the image of the eight-year-old, eyes wide and unseeing in the witness stand, haunted her. Gina remembered the delicate skin of the child's neck, marred by scars that could have been caused by anything... or so the defense argued. She pictured the noose that was said to have once been drawn tight around the child's throat and the accused: their own father.

As she turned a corner, her shadow elongated on the sidewalk, stretching out before her. The sense of victory that had buoyed her spirits was starting to wane, replaced by the gnawing discomfort of doubt. She had seen the look in the father's eyes when the verdict was read—relief, certainly, but something else too, something unreadable. And that bothered her.

She replayed the trial in her mind, the mother's fervent accusations, the father's adamant denials, and the child's confused, frightened testimony. Gina prided herself

on being able to read people, to see the truth behind their eyes, but this time she couldn't shake the unsettling possibility that she might have been duped. What if the scars on that child's neck were indeed from his father's hands? No, she chided herself, it wasn't her job to decide guilt. A prosecutor's duty was to present the case, and she had done so effectively enough for an acquittal. Still, the seed of doubt was planted, and with each passing step, it seemed to germinate further.

In an attempt to push these thoughts aside, Gina picked up the pace. She focused on the rhythmic pounding of her heart, the crisp night air filling her lungs, the clarity that physical exertion usually brought her. But as she rounded another corner, the echo of footsteps intruded upon her solitude. They were soft but deliberate, keeping perfect time with hers yet growing steadily louder.

Gina glanced over her shoulder, her pulse quickening not from exertion now but from a sudden spike of adrenaline. There was a figure maintaining a consistent distance behind her—a man, it seemed, though she couldn't make out his features in the dim light. It was probably just another late-night runner, she reasoned, trying to dispel the unease that settled in her chest. This was a safe neighborhood, after all, one where families strolled during daylight and teenagers congregated quietly on porches at night.

She told herself to ignore the footsteps, to let the soothing cadence of her own movements reclaim her focus. But there was something about the way those steps never faltered, never slowed, that kept her senses on edge. Gina forced herself to maintain her pace, her every instinct screaming to sprint but her rational mind insisting she was overreacting.

She made the familiar turn onto Mulberry Street, the tree-lined avenue offering a comforting canopy even in the darkness. But comfort shattered into fragments when she nearly collided with an unexpected silhouette.

A man stood there, his features obscured by the shadow of a hood, but it was what dangled from his hand that seized Gina's attention and throttled her calm—a rope, its end twisted into the unmistakable shape of a noose. Her eyes locked onto it, a chill slicing through the warmth of her run-induced sweat. The sight of it—an echo of the case that lingered on her conscience—was jarringly out of place amidst the manicured lawns and silent houses.

"Sorry, I didn't see...," Gina started, her voice trailing off as instinct screamed at her to back away, to put distance between herself and this potential threat.

But before she could act on her instincts, the man moved with terrifying swiftness. His hands were rough, the force with which he grabbed her shocking in its intensity. Gina's heart hammered, adrenaline flooding her system as she felt the coarse rope encircle her neck.

"Wait—" she choked out, her plea cut short as the loop tightened, pressing cruelly against her windpipe.

Desperation surged within her, and she clawed at the binding, trying to loosen its grip. Her fingers found only unyielding fibers and the strength of the man's hold.

"Help!" Gina managed a strangled scream, her voice barely rising above a whisper as precious air was denied passage.

The noose tightened. Gina's head swam. Everything slowly faded to white.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:36 pm*

Morgan's grip on the steering wheel was white-knuckled, each turn through Dallas's night-cloaked streets a sharp jab in the direction of her reckoning. Streetlights streaked overhead, fleeting guardians in the darkness that swathed the city. The engine's steady hum was a mantra, urging her forward to meet Thomas—an adversary turned dubious ally.

She hadn't whispered a word to Derik about this clandestine journey. Guilt gnawed at her as she envisioned him still tangled in the bed sheets, blissfully oblivious to her departure. They had crossed a threshold last night, one she'd fortified against him for so long. But as his breathing steadied in sleep, the insistent buzz of her phone severed the brief spell of intimacy. Thomas's voice on the line, urgent yet cryptic, had propelled her into the night.

Morgan could still feel Derik's touch lingering on her skin, a reminder of what she'd left behind. Their shared warmth contrasted with the chill that now seeped through her car's vents. This quest, though—this unearthing of truth—was a path Morgan knew she must tread alone. Each mile brought her closer to answers that had eluded her for over a decade.

The men who framed her for murder had remained in the shadows, their identities shrouded in enigma. Their motives, however, were crystallizing with every piece of the puzzle she painstakingly assembled. It all circled back to her father, Christopher Cross—or John Christopher, as she had come to know his true identity. The former FBI agent, her father, had harbored secrets dense enough to suffocate the carefree image she held of him.

Her hands tightened further as she replayed memories of her father—their hikes in

the woods, his laughter echoing around the cabin they called home. Had his eyes ever betrayed the weight of his past? Or had she been too enamored with the facade to notice? The revelation of his double life had shaken the foundations of her world, leaving her to question the man she thought she knew.

Morgan's dark hair whipped around her face as she rolled down her window, inviting the cool air to clear her mind. She needed to focus, to prepare for whatever game Thomas was playing. The road stretched out before her like a dark serpent, coiling through the city's underbelly. She drove with the determined precision of a woman on the edge of unraveling a decade-long lie. The dashboard clock's neon glow marked each minute with an eerie insistence, syncing with the palpitations that drummed against her chest. She was close now, so tantalizingly close to the answers that had evaded her for ten torturous years.

Morgan's thoughts were a maelstrom, each one colliding with the next as she grappled with the knowledge of her father's tragic mistake—the death of Mary Price at his hands. An accident that spiraled into an unfathomable cover-up. Thomas's mother. The thought festered in her mind like a wound refusing to heal. It explained the vitriol behind Thomas's eyes—hatred born of grief. Yet, it wasn't just her father who had buried the truth; other men lurked in the shadows of that secret, their identities elusive, their hands just as bloodstained.

She could almost hear her father's voice, feel his presence beside her, urging her to dig deeper, to expose the rot beneath the surface. But would understanding his sins change anything? Would it absolve her of the years stolen from her life? No, but it might offer a semblance of peace—a chance to reclaim the remnants of her fractured existence.

As the industrial skeletons of the warehouse district loomed closer, Morgan's focus narrowed. She parked near the water's edge, the last stop before the precipice of truth. The night air was tangy with the scent of brine and metal. The undulating waves

whispered secrets in a sibilant hush, but none as damning as what awaited her within the cold embrace of the warehouse.

Are you walking into another trap, Morgan? she asked herself, her voice barely audible above the lapping water. But the question hung unanswered in the void. With nothing left to lose, fear had become a luxury she couldn't afford. Her hand found the door handle, and with a resolute push, she stepped out into the night. The chill of the breeze embraced her, but it was the chill of anticipation that caused her skin to prickle with goosebumps.

She didn't allow herself the comfort of hesitation, knowing full well that hesitation was a luxury reserved for those who had something to spare. Morgan had been robbed of everything except her resolve. And so she moved towards the looming warehouse, its gaping entrance a maw ready to swallow her whole—or perhaps, to finally spit out the truth.

Morgan's boots echoed off the concrete floor, each step a drumbeat in the cavernous space. Shadows played tricks on her eyes, but she was no stranger to darkness—both literal and metaphorical. Her hand rested on the butt of her gun, a weighty promise against her hip.

A rustle. A shift in the shadows ahead. Morgan's instincts flared, and in an instant, the gun was in her hand, pointed at the emerging figure. Thomas stepped out from his hiding place, hands raised in mock surrender.

"Easy there, tiger," he drawled, the corners of his mouth lifting in amusement. "We're friends now, remember?"

"Friends don't kidnap each other's dogs," Morgan replied, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. The sight of him—a ghost from both past and present—set her teeth on edge.

"Ah, but they do share secrets," Thomas countered, his eyes glinting with that same perverse delight she had come to abhor. He took a step closer, and Morgan tightened her grip on the weapon.

"Stop right there," she commanded. Her heart thumped in her chest, a war drum signaling battle.

Thomas halted, smiling as though they were merely old colleagues catching up after work. "Come on, Agent Cross. You didn't come all this way to shoot me. Not when I have what you want."

He was right, damn him. Morgan hesitated for a millisecond before she slowly lowered her gun, her distrust a palpable entity between them. "Talk," she said tersely. "I'm done with your games, Thomas."

"Games?" His eyebrows rose in feigned surprise. "No more games, Morgan. I promise."

The promise hung in the air, fragile as a spider's web. She wanted to believe him, to grasp at the slender thread of hope that he might lead her to the answers she craved. But trust was a commodity she'd learned to ration.

"Then start talking." Her hand stayed close to her sidearm, ready to draw again at the slightest provocation. "Who framed me? And why?"

Thomas's expression softened, the manic energy that usually surrounded him dissipating as he realized the gravity of the moment. "It's time you knew everything," he said, and for once, Morgan thought she saw something akin to sincerity in his gaze.

"A name, Thomas. Give me a name."



"Richard Cordell," he said, his tone a mixture of reverence and disdain.

The name hammered in Morgan's mind, a distant bell tolling in a fog-shrouded memory. Richard Cordell. She knew of him—an untouchable echelon within the Bureau, a name whispered with both respect and fear. Retired or not, Cordell was FBI royalty, a king in a kingdom of shadows and lies.

"He's retired," Morgan said. "He must be in his seventies by now."

"Retirement is just a curtain," Thomas continued, stepping closer, his voice a serrated edge cutting through the silence. "Cordell still has his hands on the strings. He's the puppeteer, Morgan. And your life? It's been one of his performances."

She felt the sting of betrayal anew, the wound of injustice burning hotter than ever. To be framed, to lose ten years behind bars—it was all a play orchestrated by someone she might have saluted in another life, under different stars.

"Your father," Thomas said, the words hanging heavy in the air, "was merely an actor on Cordell's stage when he shot Mary Price. And they've been scrambling ever since to keep the final act from unraveling because she was pregnant. That... adds another layer to the tragedy, doesn't it?"

Morgan's stomach churned. Pregnant. An innocent life extinguished before it had even begun, a casualty in a game of power and control. She gripped the edge of a rusted metal shelf to steady herself. Her father, John Christopher—or rather, Christopher Cross—had kept his sins buried deep beneath his love for the wild and simple cabin life. But those sins had roots entangled with men like Cordell.

"Does he know you're telling me this?" she asked, her voice steady despite the tempest inside her.

Thomas shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. "Let's just say I'm not following the script anymore."

She studied him, the man who'd once held her dog, Skunk, hostage, the man who'd haunted her footsteps and now presented himself as an ally. Could she believe a word that slithered from his mouth? But what choice did she have? She needed the truth.

"Where does this leave us?" Morgan demanded, every muscle taut, ready for whatever came next.

Thomas's eyes flickered with something that might have been admiration or perhaps anticipation. "We're at the crossroads, Agent Cross," he said. "It's time to decide how far you're willing to go to set the record straight."

The revelation left Morgan reeling, the stale air of the warehouse suddenly constricting around her. "How do you know it's Cordell?" she asked, her words slicing through the tension.

Thomas shifted, his gaze flickering in the dim light. "I was working under Cordell's associates," he admitted, his voice barely a whisper against the vast emptiness. "They tasked me to watch you, to... handle you if necessary."

"Handle me?" Morgan's hand tightened on her gun, though she kept it pointed at the ground. Thomas was a specter of treachery, his motivations as elusive as shadows.

He nodded, solemnity etched into his features. "I never knew why they wanted you gone. I just followed orders until—" He paused, swallowing hard. "Until I learned about my mother."

"And that changed everything?" Morgan's skepticism bled into her tone. She knew the weight of familial ties all too well—their power to bind or unravel a soul.

"It did." His eyes were unwavering. "They don't know I've gone rogue."

Morgan processed his words with caution. Thomas had betrayed her once; his sudden turn of heart could easily be another ruse. But the enemy of her enemy could also be her key to unlocking a decade of lies.

"Rogue," she echoed, her mind racing.

He stepped closer, and Morgan instinctively tensed, but he halted, maintaining a respectful distance. His gaze softened, and something akin to warmth flickered there—a stark contrast to the cold steel of the warehouse.

"I want you to know," he said quietly, "I really would have loved to take you on a real date."

The confession struck Morgan like an unexpected blow, vile and out of place. Disgust churned within her, a storm cloud threatening to burst. She bit back a scathing retort, knowing that any emotional slip could give him the upper hand.

"Is that supposed to make me trust you?" she asked, coolly masking her revulsion.

Thomas's expression faltered, the sincerity in his eyes now tinged with regret—or perhaps another layer of his deceit. "No," he said softly. "But it's the truth."

Morgan held his gaze, searching for any sign of duplicity. It was possible that even in his twisted way, Thomas had felt something genuine. But now was not the time for vulnerable hearts; it was the time for hard truths.

"Your truth doesn't change our situation," she stated flatly.

"Perhaps not," Thomas conceded, "but it's all I have to offer."

Morgan's resolve hardened like the concrete beneath her feet. She had been betrayed by those closest to her before, and she wouldn't allow history to repeat itself. Not with so much at stake.

"Save your affections, Grady," she said with icy detachment. "I'm here for answers, not romance. What's our next move?"

Thomas contemplated her question with an intensity that seemed to draw the darkness closer around him. "We'll have to play this strategically," he murmured. "Cordell... he's not just a name you can strike off a list. He's a fortress."

Morgan's gaze narrowed, her mind racing. She knew all about fortresses—she'd been locked within the stone-cold walls of one for ten years, after all. "And?"

He stepped forward, his figure momentarily illuminated by the faint glow of a distant streetlamp filtering through a grimy window. "For now, dig into Cordell. Find out everything. We reconvene when you do. Planning takes precision." His voice, though low, carried the weight of urgency.

"Precision," Morgan echoed, a bitter edge to the word. Precision had been her life's mantra—the kind that had kept her alive in prison, that had fine-tuned her instincts to razor-sharp acuity. Yet now, it felt like a cruel joke when pitted against the nebulous specter of conspiracy.

"Taking down someone like Cordell..." Thomas trailed off, as if the gravity of their undertaking suddenly loomed over him. "It won't be easy. It'll be the hardest thing you've ever done."

Morgan's lips pressed into a thin line. The hardest thing? No, nothing could compare to the cold steel of handcuffs and the slam of a cell door, marking the end of her freedom and the beginning of her nightmare. She'd spent ten years in prison for a

crime she didn't commit, framed by the very institution she'd dedicated her life to. She'd gone behind bars at thirty, emerged at forty, having lost ten crucial years of her life.

Nothing could be harder than that.

She could handle anything now.

"Understood," she said tersely. "Anything else, or can I get started on unraveling this mess?"

"That's all I have—for now." There was a hint of something unspoken lingering in his tone, a note of finality that told her the conversation was over. "I'll be doing my part to find out more information, but you need to do yours too. I'm not in your branch anymore. But you can find out who else in your department might be working with Cordell."

With a fluid motion that betrayed no hesitation, Thomas turned and strode toward the engulfing blackness at the back of the warehouse. Morgan watched him go, each step he took echoing like a countdown. Then, with the softest whisper of fabric against concrete, he vanished from sight, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

She stood still for a long moment, her hand hovering near her holstered gun, the familiar weight of it both a comfort and a reminder of the line she could never cross again. In the solitude of the warehouse, surrounded by the ghosts of conversations past and the weight of revelations yet to come, Morgan allowed herself a moment to gripe, to feel the full force of frustration and anger at the decade stolen from her.

But moments were all she could spare. With a deep breath, she steeled herself, her resolve crystallizing into focus.

Richard Cordell was now more than a name—he was a target.

The Dallas skyline loomed in the rear-view mirror, a jagged silhouette against the night sky. Morgan gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white. The meeting with Thomas had left her with a cocktail of emotions—anger, betrayal, and a glimmer of hope. Richard Cordell's name echoed in her mind like a siren's wail. Trusting Thomas felt like playing Russian roulette with a semi-automatic, yet he dangled the key to her vindication just out of reach.

A flash of blue and red lights snapped her from her reverie. A cavalcade of police cars tore past her, sirens blaring. Their urgency was a magnet, pulling at instincts honed over years of FBI service. She followed, her dark sedan a silent shadow amidst the chaos.

They headed toward a suburb not unlike her own—a place where lawns were manicured and secrets grew behind closed doors. Morgan's instincts sharpened as she tailed the flashing lights. The road blurred past, her mind sifting through possible scenarios. She wasn't on duty, but the FBI agent within couldn't ignore the pulse of urgency—the call of the chase that set her nerves alight.

Turning a corner, the stark scene unfolded before her. A female body lay sprawled on the sidewalk, illuminated by the harsh glow of streetlights. Morgan's gaze locked onto the rope circling the woman's neck, a cruel imitation of a necklace. Her throat tightened; this was more than a mere tragedy—it was a message.

Without hesitation, Morgan parked her car. The engine's hum faded into the night's chorus of distant sirens and murmured commands. She approached the barrier of uniformed officers, the air thick with the scent of asphalt and unease.

Morgan's eyes met the man in charge—a stocky figure whose posture commanded the scene. She strode forward, her boots steady on the pavement.

"Agent Morgan Cross, FBI," she announced, voice firm, badge held out to catch the flashing lights.

"Officer Smith," he replied curtly, scanning her credentials. "This is a local matter."

"Understood," Morgan nodded. "Just passing through. Noticed the commotion."

Smith's stance softened slightly. He glanced back at the grim display—a lifeless form sprawled on the sidewalk, the cruel arc of a rope around her neck.

"Victim's name's still unknown. No ID on her." Officer Smith's tone carried the weight of routine sorrow. "Doesn't look like suicide. Strangulation marks suggest murder."

"Murder..." The word hung between them, a thread of shared understanding in the grim tapestry of their professions.

"Any leads?" Morgan asked, her gaze flicking back to the body. The scene bore a familiar chill, echoing her past. It was the kind of cold that seeped into your bones and lingered long after you left.

Smith shook his head. "Nothing so far. Seems she was dumped here, or possibly killed right here. Nobody saw anything."

Morgan nodded, a strange unease prickling the back of her neck. Striding past Smith, she approached the victim's body as an officer lifted a photography lamp. The harsh light revealed the woman's face under the twisted play of shadows.

"Agent Cross," Smith interrupted, "I can tell you're eager to help, but we can handle it from here. Please, I can't have anyone tampering with our crime scene."

"I'm not here to tamper, Officer Smith," Morgan replied, keeping her gaze steady on the body. "Just paying my respects."

Smith followed her gaze, his eyes lingering on the victim. He gave a slight nod, understanding but hesitant. He didn't completely trust her, and she couldn't blame him. After all, they were products of the same system—a system that had left her framed for murder.

"Alright," he finally said. "Be respectful."

Morgan's boots crunched against gravel as she walked towards the corpse, an ominous figure in the harsh lighting. As she moved into the floodlights' glow, the typically invisible tattoos inked across her arms emerged—a testament to her hardened past. Her heart ached at the sight before her—an echo of a life cut short, just like Mary Price.

Kneeling beside the body, she examined the woman's face. Her eyes were still open—wide with fear and shock. Who had she been? Why use a noose as a murder weapon in the middle of a public street? So many questions swam through Morgan's mind, but she knew this wasn't her place. She stood up and faced Officer Smith.

"I'm sure you can take it from here," she said. "Thank you, Officer Smith."

"If we need the Bureau's resources, you'll be the first to know."

She could hear the unspoken dismissal in his voice, the subtle hint to back off. Morgan recognized when doors were being closed in her face. This was one such time. Despite the itch in her mind, she knew pushing further would only tighten Smith's resolve to keep her at bay.

"Alright," she conceded, masking her frustration. The night air felt cooler as she



turned, her boots clicking on the pavement. Each step away from the scene hollowed her out a little more.

Back inside her car, Morgan's hands hovered over the ignition. She should drive home, file away the image of the lifeless woman, and wait for daylight to chase away the shadows. Yet the thought left her feeling stranded, like a ship adrift without a compass. With a sigh, she started the engine, the hum of machinery offering no comfort.

The roads were nearly deserted as she drove, the city's heartbeat muted by the lateness of the hour. Streetlights flickered overhead, casting long and distorted shadows like dark omens. The further she drove, the more her surroundings blurred into a monochrome landscape, indistinct yet oppressively real.

There was a connection here; she could feel it in her bones. But without proof, without jurisdiction, she was powerless to act. For now.

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Morgan's eyes fluttered open to the warmth of her bedroom, a stark contrast to the chill of secrets and death that had engulfed her just hours ago. The savory scent of frying bacon lured her from beneath the blankets, coaxing her into the reality of a new day. As she sat up, the mattress beside her was cold, empty, Skunk's usual spot by her feet vacant.

Dragging herself out of bed, she padded softly down the hallway, following her nose. In the kitchen, Derik stood at the stove, spatula in hand, deftly flipping bacon slices with an easy grace. Skunk sat dutifully nearby, his warm brown eyes tracking each movement, hopeful for a morsel to drop.

"Morning," Derik said without turning, his voice carrying the melody of routine

domesticity.

"Hey," Morgan replied, her tone flat, betraying none of the turmoil that stirred within her. She pulled a chair from the table, the scrape of wood against tile breaking the morning's silence.

It could be any ordinary day, but the shadows of last night lingered, clinging to her like cobwebs. Derik continued cooking, unaware of her midnight excursion, and she decided to keep it that way—at least for now. While he focused on breakfast, Morgan opened her laptop, logging in with swift, practiced keystrokes.

The police report loaded on screen, stark and official. Information about last night's crime scene. Gina Bellwood, 29, defense attorney—her life reduced to sterile facts and figures. Morgan's gaze fixed on the photo attached to the file: blonde hair, petite frame, eyes that once held ambition now staring emptily back at her from a world beyond.

Derik's shadow fell across the kitchen tiles, elongating as he approached Morgan from behind. She didn't need to look up to know it was him; the gentle clink of a fork against a plate announced his presence just as much as the warmth radiating from his figure.

"Everything okay?" Derik's voice held a note of concern that Morgan felt piercing through the thick air of tension surrounding her. She was keeping a huge secret from him by not telling him about her meeting with Thomas, but she just couldn't involve him anymore. Derik had already been swept into this before, and it had endangered him and his estranged son, who had to flee the country with his ex-wife to escape the men who'd framed Morgan. Derik was a weakness, and he'd be much safer left in the dark.

"Fine," she muttered, but the tightness in her voice betrayed her. She could feel his

eyes on the laptop screen, on the official report and the face of Gina Bellwood staring back at them. "Just saw something last night...drove past an active crime scene."

He leaned in closer, the smell of cooked bacon mingling with his aftershave. "A midnight drive? And you happened upon a crime scene?" There was a beat before he added, "Why didn't you wake me?"

Morgan shrugged, a defensive gesture she couldn't suppress. "Sometimes I just need to clear my head." It was true, yet not the whole truth, and she hated the necessity of these half-confessions.

"Okay." Derik let out a soft exhale, stepping away to place a plate brimming with bacon and eggs on the table before her. The mundane act seemed so disjointed from the gravity of last night's darkness.

"Thanks," Morgan said, though her appetite had evaporated. She forced herself to pick up the fork, to slice through the sunny-side-up egg and watch the yolk bleed over the plate—a vivid reminder of death under moonlight.

As she chewed mechanically, Morgan's mind wandered back to Gina Bellwood, laid out on the sidewalk, an image superimposed over countless case files she'd studied. There was a sense of déjà vu that she couldn't shake off, a link between this murder and a past case—or perhaps something more personal.

"So what's the deal with this crime?" Derik asked, sitting beside her at the table with his own plate of food.

"Well, I couldn't get much information at the scene," Morgan explained. "It was fresh. Looks like someone strangled a woman with a rope, tied like a noose."

Derik's fork paused halfway to his mouth, his eyes filled with questions. "Damn.

That's... intense."

"I know." Morgan sighed. "And here's the report. Her name was Gina Bellwood, a defense attorney. There's something familiar about it..."

Morgan trailed off. She pushed her food aside and opened her laptop. In the police reports, she looked up "defense attorney" and "homicide."

Right below Gina's report, there was another report from a little over a week ago.

With her heart in her throat, and Derik watching over her shoulder, Morgan opened it and read the details of the case. Elaine Harrows, thirty-five, another defense attorney. Only, she wasn't strangled—the cause of death was ruled to be blunt-force trauma, and the investigation was open.

"Two female defense attorneys killed barely within a week," Morgan muttered.

"But the MOs are different," Derik pointed out.

"Yes, they are..."

Morgan dug deeper into the report the police had available for Elaine. She had recently acquitted a man named Harold Jones, who had been accused of murder—however, the evidence against him was circumstantial. Morgan read further on the crimes accused of Jones, and apparently, he had been accused of murdering someone by bashing a rock over the back of their head. Blunt-force trauma. The same way Elaine was killed.

Morgan blinked, her gaze shifting over to Derik. "It's the same. Elaine's murder and the man she managed to get acquitted, it's the same method—blunt-force trauma."

Derik's eyebrows furrowed, confusion playing across his face. "So, are you saying Jones killed her? Or someone tried to frame him?"

"I'm not sure yet," Morgan admitted, still sifting through the information available. "Looks like the cops cleared Jones. He had a rock-solid alibi, so it wasn't him."

"Hm," Derik said. "Well, it's out of our hands, Morgan. These cases belong to the police."

"I know, but something's not sitting right."

She keyed in Gina Bellwood's name and read through her latest cases. There was a controversial one: Gina had a defendant, Christopher Gilmore, accused of domestic abuse against a minor—his own child. Gina had gotten Gilmore out of it.

Morgan's blood froze over.

Gilmore hadn't just been accused of domestic abuse—he'd been accused of threatening to strangle his child with a noose.

The pieces clicked together in her mind, the same way one fits the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle with a satisfied sigh. Except there was no satisfaction here, only dread pooling in her gut like acid. The room seemed suddenly colder, the reality of it all descending upon her with an icy blow.

"Gilmore, Christopher," Morgan murmured under her breath. She turned the laptop screen towards Derik, showing him the case file she'd been reading. "Gina Bellwood's defendant. Accused of domestic violence and threatening his child with a noose."

"What?" Derik's brows furrowed again as he leaned closer to read the report.

“Just like how Elaine Harrows was killed in a similar method one of her defendants was accused of.”

“So you think that connects them?” Derik asked, skepticism in his voice.

Morgan nodded, her eyes blazing on Derik’s. “We should bring this to Mueller.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:36 pm*

Morgan's boots clicked a steady rhythm on the polished floors of the FBI headquarters as she and Derik approached Assistant Director Mueller's office. The tension knotted in her shoulders, a familiar weight when dealing with Mueller, but necessary. She needed this case.

She raised her hand to knock, but the door swung open before her knuckles could make contact. Assistant Director Mueller stood framed in the doorway, his imposing figure taking up space like a storm cloud ready to burst.

"Cross, Greene," he greeted in his gravelly tone, stepping aside to let them enter.

"AD Mueller," Morgan acknowledged with a nod, stepping into his meticulously organized office. She scanned the room quickly, noting the strategic placement of accolades and commendations—a silent declaration of power. "Sir, we believe we've got a serial on our hands," Morgan began, wasting no time. She pulled out the files from her leather bag, laying them on his desk with precision. "Two victims in little over a week — both female defense attorneys who recently acquitted men charged with violent crimes. Gina Bellwood, strangled with a noose. Elaine Harrows, blunt force trauma."

Mueller's eyes remained impassive as he glanced at the evidence laid out before him. "And you think this is our jurisdiction because?"

"Because these aren't random acts of violence," Morgan stated. "These women were targeted, methodically chosen. It's calculated, which suggests premeditation and possibly a deeper motive. We need to get ahead of this before another attorney ends up dead."

"Interesting theory," Mueller said flatly, though his fingers tapped against the desk—a telltale sign of interest Morgan had come to recognize.

"More than a theory," she insisted. "We can link these cases, given the chance. This killer is meticulous, leaving breadcrumbs that scream for attention. We can track him down with the right resources."

Mueller regarded her for a long moment, the silence stretching between them. Then, without a word, he scooped up the files and sank into his chair, the leather creaking under his weight as he began to read.

Morgan exchanged a brief glance with Derik, whose expression echoed her own resolve. They watched as Mueller's eyes narrowed, tracing lines of text, absorbing the grim details of their plea for jurisdiction. The clock ticked audibly in the background, each second a tiny hammer against Morgan's patience.

"Defense attorneys," Mueller mumbled, almost to himself. "Interesting choice of prey."

"It's a pattern," Morgan pressed. "And it's our job to understand why. To stop it."

Mueller folded his arms, a skeptical arch to his brow. "Or it's two separate incidents. You know as well as I do, Morgan, coincidence is more common than conspiracy."

"Too easy," Morgan shot back. "These women, their profiles were public, searchable. A killer could've found them with a few keystrokes. It's targeted, Mueller. Someone's picking off defense attorneys."

"Based on what? Your gut?" Mueller challenged, leaning back in his chair, the leather groaning in protest.



"Experience," she retorted. "Patterns emerge if you're willing to connect the dots. And these dots..." Morgan paused, letting the gravity of her statement sink in, "...they form a line straight to a predator."

Mueller's eyes narrowed, assessing. She knew that look—it was the calculating gaze of a man who had spent a lifetime sifting truth from lies. Morgan held her ground, her resolve a steel beam through the heart of her argument.

"Convince me," he finally said, his words clipped.

"Defense attorneys," Morgan began, ticking off each point like a metronome set to a sprinter's pace. "They stand between the law and those who fear its grip. They're champions to some, villains to others. Anyone with a grudge against the system, against perceived injustice..."

She stood up, pacing the room now, her mind racing, her tattoos peeking out from under her sleeves like silent witnesses to her intensity. "Think about it—vigilantes, fanatics, individuals burned by plea deals gone wrong. The list goes on. Men and women who've watched someone walk free when they believed they should've been locked away."

"Speculation isn't evidence," Mueller cut in.

"True." Morgan stopped pacing, fixing him with a stare that bore all her years of chasing shadows. "But speculation founded on logical patterns has led us to killers before. If we wait for concrete proof, it might be too late for the next victim. We need to get ahead of this, and that means considering every angle, no matter how much it challenges our assumptions."

"Your argument is compelling, Agent Cross," Mueller admitted, his voice betraying a hint of respect that was as rare as it was fleeting. "But compelling isn't synonymous

with conclusive. We have two victims, two different methods of execution. That doesn't scream serial killer—it whispers coincidence."

Morgan tensed, the muscles in her jaw tightening. She knew better than to let frustration seep into her tone. "Understood, sir. But if we consider the killer's psychological profile—"

"Profiles are built on evidence, not suppositions," he interrupted. His gray eyes were sharp, dissecting. "However," he continued, lifting a hand to stall her rebuttal, "the fact that both women were defense attorneys and their online presence made them accessible... it could merit further investigation. I will consider your request to transfer jurisdiction over to the Bureau."

"Thank you, sir." The words were succinct, as much an acknowledgment of Mueller's concession as they were a verbal handshake sealing an unspoken agreement.

Mueller stood, towering over the desk that served as his command center. "I'll make some calls. See what strings can be pulled without drawing too much attention. We do this quietly until there's something concrete."

"Understood." Morgan rose, her posture rigid with purpose. Every cell in her body was alert, ready. "I'll await your instructions."

"Good. Don't get ahead of yourself, Cross." Mueller's gaze held hers for a moment longer before he turned away, dismissing her with the finality of a closing door. "You'll hear from me soon."

As Morgan exited the office, the sense of urgency that had crackled in the air settled into a simmering determination. The game was on, and she wasn't just a player—she was the hunter. With Derik at her side, matching her stride for stride, she felt the old, familiar thrill of the chase. They had a narrow window, and she intended to shatter it

wide open.

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Morgan's office was a chamber of restless energy, the air charged with the static of anticipation. She remained seated, her eyes darting across the computer screen where secrets waited to be unearthed. Although she was anxious to hear if they'd been given the attorney case, Morgan took some time to follow up on the other lead she needed to chase: Richard Cordell.

The glow of the monitor cast harsh shadows on her face, accentuating the lines of determination etched into her skin. Years in prison had honed her instincts, sharpened her senses, and now she wielded them like weapons against the invisible adversary who haunted the edges of her life.

She found it, an article headlined with Cordell's name, accompanied by a grainy photograph that captured his confident smile. His career sprawled before her in black and white—the celebrated cases, the commendations for bravery, promotions rising like stepping stones to power. He'd been a titan within the Bureau.

The scrolling continued, past accolades and official portraits, until she landed on an article about his retirement event. It was a gala affair, the pageantry of law enforcement's elite bidding farewell to one of their most revered figures. In the sea of faces, Morgan's gaze snagged on one in particular—Mueller, looking younger, his hair less gray, but no less imposing.

He was there, amidst the high ranks, a part of the world that had once been Cordell's domain. And while they had celebrated, she had been confined behind bars, her name tarnished, her life unraveled by the very institution she had sworn to serve.

A bitter taste curled at the back of her throat, a reminder of betrayal's sting. Each

revelation was a foothold, a piece of the puzzle she was determined to solve. The connection between Mueller and Cordell was tenuous, perhaps nothing more than the obligatory attendance of bureau politics—but she filed it away. Every detail mattered. Mueller had known her father too, as John Christopher, but Morgan still didn't know if he had any idea that Morgan was his daughter.

Just then, a knock at the door. Mueller's wide frame filled the space, and she exited the article.

"Cross. You're on the case."

Morgan's pulse quickened. All her instincts as an agent surged to the forefront, ready for the hunt. Recognition of the gravity of their assignment washed over her.

"Two days," Mueller continued, his voice cutting through the tension like a blade. "That's all you've got to link these murders before it reverts back to local jurisdiction."

"Understood, sir," Morgan replied, rising from her chair. "Thank you."

The Assistant Director gave a brief nod in return before turning on his heel and departing, leaving behind a silence that throbbed with unspoken urgency.

Morgan allowed herself a moment, a fleeting pause for breath. Then she reached for the phone.

"Derik," she said as soon as Derik picked up, "We're on. Two days to link the cases."

In the background, she heard the faint rustle of paper and the hurried shuffle of movement. After being her partner for years, Derik had learned to match her pace.

"Two days?" She could hear the strain in his voice, mirrored by her own tension.  
"That's not a lot of time, Morgan."

"No, it isn't," she admitted, "but we can do it."

"If they even are related, Morgan."

"We're going to find out if they are. First thing we should do is go to Gina's crime scene. I want to see it for myself now, in the daylight. Be ready to go in five."

"Got it," Derik said.

Morgan ended the call, her gaze lingering on the dark screen. She looked out the office window at the sprawling cityscape beyond, her keen eyes picking out the surreal landscape beneath the morning sun. She had two days to dig for answers, to expose a killer's hidden truth beneath the glaring light of justice.

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The suburb Morgan had been in last night looked different in the fresh light of day without the swarms of police officers around it. On a corner of the sidewalk, crime scene tape created a barricade; there were still some officers there, guarding the scene, when Morgan drove her car up to the curb with Derik in the passenger seat.

"So this is where it happened?" Derik asked.

"Yeah," Morgan said. "I saw here there, last night... Gina."

"What are you hoping to find here now?" Derik asked. "The cops have already done a sweep of the area."

"I know, and we'll go see what they have too. But I want to see it for myself. They could've missed something."

Derik sighed, the sound tinged with resignation and a hint of admiration. "Right. Lead the way, Cross."

Exiting the car, Morgan took a moment to analyze the scene before her. The quaint suburban house projected an air of innocence that belied the horror that had taken place within. The lawn was neatly trimmed, flowers blooming in a riot of colors by the porch — a stark contrast to the somberness of death that hung in the air.

"Let's do this," she said, striding toward the sidewalk where Gina Bellwood had been found dead. A uniformed officer met them halfway, his eyebrows furrowing in recognition upon seeing them. Morgan flashed her badge, her face set in a stone-cold mask as she introduced herself.

"I'm Agent Morgan Cross, and this is my partner, Derik Greene. We've been assigned to review this case."

The officer, a young man with a smudge of dirt on his uniform, eyed them warily before giving a curt nod. "Everything's pretty much the same as last night. Crime scene guys didn't find anything new this morning."

As they stepped onto the sidewalk, her eyes immediately began surveying the area. Derik stayed on her heels, his own gaze scanning their surroundings.

"Want to share your thoughts?" he asked.

Morgan chewed on her lower lip, a rare sign of uncertainty. "I'm not sure yet." She knelt down, studying the ground and running a gloved finger across the cement where traces of dried blood still lingered. The rope had strangled Gina, but the roughness of

it had caused some bleeding too. The brutal reality of Gina Bellwood's end. "But we're going to find out."

She moved to the grassy patch next to the sidewalk, crouched low, and squinted at something there.

"Derik," she called, never taking her eyes off the ground. When he approached, she pointed at a small object nestled amongst blades of grass—a piece of fabric. It was black and almost blended with the shadowy patches on the lawn.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Fabric," she replied curtly, retrieving a plastic bag from her pocket. With careful precision, she picked up the tiny scrap using tweezers and placed it in the bag. "We need to get this back to forensics."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You think this is related?"

"I don't know yet," Morgan said as she stood. "But anything could be the smoking gun here. I want to get this to forensics, then see what the police have on their end."

"Agreed," Derik said, a note of admiration in his voice. "Let's get to it, then."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:36 pm*

Morgan stepped out of the car, her boots clicking on the precinct's asphalt like a metronome. Derik closed the passenger side door with a soft thud, then caught up to her in two long strides. They exchanged a brief glance, a silent agreement passing between them; this case was theirs now, and every tick of the clock mattered. Morgan needed everything she could get from the police if they were going to do this thing right.

The precinct doors swung open to the buzz of fluorescent lights and the undercurrent of radio chatter. Morgan's eyes, sharp as flint, scanned the room before settling on Officer Smith. He stood by a desk cluttered with coffee cups and case files, his posture straightening as he recognized her approach.

"Agent Cross," Smith greeted, eyebrows knitting together in surprise. "Didn't expect to see you so soon after last night."

"Time's not on our side, Officer," Morgan replied curtly, her voice carrying the weight of urgency. She glanced at Derik, who nodded subtly, his green eyes reflecting the gravity of their task.

Smith shifted, discomfort etching into the lines of his face. "Heard you got the case transferred to the FBI. Figured the local PD was doing a decent job..."

"Two defense attorneys, both killed within a week," Morgan cut through the niceties, her words crisp and unyielding. "There's a pattern here, and it's not just the local scene anymore."

Smith rubbed the back of his neck, conceding with a reluctant nod. "I can see why



you'd think that. So, what do you need from us?"

"Everything you've got," Morgan said, locking eyes with him. It wasn't a request—it was a demand. They were running against time, and she needed Smith to understand the stakes.

Smith pulled out a thick folder, the word 'Bellwood' stamped across it in red. As he handed it over, his gaze lingered on Morgan's tattoos, visible beneath the rolled-up sleeves of her dark blouse—a tapestry of ink that told stories of her past battles. "Here's the rundown," Smith began without preamble as he handed over a sheaf of documents. "The acquitted client, the one Gina got off the hook? We checked him out—solid alibi. He was out of state when it happened."

"Any other suspects circle back?" Morgan's voice was a cool blade cutting through the ambient hum of the precinct.

"None that stand out. It's like the killer ghosted in and out." The frustration in Smith's tone mirrored the tension etched in the lines of his face.

"Forensics? What have they got?" Morgan inquired, her mind racing ahead, meticulously piecing together the scant evidence.

"Zilch on DNA. No prints, no fibers that don't belong to Gina herself. Whoever did this was thorough." Smith's eyes flickered with a mix of admiration and disdain—a professional recognizing the skill level of an adversary.

"Rope used in the murder—it's still with forensics?" Morgan pressed.

Smith nodded. "Yeah, but it's like everything else. Clean. Almost too clean." He gestured vaguely toward the direction of the forensics lab. "You wanna take a look? Be my guest."

"Thanks," Morgan replied curtly, her mind already shifting gears to the next phase of the investigation. "Our lab at the FBI is processing a piece of fabric I found at the scene too. Not sure if they're related yet... but we'll find out."

Smith nodded. "Head downstairs. You'll wanna talk to Lisa, our lead forensics expert."

"Thanks, Smith." With a determined stride, Morgan and Derik moved towards the lab, the possibility of a new lead igniting a familiar fire within her. Each step was purposeful, each thought honed to a razor's edge. In the sanitized silence of the lab, she would confront the silent witness to Gina's final moments—the rope that had snuffed out a life. It was there, in the intricate fibers of the seemingly innocuous object, that Morgan hoped to find the whisper of a clue that could scream volumes about the shadow they were chasing.

Morgan's boots echoed on the linoleum as she and Derik approached the forensics lab, a sterile chamber of cold fluorescence and stainless steel. The air was thick with determination, each inhale drawing in the scent of chemicals and latent answers. She nodded briefly to the lab technicians, her gaze settling on the table where the rope lay coiled like a silent serpent.

"Agent Cross, Agent Greene." Lisa's voice cut through the quiet. She was young, but her eyes held the weary knowledge of someone who'd seen too much. She gestured toward the murder weapon. "I was told to expect you. This is what you're here for, right?"

"Show us," Morgan said tersely, stepping closer to examine the rope. It looked deceptively simple, its weave tight and unfrayed, betraying nothing of its violent use.

"Marine-grade line," Lisa explained, pointing out the intricate braiding. "It's used for boating—strong, designed to resist water and weather. This one had no signs of wear;

it must've been purchased recently."

"Could be a red herring," Derik chimed in, his tone cautious. "Killer might want us chasing boat owners."

Morgan considered his point, her fingers grazing the rope, feeling the roughness that had choked the life from Gina Bellwood. "Maybe," she conceded, her mind churning. "Or it's a mistake. They could have underestimated our ability to track purchases."

"Either way," Lisa added, "it's a clue. Whoever bought this wanted something reliable, something that wouldn't fail during... you know." Her voice trailed off, the gravity of the situation pressing down upon them all.

"Thanks, Lisa," Morgan said, giving the tech a nod of gratitude mixed with resolve. She knew the significance of every trace element, every choice the killer made. A rope with no past, purchased with a deadly future in mind—it was a thread, however thin, that Morgan intended to follow. "Let's go," she instructed Derik, already mentally cataloging marine supply stores, harbors, and sailing clubs that they would need to canvas. The killer had left a trail, however faint, and Morgan was determined to follow it wherever it led.

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Back at HQ, Morgan stood before the briefing room's stark whiteboard, her dark eyes scanning over the hastily pinned photographs and scribbled notes. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting an unnerving glow on the faces of her small but attentive team. Derik leaned against the wall, his green eyes sharp with focus despite the shadows of fatigue that clung to him like unwelcome companions. They were already partway through their first day, and they needed to prove these crimes were linked fast.

"Alright, people," Morgan stated, her voice a controlled blade slicing through the tension in the room. "We have two dead defense attorneys, both killed within days of each other, both with acquitted clients for similar crimes. Elaine Harrows was killed with a rock found near the scene." She tapped a finger against the board next to Gina Bellwood's photo. "And we have our murder weapon for Gina Bellwood, A rope." Her hand moved to reveal the image of the rope, coiled and sinister even in its stillness. "It's boating rope. No wear, likely bought for the job." She paused, letting her words sink in. "Which means we could trace it."

The team leaned forward, their expressions etched with anticipation.

"Derik and I are going to track down where this rope came from. We need to know who bought this type of rope in the past week."

"How many outlets are we talking about?" asked one of the agents, his pen hovering over a notepad.

"Every marine supply store, sports shop, and hardware store that could carry it," Derik interjected.

"Start with credit card transactions." Morgan's gaze swept across the room, locking onto each pair of eyes in turn. "I want names, and I want them yesterday."

Her last command echoed off the walls as the team sprang into action, fingers flying over keyboards, phones pressed against ears. The air crackled with the electricity of the hunt, the chase for a ghost hidden in transaction records and mundane purchases.

As the cacophony of the room escalated, Morgan turned to Derik, her face set in grim determination. They had a lead, fragile as it was, and every second counted. This killer was methodical, calculating—qualities Morgan despised and respected in equal measure.

Morgan's eyes narrowed as she watched her team tear through the digital labyrinth, each click and keystroke a step closer to the truth. The hum of computers blended with the murmur of hushed conversations, creating a soundtrack to their search for justice. She paced behind them, a spectral overseer, until Derik's voice drew her aside.

"Are you sure about this?" His green eyes, usually so clear and resolute, flickered with doubt. "Linking these murders—it's a bold move."

"Bold is what we need," Morgan replied without hesitation. "The clients are clean, families too. We're missing something, Derik, and I intend to find it. Trust me."

Derik searched her face, the lines around his eyes deepening. He nodded slowly, accepting her conviction as gospel. "Alright, Morgan. I'm with you." His words were a tether, grounding her in the storm of possibilities.

"Good. Let's get back to it." She clapped him on the shoulder, feeling the reassuring solidity of an ally.

The room swelled with intensity as the hour crept by, the air heavy with concentration. Morgan's team filtered through transactions, compiling data with relentless precision. The list grew, name by name—a ledger of potential guilt.

"Got something," called out an agent, breaking the silence like a gunshot. Heads turned as he read out a series of names, each one a potential key to unlocking the mystery.

"Print it," Morgan commanded, and moments later, a sheet was in her hands. The paper felt like lead, each printed name a weight on her conscience. Credit card purchases—traceable, tangible threads in the vast web they hoped to unravel. But cash transactions remained elusive, hidden beneath layers of anonymity.

"Credit cards first," she decided, her mind racing ahead. "We'll dig into cash sales next. It's a longer shot, but we can't afford to miss anything."

"Understood," Derik affirmed, his tone steady in the face of the unknown. "Let's start cross-referencing these with known associates of the victims."

Their gazes locked, a silent pact forged between them. This list was the beginning, a first step down a path that promised to twist and turn with the cunning of their quarry. Morgan felt the familiar thrill of the chase surge within her, the sharp edge of purpose honed by years of navigating the shadows of human malice.

Morgan scanned over the list, the names blurring into a morass of potential and suspicion. Her eyes snagged on a familiar one—Daniel Keen. The letters seemed to pulse with a dark energy, as if the man's reputation had imbued them with a life of their own.

"Keen," she muttered under her breath, her voice a low growl of recognition.

She'd heard of him before. His name was synonymous with courtroom warfare, a prosecutor who played in the gray, where right and wrong often became indistinct. She flipped open her laptop, the click of keys punctuating the tense silence of the room.

"Derik, look at this," Morgan beckoned with an urgency that made her partner pivot mid-step, his curiosity piqued. He leaned over her shoulder as the search results confirmed what she dreaded—Daniel Keen had faced off against both victims within the past year. Unrelated cases, but still, he was a connection.

"Always lost..." Derik's voice trailed off, echoing the incredulity that tightened around Morgan's chest like a vice.

"Keen has a pretty bad reputation for losing cases for his clients," Morgan said. "If he wanted to get rid of people like Gina and Elaine, it would make sense. They were good defense lawyers. They got a lot of people who looked very guilty free of charge. To be honest, a lot of people could take issue with people like that."

"Let's not jump the gun," Derik said, a note of caution coloring his voice. "There could be any number of reasons for his losing streak. Correlation, not causation and all that."

Morgan nodded, her mind a whirlwind of possibilities. "We can't rule it out, though. This is the first solid link we've had between the victims. Was Keen set to face off against either of them in the coming weeks?"

Derik turned back to his own laptop, fingers once again flying over the keys. "Let's see... yes. According to this," he said after a moment, "he was scheduled to go up against Gina in court next month."

Morgan clenched her jaw. The connection was tenuous, but it was more than they had before – a thread to pull on, a path to follow. And while Morgan knew better than anyone how dangerous assumptions could be, she couldn't shake off the feeling that they were onto something.

"Could be a motive," she mused aloud, "but we need more."

"Hold on," Derik said, voice urgent as he frowned at the screen. "I'm on Keen's file right now. His wife filed for divorce less than two weeks ago."

"That could be a reason for your psyche to start crumbling," Morgan said. "If he keeps losing to defense lawyers such as Gina and Elaine, then maybe he wanted to start taking them out, to boost himself. We don't know what's been going on in his marriage, but maybe his wife was tired of being with a lawyer who could never win a

case.”

“So he’s trying to kill the competition,” Derik muttered.

A new intensity filled the room. Daniel Keen just might be the thread connecting these women.

“We should split up,” Morgan suggested. “You take Keen’s wife, I take Keen.”

Derik looked at her for a moment before nodding. "Right. I'll see what the ex can reveal about him. You be cautious, alright? This is only a lead, but if Keen is our man..."

"I've dealt with worse." Morgan interrupted, forcing a grim smile onto her lips.

Derik squared his shoulders, a glint of determination flashing in his eyes. "See you on the other side then."



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:36 pm*

Derik's black sedan pulled up to the curb, the engine purring gently before he cut it off. The vehicle coasted to a stop in front of a small suburban house, its white picket fence and meticulously trimmed hedges exuding a sense of normalcy that Derik knew was only surface deep. According to their research, this was where Debby Keen lived alone, her husband Daniel recently ejected from the picture.

He surveyed the well-maintained exterior, eyes lingering on a collection of garden gnomes that stood guard among colorful flower beds. They were whimsical, out of place with the gravity of his visit. It was a stark reminder that behind every front door, there could be stories untold, lives unraveling silently.

As he sat behind the wheel, Derik's thoughts drifted to Morgan. She had taken a different path this morning—straight towards confrontation with Daniel Keen. Alone. A knot tightened in his gut. What if Keen was their guy? What if she gets hurt? The scenarios played out in his mind like a series of grotesque still frames.

"Trust her," he muttered under his breath. It was their creed, the foundation on which they built not just their partnership but something more. Trust wasn't just given; it was chosen—again and again.

Derik's fingers drummed a staccato rhythm on the steering wheel, his gaze fixed on the rearview mirror where the road behind him stretched empty. It echoed the hollow feeling in his gut—something wasn't adding up. Morgan had always been an enigma, but her actions last night were out of character, even for her. A midnight drive alone? Stumbling upon a crime scene like some rookie beat cop?

His instincts buzzed with suspicion. He knew better than to ignore that nagging voice

in the back of his head—the one that usually led to breakthroughs or, at the very least, kept him alive.

He ran a hand through his slicked-back hair. Morgan was more than capable, yet the thought of her confronting Daniel Keen solo, the man potentially at the center of their investigation, sent a shiver down his spine. Keen had motive, opportunity, and now, thanks to a slip of paper detailing a purchase of rope, a tangible link to the killings.

With a deep breath, Derik pushed open the door, his feet hitting the pavement with determined thuds. The suburban air filled his lungs, crisp and clean, yet it did nothing to clear the fog of doubt clouding his judgment. He shook off the unease clinging to him like a second skin and started toward Debby Keen's front door.

Answers, he promised himself. That's what he needed—that's what he would get. Each step was a silent pact between him and the unknown; each stride a commitment to the truth, whatever form it might take. With every move, he left behind a trail of trust for Morgan, like breadcrumbs leading back to the faith they had in each other.

Derik raised his hand and rapped on the door, his knuckles sharp against the wood. It swung open swiftly, revealing Debby Keen. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her face free of the strain that often marked those entangled in marital discord. She wore a simple T-shirt and jeans, an armor of normalcy amidst the chaos of her crumbling marriage.

"Mrs. Keen? I'm Agent Derik Greene with the FBI." His voice held the practiced calm of countless interviews, but his eyes searched hers for signs of distress.

"Oh, hello," Debby said. "Can I help you with something?"

"Can we talk about your husband, Daniel?" he asked, treading carefully. The question hung between them, a delicate thread ready to snap.

"Of course," she replied, stepping aside to let him in. "Please, call me Debby."

Her living room was a study in contrasts; cozy furnishings clashed with the stark reality that the man of the house was now just a ghost of accusations and legal paperwork. Derik took note of the neatly arranged space, a testament to Debby's attempt to maintain order in a life disrupted.

"Do you know where Daniel was last night?" he inquired, observing her closely. If she was surprised by the suddenness of the question, she didn't show it.

"No idea," Debby said, a hint of bitterness seeping through her composed facade. "I kicked him out. I think he's staying at some motel. God knows which one."

There was a finality in her tone that suggested a woman who had reached the end of her tether with a spouse who had drowned their vows in alcohol.

"I don't care where he is," she continued, her gaze steady on Derik's. "He's a drunk, Agent Greene, and I'm done with him."

The words were a punctuation mark on the life they once shared. They spoke of late nights waiting up, of arguments fueled by liquor, of love that had soured into something unrecognizable.

Derik shifted uneasily, his gaze lingering on the collection of garden gnomes lining the path to Debby's door. He cleared his throat. "Debby, do you know a Gina Bellwood or Elaine Harrows?"

She furrowed her brow, her fingers tracing the edge of her coffee mug. "Those names sound familiar," she mused. "Defense lawyers, right? Daniel's mentioned them... complained about them. Said they made a fool out of him in court. Not like that was hard to do."

"Right," Derik affirmed, noting the bitterness lacing her tone. He swallowed hard, the gravity of his next words pressing down on him like a physical weight. "Both of these women were found dead. Murdered."

Shock flitted across Debby's face, her hand tightening around the mug until her knuckles turned white. "Murdered?" Her voice was barely above a whisper, disbelief etched into every syllable.

"Unfortunately, yes." Derik watched her closely, gauging her reaction for any flicker of knowledge, any sign of complicity.

"Does... does that mean you think Daniel might be involved?" Her question hung between them, charged with implications.

"Is there any reason we should suspect he is?" Derik probed gently but firmly. It was crucial to tread carefully; to push too hard might shut her down completely.

Her lips parted, then closed as if the words fought to stay within. Finally, with a shudder, she confessed, "I filed for divorce because Daniel...he got violent when he drank."

"Violent?" Derik echoed, his pulse quickening. There was a lead here, something tangible amid the haze of speculation.

"Once, after a case he'd lost, he came home drunk and..." Debby trailed off, her eyes darting away. "He's never been good at losing. And after enough whiskey, he'd turn into someone else—someone I didn't recognize."

"Did he ever threaten you?"

"It wasn't just threats, Agent Greene." The facade of composure crumbled as she

clutched the mug like a lifeline. "One night he...he just lost it. That's when I knew I had to get him out before it was too late. He was never like that when he was sober, but the alcohol..."

"Did he ever mention Gina or Elaine outside of work frustrations?" Derik pushed, his mind racing with the possibilities unfolding before him.

"Only to curse their names after another lost case," she said. "But to kill? Could he...?" Debby shivered, wrapping her arms around herself as if warding off a chill.

"Thank you, Debby," Derik said, his thoughts already on Morgan's safety. As he stepped back into the sunlight, the pieces of the puzzle began to click together—but the image they formed was dark and unsettling. He needed to find Morgan, and fast.

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Morgan strode into the lobby of the historical building downtown, its walls echoing with hushed whispers of high-profile cases and confidential conversations. She approached the reception desk, where a polite girl with the nametag Sandra glanced up, her smile practiced and unflinching.

"Daniel Keen," Morgan said, her voice clipped and authoritative. "Where can I find him?"

"Mr. Keen?" Sandra's brow furrowed slightly as she checked her computer. "I'm sorry, he isn't here today."

Before Morgan could press further, the click of leather soles on marble cut through the air. A tall man emerged from the corridor, his presence commanding attention like a conductor before an orchestra. His voice, rich and resonant, filled the space.

"Daniel Keen won't be coming back at all."

He extended his hand, which Morgan shook firmly, noting the callouses that spoke of someone not afraid to get their hands dirty.

"Roger Oswald," he introduced himself, "the owner of this firm."

"Agent Morgan Cross, FBI," Morgan replied, her gaze steady. "Daniel Keen. I need to speak with him."

Roger crossed his arms over his fitted suit. "Keen has been...less than cooperative lately. His performance here has suffered—divorce proceedings can unravel even the best of us," he offered, though the statement felt hollow, an afterthought meant for anyone but the seasoned agent before him.

"Problematic how?" Morgan prodded, her eyes narrowing slightly as she registered the calculated neutrality in Roger's tone.

"Let's just say he hasn't been his usual, composed self." Roger's eyes flickered, a telltale sign that he treaded on delicate ground. "Look, Agent Cross, his personal life is not our concern unless it affects this firm's reputation."

Morgan's jaw tightened imperceptibly. Every detail mattered—personal or otherwise. "And where might I find him now?"

"Earlier today, I had to kick him out. He was...disruptive." Roger's lips twisted at the memory, the distaste momentarily breaking through his practiced facade. "If I were to hazard a guess, he's at The Rusted Inn's bar. It's become somewhat of a refuge for him."

"Thank you." Morgan's response was curt, her mind already racing ahead. She turned

swiftly and strode toward the exit, the click of her boots resuming their rhythmic report.

Outside, the city hummed with the buzz of mid-morning activity. Morgan navigated through the throng of pedestrians, her path clear and unerring. The Rusted Inn loomed ahead, its vintage sign a beacon amidst the modernity surrounding it. Daniel Keen's choice of sanctuary seemed an apt metaphor—a once shiny coin now tarnished by time and circumstance.

She reached the threshold of the bar, the muted clinks and murmurs from within leaking onto the street like wisps of tobacco smoke. Through the smudged pane of glass by the entrance, Morgan spotted him—a hunched figure nursing a drink, the lines of his suit hanging off him like a shroud, his posture defeated. It was the unmistakable slump of Daniel Keen, the man who had lost too much and perhaps taken even more.

Her eyes narrowed, fixing on the disheveled prosecutor, when her phone vibrated against her hip. Morgan stepped aside, into the shade of an alcove, and answered, "Cross."

"Cross, I've got news," Derik's voice came through, carrying an undercurrent of concern that stirred something within her. "The wife, Debby, says he's been violent with her. He's unstable, Morgan."

The words etched themselves into the back of her mind, painting Keen in a more dangerous light. "Understood," she replied, her voice low but firm. "I have eyes on him, Derik. I'm going in."

"Back-up is on the way, just—"

But Morgan had already ended the call; there was no time for hesitation. She knew

the stakes. Two women dead, their lives snuffed out callously, brutally. If Keen was their connection, if he was the one who held the answers, then Morgan had to know. She owed it to the victims to brave whatever darkness lay ahead.

Tucking her phone away, Morgan steeled herself against the surge of adrenaline that threatened to quicken her pulse. Without another moment of hesitation, she went inside the bar.

Morgan's shadow fell across the gleaming bar top as she advanced toward Daniel Keen. His reflection in the mirror was marred by bottles of liquor, a man fragmented by his vices. She cleared her throat, asserting her presence.

"Daniel Keen?" Her voice was the crack of a whip in the silence.

He swiveled sluggishly on his stool, his gaze clouded with alcohol but sharp with resentment. "What do you want?"

"Agent Morgan Cross, FBI." The badge flashed briefly before she slipped it back into her coat. "I need you to come with me to answer some questions."

"Questions?" Keen sneered, his words slurring. "You gonna ask about my bitch wife? Is that why you're here?"

"Let's keep this civil, Mr. Keen," Morgan cautioned, her tone even but firm. She could see the vitriol churning beneath his demeanor, the embittered fury of a man watching his world unravel thread by thread.

"Nothing civil about that woman," he spat, bitterness seeping through every syllable. "Accusing me... Making my life hell..."

"Stand up, Mr. Keen," Morgan insisted, unwilling to wade through the mire of his



marital woes.

"Make me!" Keen shouted, and with a sudden, reckless motion, he hurled his beer glass in her direction.

Instinctively, Morgan sidestepped, the projectile shattering against the wall behind her. Glass shards rained down like crystalline raindrops, catching the light with their brief, violent lives. The bar patrons gasped, turning their heads towards the commotion.

"Dammit, Keen," Morgan muttered under her breath. She lunged forward as Keen staggered from his stool, attempting to bolt for the door.

But Morgan was quicker, her honed reflexes snapping into action as she closed the distance, gripping his arm in an iron-tight hold. Keen squirmed and cursed, his face a mottled red as he struggled to break free.

"Let me go!" he spat, his eyes wide with fear. But there was something else there, too—a desperate glint that spoke of dark secrets and hopeless corners.

"I need you to calm down," Morgan ordered, maintaining her grip despite his thrashing. "Throwing a glass at a federal agent is assault, Keen—you're under arrest."

"Get off me!" His voice wavered on the edge of panic, attracting a crowd of onlookers from the bar patrons. But as Morgan read him his rights and snapped the cuffs on his wrist, she knew she'd won this time.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

The stench of stale liquor wafted from Daniel Keen's slack-jawed mouth as he slumped in the metal chair. The interrogation room was cold and sterile, but the man before Morgan seemed oblivious to the chill, his consciousness ebbing like the tide. Morgan leaned forward, her dark eyes sharp as flint.

"Mr. Keen," she began, her voice slicing through the haze of alcohol that enveloped him. "I need you to focus."

Daniel's eyelids fluttered, a slow grin spreading across his face, incongruent with the severity of the situation. "Agent... Cross, is it?" he slurred, his words a jumbled mess. "You're here 'bout Debby, right? Can't leave a guy to drown his sorrows in peace?"

Morgan's patience was a thin veneer over her frustration; time was a luxury she couldn't afford. "This has nothing to do with your wife, Mr. Keen. Your recent purchases have brought you under scrutiny."

Confusion flickered across Daniel's reddened features, his mind struggling to keep up. "Purchases? What are you—Debby?" His thoughts were a tangled skein, knotted and frayed.

"Focus, Daniel," Morgan pressed, her tone sharpening like the blade of a knife.

Morgan flicked the two glossy images across the scarred steel table, their corners skidding to a stop inches from Daniel Keen's slack fingers. One image of Elaine Harrows, smiling and alive. Another of Gina Bellwood, looking stoic.

"Recognize them?" Morgan's voice sliced through the haze of alcohol emanating

from Keen like a knife.

Daniel squinted at the photos, his focus wavering before locking onto the faces. "Yeah," he slurred, the word dragging out into a sneer. "Screwed my clients over... more times than I can count."

"Good," Morgan replied, a cold satisfaction settling in her chest. She leaned forward, tattoos stretching along her arms as she braced herself on the table, dark eyes boring into him. "Because this isn't about your petty grievances, Keen. This is about murder."

"Murder?" The scowl etched deeper across Daniel's face, a wrinkle of confusion between his furrowed brows. He pawed at the photos, a clumsy attempt to align them better with his blurred vision. "Elaine? Sure, heard something happened to her. But Gina?" His voice wavered, disbelief and alcohol blending into a potent cocktail of denial.

"Dead," Morgan confirmed, letting each letter drop like a stone into the growing pit of realization in Daniel's gut. "Both of them. And not by accident."

"Is this some kinda sick joke?" Keen's laugh was hollow, a sound that didn't reach the bloodshot desperation in his eyes. He tried to prop himself up, but his limbs betrayed him, as unsteady as the rest of his crumbling defense.

"This is very real." Morgan's words were as sharp and precise as the blade she'd once been accused of wielding. "Sober up, Keen. I need you clear-headed. We're talking life and death here—yours might just hang in the balance."

Daniel's gaze faltered, flickering between the photographs and Morgan's unwavering stare. Somewhere beneath the liquor and loss, a spark of sobriety ignited. "I'm tryin'," he muttered, forcing the words out like they were dredged from the bottom of a

bottle. "Tryin' to take it seriously."

"Try harder," Morgan snapped back. She leaned in, her eyes unblinking as she studied the man across from her. The interrogation room was suffocating, the air thick with the tang of alcohol that seeped from Daniel's pores. She had seen many a suspect unravel in these confines, but Keen seemed on the precipice of collapse without a nudge. "Let's talk about Gina Bellwood's last case," Morgan said, her voice steady. "She defended a man accused of attempted assault on his child with a noose. Ring any bells?"

Keen's gaze was distant, his thoughts adrift in a liquor-fueled haze. He shook his head, strands of disheveled hair clinging to his forehead. "Don't... don't know what you're getting at," he slurred, squinting to focus on Morgan's face. "Never paid her cases any mind 'less they crossed mine."

"Is that so?" Morgan pressed, sensing the veneer of indifference was just another layer she'd peel back. She knew Keen's type—proudful to a fault, yet crumbling under the weight of their own failures.

"Cross my heart," Daniel muttered, a sardonic grin twitching at the corners of his mouth before dissolving into nothingness.

"Sure, Daniel," Morgan replied, her tone dry as desert sand. She made a mental note of his denial, filing it away as she shifted her approach. "Earlier this week, you purchased a marine rope," she began, watching as Keen's bloodshot eyes widened slightly, a flicker of awareness cutting through the fog. "A rope similar to the one used in Gina's murder."

"Rope?" The word escaped Keen's lips like an expelled breath, a ghost of recognition passing over his features. Daniel's defenses were up now, the mention of the rope a spark that ignited something within him.

"Care to explain why you needed such a specific item?" Morgan asked, her voice edged with the sharpness of a blade.

Daniel hung his head low in shame. "Yeah... I can explain it."

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Derik stepped through the threshold of The Rusted Inn, scanning the dimly lit corridor. A sense of urgency propelled him forward, each step carrying the weight of the unsolved murders that had consumed every waking moment of his life recently. Behind him, a team of officers moved with practiced efficiency, their footsteps a silent march through the worn carpeting.

"Room 204," Derik muttered to himself, the number etched in his mind like a bad omen. He led the way up the narrow staircase, his tall frame moving with a hidden grace despite the tension knotting his shoulders. The warrant felt heavy in his pocket, a tangible reminder of the legal line they walked on.

Reaching the second floor, Derik paused before the room's door, the flimsy brass numbers offering no resistance to what lay beyond. With a nod, he signaled to the officer beside him. The door yielded easily to the master key, swinging open to reveal a scene of mundane chaos.

"Let's gut it," Derik commanded, his voice low but clear. The officers sprang into action, pulling drawers from dressers, flipping mattresses, and sifting through the debris of a life unraveling at the edges.

The closet stood ajar, its darkness beckoning. Derik approached, his curiosity mingling with a growing sense of unease. The smell of stale whiskey hung heavily in the air, a ghost of Daniel Keen's presence. Inside the closet, amidst the scattered suits and crumpled shirts, something caught Derik's eye—a coil of thick marine rope.

"Hey, forensics!" Derik called out, his heart rate quickening as he reached for the rope. It was loosely fashioned into a shape resembling a noose, an amateur attempt at best.

Forensics crowded into the small space, their cameras clicking as they documented the find. The flash of the camera cast eerie shadows on the walls, turning the innocuous hotel room into a tableau of potential guilt.

"Be careful with that," Derik instructed as one of the forensic technicians gingerly lifted the rope. As if in response to the warning, the poorly tied knot unraveled, the rope slithering to the floor like a lifeless serpent. "Damn," Derik exhaled, the pieces of the puzzle stirring restlessly in his mind. He watched as the rope was bagged and tagged, evidence of something yet unknown.

Derik ran a hand through his slick black hair, the stray ends sticking to his forehead in his agitation. "Keen couldn't even tie a proper noose," he muttered under his breath, more to himself than anyone else in the cramped hotel room.

One of the forensic technicians paused, her gloved hands holding the now limp rope. "You think he was trying to?"

"Looks that way." Derik's voice was flat, his mind racing ahead. Keen bought this rope, but the clumsy attempt suggested he wasn't the one who crafted the deadly noose used on Gina Bellwood. Was this a rehearsal gone wrong? A drunken fumble? A distraction? "Okay, people, let's double down here!" His authoritative tone cut through the murmur of activity. "I'll be right back—I need to talk to the hotel staff. Something's not adding up here."

With that, Derik slipped out of the hotel room. He needed to know more about what Daniel Keen was doing the night Gina Bellwood died.

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Morgan's gaze didn't waver as she watched Daniel Keen fumble with the cuffs linking him to the cold metal table. His breath still stank of liquor, his eyes red and unfocused, yet there was a sharpness there—a prosecutor's mind trying to claw its way out of the haze.

"Daniel," she began, her voice steady as steel, "focus on me. Why did you buy the rope?"

"I... well..."

But before he could muster a coherent response, her phone vibrated against her hip. She glanced at the screen—Derik. As much as she didn't want to leave this room yet, Derik wouldn't call unless it was important. She excused herself with a nod.

Stepping into the hallway, the change from the stifling interrogation room to the openness felt like a splash of cold water.

"Talk to me, Derik," Morgan said, pressing the phone to her ear.

"Found the rope Keen bought," Derik's voice came through, laced with fatigue.

Morgan's brow furrowed. This was unexpected. She leaned against the wall, the gritty texture grounding her. "Explain."

"It's a mess," he continued. "Looks like he tried to tie a noose but couldn't figure it out. It fell apart in our hands."

"Any chance he left his room the night Gina died?" Morgan asked, the gears in her head turning rapidly.

"Checked with the hotel staff—no footage of him leaving. Chances are slim he's our guy."

"Damn it." The words slipped out, tinged with frustration. They were running out of time, and this lead was crumbling to dust.

Morgan's thumb lingered on the red button before she pocketed her phone, the digital conversation ended but the real one just beginning to unravel in her mind. Keen—a dead end. She exhaled sharply, the breath fogging the air of the sterile hallway. She had hoped for an easy solve; a neat package of motive and opportunity tied with the bow of forensic evidence. Instead, she had a drunk prosecutor and a knot that wouldn't hold.

She shook her head, clearing it of the cobwebs of frustration. Time wasted was a luxury she couldn't afford—not with a killer at large and the clock ticking down on FBI jurisdiction. The weight of the badge pressed against her chest, a constant reminder of duty and the promise to seek truth amidst chaos.

Pushing off the wall, Morgan strode back into the interrogation room. The door closed with a definitive click behind her—a sound that resonated with finality. Keen looked up, his bleary eyes searching hers for some hint of his fate. Despite his pitiable state, Morgan held onto a sliver of empathy. Desperate men were dangerous, yes, but not always guilty.

"Keen," she started, the name dropping like a stone in still water, "I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, you're probably too inept to have pulled this off."

His mouth opened, then closed, words failing him as he processed her blunt delivery. Morgan continued, unyielding.

"The bad news," she said, leaning forward with hands flat on the table, "is that while



you've been drowning your sorrows, someone out there is making a mockery of justice—killing people who do what you can't seem to: win cases."

A flicker of anger crossed Keen's face, and for a moment, he seemed sobered by indignation rather than alcohol. Good. Anger could be useful—it could lead to slips, to truths unintentionally revealed.

"Who else knew about the rope, Keen? Who did you talk to about your little purchase?" Morgan demanded, her voice taut as a wire.

He shrugged, a sloppy gesture. "No one... no one knew."

"Do you know anyone else in your field who may have bought it? Did someone recommend it to you?"

"No," Keen slurred. "No, I was just... I don't know what I was thinking."

Morgan sighed. Although she knew Daniel Keen was far from innocent—the physical violence against his wife being his biggest crime—she pitied him. In all honesty, right here was the best place for Daniel.

"Daniel, you assaulted a federal agent," Morgan said. "We're going to keep you here."

"I never meant to hurt anyone," Daniel muttered. "I just... when I'm drunk..."

"Actions have consequences, Daniel," Morgan cut him off. She was tired, too tired to babysit drunkards and lend them comforting words. She stood up, smoothing down her dark clothing. "It's time for you to sober up and face them."

Morgan left the room without another word. Although Daniel Keen would face what

he'd done, the killer was still out there. She still had to link the two crimes together—she needed to look more into Elaine's crime scene. Maybe there was something they'd missed.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan slumped deeper into the worn leather chair, the case files spread across the briefing room table like a fan of grim tarot cards. Derik leaned against the wall, his green eyes shadowed with fatigue. It was well past midnight, and the fluorescent lights hummed a lullaby for the weary.

"Elaine was hit with a rock—" she began, tapping a finger on the coroner's photos, "—in her own neighborhood. Gina, choked out on a sidewalk." Morgan's voice trailed off, but her brain raced forward. Two women, two sidewalks, two sentences cut short. "There has to be something to link these cases."

Morgan's fingers danced through the scattered evidence photos and reports sprawled across the metal table, her eyes sharp. The sterile light of the briefing room accentuated the bags under Derik's weary gaze as he watched her sift through the remnants of Elaine Harrow's final moments.

"Wait," she murmured, pausing on a photo glossed with the grim hue of the crime scene flash. A speck of white clung to the edge of the rust-red pool where Elaine's life had ebbed away—a stark contrast that seemed almost deliberate.

"Derik, did you see this?" Morgan's voice cut through the silence, urgent yet controlled.

He leaned in, squinting at the image. "It's fluff. Forensics tagged it as debris from the neighborhood kids."

"Did they now?" Her tone was laced with skepticism. She flipped through the folder for Gina's case, extracting another photo—the of fabric Morgan had found nearby. It

was such an inconsequential detail that it could be easily dismissed. “What if the fabric I found earlier is connected?”

“I mean, that looked different,” Derik argued. “It wasn’t fluff. I read the report, they think the fluff just blew in and is not related.”

“Yes, but...” Morgan trailed off, wondering if she was really grasping at straws here. “I don’t know. We still don’t have the report on the fabric from Gina’s scene. Let’s go down to the lab, see what they can tell us.”

Their footsteps echoed on the polished concrete as they moved through the deserted FBI corridors, the stillness of the night pressing down on them. Morgan could see Derik's mind working, whirling with possibilities. She could tell he wasn’t convinced these cases were connected, but she appreciated him taking her side on this either way.

They reached the forensics lab's frosted glass door, and Morgan didn't hesitate, pushing it open with a force that matched the thrumming pulse at her temples.

"Harriet," she called out, scanning the room for the forensic tech. The hum of machinery was punctuated by the click of keyboards and the occasional murmur of technicians lost in their analyses, working overtime; the forensics department was the secret backbone of the FBI, often working far after hours to gather forensic information vital for agents to know during the regular working hours. Morgan had always been grateful to them.

A head popped up from behind a microscope, framed by wild curls. "Agent Cross," Harriet greeted, pushing her glasses higher on her nose. "I was just about to call you—"

"Show me," Morgan cut in, the impatience clear in her voice as she approached

Harriet's workstation, Derik trailing behind.

Harriet gestured to the slide under her microscope. "The fabric you brought in from Gina Bellwood's scene—it's peculiar. So, initially, I thought we were looking at typical clothing material. But these fibers here," she pointed with a precision tool to the magnified image on her screen, "are indicative of something else entirely."

"Something else?" Morgan prompted, her arms folded across her chest, the ink from her tattoos seemingly pulsating with her rising pulse.

"Right. Small, synthetic, consistent with what you'd find in a child's plaything. Specifically," Harriet paused for effect, "a stuffed animal or similar object."

Morgan's breath hitched imperceptibly, her mind racing back to Elaine Harrows' case file. The fluff found there, innocuous as it had seemed, took on a new, sinister significance. "We found something like that at Elaine's scene too," she said, her voice a low growl of realization.

"Seriously?" Harriet seemed momentarily taken aback by the revelation.

"Yes," Morgan affirmed, with a gravity that left no room for doubt. She leaned closer to Harriet, her gaze piercing. "I need you to compare both samples, right down to the microfiber. We have to know if they came from the same object."

"Will do, Agent Cross." Harriet nodded with renewed vigor. She understood the implications as well as Morgan did—if these fibers matched, they were looking at a signature element of a serial killer's MO.

"Keep me posted, the minute you have something," Morgan instructed, turning to leave, the shadows of the lab seeming to press in around her.

"Absolutely," Harriet replied, already absorbed in the process, her hands deftly preparing the samples for comparative analysis.

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Morgan paced the length of the briefing room, her dark eyes locked onto the fiber evidence photos pinned across the whiteboard. Each step was measured, a physical manifestation of the mental gears churning relentlessly in her mind. Derik stood nearby, his posture stiff with anticipation. Across from them, Assistant Director Mueller perched on the edge of the table, an immovable bastion of authority.

"Explain," Mueller's voice broke the heavy silence, his tone commanding yet expectant.

"Two women, both defense attorneys, both dead," Morgan began, her words crisp as she pointed to the images of Gina Bellwood and Elaine Harrows. "Different methods of killing, but the same twisted signature—items related to their previous cases used to murder them."

"Coincidence isn't your style, Agent Cross," Mueller observed, his scrutinizing gaze never wavering.

"No, it's not," Morgan conceded, turning to the crucial piece of evidence. She tapped a finger on the enlarged photo of the fluff—a seemingly innocuous detail that had been the key to linking the murders. "Teddy bear fibers found at each crime scene, confirmed by forensics to originate from the same object."

Derik chimed in, "It's like the killer's leaving a calling card, only it's subtle, easy to overlook."

Mueller leaned forward, interlacing his fingers. "And because of this, you're certain

this is the work of a serial killer?"

"Without a doubt," Morgan affirmed. "This is orchestrated, deliberate. He's targeting these women because of what they represent to him—not just for what they've done."

Mueller's expression shifted; the slightest upward twitch of his lips signaled a rare approval. "Impressive work," he said, standing tall, his presence filling the room. "You two have managed to connect the dots where others saw only random points."

"Thank you, sir," Derik replied, relief evident in his tone.

Mueller's nod was curt, businesslike. "This gives us the grounds we need. You're right—we have a serial killer at large." His voice hardened with the gravity of their task. "Find him before he takes another life. We can't afford to let this predator roam free any longer."

"Understood, sir," Morgan responded, the weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders like a mantle. Her mind raced with strategies and next moves, the hunt now officially sanctioned and more pressing than ever.

"Time is of the essence," Mueller added, his steady gaze locking onto Morgan's. "I expect regular updates. Stay sharp, agents."

As Mueller exited the room, his footsteps echoing a silent urgency, Morgan turned to Derik. "We've got the green light, and now it's a race against the clock," she stated, determination etched into every syllable.

Morgan hunched over the stark whiteboard, scrawling notes with a fervor that betrayed her inner turmoil. Beside her, Derik watched, his own countenance grave as they confronted the task ahead. "We need to alert them," she said curtly, tapping the marker against the list of potential targets—women in law who might as well have

bulls-eyes painted on their backs.

"Agreed." Derik stepped closer, his green eyes scanning the names. "A media release is risky, but necessary."

"Exactly." Morgan's voice was clipped, efficient. "It'll scare people, but better scared than dead." She capped the marker with a decisive snap and turned to him. Their gazes locked, a silent acknowledgment of the gravity of the situation.

"Let's draft it. We'll need to be careful with our wording, cautious not to incite unnecessary panic," Derik suggested, reaching for a laptop.

"Keep it factual. Stick to the evidence we have." Morgan leaned in, her tattoos shifting with the movement of her muscles, a vivid contrast to the sterile environment of the FBI office.

"I'll handle the press release," he assured her, placing a steady hand on her shoulder. "You focus on coming up with a profile."

"Thanks, Derik," Morgan replied, the burden lightening ever so slightly at his words. She watched him go, the set of his shoulders telling her he felt the weight of their mission just as heavily.

Alone now, Morgan allowed herself a moment to breathe, her gaze resting on the empty chair where Mueller had been. Gratitude mingled with a relentless drive; she had linked the cases, a victory in its own right. Yet the taste of success was bitter, laced with the knowledge that somewhere out there, a killer prowled the streets of Dallas.

Her dark eyes flickered to the board where the names of Gina and Elaine stood out starkly against the white. It was for them she fought, for justice that seemed elusive in



the creeping darkness of the city. The game was afoot, and Morgan was no stranger to the hunt.

"Time to get to work," she murmured to the silence, rolling her sleeves up past the ink that adorned her arms—the marks of her past, her pain, and her unwavering resolve. This was no win, not yet. But it was a start, and Morgan would follow it to the end, wherever it led, whatever the cost.

First thing was first—she needed to build a psychological profile based on what they knew. They knew he was targeting women in law. He knew they were defense lawyers, and he was killing them the same as some of her clients had been accused of. There was clearly some sort of justice—or revenge—there, but not connected to the actual cases themselves.

And the teddy bear fibers... what could they mean?

Had the killer lost a child, perhaps?

And how did that play into the victims he chose?

As the questions swirled, Morgan forced herself to slow down, drawing on every psychological profiling technique she'd honed over years of experience. These were more than crimes; they were statements, a chilling narrative woven through each victim's fate.

Gina Bellwood. Elaine Harrows. Both career women, young, successful.

Why had the killer chosen them?

And more importantly, who would he choose next?

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

The evening air in downtown Dallas hummed with the life of a city that never truly sleeps. He stood, just another shadow among the many, up the street from the courthouse. The building's steps were still busy, even as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long, angular shadows across the pavement. His posture was casual, relaxed against the cool brick wall, with his phone out like countless others who passed by without giving him a second glance.

His eyes, sharp and calculating beneath the brim of his nondescript cap, watched the stream of people ebbing from the courthouse. Lawyers, he thought with a sneer, sycophants to a flawed system. They clung to their briefcases like lifelines, laughing and chatting about cases and cocktails, oblivious to the predator in their midst.

A buzz from his device broke his silent vigil. The screen lit up with a news application notification—something he'd been anticipating with a morbid sense of satisfaction. A video began to load, buffering for a mere second before revealing a man in a suit. FBI Agent Derik Greene, looking weary yet determined as he addressed the camera.

"Good evening," Greene started, his voice steady. "We are notifying the public about a serious threat. There is a serial killer targeting individuals within our city..."

He listened, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth as Greene continued. The agent's green eyes flickered with a hint of fear, perhaps, or determination—it mattered little to him. They didn't understand, none of them did. Justice wasn't something that could be neatly packaged into courtroom proceedings and jury deliberations. It was raw, it was primal, and it demanded sacrifice.

"Everyone in the legal profession, especially women, should take extra caution," Agent Greene's stern voice echoed from the phone, his image blurring as he moved. "There's a predator targeting defense lawyers. I urge you not to walk alone at night."

The man leaned closer, absorbing every syllable with mocking attentiveness. The agent's eyes, sincere and urgent, scanned unseen faces through the camera—the futile plea of a shepherd unable to grasp the wolf amidst his flock.

"Stay vigilant, and report any suspicious activity," Greene concluded, the press hanging on his every word.

As the screen faded to black, the man turned off his phone with a deliberate motion. He clacked his tongue against his teeth—a sound of disdain for the FBI's narrow vision. His thumb hovered over the power button, relishing the momentary silence as if it were a prelude to the symphony of chaos he orchestrated.

He knew better. He understood that the rot ran deeper than the agents dared to admit. It was not merely the defense lawyers who shrouded the guilty with their lies; it was the entire justice system, bloated and blind, that deserved his purgation.

As he lifted his gaze, the courthouse doors swung open, casting a sharp rectangle of light onto the darkening street. Emerging from within its marbled jaws was Mariana Torres. Her confident stride, the precise cut of her pantsuit, and the sway of her dark hair spoke of a woman who believed herself untouchable—above the fray of common fears that plagued lesser mortals.

To him, she was arrogance personified, a beacon of the systemic hubris he loathed. They thought they could control fate with their gavels and legalese, but tonight, he would be the arbiter of destiny. Tonight, Mariana Torres would learn that her newly acquired robes of judgment offered no protection from the true scales of justice.

He pocketed his phone and straightened, blending seamlessly into the evening crowd. His steps were measured, purposeful, as he tailed the judge from a safe distance, undetected. The city around him swirled with life, ignorant of the predator in their midst, but he was patient.

After all, justice never hurried, and neither did he.

The FBI had it all wrong.

Mariana Torres had been freshly appointed to judge. She was no defense lawyer, just another part of the broken, corrupt system that he was correcting.

The echo of her heels against the concrete was more of a magnet than a deterrent. His pace quickened, yet he remained a ghost, his steps silenced by the bustling city soundscape. A rigid smile crept onto his face as he began to close the gap, his target oblivious to the danger.

The city lights reflected off Mariana's glasses as she pulled them from her face, pinching the bridge of her nose in exhaustion. She exuded confidence; her every stride and gesture screamed defiance, unknowingly challenging him. His breath hitched at the sight; it was a picturesque tableau - a woman of power undone by her own hubris.

She would pay for that hubris.

She, and everyone else.

The FBI could try all they wanted, but they would never catch him.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's eyes felt like they were filled with sand, each blink a gritty reminder of the long day spent chasing ghosts. The sterile light of the briefing room flickered above, casting shadows that seemed to mock their lack of progress. Beside her, Derik slumped over the table, poring over the list of names they had compiled – every soul who'd purchased that damned marine rope.

"Nothing," he groaned, pushing away a stack of papers with a sense of finality that resonated through the quiet room. "They all have alibis tighter than Fort Knox."

"Of course, they do," Morgan muttered, scanning the list once more, as if the killer's name might magically reveal itself through sheer willpower. "Because why would it be easy?"

She knew the frustration gnawing at her was a hungry beast, but she couldn't afford to feed it – not when lives were at stake. She glanced sideways at Derik, his face drawn tight with fatigue and something else... guilt, maybe? He caught her gaze, and for a moment, there was a silent understanding between them. They were both haunted by their own demons, yet here they were, united in pursuit of someone else's monster.

Morgan flipped a page on the clipboard, her eyes scanning the endless rows of names and transactions. She could feel the fatigue gnawing at her bones, yet her mind churned relentlessly, refusing to succumb to rest. "You know," she started, her voice slicing through the silence of the briefing room, "this killer might've had the rope all along. Or maybe they didn't buy it—could've stolen it."

Derik leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. His green eyes met hers, weary but sharp. "I've been thinking the same," he admitted. "It doesn't

exactly expand our suspect pool, though."

"Nothing ever does," Morgan muttered under her breath. She tossed the clipboard onto the table, the sound echoing sharply. Then, as if remembering something, her expression softened slightly. "Hey, you did good today with the press. Kept your cool, got the message out. Thanks for handling that mess."

"Anything to keep us from being hounded every step of the way." Derik managed a tired smile. "Just hope it's enough to stop another headline with 'murder' in it."

"From your lips to God's ears," she said, her voice tinged with a bitter edge.

A frustrating dead end loomed over them, but Morgan's resolve only hardened. She stood, pacing like a panther in a cage, her dark clothing blending into the shadows.

"Look at this profile," Morgan began, her tone shifting gears. "Our perp is a man obsessed with retribution. The teddy bear fibers... I can't shake the feeling they mean something personal. A child, lost and mourned."

"His own twisted sense of justice," Derik murmured, following her train of thought. "He's targeting those who he thinks failed that child. Defense lawyers who walked a guilty man free."

"Exactly." Morgan stopped pacing and fixed her gaze on Derik. "Someone whose grief turned into madness. And now he's dealing out punishments where he believes the law fell short."

"Vigilante justice," Derik nodded. "But there's no pattern to the when or how. Makes anticipating his next move a shot in the dark."

"We should try to check the court records, see if there's anyone in there who has a

story like that. Child died, culprit got off free or too easy... something like that.”

Morgan went onto her laptop, the screen's glow casting an eerie pallor on her face as she scrolled through the endless digital pages of court documents. The clock was inching towards midnight, and the usual cacophony of the FBI headquarters had dwindled to a distant hum, leaving only the sound of their own frustrated breaths.

"Look for anything involving child endangerment, custody battles... anything that could have snapped," Derik said, his voice tinged with fatigue as his fingers flew over the keyboard. "We're looking for someone pushed over the edge."

A sudden creak of the door broke the silence, causing them to look up sharply. Agent Matthews stood there, his normally composed features twisted into a scowl of frustration. "There's been another one," he announced grimly.

"Tell me you're joking," Derik said, half-rising from his seat.

"I wish I was," Matthews replied, stepping fully into the room. "Body's been found—looks like our guy might be connected."

"Damn it," Morgan cursed under her breath as she stood, the weariness momentarily forgotten. "Where?"

"Suburb just outside the city," Matthews informed them. "Looks like a car accident at first glance, but there's more to it."

"Always is," Morgan said tersely, grabbing her jacket. She met Derik's gaze, and without a word, they both knew—their profile, the court documents, all of it would have to wait. There was a new crime scene calling, and it could not be ignored.

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Morgan and Derik approached the chaotic scene, red and blue lights slicing through the darkness of the late night suburb. The air buzzed with the low murmur of police radios and the distant wail of an ambulance siren fading into silence. A crushed car, pinned beneath a fallen pole, lay at the heart of the turmoil like a grim centerpiece.

"Doesn't seem our killer's style," Morgan muttered, her eyes scanning the wreckage. But they'd been called in for a reason—she needed more details from the officers on site."

They ducked under the yellow crime scene tape, badges flashing briefly in the harsh light from the squad cars. Morgan moved closer to the vehicle, the sharp scent of spilled gasoline mingling with the metallic tang of blood in the air. She peered through the shattered windshield at the victim, a woman, her body slumped over the steering wheel, dark hair cascading down her shoulders.

"Looks like she never saw it coming," Derik observed quietly, his gaze locked on the figure in the front seat.

"Or couldn't stop it," Morgan added, noting the angle of the car, as if it had been driven straight into disaster. There was something eerily deliberate about it all—the way the pole cradled the mangled metal, the silent stillness of the woman who now seemed almost part of the wreckage.

Morgan's boots crunched on broken glass as she approached the twisted wreck, her breath a fog in the cool night air. The stench of burnt rubber and spilled fuel hung heavy, mingling with the faint coppery scent of blood. She spotted a tall, familiar figure among the sea of uniforms.

"Officer Smith," she called out, her voice cutting through the cacophony of crackling walkie-talkies and murmuring first responders.



The uniformed officer turned, his young face drawn tight with the gravity of the situation. "Agent Cross," he greeted, stepping away from the huddle of his colleagues. His eyes flickered to the crushed vehicle, then back to Morgan. "This is Mariana Torres," he said, gesturing towards the wreckage. "New judge at the courthouse."

Morgan's mind whirled, piecing together the implications. A judge meant widening circles, expanding threats. "Your team was first on scene?" she asked tersely, her gaze never leaving the car.

Smith nodded. "We got here fast, but..." He trailed off, a shadow of doubt clouding his features. "She was dead on site. Thought it was just an accident at first, but we found something."

"Found something?" Morgan pressed, reading the hesitation like a telltale sign.

"Inside the car. Passenger seat." Smith gestured for her to follow.

They moved closer, the flashing lights from the emergency vehicles casting an eerie dance over the scene. Morgan leaned in, her dark hair falling like a curtain around her face as she peered through the shattered window. There, amidst the chaos of debris, lay the small, plush foot of a teddy bear—ripped off, its stuffing exposed like entrails.

For a moment, silence roared in Morgan's ears, the noise of the scene fading into the background. The innocent remnant was an accusation, a signature left with cruel intention. Her jaw clenched, the revelation etching itself onto the hard lines of her face.

"Anything else?" she asked, her voice steady despite the storm brewing inside her.

"Still processing," Smith replied, watching her closely. "But the brakes... there's talk

they might've been tampered with."

Morgan's heart raced as the gravity of the situation took hold. The teddy bear's larger, more conspicuous limb was a brazen departure from the subtlety of previous tokens—a taunt left in plain sight. She felt the weight of every decision pressing down on her shoulders as she turned to Officer Smith.

"Your thoughts?" Her voice cut through the din of activity, crisp and demanding.

"Looks like sabotage to me," Smith said grimly, gesturing towards the twisted wreckage. "She might not have even noticed the item in her passenger seat. Maybe she was just going for a drive..."

The words hung heavy in the air, each syllable a confirmation of their worst fears. Morgan nodded curtly, filing away the information with clinical precision. This was no accident; it was a message.

"Thanks, keep me posted."

Morgan's eyes flicked back to the car one last time before she pivoted on her heel, seeking out Derik in the sea of uniforms.

"Derik," she beckoned, her tone urgent but composed as they stepped aside, away from prying ears.

"Torres wasn't just another attorney—she was a judge," she stated, watching his reaction closely. "It means this killer isn't just targeting defense lawyers. He's escalating, hitting the whole justice system."

Derik's eyes darkened, the implications of her words sinking in. "It broadens the scope," he murmured, "puts anyone involved on the potential hit list."

"Exactly," Morgan affirmed, her brain already sifting through the ramifications. They weren't just hunting a murderer; they were up against someone challenging the very pillars of their society.

"Let's get back and dig into those court documents. We need to find a connection before this spirals out of control," she instructed, her resolve steeling.

Derik nodded, his own determination mirroring hers. They had entered uncharted territory, where the line between hunter and hunted blurred. As they made their way back to their vehicle, the night seemed to close in around them, filled with shadows and untold threats.

Morgan could feel the unsaid words hanging between them—the fear that they might already be too late to stop the next attack. But she pushed it aside; hesitation was a luxury they couldn't afford.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

The fluorescent lights of the FBI headquarters buzzed overhead, casting harsh shadows across the briefing room where Morgan hunched over a scattered array of court documents. Derik was beside her, scanning papers with an intensity that belied the late hour. They had returned from Mariana Torres's crime scene, and the image of her crushed car was imprinted in Morgan's mind—a grim punctuation to their urgent search.

Morgan's fingers flipped through the files, her dark hair falling over her face like a curtain, obscuring her tattoos that snaked up her arms. Each page she turned seemed to throb with the potential of harboring a vital clue, yet the answers remained elusive, slipping through her grasp like smoke.

"Any case involving a child," Derik murmured, almost to himself, his voice a low rumble in the quiet room.

"Has to be," Morgan agreed curtly, the words laced with the pressure mounting within her. Her keen eyes darted over each name, each verdict. Somewhere amid these inked judgments lay the key to unlocking the identity of a killer driven by a twisted sense of retribution.

She felt it in her bones; the pattern was there, a man who had lost a child—the teddy bear remnants were screaming that sorrowful narrative. But which case? Which shattered life had spiraled into this vortex of vengeance?

"Nothing on this one," Derik said, setting aside a folder with a resigned flick. "Single mother, custody dispute. No child loss."

"Keep looking." Morgan's command was sharp, edged with the urgency of the ticking clock. She knew they were racing against time, against an unknown when this killer might strike again.

Their suspect list narrowed with each dismissal, yet the right connection eluded them. The air grew heavy with the scent of paper and the ghosts of cases past. Morgan's mind raced, sifting through possibilities, discarding them just as quickly.

"Dammit, there's got to be something here," Morgan muttered, frustration creeping into her typically steely composure.

Morgan's eyes were gritty from the artificial light as she rifled through the stack of court records. Her fingers paused, a chill tracing her spine when a particular case file offered itself up to her weary scrutiny. It was Mariana Torres's, one of her earliest as a judge, and it bore the heavy weight of sorrow within its pages.

"Oliver Denton," Morgan read aloud, her voice a low murmur in the stillness of the room. The name was just another in a long list of the defeated until she flipped further into the dossier. "Sued the hospital over his kid's death."

Derik leaned in, his own exhaustion etched into the lines of his face. "Cancer?"

"Looks like it." She scanned the documents, each page a tale of a father's despair translated into legal jargon. The child was a cipher, unnamed, but to Oliver Denton, undoubtedly the center of a now-shattered universe.

"Any traction on the suit?" Derik asked, his gaze locked on Morgan, seeking a thread in the tangled web of evidence.

"None. He threw everything at them—malpractice, negligence." Morgan's finger traced the lines of text where Oliver had argued, desperately, that the treatment was

wrong, too aggressive. His belief that it hadn't been the cancer that stole his child's life, but the cure.

"And?"

She sighed, feeling the weight of the gavel's final fall. "Torres ruled against him. Said the hospital did what they could."

"Could be motive," Derik mused, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Could be," Morgan echoed, though the certainty wasn't there. Not yet. There was a pattern emerging, a dark design woven by loss and vengeance. But was Oliver Denton its architect?

The question hung in the air between them, unspoken but palpable. They both knew what was at stake—lives teetering on the brink of a killer's twisted sense of justice. And with each passing moment, the killer remained a ghost among them, his grievances inked in blood across the city.

Morgan's fingers flew over the keyboard, the click-clack of keys punctuated by the low hum of late-night activity in the FBI headquarters. The dim glow of the computer screen cast a pallid light on her face, etched with determination as she pored over the case details. The timeline was tight but damning—a jigsaw puzzle coming together with grim precision.

"First murder over a week ago," she murmured, eyes scanning the dates like a hawk. "And Denton's trial... two weeks back."

"Could losing the case have pushed him over the edge?" Derik pondered aloud, leaning in to study the screen over Morgan's shoulder. His presence was a steady comfort, even in the thick of uncertainty.

"Could've lit the fuse to his rage," Morgan conceded, her instinct gnawing at her. Mariana Torres, dispenser of justice, now silenced forever. And yet, those who had defended the hospital against Oliver Denton remained untouched. It didn't add up, but the scent of revenge hung heavily in the air, an acrid smell that Morgan knew all too well.

"Everyone else is alive," she continued, her voice steady despite the churn of her thoughts. "But she—Torres—is dead. Could be he's targeting anyone he can reach, anyone connected to his grief."

"Revenge can make a man blind," Derik agreed solemnly.

"Let's see what the database says about our grieving father," Morgan said, her fingers already executing the command. A few keystrokes and the ghostly image of Oliver Denton appeared on the screen, his life reduced to text and digital records. "Single dad," she read, the facts unfolding before them. "Wife died in a car accident years ago." Her eyes lingered on the words, a tragedy compounded by another, a man left to weather the storm of loss alone.

"Car accident, huh?" Derik mused, catching the thread of implication. "Maybe that's why he cut Torres's brakes—his own twisted echo of the past."

"Could be," Morgan replied, though her gut twisted with doubt. Connections in cases like these were often frayed, tenuous links that could just as easily snap under scrutiny.

"Seems thin," Derik admitted, echoing her skepticism. But they had little else to go on, and time was a currency fast depleting.

Morgan's fingers drummed on the briefing room table, her mind a whirl of facts and suspicions. She flipped through the stack of papers detailing Mariana Torres's recent

court cases one more time, searching for anything they might have missed, something more concrete. Derik leaned against the wall, his gaze fixed on the digital clock as it flicked later into the night.

"Nothing," Morgan muttered. "No recent cases with car accidents except for Denton's own loss." Her voice was weighed down by frustration, the sense of urgency pressing like a vice. They were missing something, a crucial piece that would make everything click into place.

"Looks like we're grasping at straws here," Derik said, pushing off the wall.

"Either way," she said finally, standing up and gathering the papers, "we can't ignore this. We've got to confront Denton."

"Tonight?" Derik raised an eyebrow, but he was already reaching for his coat, knowing full well that waiting wasn't in Morgan's playbook.

"Every second counts," she replied curtly, her tone leaving no room for debate. The shadows under her eyes spoke volumes of the sleepless nights that had become her norm, but her determination was unwavering.

They moved swiftly through the deserted corridors of the FBI headquarters, their footsteps echoing in the silence. The night air was crisp as they stepped outside, a half-moon casting pale light over the parking lot. Morgan felt the familiar grip of her weapon at her side, a cold comfort that had seen her through too many dark hours.

"Let's go," she said, her voice low, as they climbed into the unmarked sedan.

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The night air was crisp, the kind that bites at the cheeks and reminds you of your own



fragility. Morgan stepped out of the black sedan, the quiet suburban street feeling like a world away from the chaos of the city. She paused, taking in the scene before her—the faint outlines of sidewalk chalk drawings haloed by the soft glow of a streetlamp, a tricycle abandoned by the garage door. Childhood innocence juxtaposed with the darkness they were about to delve into.

"Let's not forget he could be innocent," Derik whispered beside her, his voice carrying the weight of their responsibility.

Morgan merely nodded, her jaw set. This was part of the job, confronting the shattered lives behind the cold veneer of crime scenes. They approached the front door, where the shadows seemed to cling a little tighter, as if reluctant to reveal what lay behind them.

With a practiced motion, Morgan rapped sharply on the wood, the sound cutting through the silence like a verdict. Moments later, it creaked open, revealing a man with eyes red-rimmed from sorrow or sleeplessness—or both. He wore a housecoat that hung loosely around him, a stark contrast to the agents' rigid professionalism.

"Mr. Denton? I'm Agent Cross, and this is Agent Greene, FBI." She flashed her badge, the silver catching the light and casting an angular glare across Oliver Denton's hollowed features.

"Agents? At this hour?" His voice was rough, edged with confusion and a trace of fear.

"May we come in?" Morgan asked, though it was less a question and more of a necessity. Oliver stepped aside, granting them entry into the remnants of his life.

As they entered, the scent of stale coffee lingered in the air, mixed with the ghost of laughter and happier times. Photographs dotted the walls, each frame capturing

moments frozen in joy—Oliver with a young boy, smiling wide, innocence and love captured in pixels and ink. The boy Morgan knew would never grow older, forever enshrined in these memories.

"Sorry for the mess," Oliver muttered, gesturing vaguely toward a living room cluttered with the detritus of grief. A toy train lay derailed on the carpet, its cargo of memories spilled out for all to see.

Morgan felt a pang of regret twist in her gut, the kind that comes when duty collides with empathy. Here stood a man broken by loss, and now she had to push a little harder, pry into wounds that were far from healed.

"Mr. Denton, we need to ask you some questions about Judge Mariana Torres," she began, her voice steady despite the storm of emotions brewing behind her stern facade.

"Torres?" Oliver's brow furrowed, and for a moment, Morgan saw a flicker of something raw pass over his face—a spasm of pain, of anger, or perhaps guilt.

"Can we sit?" Derik interjected, his tone gentle, offering a semblance of normalcy in the midst of the chaos that was surely churning inside Oliver Denton's mind. The grieving father nodded.

Morgan sat, her posture rigid, eyes fixed on Oliver Denton as he processed the news. The worn fabric of the couch seemed to swallow them, a stark contrast to the sterile environment of the FBI headquarters, where they'd spent countless hours pouring over evidence. Shadows danced across Oliver's face, cast by the single lamp that stood sentry in the corner.

"Judge Torres is dead," Morgan stated flatly, watching for any telltale sign, a flinch or flicker in those red-rimmed eyes – anything.

"Dead?" Oliver echoed, his voice hollow. "What does that have to do with me?"

"We believe she was murdered," Derik chimed in, his tone measured but firm. "Just like the other defense attorneys in town. You've heard about them?"

Oliver nodded slowly, his gaze drifting toward a photograph of a young boy with bright, hopeful eyes – a painful reminder of what had been taken from him. "I've heard," he murmured.

Morgan leaned forward, her fingers lacing together as she wrestled with the delicate balance of her duty and the empathy that gnawed at her. "Mr. Denton," she began, her voice a blade slicing through the tension, "we need to know if you hold any resentment towards Judge Torres for the ruling on your case."

"Resentment?" A bitter laugh escaped Oliver's lips, the sound more akin to a sob than any expression of mirth. "She let them get away with it. My Ben... they killed him with their incompetence."

"Did you have anything to do with her death?" Morgan's question cut through the air, sharp and direct.

Oliver's reaction was a mixture of resignation and derision. He stood abruptly, a weary titan amid the wreckage of his life. As he approached the dresser, his back to the agents, he spoke with a voice laden with sorrow.

"Every day is a struggle without him," he said, his words painting the portrait of a man adrift in a sea of grief. "You think this is about revenge? It's about justice. About making them understand what they took from us..."

His hand moved to the top drawer, withdrawing something metallic and ominous—a handgun.

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The metallic glint of the gun in Oliver's trembling hand was all the confirmation Morgan needed. Instincts honed by years of danger propelled her upward, the chair skidding back with a screech against the wooden floor. Beside her, Derik mirrored the action, his firearm drawn as swiftly as hers. Their training had merged them into a single force of authority.

"Oliver, don't," Morgan commanded, her voice a sharp blade cutting through the thick tension. Her dark eyes locked onto the man who seemed to be teetering on the edge of an abyss.

But Oliver's gaze was inward, fixated on something beyond their reach. "You can't understand," he whispered, the muzzle of the gun cold against his temple. "There's nothing left for me here."

"Please, put down the gun," Morgan implored, her plea wrapped in the authoritative tone of Agent Cross but softened by the empathetic undertones of someone who knew loss. She could almost feel the weight of the weapon in Oliver's hands, heavy with his desolation.

"We do understand, Oliver," Derik added, his voice gentle yet firm. "But this is not the way."

A bitter laugh escaped Oliver's lips as he closed his eyes, shutting out the world. His finger began to tighten on the trigger, and Morgan's heart lurched.

"Oliver!" It was more than a shout; it was a raw, desperate cry as Morgan made a split-second decision. Her finger squeezed the trigger of her own weapon, the report

deafening in the stillness of the living room.

Time seemed to fracture, the moment stretching like taffy as the bullet found its mark. Oliver's arm jerked, the gun slipping from his grasp and clattering to the hardwood floor. A sharp cry pierced the air, and Morgan's chest tightened at the sight of blood blossoming across the fabric of his housecoat.

Morgan's breath hitched, her ears still ringing from the gunshot. She barely registered Derik's swift movement as he lunged toward Oliver, his large hands deftly stripping the gun away and sending it skidding across the floor. The metallic clang of it hitting the wall was a punctuation in the chaos.

"Oliver Denton, you're under arrest," Derik declared, his voice steady despite the tremor that Morgan knew was coursing through both their veins. He secured Oliver's uninjured arm behind his back with practiced ease, even as blood seeped through the fabric of his housecoat, dark and accusing.

She watched, her own weapon now feeling like a lead weight in her holster. This wasn't how she envisioned it—she was trained to save lives, not teeter on the edge of taking them. Shooting to disarm was textbook, but reality was a jagged edge that cut deep into her resolve.

"Call it in," Morgan managed to say, her voice sounding distant to her own ears. But Derik was already ahead of her, his words a rapid-fire stream into the radio clipped to his shoulder.

"You'll get medical attention soon, Oliver. Hang in there," he said, the kindness in his tone at odds with the iron grip he kept on the suspect.

Morgan knelt beside the broken man, her hands hovering, unsure whether to offer comfort or restraint. He looked up at her, his eyes swimming pools of despair.

"Why?" he whispered. The single word hung heavy between them, freighted with the weight of loss and rage. "Why not just let me die?"

"Because we need answers," she replied, her voice firm yet not unkind. "And because your son wouldn't want this for you."

Oliver's breaths came in shuddering gasps, his gaze flickering to the pictures of his child that adorned the walls. For a moment, there was silence, save for the sound of his pain.

"Did you do it, Oliver?" Morgan asked, unable to mask the urgency in her voice. "Did you kill them because of what happened to Ben?"

The question lingered, a specter in the dimly lit room. Oliver's laughter was hollow, void of humor. "Does it matter?" he rasped, his voice laced with bitterness. "They took everything from me. My boy... my life..."

Derik met Morgan's eye, his own green orbs a tumult of emotion. They both knew the gravity of the situation; a confession loomed close, yet Oliver's words were a riddle wrapped in grief.

"Your life isn't over," Morgan countered, though doubt gnawed at her. Was his attempt at ending his life an admission of guilt, or simply the act of a shattered soul?

"Isn't it?" Oliver challenged, his voice growing weaker as the room filled with the sounds of approaching sirens.

Morgan felt a chill run down her spine. Tonight had brought them face-to-face with death, its shadow lingering in the corners of the room. And as they waited for the paramedics to arrive, the uncertainty was a living thing, whispering questions that begged for answers.

Was Oliver Denton their killer, or just another victim in a string of tragedies? As the line between justice and vengeance blurred, Morgan knew one thing for certain—the truth was still out there, waiting to be uncovered. And until it was, none of them could rest.

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Morgan's boots clicked in a staccato rhythm against the sterile hospital floor. It was a sound that matched the hammering of her heart, relentless and unyielding. The pallid corridor stretched out before her like a runway to uncertainty, fluorescent lights flickering overhead casting long shadows that danced with each turn of her dark-clad form.

"Hey, Morgan," Derik called softly, his voice laced with exhaustion. "You should sit down for a minute."

She shook her head, her dark hair swaying about her shoulders. Pacing was the only thing keeping the adrenaline at bay, the only thing stopping her from crashing. She had shot a man today - Oliver Denton, a desperate father whose life seemed to crumble piece by piece. Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than just grief gone wild.

"Can you believe he's our guy?" Derik probed cautiously, leaning against the cool wall. His green eyes searched hers, looking for an answer she wasn't sure she had.

Morgan stopped and turned to him, her tattoos shifting with the movement of her arms. "I don't know, Derik. Something doesn't add up," she replied, her voice a stark whisper in the empty hall. "The evidence... it's thin. All this time, we thought it was a vendetta against the system that took his son. But pulling a gun on himself?"

Derik ran a hand through his slick black hair, a nervous gesture she had come to

recognize. "Yeah, I wish we knew what was going through his mind. Maybe we pushed too hard, cornered him into thinking there was no other way out."

"Or maybe he's just that good at playing the victim," Morgan countered, her gut twisting with doubt. This case had burrowed under her skin, reminiscent of her own past, a time when the truth had been so skillfully manipulated against her.

"Oliver's motive, it felt right initially," Derik added, "but now... I can't reconcile the man who wanted to end his pain with the cold-blooded precision of these murders."

"Neither can I." Morgan resumed her pacing, her thoughts chasing each other in circles. "I keep thinking about the toy bear pieces left at the crime scenes. It's personal, symbolic. Does it really track back to Oliver's loss?"

"Everything's muddled. Grief, anger, revenge – they can push anyone over the edge. But is it enough to make you murder three people?" Derik pondered aloud.

"Dammit." Morgan's fist clenched. They were professionals, trained to follow the evidence, yet here they were, doubting their instincts, questioning the path they had taken.

"Hey," Derik's voice broke through the cacophony in her head, gentle yet firm. "You save a life tonight, Morgan. That shot—"

"It wasn't a choice, Derik." Her words cut the air, sharp as the memory of gunfire.

"But it wasn't us because of you. Because of what you did." His affirmation was unwavering, and for a fleeting moment, she allowed herself the comfort of believing it. "And Oliver will live too. He couldn't hurt himself either."

"Yeah." The admission came grudgingly from Morgan; she didn't love having to fire



her weapon. Her mind replayed the scene—a blur of movement, the glint of metal, the split second where everything had hung in the balance.

The sterile hush of the hospital corridor was broken by the approaching footsteps of a nurse. She stopped before them, her face etched with the weariness that came with too many hours on a too-long shift.

"Agents?" Her voice was soft, a stark contrast to the chaos that had led them here. "You can see him now."

Morgan nodded in acknowledgment, her body moving on autopilot as she followed the nurse into the room where Oliver Denton lay. The scent of antiseptic filled her nostrils as she entered, and she saw him there—the man whose life had teetered on the edge of her decision.

Oliver's arm was bandaged, stark white against his skin that had turned an unhealthy pallor. Tubes and wires snaked from his body to the monitors that beeped with a rhythm he was lucky to still have. His eyes were closed, the shadows beneath them telling tales of torment and loss.

She studied his face, searching for any clue that might betray the truth of the man who lay before them. Was he the architect of sorrow that had claimed three innocent lives? There was no satisfaction in this tableau, no clear answers—just the complex tapestry of human frailty.

"Been through hell, hasn't he?" Derik murmured from beside her, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Looks like he brought some back with him," Morgan replied, her gaze never leaving Oliver. She could see the remnants of anguish that clung to him; it mirrored the darkness she'd seen in too many eyes, including her own at times.

Oliver stirred then, a slight twitch of his fingers drawing their attention. Whether it was the pain or the presence of strangers that roused him, his eyelids fluttered open, revealing eyes that seemed to have lost their fire.

For a moment, Morgan felt the weight of the badge on her chest grow heavier. Here was a man who had suffered, who had almost succumbed to despair. And here she stood, the arbiter of his fate, hoping against hope that justice would not be another casualty in an already tragic tale.

Oliver's breathing was shallow, the rise and fall of his chest the only sign of life in the otherwise still figure on the bed. She had seen this vulnerability before, in those who had reached their breaking point, and it never got easier. He looked at them then.

"Hello again," was all he said.

"Oliver," she began, her voice steady despite the storm of thoughts swirling in her mind. "I need to ask you again. Do you know anything about the deaths of Mariana Torres, Elaine Harrows, or Gina Bellwood?"

His eyes met hers, a flicker of something that might have been indignation—or fear—passing through them before he answered. "No," Oliver rasped, each word punctuated by pain. "I would never... I didn't hurt anyone."

She scrutinized him, searching for any telltale signs of deception. But there was something in his voice, a raw honesty that seemed to cut through the clinical sterility of the room.

"Look, I swear it," he continued, his voice gaining strength as he clung to his innocence. "I'll do whatever you need. I'll cooperate."

His gaze held hers, and for a moment, Morgan saw the man behind the bloodshot

eyes—a man cornered by circumstances, perhaps, but not a killer.

"You talked about Ben," Morgan pressed on, invoking the memory of his son. "You remember what you were willing to do for him. He wouldn't want this for you, Oliver. You have to keep living."

Oliver's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, his bandaged arm a stark reminder of how close he had come to a different choice. "You're right," he admitted with a shaky exhale. "Ben... he was everything. And you're right. I have to live—for him. I am not a murderer, Agent Cross."

There was a resonance to his words that struck a chord within Morgan. His grief was palpable, his resolve to honor his son's memory genuine. For a moment, she allowed herself to feel a twinge of compassion for the broken man in front of her.

Morgan stepped out of the sterile hospital room, her boots silent on the polished floor. Beside her, Derik's presence was a steadying force in the chaos that churned within her. They paused in the hallway, the fluorescent lights casting stark shadows on their faces.

"His alibi," Morgan started, breaking the silence as she turned to face Derik, "we need to go over it again."

Derik nodded, his green eyes reflecting a weariness that mirrored her own. "We'll get the team on it first thing. Every statement he's made, we verify. If there's even a thread out of place..."

"Then we pull," Morgan finished for him, the corner of her mouth lifting in a half-smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. She knew the drill, had run the gamut more times than she cared to count. The ink on her arms seemed to pulse with the rhythm of her heart—a constant reminder of the past that shaped her.

"Still," Derik added, running a hand through his slick black hair, "he doesn't fit the profile of our killer, does he? Not really. He's just... broken."

"Broken or not, we can't afford to be wrong," she replied, her voice a low rasp. But somewhere inside, Oliver Denton's pained admission resonated with her own hidden fractures. A grieving father, lost without his son, didn't necessarily equate to a murderer. And if they were wrong about him, the real killer was still out there.

"Come on," Derik said, glancing at the clock on the wall. "It's late, and we're running on fumes. Let's break for the night."

As they moved towards the exit, Morgan could feel the weight of exhaustion settling in her bones. It had been hours since they'd eaten, and the adrenaline that had fueled her earlier was waning fast. She nodded, conceding to the logic in his words. There was a part of her that wanted to keep pushing, to stay until every possibility was exhausted.

But Derik was right; they needed rest, clarity, and a fresh start come morning.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Heart thudding with the rush of adrenaline, he stood alone in the darkness of his living room, the curtains drawn tight against the outside world. His hands were still trembling; the electric charge of his third kill coursed through his veins, a live wire sparking with satisfaction. He peered through the sliver between the drapes, replaying the scene that had unfolded just hours before.

Mariana Torres, the newly-appointed judge with her dark hair and olive skin—she who had donned the robes of justice and yet, to him, was as guilty as those she judged—had been but a pawn in a much larger game. He had watched from a distance, obscured by the shadows, as her car sped down the street, unaware of its sabotaged state. The moment when the vehicle swerved uncontrollably, the brakes rendered useless by his meticulous handiwork, played on an endless loop in his mind's eye.

The crash, when it came, was a symphony of destruction: metal shrieking, glass shattering, and then—the coup de grace—a pole crushing the chassis with Mariana trapped inside. It had worked. The plan that had taken shape in the darkest recesses of his thoughts had come to fruition flawlessly.

He moved away from the window, the ghost of a smile playing across his lips. In his house, surrounded by silence, he savored the feeling of power that washed over him. Another pawn down; the corrupt system that sheltered the guilty was one step closer to facing its reckoning. They all hid behind their laws and procedures, thinking themselves untouchable. He would show them how fragile their world truly was.

This was his brand of justice—cold, calculating, and absolute. Each life he extinguished, each pillar of corruption he toppled, brought him closer to his ultimate

goal. Mariana Torres had been no different. She had believed herself to be a beacon of justice, but to him, she was just another hypocrite cloaked in authority, protecting the very vermin she should have been condemning.

His heart rate began to slow, the rush of adrenaline subsiding into a steady pulse of determination. With every kill, he felt himself becoming more alive, more attuned to the twisted balance he sought to enforce upon a world gone mad. Mariana's death wasn't just a statement—it was a promise of what was to come.

His footfalls were muted against the carpet as he ascended the staircase, the ebb of his adrenaline-laced high giving way to a cold, purposeful calm. The house was silent, holding its breath with him, and for a moment, it felt like an accomplice to his cause. In this quiet sanctuary, the pounding of his heart was the only testament to the life he had just taken.

He reached the top of the stairs and paused, staring at the closed door that always seemed to mock the facade he presented to the outside world. This door was a portal to a truth no one else could know, a truth he protected with every shred of his being. With a steady hand, he pushed the door open, its hinges whispering into the hush of the house.

The room spilled into view, awash in the innocence of baby blue. The walls, once vibrant, now looked at him with a faded gaze, remnants of sunlight dancing through the dust motes stirred by his entrance. It was a stark contrast to the darkness that clung to his soul, a darkness fed by justice and retribution.

A child's bed sat nestled against the far wall, its sheets undisturbed, frozen in time. He approached it, the distance between him and the bed bridging the gap between the man he was and the man he wished he could forget.

There, nestled among the pillows, lay a teddy bear. Its plush fur was marred with

deliberate incisions, each cut a mark of the pawns he had toppled, a symbol of the corrupt filth he had wiped clean from the earth. He picked up the bear, its softness belying the violence of its scars.

A smile curled the edges of his lips, a private, twisted smile that belonged to the shadowed corners of the room. He sat on the edge of the child-sized bed, cradling the teddy bear delicately in his hands. The mutilated toy's empty gaze seemed to urge him to speak, its silent form a perfect confidante for the gnawing darkness within. He leaned in close, as if whispering clandestine truths to an old friend.

"Justice," he murmured, his voice barely above a breath, "it was a game they had rigged, you know?" The words spilled out, heavy with a venom reserved for those who pervert the law. "They cloaked themselves in suits and legalese, but they were charlatans, every last one."

He pressed the bear against his chest, feeling its jagged edges scratch against his suit—his uniform in the war against corruption. "We were cutting them out, weren't we? One by one." His eyes glinted with the fervor of his cause. "They thought they were above it all, but they were just pawns. Pawns in a system that had failed us long ago."

The room was still, save for the faint rustling as he shifted, the bear gripped tightly in his grasp. The silence was an ally, a canvas upon which he painted his twisted vision of justice. He imagined the courtrooms, the lies, the deceit—all the cogs in the machine he was determined to dismantle.

"Each cut," he continued, caressing the tattered seams of the bear, "was a life that wouldn't be ruined by their greed. A future that wouldn't be tainted by their touch." His heart hammered, not with doubt, but with the righteousness of his crusade.

"Sleep now," he whispered to the bear, laying himself down alongside its damaged

form. "There was more to do when dawn broke."

As his eyes closed, the world faded away, leaving only the sanctity of the baby blue room—a temple to a lost innocence. In the embrace of sleep, he drifted into dreams where his mission thrived, a place where each move was calculated, and every strike was precise.

Visions of the next pawn danced behind his eyelids. Faces of those cloaked in false virtue, marked for retribution. His subconscious plotted the downfall of another pillar of the corrupt edifice, weaving nightmares of justice through the veil of slumber. He was both the architect of ruin and the harbinger of a twisted salvation, a man on a quest to cleanse a world mired in filth.

The stillness of the room was a stark contrast to the storm raging in his mind—a tempest set to break at the dawn of a new day. He slept soundly, the bear nestled close, as the shadows whispered promises of the vengeance yet to come.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's feet hammered the damp earth, each breath tearing at her throat as she raced through the dense forest. The trees blurred into a tangle of shadows under the moon's half-hearted glow. Ahead, the outline of her father's cabin emerged, a dark silhouette against the night. This was the place she had unearthed so many buried truths, where secrets whispered through the timber walls.

She burst into the clearing and there he stood—John Christopher, her father, his weathered hand trembling on the grip of a revolver. His aim fixed on a figure before him: a woman, visibly pregnant, her eyes wide with terror. Morgan's heart clenched; every instinct screamed to intervene. "Dad, stop!" Her voice shredded the silence, but it was like screaming into a void.

The gun roared, a final verdict. The woman crumpled, a life extinguished, a future stolen. Morgan felt the scream rip from her, a sound of anguish and betrayal, but no one heard—the woods swallowed her plea.

Suddenly, the pines vanished, replaced by four cold walls steeped in darkness. Morgan sat, wrists chafing against the restraints that bound her to the chair. A solitary bulb swung overhead, casting an oscillating light over her interrogator—a man obscured in shadow, his presence heavy with accusation.

"Murderer," the voice rasped, a label she'd fought to shed for a decade. The word echoed off the concrete, a ghostly jury delivering its sentence over and over.

"Prove it," Morgan spat, her voice laced with venom. She glared into the darkness, challenging the faceless entity to reveal itself. The chair scraped against the floor as the man leaned forward, the bulb swinging erratically now.

Light sliced across the man's features, etching out the lines of time and malice. Richard Cordell stepped into clarity—a visage from a past Morgan wished could remain buried. His lips curled into a semblance of a smile, one that held no warmth, only a chilling satisfaction.

"Agent Cross," he began, his tone mocking the title she once held. "Or should I say, inmate Cross?"

"Go to hell, Cordell," she shot back, her words sharp as daggers. He had orchestrated her downfall once, but she would not cower before the puppeteer of her misfortunes.

Cordell moved closer, the light now steady upon his aged face. "You're already there, Morgan. And this time, there's no escape."

Her pulse thundered in her ears, a crescendo of rage and fear. This was the man who had framed her, the architect of her darkest days. And here he was, weaving another web of lies to ensnare her. But the truth remained her weapon, her unwavering ally amidst the deceit.

"Wrong again, old man," Morgan growled, defiance flaring within her. "I've been to hell and back. And I'll tear down your legacy brick by brick if I have to."

Cordell's smile wavered, the first crack in his facade. Morgan saw it, the glimpse of uncertainty. She leaned into it, pressing her advantage. "Your empire is crumbling, and I'll be the one to watch it fall."

Morgan jolted awake, gasping for air as if she had been drowning. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, a relentless drumbeat echoing the terror that clung to her skin like cold sweat. Derik shifted beside her, his voice heavy with concern.

"Hey," he murmured, his hand finding her shoulder in the dim light of predawn. "You

were tossing and turning like you were fighting off demons."

She blinked rapidly, chasing away the remnants of her nightmare, the image of her father and the pregnant woman dissolving into the shadows of her room. "Just a dream," she rasped, her throat tight with unshed emotions.

"Another one about your dad?" Derik probed gently, green eyes searching hers for the truth she habitually concealed.

"Doesn't matter." Morgan swung her legs over the edge of the bed, distancing herself from the comfort he offered. She could still feel Richard Cordell's accusing gaze, the phantom weight of it bearing down on her even in wakefulness.

"Are you sure?" His voice was soft, tinged with the kind of patience that only someone who had known the jagged edges of pain could offer.

"Positive." She stood, her body moving on autopilot as she straightened her spine and forced herself to focus on the present. There was no time for the luxury of unraveling dreams when reality held far more pressing horrors.

Her eyes flicked to the digital numbers on the bedside clock—six a.m.—bold and unforgiving. Time didn't pause for personal demons or restless nights. With a deep breath, she collected the scattered pieces of herself, the agent overtaking the haunted daughter.

"Time to get up and keep working anyway," she declared, her voice steady now, the tremor banished. It was a mantra, a lifeline that had pulled her through ten years of hell and back.

Derik watched her, the lines of his face etched with quiet understanding. He knew better than to push; they both carried their scars, after all. But his presence, solid and

reassuring, reminded her that she wasn't alone—not anymore.

"Right behind you," he said, matching her resolve as he rose from the bed. They were partners, in more ways than one, bound by a shared determination to untangle the web of death that had ensnared them.

As they readied themselves for the day, the silence between them was comfortable, a mutual respect hanging in the air. Morgan's fingers drummed against the bathroom countertop, a staccato rhythm that matched her racing thoughts. She caught her reflection in the mirror—a visage of determination etched into features that bore the weight of unresolved mysteries. The dream had been vivid, disturbingly so, but she pushed it down, locking it away where it couldn't distract her.

"Hey," Derik's voice floated through the crack of the partially opened door, tinged with concern. "That dream seemed to rattle you pretty bad. Want to talk about it?"

She met his gaze in the mirror, her dark eyes resolute. "No," Morgan replied curtly, turning off the faucet. "It's nothing. Just echoes of the past."

"Alright," he conceded, though his eyes lingered on her a moment longer before retreating.

Morgan knew she needed to delve deeper into Richard Cordell's shadowy influence, but not now—not when another killer was playing a macabre game with innocent lives. Shaking off the remnants of unease, she buttoned her shirt with practiced efficiency, sleeves hiding the inked stories on her arms.

"Focus," she muttered, slipping into the armor of Agent Cross.

"Ready?" Derik asked as he adjusted his tie, an attempt at normalcy amidst the chaos.

"Let's hit the road," she responded, her voice clipped. "We need to speak to Mariana Torres's family. It doesn't make sense; Mariana hadn't worked a case involving car crashes recently. Why did the killer cut her brakes?"

Derik nodded, his brow furrowed in thought. "Maybe there's something personal in it. Something we're not seeing yet."

Morgan grabbed her keys, the metal cool against her skin. "Or it's a message. We find the link, we find the motive." She led the way out of the house.

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Morgan eased her car to a halt, the engine's hum dying as she surveyed the neighborhood bathed in the hesitant light of dawn. The houses stood close together, wear evident in their sagging porches and peeling paint, a stark contrast to the glossy office towers where Mariana Torres had presided as a judge. Beside her, Derik shifted, his gaze following the path Morgan's took—studying the silent witnesses to lives less fortunate.

"Reggie Torres," she murmured, her eyes on the house that seemed to crouch between its taller neighbors, "lives worlds apart from his sister."

Derik nodded, his face reflecting the same curiosity that flickered in Morgan's eyes. "Different paths from the same starting line," he said.

They stepped out onto the cracked sidewalk, the door thuds echoing in the still air. A battered pickup truck sat neglected in the driveway, rust gnawing at its blue paint like a slow disease. Unkempt weeds vied for dominance in the small front yard, creeping up the walls of the house as if trying to escape the ground they sprouted from.

"Success doesn't always lift everyone in its wake," Morgan observed, her voice low.

She could feel the weight of Reggie's existence pressing against her—a pressure that had no place in the sterile courtrooms his sister had frequented.

"Or maybe it's not about success." Derik glanced at her, his green eyes searching. "Maybe it's just about choices."

"Choices," she echoed, tasting the word. It was about choices, wasn't it? The choice to uphold the law or to bend it, to save a sibling or to let them flounder. To chase down killers or... Morgan shook her head, banishing the thought. This was not the time for introspection. As far as they knew, Reggie was a grieving sibling, not a suspect.

Morgan approached the front door. Each step felt heavier than the last, her mind racing with possibilities, each more troubling than the next. The morning air hung heavy with the scent of impending rain, the clouds above a tapestry of grays. Morgan's knuckles rapped against the weathered wood, a sharp contrast to the muffled chaos of the neighborhood waking up. Derik stood half a step behind her, his presence a silent reassurance in the grey morning light.

"Reggie Torres?" Morgan asked, badge in hand, when the door creaked open. The man on the threshold bore the unmistakable stamp of shared blood with Mariana—the same dark, haunted eyes—but where hers had held a fire, his seemed drowned in sorrow.

"Yeah, that's me," he rasped, voice heavy with weariness. He stepped aside, gesturing them into the dim interior.

The scent hit Morgan first; a pungent mix of marijuana and stale alcohol assaulting her senses as she crossed the threshold. The living room was a visual cacophony, strewn with dirty laundry and empty bottles—a stark departure from the sterile order of Mariana's world. Reggie slumped onto a frayed couch, his hands trembling

slightly.

"Reggie, we're sorry for your loss," Derik said gently.

"Loss..." Reggie's whisper trailed off as he rubbed his face, fingers coming away wet. "It's all my fault."

Morgan exchanged a glance with Derick, her mind already running through the implications of his words. Her gut twisted with the familiar mix of empathy and suspicion, but she kept her voice steady. "Why would you think that, Reggie?"

He looked up at her, tears brimming in those reddened eyes, and Morgan felt the weight of the unsaid hanging thickly in the room. She knew they were on the brink of something, a truth teetering on the edge of revelation. But whatever Reggie held back remained locked behind a wall of grief and guilt, waiting for the right key.

"Can you tell us about the last time you saw Mariana?" she prodded, her instinct telling her that Reggie's torment was a piece to a larger puzzle—one she was determined to solve.

Reggie's gaze dropped to his fidgeting hands as he grappled with memories that clearly pained him. In that moment, surrounded by the detritus of a life falling apart, Morgan could almost see the fractured lines of a family trying to hold each other together.

"The last time I saw her... she was so mad at me for what I'd done, but she still bailed me out, because she was my older sister, and that was what she did... but she bailed me out."

Reggie's confession hit the stagnant air like a shockwave, rippling through the cluttered space and crashing into Morgan's senses. "Say that again," she commanded,

her voice low but insistent. "Mariana bailed you out? Of what, jail?"

He nodded, swiping at his nose with the back of his hand, a childlike gesture that seemed incongruent with the gravity of his admission. "Yeah. Drunk driving," Reggie muttered, his voice breaking. "Hit another car... caused them to spin out and hit a pole. They died." He sucked in a shuddering breath. "Mariana took care of it. Got me out before I could even sober up."

Morgan exchanged a tense look with Derik. This was it—the reason why the killer had cut Mariana's brakes. It wasn't because she had been a judge on a case like that. It was because she, a judge herself, had bailed someone out for causing the wrongful death of another; death by crashing into a pole, the same way Mariana died.

But this wasn't public information. So how would the killer know Mariana ever bailed Reggie out at all?

"Did anyone else know about this?" Morgan asked, her mind racing. The room seemed to close in around her, the walls whispering secrets.

Reggie shook his head, his eyes lost. "No. It wasn't public. Mariana... she had connections. Kept it quiet."

"Connections," Morgan echoed, the word tasting like bile. It was a thread, frayed and thin, but it connected. Someone with access, someone who knew things they shouldn't. Her eyes met Derik's, a silent exchange passing between them.

"Someone who knew about your bail might have had a motive," Derik added, his tone careful. "They targeted Mariana because of what she did for you."

"But I don't..." Reggie trailed off, helpless. "I don't know who would do that. Who could?"



"We're hoping we can find that out. Thank you, Reggie," Morgan said, standing.

As they left the house, the morning sun did little to warm the chill that had settled in Morgan's bones. The neighborhood was waking up, life going on as if nothing had changed, as if Mariana Torres hadn't been brutally murdered.

"Someone with access to sealed records," Morgan mused aloud, her thoughts a whirlwind of profiles and possibilities. "A cop, a clerk... anyone in the judicial system."

"Or someone hacking into it," Derik suggested. "We need to look at everyone who touched those files."

"Everyone," Morgan agreed, her resolve hardening. The game was afoot, and she was no stranger to hunting monsters. They lurked in the shadows of data and in the light of day, hiding behind smiles and badges. But she would find this one. She had to.

"Let's get to HQ," she said, unlocking the car. "We have work to do."

The engine roared to life, a growl of determination as they pulled away from the curb. Reggie's house faded into the rearview mirror, but the image of Mariana Torres—judge, savior, victim—lingered in Morgan's mind, a specter demanding justice.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

The morning sun barely filtered through the blinds of the FBI headquarters' briefing room, casting elongated shadows across the whiteboards littered with crime scene photos. Morgan stood motionless, her gaze locked on the images that painted a grisly narrative. Beside her, Derik hunched over a cluttered desk, sifting through a pile of suspect profiles.

"Loss," Morgan muttered, more to herself than to Derik. "It's about loss."

Derik looked up, his green eyes reflecting the gravity of their situation. "A child," he agreed, connecting the dots. "And they're targeting the justice system."

Mariana Torres's photo held the center spot on the board, her dark eyes conveying a story cut short. The document beside it showed she'd bailed out her brother Reggie after his DUI. The killer had to have seen this, known it.

"Okay, we need to figure out who had access," Morgan stated firmly, her voice cutting through the stillness of the room. She turned to face the team of agents assembled before her, their faces expectant and alert. "Secretaries, custodians, anyone in the courthouse could be our guy," she instructed, pacing slowly before them. "I want every angle covered. If they've touched a file, spoken to a clerk, or just breathed too close to a document, I want to know."

"Remember, they knew about Reggie," Derik added, standing beside Morgan now. His tone was kind, yet carried an undercurrent of urgency. "That info isn't public. Our suspect got it from inside."

Nods rippled through the agents as fingers flew over keyboards, phones were dialed,

and leads were chased. The hum of activity filled the room, but Morgan's mind raced ahead, analyzing, predicting, planning steps in a dance with a killer always one beat ahead.

"Time is not our ally," she said, quieter now, her words meant for Derik alone. He met her gaze, understanding passing between them without need for further words.

"Let's keep pushing," Derik replied, his voice steady despite the fatigue that lined his face—a testament to countless sleepless nights and personal demons fought in silence.

They returned to the task at hand, each clue a potential key, every lead a path to follow. And behind them, the whiteboards watched, silent witnesses to a story unfolding—one of vengeance, justice, and the thin line that separated hunter from hunted.

Morgan's eyes darted across the room, a predator scanning the terrain for signs of movement. The buzz of agents collaborating formed a backdrop to her laser-focused thoughts. She could feel the weight of the whiteboards behind her, plastered with crime scene photos that seemed to taunt her with their silent screams for justice.

"Agent Cross," came a voice, slicing through the hum of activity. Morgan turned to see Agent Sanders approaching, a file clasped in her hands like a lifeline. Young, eager, with determination etched into her features, Sanders stopped at Morgan's desk, her posture stiff with the formality of delivering potentially vital information.

"Got something?" Morgan's question was sharp, cutting to the chase as always.

Sanders nodded, placing the file before Morgan. "Theodore Nash," she said. "Custodian at the courthouse. Forty-five, divorced, and—this might be important—he recently lost a custody battle for his eight-year-old child."

Morgan's fingers flipped open the file, her gaze quickly absorbing the details of Theodore Nash's life splashed across the pages. Divorced. Custodian. A recent tear in the fabric of his family life. It wasn't the thread of a child's death they had been following, but the loss was palpable, and loss could breed the kind of fury they were hunting.

"Interesting," Morgan murmured, her brain already churning over the implications. She lifted her head to lock eyes with Sanders. "How recent?"

"Last month," Sanders replied, her voice steady despite the charged atmosphere.

Morgan leaned back in her chair, the creak of leather barely audible over the din. A loss of custody was a different kind of bereavement, but it could carve out just as deep a hunger for retribution. Her mind raced with the possibilities, weaving this new thread into the pattern of psychopathy they were up against.

"Pull what you can on him," Morgan instructed, her voice low and intense. "I want to know every inch of Nash's life. Friends, habits, routines. If he's our guy, there'll be something that ties him to these scenes."

Morgan hovered behind Sanders, her presence a silent weight as the young agent's fingers flew across the keyboard. The hum of the office faded into a distant murmur while they waited for the screen to reveal the secrets of Theodore Nash. A gaunt face flashed onto the monitor—his courthouse ID photo. Those hollow blue eyes stared back at them, etched with an intensity that was hard to read. Could this be the face of a killer? Morgan pondered, her instincts prickling.

"Clean record," Sanders said, breaking the silence. "Fifteen years at the courthouse. No disciplinary actions."

"Good employee, then," Morgan observed, her voice even, betraying none of her

skepticism. She studied Nash's image, tried to glimpse any hint of malice in his features. Surprisingly handsome, she noted, despite the lean cheeks and the shadows beneath his eyes. But looks could be deceiving; she knew that better than anyone.

"Pull up the custody documents," Morgan instructed, still locked on Nash's photo as if it might suddenly confess.

"Got them," Sanders replied, a new window popping up on the screen. She began reading aloud, "Nash was proven to be an adulterer during the divorce proceedings. That's why he lost custody."

"Keep going," Morgan urged, her gaze now fixed on the text scrolling before her.

"Shows signs of misogyny... behaved poorly in court..." Sanders' voice faltered slightly. "Claimed bias from the female judge towards his ex-wife."

"Anything else?" The question came out sharp, a blade slicing through the air.

Sanders shook her head. "That's the gist of it."

Morgan's fingers drummed a staccato rhythm on the tabletop, her eyes darting across the sea of faces in the crowded briefing room. The stark fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows over the whiteboards, each one a grim mosaic of crime scene photos and notes. The air was thick with the tension of unanswered questions and the bitter tang of too much coffee.

"His job was on the line," she began, voice steely as she addressed the team, "but Nash managed to keep his position at the courthouse." A click of a button, and Theodore Nash's life post-divorce splashed onto the screen: a timeline of loss and bitterness. "He's still here in Dallas while his ex-wife and daughter moved away. All this happened recently—enough turmoil to trigger someone into a killing spree."

Derik leaned in, his brow furrowed. "We're talking about a man who's had his life upended. Could be looking to even some perceived score."

The room hummed with murmurs of agreement, agents hunched over laptops, their fingers flying over keys. Morgan's gaze swept the assembly, searching for that spark of intuition, that leap of logic that could tie a suspect to the heinous acts they were investigating.

"Okay, listen up!" Morgan's command cut through the low chatter. "Nash has access to areas others don't—he has the keys to the kingdom, so to speak. It's possible he got his hands on those private documents about Mariana Torres."

"Could be our guy," someone chimed in from the back.

"Maybe," Morgan conceded, her instincts prickling with uncertainty. Nash fit the profile in many ways—a man scarred by loss and betrayal—but something didn't sit right with her. She knew better than to trust an easy answer. "Agent Sanders, what else do we have on him?" Morgan's question was a lifeline thrown into the digital sea of data.

Sanders swiveled her chair around, her youthful face alight with the glow of the computer screen. "Well, there's this." She clicked on a link, and social media pages filled the display. "Theodore Nash is quite the boating enthusiast." Pictures of Nash, wind-swept and grinning broadly aboard a sleek vessel, scrolled past.

Morgan's gaze lingered on the last photo of Gina Bellwood, displayed starkly amidst the clutter of crime scene images on the corkboard in the room. It was a haunting reminder — the rope, marine-grade and coarse, looped into a noose that had sealed the young prosecutor's fate. They had chased down the sales of such rope to a dead end; every lead evaporated like morning mist under the relentless sun of inquiry. The killer hadn't just acquired it; he owned it, knew its knots and binds as intimately as a

sailor knows the sea.

"Derik," Morgan said, her voice slicing through the hum of activity in the HQ, "the marine rope. The list was a bust. He already had it."

Derik looked up from his notes, green eyes sharp with the realization. "You think Nash?"

"Boat owner, access to the courthouse...and now this?" She tapped on Gina's photo. "It fits, doesn't it?"

A moment passed between them, heavy with the weight of unspoken thoughts. Then, as if an invisible signal had passed, they both stood. Decision made.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's eyes narrowed as the Dallas morning sun glittered off the serene waters of the pier. It was a scene she'd witnessed countless times, but today, it held a chilling undertone. Beside her, Derik adjusted his tie, a nervous habit that surfaced when they were on the brink of something big. They had traced Theodore Nash to this haven for boating enthusiasts, his absence from home leading them straight here.

They stepped out of the car, crisp air filling their lungs as they approached the boathouse pier with purposeful strides.

"Morning," Morgan greeted the young receptionist, a girl named Tina with wide, observant eyes. Derik flashed their badges, all business. "We're looking for a boat registered to a Theodore Nash."

"Of course, Agents." Tina's fingers danced across the keyboard, pulling up records with efficiency. She pointed toward Dock C. "His slip is at the end, the white sailboat with blue trim—The Siren's Lullaby."

"Has he been around today?" Derik queried, his gaze sharp and assessing.

Tina nodded. "He checked in about thirty minutes ago."

Morgan lingered, her gaze steady on the young receptionist. "One more thing, Tina," she said, her voice low and measured. "Theodore Nash... what's his reputation around here?"

Tina hesitated, biting her lip as she glanced at the dock through the window. "Well," she started, fidgeting with a pen, "he can be... difficult. Gets into arguments a lot."



Some folks try to avoid him."

"Difficult how?" Morgan probed, sensing the reluctance in the girl's tone.

"Hot-tempered, I guess. He doesn't really take well to being told 'no', or when things don't go his way." Tina's eyes darted away, and she shuffled some papers unnecessarily. "He's had fights with other boat owners. Calls it 'defending his territory'."

"An asshole, then," Morgan concluded, her suspicions growing like weeds in an untended garden.

"Basically, yeah." The word slipped out before Tina could censor it, and her cheeks flushed with a mix of embarrassment and fear.

Derik leaned against the counter, his demeanor gentle, designed to disarm. "Ever feel unsafe around him, Tina?"

She paused longer this time, her fingers trembling slightly. "Sometimes he looks at me funny, you know? It's probably nothing but..." Her voice trailed off, leaving the unsaid to hang heavy between them.

"Scary," Derik finished for her, his tone sympathetic.

"Right," she whispered, nodding.

"Thank you, Tina. You've been very helpful." Morgan's gratitude was genuine, but her mind was already racing ahead, piecing together a profile of a man who seemed all too comfortable with conflict.

"Stay safe," Derik added, casting a concerned glance at the girl before leading the

way out.

As they stepped outside, Morgan felt the weight of the bright morning press against her. They were close, she could feel it in her bones. But closeness mattered little without capture, and Theodore Nash was still just a shadow they were chasing. She squared her shoulders, ready to bring that shadow into the light.

Morgan's gaze swept over the pier as she walked alongside Derik, both scanning for Theodore Nash. The boardwalk creaked under their brisk steps, the sounds mingling with the slap of water against moored boats. The morning sun cast long shadows and glinted off polished hulls, but the scene's tranquility felt deceptive.

"Every victim connected to the courthouse, and this guy works there," Morgan mused aloud, her voice carrying an edge sharp enough to cut through the mild air. "He lost a daughter, has access to marine rope, and now we find he's not just a hothead but potentially dangerous."

Derik nodded, his eyes narrowed in thought. "And the teddy bear parts... could be something a grieving father would hold onto."

"Exactly." There was a grim set to Morgan's mouth. "If it's not him, he's still someone we can't ignore."

They continued in silence until they reached the section of the pier where Tina had directed them. The boat named "Serenity" stood out among the others, its sleek lines bearing the mark of frequent and meticulous care. And there, on the dock, was a tall figure moving about with deliberate, almost defensive motions—Theodore Nash.

"Mr. Nash?" Derik called out first, holding up his badge as they approached. "FBI. We need a moment of your time."

Nash didn't bother looking up from his work. "I'm busy," he replied curtly, dismissing them without a glance.

"Important FBI business, Mr. Nash," Morgan pressed, stepping closer to the edge of the dock. Her presence commanded attention, yet Nash seemed intent on ignoring them as he coiled a line with practiced hands.

"Can't it wait?" Nash's tone was laced with impatience, though he finally deigned to give them a fleeting, irritated look.

"No, it can't." Morgan locked eyes with Nash, her stare unyielding. "We'd appreciate your cooperation."

"Fine," Nash grudgingly conceded, setting down the rope. He straightened his tall frame, turning to face them fully. His blue eyes were cold, his expression one of annoyance rather than concern. "Make it quick."

Morgan squared her shoulders, the bright Dallas sun doing little to dispel the chill of suspicion that clung to her. "We need to talk about Mariana Torres," she began, voice sharp as a scalpel, "Gina Bellwood, and Elaine Harrows."

The names hung in the air between them, like bait cast into still waters. Nash's previously dismissive demeanor faltered, his gaze sharpening on Morgan as if seeing her for the first time. The line of his jaw tensed, a muscle ticking beneath the gaunt pallor of his cheek.

"Those women," he said slowly, almost cautiously, "they were killed, weren't they?" There was a flicker in his blue eyes, something that might have been knowledge—or fear.

"Murdered," Derik corrected, his tone softer than Morgan's, but laced with an

undercurrent of steely resolve. It was a dance they had mastered over time; Morgan's hard edge complemented by Derik's more empathetic approach.

Nash looked out across the water for a moment, as if searching for an escape. "I heard about it. The courthouse talks." His voice was flat, betraying nothing.

"Talks about what, exactly?" Morgan pressed, taking a step closer. She could feel the weight of her badge against her chest, a symbol of the justice she pursued with relentless determination.

"Tragedies," Nash answered vaguely, his attention drifting back to his boat, as though he could will away their presence.

"Let's not play games, Mr. Nash," Morgan insisted, her patience waning like the morning tide. "You work at the courthouse. Your path crossed with theirs."

Nash's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "So? That doesn't mean anything. I'm a janitor, for Christ's sake."

"Which gives you access," Morgan argued, her gaze unrelenting. "You hear things, see things... and you have a history, don't you?"

His blue eyes ignited with a spark of anger. "What are you implying?"

"Your custody battle," she continued, unfazed by his rising temper. "It didn't go well, did it? Those women—"

"Enough!" Nash snapped, the word cutting through the air like a sail catching a gust of wind. "That has nothing to do with anything. My personal life is none of your goddamn business!"

"Except when your personal grievances turn into a pattern that ends in death," Morgan retorted, each word deliberate, probing for the cracks in his facade.

"Is that what this is?" Nash scoffed, but the scorn sounded hollow. "You think because some judge screwed me over, I'm out for blood?"

"Are you?" Morgan asked, her voice steady, her mind racing with the implications of Nash's reactions—each one a piece of the puzzle clicking into place. She watched him, ready for the slightest slip, the smallest confession.

Nash's face contorted with rage, his composure fracturing. "The system is broken! It takes from men like me and—"

"Does it take enough to kill for?" Morgan cut in, her question like a knife poised at the thread of his self-control.

"Get out of here," Nash growled, his body rigid with fury. "Get off my dock and leave me the hell alone."

Morgan's gaze locked onto Nash, noting the twitch in his jaw, the slightest tremor of his hands. "Your daughter," she began, voice even, a scalpel slicing through the tension, "did she have a favorite toy? A teddy bear or stuffed animal she was particularly attached to?"

Nash's gaunt face reddened, veins bulging like cords on his neck. "Of course she did!" he spat, his voice laced with incredulity and anger. "She had plenty of toys. What sick game are you playing? What does that have to do with women being murdered?"

"Details matter, Mr. Nash," Morgan replied, unflinching. She watched as the question clawed at his composure, revealing raw edges beneath.

"Are you implying I took some damn toy and— No!" Nash's denial boomed over the water, an echo of desperation. "You're out of your mind!"

Morgan observed him closely, each reaction a note in the growing symphony of his guilt. His defensiveness, the way rage clouded his judgment—it all told a story. And she intended to read every page.

"Is my daughter hurt?" Nash's tone shifted from fury to fear, a rapid pivot that caught Morgan's attention. "Is that why you're here?"

"No, Mr. Nash," Derik interjected, his voice steady. "Your daughter is not the one who's hurt."

"Then why are you here?" Nash demanded, his hands clenched into fists. Confusion danced across his features—a mask slipping off to reveal the panic-stricken man underneath.

"Because there's a pattern," Morgan said, her eyes never leaving his. "And you fit it."

"Pattern?" Nash's voice cracked. "I don't know what you're talking about! This is insane!"

Derik stepped forward, his hands raised in a calming gesture. "Mr. Nash," Derik said. "I understand this is confusing, but let's just talk this through, okay?"

Nash's chest heaved, and his eyes, sharp as shards of ice, darted from Derik to Morgan. It was clear that words were ricocheting off him, unable to penetrate the shield of panic and anger he had thrown up. Morgan's muscles tensed, readying for what was to come. She knew the look of a man cornered by his own guilt—she'd seen it too many times before.

"You have no right!" Nash spat out, his voice cracking under the strain. He took an aggressive step toward Derik, his posture rigid with defiance.

"Take it easy, Theodore," Derik continued, the kindness in his tone stark against the harsh backdrop of suspicion. "We're not accusing you of anything. We just need some information."

But Nash wasn't listening. With a grunt of frustration, he lunged, shoving Derik hard in the chest. Derik stumbled backward, catching himself before he could fall. Morgan's heart raced, her training kicking in. This was the moment—the line crossed.

"Assaulting a federal agent, Nash?" Morgan's voice sliced through the tension. "Bad move."

In one swift motion, she reached for her handcuffs, the metal glinting in the sunlight. Derik regained his footing, his kind eyes now steel traps, the previous warmth extinguished.

"Turn around," Morgan commanded. Her voice was devoid of emotion, but inside, the cogs of justice were turning, fueled by adrenaline and the relentless pursuit of truth.

Nash's shoulders slumped as realization sunk in, yet he was still bristling with indignation. "You can't do this to me," he growled, but the fight was leaving his voice, replaced by the hollow sound of defeat.

"Actually, we can," Derik chimed in, grabbing Nash's arm and twisting it behind his back. Nash winced at the sudden movement, his resistance crumbling like the facade of innocence he tried to maintain.

The click of the cuffs echoed off the water, a grim punctuation to the ordeal. Morgan

watched as Nash's face contorted—a mix of rage, fear, and something else she couldn't quite place.

"Let's go," she said, her voice cutting through the morning calm that had been shattered by their arrival. They began to lead Nash away from the dock, the clatter of footsteps on weathered wood marking their exit.

As they moved, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that they had just peeled back the first layer of a deeply disturbing narrative. But for now, they had a suspect in custody—and a new set of questions that begged to be answered.

The pier faded behind them, the sounds of the harbor swallowing up the echoes of confrontation. Ahead, the path wound on, twisting into the unknown.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead in the interrogation room, casting stark shadows across Theodore Nash's gaunt face. Morgan studied him from across the table, her dark eyes narrowing as she gauged his every twitch and scowl. Derik stood behind her, a silent sentinel, his green eyes fixed on Nash.

"Let's get one thing straight," Nash spat out, breaking the silence, "I didn't kill anyone."

"Is that so?" Morgan replied, her voice even, betraying none of the skepticism churning inside her. She slid a photograph across the table—Gina Bellwood, lifeless, a noose around her neck. "You expect us to believe that's just a coincidence?"

Nash's eyes flickered to the photo before returning to Morgan, his lips pressed into a thin line. "I work at the courthouse, Agent Cross. You think I'm the only one with grievances?"

"Where were you the past two nights, Theodore?" Derik interjected, leaning forward. His tone was softer, almost coaxing, but the hard edge of an experienced interrogator lingered beneath the surface.

"Like I said, not killing anybody." Nash sneered, the muscles in his jaw flexing.

Morgan leaned in, her tattoos peeking out from under her sleeves as she folded her arms. "Funny, considering your... history with women. Seems like you have more than enough motive."

"Having a crappy divorce doesn't make me a murderer," he shot back, defiance

etched into the lines of his face.

"Three women are dead, Nash. All connected to cases similar to what you went through," Morgan pressed, her gaze unwavering. "And here you are, working where all the details are kept. It's not looking good for you."

"Coincidences and bad luck, that's my life story," he retorted, but there was a hint of uncertainty now, a slight falter in his brash facade.

"Enough games, Nash," Morgan's voice was steel. "We found marine rope at Gina's scene—the same kind you have access to at the pier. Care to explain that?"

"Rope is rope," Nash shrugged, but sweat had begun to bead at his temples.

"Your aggression towards me during your arrest didn't help your case," Derik added, circling the table to stand beside Morgan.

"You got in my way," Nash retorted, tilting his chin defiantly.

"Seems to be a pattern with you," Derik murmured, exchanging a glance with Morgan.

Morgan watched Theodore Nash's gaunt face twist into a sneer, the corners of his mouth pulling taut over clenched teeth. He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed defensively across his chest.

"Where were you last night?" Morgan asked.

"Alone," he spat out, "like every damn night since she left me."

"Who left you, Nash?" Morgan pressed, tapping her pen against the metal table for

emphasis.

"My wife! Sandy!" His voice cracked, a bitter laugh escaping him. "Took my little girl and ran off. What do you think I've been doing? Hosting wild parties?"

"Loneliness can drive people to do extreme things," Derik chimed in, skeptical.

"Ah, so now I'm a killer because I miss story time with my kid?" Nash's blue eyes were icy as they met Morgan's gaze. "That it?"

"Patterns emerge, Nash," Morgan countered. "People seek substitutes."

"Substitutes?" Nash scoffed. "You think I'm replacing my daughter with... what? Murder?" He shook his head, mocking pity painted on his features. "You agents really have your heads screwed up."

"Where does this leave your ex-wife in all this?" Derik asked.

"Call her!" Nash shot back, defiant. "She'll tell you. Even after all the crap between us, she knows I'm no murderer."

"Your relationship with her—"

"Complicated," he interrupted, his tone softening ever so slightly. "We fight like hell, but Sandy, she knows me. She knows despite all my flaws—and I got plenty—I'd never lay a hand on another person like that. Not in violence. I'm an asshole, but not a psycho."

"Assholes can be killers, too," Morgan remarked dryly.

"Sure, but not this one," Nash said firmly. "You want an alibi? You want someone

who hates my guts to clear my name? Call her. She's the best you got because I got nothing else for you."

"Is that right?" Derik leaned forward, elbows on the table, locking eyes with Nash. "Just an innocent man caught in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"Story of my life," Nash muttered, looking away. "But you go ahead, dial her up. See what she has to say about good ol' Teddy Nash."

Morgan eyed Theodore Nash across the cold metal table, the fluorescent light casting stark shadows on his gaunt face. His blue eyes held a defiant gleam as she circled like a predator closing in on its prey.

"You knew the victims, Nash," Morgan stated flatly, her dark hair framing her intense gaze.

"Knew of them," he corrected quickly, a sneer edging his voice. "Heard about it on the news, overheard lawyers yapping at the courthouse. That's it." Theodore sighed, exasperation bleeding through his false bravado. "I mop floors, empty trash cans. I'm not exactly in the social circle of attorneys and judges."

"Yet here we are," she shot back, unmoved by his attempt at innocence.

Theodore's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "Yeah, here we are."

"Let's take five," Derik interjected, catching Morgan's eye. She nodded once, her thoughts a swirling vortex of doubt and suspicion.

Stepping outside the interrogation room, Morgan felt the weight of the case pressing down on her. Derik leaned against the hallway wall, his green eyes searching her face for an inkling of her thoughts.

"Something doesn't add up," Morgan admitted, tapping her fingers against her arm—an old habit when uncertainty crept in. "No alibi, sure, but Nash doesn't strike me as our guy."

"His type is all too common, though. Lonely, angry, feels wronged by the world—and his wife," Derik pointed out, his voice tinged with the weariness of too many cases, too many faces.

"True," Morgan conceded, her gut twisting as she mulled over Nash's words. "But anger doesn't always mean guilt. We'll see what Sandy has to say."

"Still," Derik said, rubbing the back of his neck, "the lack of remorse, his history at the courthouse... He fits a certain profile."

"Profiles aren't proof," Morgan countered, her mind racing as she considered every angle. "And we can't afford tunnel vision."

"Agreed," Derik replied, offering a small, supportive smile. "Maybe Sandy's insight will shed some light."

"Maybe." Morgan chewed on her lip, feeling the familiar pull of intuition tugging her in an uncertain direction. She was about to speak again when an agent burst down the corridor, urgency etched on his face.

Morgan pressed the phone's speaker button with a deliberate thumb, the click echoing in the stillness of the corridor.

"Sandy Nash?" Her voice was steady, betraying none of the turmoil churning inside her.

"Speaking," came the cautious reply, tinged with the hum of domestic life—a

television droning in the background, the clink of dishes perhaps.

"Agent Morgan Cross, FBI," Morgan introduced herself, her gaze on Derik who stood nearby, arms folded, his eyes sharp with anticipation. "I'm calling about Theodore—your ex-husband."

There was a beat of silence, then a muted gasp. "Theo? What's he done now?"

"We're questioning him regarding the recent murders of three women linked to the courthouse," Morgan said, choosing each word with care, watching Derik's reaction closely.

"Murders?" Sandy's voice pitched high with incredulity. "You think Theo killed those women? The defense attorneys and that judge? I don't live in Dallas anymore, but I read about that..."

"Right now, we're exploring every possibility," Morgan replied, her voice as neutral as she could make it.

Silence crackled over the line before Sandy spoke again, her words laced with a bitter edge. "Look, I won't lie—Theo can be a real piece of crap. He cheated on me, lied, made my life hell... But murder? That doesn't sound like him."

"Are you certain?" Morgan pressed, her instincts alive with the dance of suspicion and doubt.

"God, I don't know." There was a shakiness now in Sandy's voice, a vulnerability that Morgan knew well—the fear of uncertainty. "I thought I knew him once, but after everything... You never really know what someone is capable of, do you?"

Morgan felt a flicker of empathy for the woman on the other end of the line. "No, you

don't," she agreed quietly. But that flicker was quickly snuffed out by the pressing need for answers. "Was there anything in your time together that might suggest he was capable of violence?"

"Nothing more than the usual anger when he drank too much or we fought," Sandy admitted, her tone resigned. "But to strangle someone, to kill... No. I just can't see it."

"Thank you, Sandy. Your insight is invaluable," Morgan said, her mind racing to fit this new puzzle piece into the ever-growing picture. She ended the call, the click sounding final in the quiet hallway.

Derik met her gaze, his expression unreadable. "Well?"

"She's thrown, but she doesn't believe he could do it," Morgan relayed, the same uncertainty from the call reflected in her own voice now. "But she admitted the possibility, given their past. Not exactly a ringing endorsement."

"Still leaves us with no solid alibi for Nash," Derik remarked, the lines of his face tightening.

"Doesn't clear him either," Morgan added, feeling the weight of responsibility bearing down on her. Every decision, every hunch, could mean the difference between catching a killer and condemning an innocent man. And somewhere out there, the real murderer was watching, waiting.

"Interrogation round two?" Derik suggested, his eyebrows knitting together in contemplation.

"Let's turn up the heat a little," Morgan replied, her mind already strategizing the next move.

They were about to re-enter the interrogation room when the sudden urgency in the footsteps of Agent Ramirez sliced through the tension. Ramirez's face was flushed as he caught his breath.

"Cross, Greene, you need to see this," he said breathlessly.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Lara's fingers drummed against the ceramic mug, her eyes darting to the door every time it creaked open. The coffee shop buzzed with lunchtime chatter, but the hum of conversation only heightened her sense of disquiet. She took another jittery sip, feeling the warmth slide down her throat, failing to calm her frayed nerves.

Her friend, Gavin, leaned across the table, his voice animated as he recounted his latest foray into investigative journalism. "So there I was, in the mayor's office, and you wouldn't believe what I found—"

But Lara's mind was elsewhere, tangled in a web of anxiety that seemed to tighten with each passing second. She was vaguely aware of Gavin's lips moving, the enthusiastic gestures of his hands, but the words slipped past her like ghosts, intangible and distant.

"Hey." Gavin's hand lightly touched hers, the sudden contact pulling her from the depths of her paranoia. "You're miles away. What's going on?"

She blinked, focusing on his concerned face, the crease between his eyebrows. "Sorry," she murmured, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Just...a lot on my mind, I guess."

"Want to talk about it?" His tone was gentle, probing, and Lara hesitated. The secret she harbored lay heavy on her tongue, a truth that could undo her quiet life with the weight of its revelation. For a moment, she teetered on the brink of confession, the words clawing for escape.

Lara's fingers wrapped tighter around the ceramic mug, the heat seeping into her

clammy palms. Across from her, Gavin was a steady presence, his journalist's mind always ticking, always analyzing. She envied that focus, that ability to compartmentalize—even now, as her own thoughts frayed and tangled like threads in the grasp of a storm.

"Can I tell you something?" she blurted, her voice a half whisper swallowed by the hum of the coffee shop. Her eyes darted to the door, the windows, the other patrons—anywhere but at Gavin's face.

"Of course," he said, setting down his cup with a soft clink. "You know you can tell me anything."

"It's just..." Lara hesitated, biting her lip. "I've been feeling paranoid since the news broke out about the murders. You've heard, right? The women killed—all worked in law. Two defense lawyers and a judge."

The words tumbled out, each one heightening the sense of dread that had taken root inside her. It clawed up her throat, constricting, choking. Gavin nodded. She leaned in closer, lowering her voice even further.

"Gavin, do you think I could be in trouble, too?"

His reaction was immediate, almost reflexive. Gavin shook his head, a short, sharp movement, and let out a breathy laugh tinged with disbelief. "Lara, come on. Why would you be a target? You're a secretary, not involved in cases directly, right? Besides, you haven't done anything to put yourself on someone's radar."

He reached across the table, his hand hovering in the air as if considering whether to cover hers. He seemed to think better of it and withdrew, scratching the stubble on his chin instead. "You're just spooked by the whole situation, which is completely understandable. But you're safe, Lara. You haven't done anything bad, have you?"

His question, rhetorical as it might have been, stung like salt in an open wound. Lara forced a laugh, high-pitched and strained. "No, of course not." She met his eyes then, searching for some sign of doubt, some inkling that he suspected the truth. But there was only warmth, concern, and an unwavering trust that tightened the knot of guilt in her chest.

"See? There's nothing to worry about," Gavin continued, his voice firm and reassuring. "These things, they have a way of getting under your skin, making you see shadows where there are none. Stick to your routine, lay low, and this will all blow over soon enough. You'll see."

Lara's fingers trembled around the ceramic mug, the clinking of spoon against porcelain loud in her ears despite the hum of conversation that filled the coffee shop. She could feel Gavin's gaze on her, patient yet probing, as if he could peel back the layers of her facade with nothing but a look.

"I..." Lara started, voice barely above a whisper, "I haven't been completely honest." The words felt like stones in her mouth, heavy and hard.

"Okay," Gavin leaned forward, his own cup forgotten. His eyes were steady, a silent encouragement for her to continue.

She drew in a breath, feeling the weight of her confession crushing. "There was this case—a woman, um, ran over," she said, her voice gaining strength even as it wavered. "And I... I saw something. An attorney, meddling with the jury, trying to sway them for the accused."

Her admission hung between them, a delicate truth threatening to shatter at the slightest touch.

"Did you report it?" Gavin's question was gentle, not accusatory, but it stung all the

same.

Lara shook her head, a solitary tear betraying her stoic front. "I turned away, pretended I didn't see it." The guilt constricted around her throat, making each word a struggle. "But no one knows, right? It's not like I was involved."

Gavin's smile crept across his face, slow and reassuring. "No one knows," he echoed, the corner of his mouth lifting in a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's boots echoed in the sterile hum of the FBI forensic lab, her strides brisk and purposeful. Derik was at her side, scanning the room with that curious intensity she'd come to rely on. Agent Ramirez trailed a step behind, urgency creased into the lines of his face.

The lab was a hive of activity. At its center, Mueller stood like an immovable pillar among the flurry of agents. His gray-streaked hair seemed to blend with the cold lighting above, casting him in an authoritative glow that demanded attention without a word spoken.

Morgan approached, her senses sharpening. "What have we got, Mueller?"

Mueller didn't waste a breath. "A letter," he said, voice gravelly and low. It lay on the table amidst a scatter of forensic tools, untouched and ominous. "Addressed to Agent Greene." He shot a glance toward Derik, who stiffened visibly.

"Because of the press conference?" Morgan asked, her words clipped as she leaned in for a closer look without touching the parchment.

"Likely," Mueller nodded, his expression unreadable. "It just came in. No prints, no postage, no leads on where it originated." The frustration in his tone resonated with Morgan's own. Every dead-end felt personal.

Derik swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Do we think it's from our guy?"

"Who else would be so bold?" Mueller countered, his gaze locking onto Morgan's for a fleeting moment – a silent acknowledgment of the gravity they both felt.

"Let's see what he has to say," Morgan said, though her gut twisted at the thought. She didn't miss the way Derik's hand trembled slightly as he reached out, his fingertips grazing the edge of the paper as if fearing it might combust upon contact.

"Careful," Mueller warned, though his eyes were fixed on the letter with the same morbid fascination that had drawn them all in. It was more than just evidence; it was a window into the mind of a man who held their city in a grip of terror.

"Agent Ramirez, ensure this area remains secure. No one touches anything until we document every possible trace," Morgan ordered, already mentally cataloging the procedures they'd need to follow.

"Understood," Ramirez replied, but Morgan was already tuning out the surrounding noise, focusing instead on the letter that taunted them with the promise of answers wrapped in riddles.

They needed to dig deeper, to peel back the layers of bravado and find the truth hidden in the ink. Whoever penned that letter held the key to stopping the cycle of death that had begun to feel inevitable.

"Let's break down what we know," she said, turning to Derik, who met her gaze with a resolve that mirrored her own. They were in this together – hunting shadows in a world that had suddenly become all too dark.

Morgan's eyes skimmed the neatly typed text, her stomach churning with each self-righteous word.

"Esteemed Agent Greene," the letter began, a mocking formality that set the tone for what followed. "You chase shadows while justice slips through your fingers like sand. Your hunt is fruitless, for I am not the villain in this poorly scripted play you call law enforcement. Rather, consider me an editor, excising the corrupt passages

from an otherwise noble profession."

Derik leaned in closer, his jaw clenched. "He's taunting us."

"Quiet," Mueller snapped, gesturing for them to keep reading.

"The individuals you mourn were but cogs in a machine that grinds the innocent to dust. You arrest those without voice, without power, and parade them as trophies. Yet here I stand, a ghost in your midst, ensuring true equity is dispensed. If you believe in the virtue of justice, cease your pursuit. Acknowledge that the system you protect is inherently flawed and that I am merely an agent of its much-needed purification."

Morgan's hand tightened into a fist. The arrogance of the words was almost palpable. It was a manifesto of delusion.

"Sounds like he fancies himself some kind of vigilante," Derik muttered, his face pale under the harsh fluorescent lights.

"Cross," Mueller addressed her, his commanding presence pulling her from her thoughts. "We need more than what we have. This rhetoric—it's calculated, meticulous. We're dealing with someone who knows how to manipulate perception."

"An expert on decoding letters might give us the leverage we need," Morgan suggested, her mind racing ahead.

"Exactly my thought," Mueller affirmed with a nod. "There's a man, Marv Jenson, retired now. He used to work these kinds of puzzles for us. Find him, see if he can make sense of this." His finger tapped the letter with a finality that brokered no argument.

"Will do," Morgan replied crisply, her focus shifting to the task at hand. While they

sought expertise in semantics and subtext, Mueller and the others would scour the letter for fingerprints, DNA—anything that could lead them to the physical body behind the cerebral taunts.

"Keep me updated, Cross. Every hour," Mueller instructed, before turning his attention back to the other agents huddled around the lab equipment.

"Let's go, Derik." Morgan's voice was steely with determination as she grabbed a copy of the letter. They had a new lead, however tenuous, and it was time to follow it.

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Morgan gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles whitening as she navigated through the congestion of downtown traffic. Beside her, Derik sat slumped, his fingers fidgeting with an unopened pack of gum. The letter addressed to him had unsettled him more than he was willing to admit.

"Hey," Morgan's voice softened as she glanced at him. "You know it's just a twisted game to him, right? Targeting you because you stood up there, in front of those cameras."

Derik managed a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah, I know. It's just... getting in my head, you know?"

"Let it get in his instead," she advised. "We'll crack this. We always do." Her words were more than just comfort; they were a promise, a lifeline cast into the turbulent sea of doubt and fear.

Derik nodded, silent, and turned his gaze out the window.

Morgan refocused on the road ahead, but her mind churned with theories about the



killer. "Justice" seemed to be his calling card—a perverse sense of retribution. But the teddy bear parts, they hinted at something more personal, a narrative that went beyond cold-blooded vengeance.

"Whoever this guy is, he's fixated on justice, or at least his own warped version of it," Morgan mused aloud, breaking the silence. "But there's a child in this picture somewhere. Those teddy bear fragments... They're not just calling cards. They're symbolic."

"Symbolic of what?" Derik asked, his voice tinged with exasperation.

"Loss," she replied, her tone edged with certainty. "Maybe he lost a child, or maybe he sees himself in one. Could be why he feels justified taking lives—he thinks he's balancing the scales for someone who can't do it themselves."

"Could be," Derik agreed, though his skepticism was evident.

"Teddy bears are meant to comfort, to protect children from the monsters under the bed," Morgan continued, her eyes never leaving the road. "Our perp, he's trying to be the protector, the avenger. He's making monsters out of those he deems guilty."

Derik remained quiet, digesting her words. The profile was coming together, piece by fragmented piece.

"Justice for the innocent," he finally murmured. "He's taking the law into his own hands."

"Except the law isn't on trial," Morgan countered sharply. "People are. And he's appointed himself judge, jury, and executioner."

The afternoon sun dipped below the skyline, casting long shadows across the city. As

they drove on, the weight of their case pressed down on them, a tangible force that neither could escape. But Morgan's resolve never wavered; she was determined to stop the killer before another life was claimed by his twisted sense of justice.

Morgan steered the car to a halt, gravel crunching beneath its weight. The house before them, a modest two-story with chipped paint and an overgrown garden, seemed to sag with secrets. Morgan glanced at Derik, his pallor still betraying the rattling effect of the letter. "Ready?" she asked, her voice steady despite the chaos brewing in her mind.

"Let's do this," Derik replied, steeling himself as they got out of the car.

Morgan felt each step like a pulse, the adrenaline coagulating in her veins as the gravity of their quest settled on her shoulders. She knocked firmly, three times.

The door swung open, revealing Marv Jenson. His hair was a wild tuft of white, his eyes gleaming with a sharpness that belied his age. "Agents Cross and Greene," he greeted, recognition flashing across his features. "Heard you might be dropping by."

"Thanks for seeing us on short notice, Marv," Morgan said, accepting the warm grasp of his handshake.

"Anything for the Bureau," Marv replied, ushering them into his home.

The interior was an eclectic mix of past and present. Walls adorned with black-and-white photos displayed a younger Marv shaking hands with various dignitaries, standing beside crime scene tapes, and posing with graduating FBI classes. In a corner, a vintage typewriter sat on a desk cluttered with papers and books.

"Quite the collection," Derik remarked, glancing around.

"Memories are all we're left with in the end," Marv said nostalgically. Morgan nodded, her gaze lingering on a particular photo—a younger Richard Cordell, his arm around Marv, both men smiling triumphantly at the camera. A pang of suspicion and resentment twisted in her gut, but she suppressed it, focusing instead on the task at hand.

"Marv, we need your expertise," Morgan began, delving straight into business. "We've got a letter from someone who could be our perp. No prints, no leads on where it came from."

"Ah, the art of anonymity," Marv mused, rubbing his chin. "Let's have a look then."

Morgan handed him a copy of the letter, watching as his eyes moved swiftly over the text. His brow furrowed, then smoothed, a silent rhythm of thought playing across his face. Derik leaned against the wall, arms folded, the gears in his head clearly turning.

"Analytical," Marv muttered under his breath. "Deliberate." He looked up at Morgan, a spark of intrigue in his wrinkled eyes. "This is going to be interesting."

Morgan watched him intently, her arms crossed over her chest, tattoos peeking out from beneath the sleeves of her dark shirt. Derik stood by, silent but tense, his eyes betraying the gravity of what the letter might reveal.

"Remarkable," Marv finally said, placing the letter down with an exaggerated care that seemed almost reverent. "It's tame, isn't it? The language is precise, lacks the emotional fervor you'd expect from a killer. It's very analytical..." He trailed off, pondering, as if he was on the brink of an epiphany.

"Almost like a reporter," Morgan mused aloud, the gears in her mind whirring to life. She had seen this kind of writing before – factual, detached, yet somehow piercing. A shiver ran down her spine as she imagined the cold eyes behind these calculated

words, eyes that saw too much and felt too little.

"Could be," Derik chimed in, pushing away from the wall. "Reporters, they dig up dirt for a living."

"Exactly." Morgan paced the room, each step a punctuation to her thoughts. "This guy, whoever he is, knew things. Like how Mariana Torres bailed out her brother. That's not common knowledge." She stopped, pivoting to face Marv and Derik. "A reporter would have access to court documents, to the stories of the victims, following them closely... maybe too closely."

Derik nodded, the implications settling in. "He could've been watching them all along, waiting for the right moment to make some twisted statement about justice."

"Through murder," Morgan added bitterly. Her mind raced, connecting dots that had once seemed random but now formed a chilling pattern. If their killer was indeed masquerading as a journalist, his access to information and his ability to remain unnoticed amidst the chaos of crime scenes became alarmingly clear.

"Someone who's always at the courthouse but never draws attention," Derik suggested, his voice low and steady. "Someone we might've seen but never really looked at."

Marv's fingers traced the neatly typed sentences, his brows furrowed in concentration. "The diction here," he murmured, tapping at a particularly verbose section, "it's too polished for your average taunt." His eyes, magnified by thick glasses, flicked up to meet Morgan's steady gaze. "The structure, the cadence—it's journalistic."

"Damn right it is," Morgan affirmed, her voice a low growl of determination. She leaned over Marv's shoulder, noting the pointed phrases, the subtle allusions that now screamed of someone accustomed to hiding in plain sight. The killer was

camouflaged behind words, wielding them as deftly as knives.

"See this?" Marv continued, pointing out a paragraph where the killer had referenced an obscure legal precedent. "You'd need to do some digging to find that. It's not headline material—it's the nitty-gritty a reporter thrives on."

"Someone who loves the limelight but stays out of it," Derik added, piecing together the profile in his head. His voice betrayed a hint of respect for their adversary's cunning, quickly masked by professional focus.

"Exactly," Morgan agreed, standing upright and folding her arms.

There was a fierce glint in her eye, the telltale sign of a predator closing in on her prey. She felt the adrenaline surge, the familiar rush of the hunt. But there was also the heavy weight of responsibility—lives were in the balance, and time was slipping through their fingers like sand.

"Alright," she said decisively, tearing her gaze away from the letter. "We know he's smart, we know he's got a vendetta against the justice system, and now we know he's probably one of the vultures circling every crime scene."

"Looking for his next story," Derik concluded, his green eyes sharpening with the insight. "Or his next victim."

"His next act of 'justice,'" Morgan spat the word out like poison. Her mind was already racing ahead, cataloging every reporter they had seen lurking around the courthouse, each faceless figure scribbling notes or aiming a camera. They had been looking for a shadow when they should have been searching for a spotlight.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's boots clicked rhythmically against the polished floors of the FBI headquarters, her mind as sharp and unyielding as the steel in her gaze. The day's grim discoveries clung to her like a second skin, an oppressive weight that demanded resolution. Beside her, Derik matched her pace, his presence a silent pillar of support she'd grown to reluctantly lean on.

"Cross, Greene," called out a voice, slicing through the ambient buzz of the busy corridor. It was Sanders, young but with eyes that had already seen too much. She stood at the entrance to the briefing room, a file clasped in her hands as if it held the key to Pandora's Box.

"We've got something big," Sanders said, urgency thrumming beneath her words. Morgan's heart kicked up a notch, adrenaline already coursing through her veins in anticipation.

They hurried into the cramped confines of the briefing room, an air of expectancy settling over the team gathered there. Monitors lined the walls, displaying maps and crime scene photos in a macabre tapestry of their current case.

Sanders didn't waste time on pleasantries, cutting straight to the chase as she brandished the file. "The letter sent to Derik—it's written on a type of stationery no longer in production."

Morgan arched an eyebrow, interest piqued. "Go on."

"Only one buyer stocked up before it was discontinued," Sanders continued, her finger tapping against a printed receipt within the file. "Dependence News, a small-

time paper downtown. They bought enough to last a decade."

"Dependence News..." Morgan repeated, rolling the name around in her mind like a puzzle piece waiting to fit. It was a lead, a tangible thread in a case woven from shadows and whispers.

Morgan's eyes darted across the sea of faces on the screen as Agent Sanders handed over a freshly printed list. Fifteen names, fifteen possible keys to unlocking this twisted puzzle. "You've done good, Sanders," Morgan said with a curt nod, acknowledging the younger agent's diligence. "Do you have a list of the employees?"

"Thank you, Agent Cross," Sanders replied, her posture straightening under the praise. "And yes, I have the list."

As Morgan scanned the list, one name snagged her attention like a fishhook—Henry Caldwell. Her gut tightened; instincts honed from years of chasing shadows whispered that this was more than coincidence. She tapped his name into the database, pulling up everything they had on him.

"Thirty-eight," Morgan murmured, reading the profile. "No priors." The screen displayed a man with an average build and forgettable features, someone who could vanish into a crowd without a second glance. But it wasn't his clean record that intrigued her—it was the byline connected to articles about Gina Bellwood and Elaine Harrows. Two victims from their case, two lives snuffed out by a vendetta steeped in irony.

"Derik," she called over her shoulder, not taking her eyes off the screen. "Caldwell wrote about both Bellwood and Harrows."

"Connection or coincidence?" Derik asked, approaching with the lean grace of a predator, every step calculated.

"Let's find out." Morgan clicked through Caldwell's public records, searching for anything out of place.

"Looks like your ordinary guy," Derik observed, peering over her shoulder. His presence was both comforting and disarming—a juxtaposition that often left Morgan grappling with her feelings towards him.

"Ordinary is exactly what he wants us to think," Morgan countered. She shut her laptop with a decisive snap. "But we're going to peel back those layers."

"Expose the truth," Derik finished her thought, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Exactly," Morgan affirmed, her voice steely with resolve. They stood side by side, united in purpose, ready to dive headfirst into the murky waters of human deceit.

Morgan's fingers danced over the keyboard, the clicks punctuated by a ticking clock in the silent room. She navigated through Henry Caldwell's social media with the precision of a seasoned agent, her eyes scanning for any telltale signs that might connect him to their case. Posts railing against injustice and corruption filled his timeline, each one a testament to his obsession with exposing the flawed system.

"Look at this," Morgan murmured to Derik, pointing to a particularly fervent post where Caldwell decried a recent court decision. "He's got motive written all over him."

Derik leaned in, his curiosity piqued as he read over her shoulder. "That's almost verbatim to the phrasing in the letter."

"Exactly." Morgan's gut churned. The writing style, the thematic consistency—it was too close to be coincidence. Her fingers hovered over the mouse, hesitating just a



moment before she clicked on the profile picture—a smiling man, unassuming. But Morgan knew better than to trust appearances.

"Children?" Derik asked, his voice low.

"None." Morgan's brows furrowed. "Which means our theory..."

"Could be off." Derik finished the thought, his eyes never leaving the screen.

"Or maybe it's a metaphorical child," Morgan pondered aloud, the wheels in her mind turning. "Something or someone he's lost that he equates to a child."

"Wouldn't be the first time we've seen something like that." Derik's voice held a note of weary experience.

"True." Morgan took a deep breath, steeling herself. The profile on her screen was no longer just a collection of digital information—it represented a potential key to unlocking the violence that had taken three lives.

"Let's go confront him," Morgan decided, her tone brooking no argument. "Time to see if Henry Caldwell is just a loudmouth with a keyboard or if there's blood on his hands."

"Lead the way," Derik said, standing up.

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The glass doors of Dependence News whispered shut behind Morgan and Derik, sealing them inside the news hub's hive of activity. It was that liminal hour when daylight began to concede to night, and with it, the frenetic pace of the office tempered as employees prepared to escape into the evening.

"Can I help you?" A young man in a crisply tailored suit intercepted their path, his brown eyes flickering curiously over the badges they had pre-emptively displayed.

"Is Henry Caldwell here?" Morgan kept her voice level, her gaze piercing through the formality of the encounter to anchor itself on the intent behind the question.

"Uh, yes," the suited man hesitated, thrown by her directness. "He's still in his office."

"Thank you." She dismissed him with a curt nod, her strides long and purposeful as she led Derik through the maze of cubicles.

Caldwell's nameplate glinted dully beside an oak door partially ajar, spilling muted voices into the corridor. Without hesitation, she rapped sharply against the wood, pushing the door open wider. Two pairs of eyes swiveled toward them as they entered—a man and a woman seated across from Caldwell, who stood at the head of the table, papers in hand.

"Mr. Caldwell?" Morgan didn't wait for an invitation. "FBI. We need you to come with us."

His reaction was immediate, brows knitting together in a mix of confusion and irritation. "What is this about?"

"Questions we need answers to. Not here," she stated, eyes locked onto his.

"Look, I'm in the middle of something important," Caldwell protested, his voice edged with annoyance. "Can't it wait?"

"No, it can't," Morgan replied firmly, her posture leaving no room for debate. The atmosphere tensed, the air thickening with unspoken implications as Derik flanked

her, his presence an unspoken backing to her authority.

Morgan watched as Henry Caldwell's face shifted from annoyance to anger. His hand tightened around the stack of papers, knuckles whitening. "I know my rights," he snapped, his voice rising. "You can't just barge in here and demand—"

"Mr. Caldwell," Derik interjected, his tone even but firm, "we're not here to trample on your rights. We need to talk, and frankly, it's not optional."

"Talk about what?" Caldwell demanded. His gaze darted between Morgan and Derik, a flicker of unease betraying his composed facade. "And if you think I don't see through this system —"

"Save it," Morgan cut in sharply. She had no patience for diatribes or conspiracy theories. The direct approach was better. "We can have a civil conversation at the office, or we can do this the hard way. Your choice."

"Hard way? Are you threatening me?" Caldwell's eyes narrowed, a vein pulsing at his temple.

"Consider it a strong suggestion," Derik said, his voice laced with an undercurrent of something that wasn't quite a threat but held enough weight to make it clear they weren't asking for permission.

Caldwell threw a glance at the other meeting attendees, who sat silent, eyes wide. They were spectators to a standoff they didn't sign up for. With a huff, Caldwell set the papers down, his chest heaving with restrained fury. "This is harassment. You're persecuting a journalist for digging up the dirt you people want buried!"

"Then let's clear your name," Morgan stated, locking her jaw. "Unless there's something you need to bury."

Caldwell's lips twisted into a sneer, but the fire behind his eyes dimmed. He dropped into his chair, the leather creaking under the sudden shift of weight. "Fine," he spat out the word like it left a sour taste. "Let's go."

The walk back through the office was tense, the air practically vibrating with Caldwell's indignation. Employees peeked over their cubicle walls, curiosity mingling with concern as the procession passed. The click of Morgan's heels against the linoleum floor marked time like a metronome, steady and unyielding. Derik followed in step beside her, silent but watchful, his presence a reminder that they were a united front.

They reached the lobby, and Caldwell stopped short, turning to face them. "I'll cooperate," he said begrudgingly, "but remember, I have a platform. People will hear about this."

"Looking forward to reading all about it," Morgan replied coolly, holding open the door as she gestured for him to exit first. "After you, Mr. Caldwell."

As they stepped out into the waning light of day, Morgan felt the knot of tension in her stomach tighten. This was far from over, and every fiber in her being told her they were onto something big. But the road ahead was murky, fraught with unknowns. What secrets did Henry Caldwell hold? And would they be enough to catch a killer?

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan leaned forward, the cold metal table creating a barrier between her and Henry Caldwell. Beside her, Derik mirrored her posture, his green eyes fixed on the journalist with an intensity that matched Morgan's own. Photos of the victims lay scattered before Caldwell, their faces a mosaic of the dead.

"Recognize them?" Morgan's voice was sharp, slicing through the tension in the room.

Caldwell's gaze flitted across the photos. "Yes," he admitted, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly. "I wrote about some of them. Tragic what happened."

"Tragic," Derik echoed, his tone suggesting skepticism. "But you claim to know nothing about how they met their ends?"

"Nothing more than what I've penned down for the public eye," Caldwell responded, his voice steady, but Morgan noted the slightest sheen of sweat on his brow.

She pushed another photo towards him, one of Mariana Torres. "And Judge Torres? Did you write about her too?"

"Torres?" Caldwell's eyes narrowed as he regarded the image. "I heard about her death. Another blow to the illusion of justice." His fingers drummed a restless rhythm on the table.

"An illusion, you say?" Morgan probed, her mind racing, piecing together the man's psyche. She could see the obsessive glint in his eye, the fervor of someone who dug too deep into the world's ugliness.

"Absolutely," Caldwell spat out the word like it was poison. "The system is corrupt. People like her," he jabbed a finger at Mariana's photo, "they manipulate it to their advantage."

"Manipulate?" Derik interjected, leaning closer. "Like bailing out a brother from jail after a DUI?"

Caldwell shrugged, feigning indifference. "I didn't know about that. But am I surprised? Not in the least. More corruption from those who claim to hold the scales of justice."

Morgan's tattoos seemed to prickle under her skin, a silent testament to her own dance with injustice. She eyed Caldwell, seeing the outline of a man who might believe murder was a fair sentence for such corruption.

"Is that what you believe, Mr. Caldwell?" she asked, her tone deceptively soft. "That some are above the law, while others are buried beneath it?"

"Wouldn't be the first time the law failed to protect the innocent or punish the guilty," Caldwell said, his voice rising. "Look around, Agent Cross. It's everywhere if you're not afraid to see it."

"Believe me," Morgan replied, her dark eyes unflinching, "I'm not afraid to see anything."

Caldwell met her gaze, and for a moment, there was a silent acknowledgment of kindred spirits warped by different fates. Then he looked away, the connection severed as quickly as it had formed.

Derik shifted in his chair, the sound jolting the tension up another notch. "We're not blind, Henry. But we do believe in due process."

"Due process," Caldwell scoffed, shaking his head. "A pretty term for a dirty game."

Morgan leaned forward, her elbows resting on the cold steel table that separated her from Henry Caldwell. Her eyes, sharp as a falcon's, never left his face. "Where were you the past two nights, Henry?"

"Home," he replied, with a shrug that seemed to feign nonchalance.

"Alone?" Derik chimed in, his voice steady and probing.

"Yep." Caldwell's gaze didn't waver, but a bead of sweat made an escape down his temple.

"Anyone who can verify that?" Morgan pressed, her question hanging heavy in the silent room.

"Probably not," he admitted, a touch of irritation creeping into his tone. "But since when is being alone a crime?"

"Being alone isn't," Morgan shot back, her tone crisp. "But it doesn't make for much of an alibi either."

Caldwell's chuckle was dry, void of humor. "Well, Agent Cross, I hate to break it to you, but not having an alibi doesn't mean I'm guilty of anything."

"Maybe not," she conceded, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. His confidence seemed genuine, but so often the mask of innocence was the guilty's favorite guise.

She slid a photograph across the table—a scanned copy of the note sent to the FBI. The letters, jagged and taunting, spelled out a clear message: Back off.

"Seen this before?" she asked, the edge in her voice like the blade of a knife.

Caldwell peered at the image, his forehead creasing. "Never," he said after a moment, pushing the photo back toward her. "I've never seen that note."

"Interesting," Morgan remarked, her voice betraying none of the skepticism that churned inside her. The stationary was common enough, but the words... they had the cadence of someone who knew how to wield them like weapons.

"Is it?" Caldwell asked, an eyebrow lifted in mock curiosity.

"Very," Derik added, leaning back in his chair. "Especially considering it was written by someone who knows their way around words."

"Are you implying something, Agent...?" Caldwell trailed off, a challenge in his eyes.

"Greene," he supplied curtly. "And we're not implying anything. We're just doing our job."

"Of course," Caldwell said with a thin smile. "Just like I do mine. Now, I think I need a lawyer."

Morgan studied Caldwell with a gaze as sharp as the edge of a knife. "So, you need a lawyer, Mr. Caldwell?" she inquired, her tone flat. The interrogation room felt smaller every second, tension coiling in the air like a spring.

Caldwell leaned back, a veneer of nonchalance failing to mask the quickening pulse at his throat. He met Morgan's eyes, his own glinting with a mix of defiance and fear. "This is going nowhere," he sighed, "I've told you what I know. Now, if we're done here, I'd like my attorney."



"Sure, Henry," Derik chimed in, standing up with Morgan. "We're all about due process. But remember, this isn't looking good for you."

"Is that supposed to scare me, Agent Greene?" Caldwell countered, but there was an unmistakable tremor in his voice.

"Let's go, Derik," Morgan cut in before the journalist could say more. She didn't want to give him any more ground than he'd already tried to claim.

They left Caldwell sitting there, alone with the weight of suspicion hanging heavily upon him. The door shut with an authoritative thud that seemed to echo along the quiet hallway outside the interrogation room.

Morgan and Derik found Assistant Director Mueller waiting, his expression unreadable. "Well?" he asked, his voice carrying an expectation of results.

"His alibi is weak—nonexistent," Morgan reported, crossing her arms. "He knows the victims, wrote about them, and yes, he wanted a lawyer the moment we pressed him."

"Classic signs of consciousness of guilt," Mueller noted, nodding slowly. "The guy's got the same mindset as our killer. Obsessed with justice, or his twisted version of it. Plus, he had access to the stationery used in the note sent to us."

"Seems too neat," Morgan muttered, but she kept that doubt to herself. Mueller was already convinced they had their man, and Derik... well, Derik hoped for a resolution as much as anyone.

Mueller placed a firm hand on Morgan's shoulder, his grip almost reassuring. "You've both done good work today. He fits the profile, has the motive. It's only a matter of time before he cracks."

"Or lawyers up and shuts down," Morgan thought but held her tongue. She exchanged a glance with Derik, who offered a faint, weary smile.

"Let's wrap it up for now," Mueller decided, giving them a dismissive nod. "Resume first thing tomorrow. We'll get him."

Morgan's gaze lingered on the interrogation room as Mueller's words echoed in her mind. The teddy bears—the incongruent detail that gnawed at her. Henry Caldwell, with his vehement tirades against the justice system and his knowledge of the victims, fit parts of the profile. But those childlike tokens of innocence? They seemed to speak a different language.

"Agent Cross," Mueller's stern voice cut through her reverie, pulling her back to the dim corridor. "Let it go for tonight."

She turned, facing him squarely, her dark eyes betraying her unrest. "And if he isn't our guy?" Morgan challenged. Her tattoos, usually symbols of her resilience, seemed to itch with the tension of the unresolved case.

Mueller, tall and unyielding as ever, met her stare. "We will find out," he assured her, but his certainty was not contagious. "But you've been running on fumes. Take a break."

Derik stepped closer, his green eyes softening in the fluorescents. "He's right, Morgan. We'll come back fresh."

"Sure," she muttered, though doubt clung to her like shadows as they moved toward the elevators.

"Go home, Agent Cross," Mueller commanded before turning away, his figure receding into the maze of the FBI headquarters.

Morgan's steps echoed hollowly as she broke away from Derik, the weight of the unsolved mystery urging her feet forward. She needed space—to think, to breathe. The city air was crisp as she pushed through the revolving doors, the night sprawling before her like a dark canvas.

Her mind raced, piecing together the fragments of evidence, replaying Caldwell's reactions, his denials. Yet, amid the cacophony of facts, the teddy bear detail whispered insistently. Henry had no children, no tangible sorrow to manifest in such trinkets. Why then?

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Morgan's living room was steeped in tension, the only sound Skunk's rhythmic breathing as he lay sprawled on the cool hardwood floor. Morgan and Derik sat opposite each other, two figures carved from the same stone of determination, yet etched with different lines of thought.

"Lawyer up fast," Derik noted, tapping his fingers on the armrest. "Henry Caldwell's silence is screaming guilt."

"Or fear," Morgan countered, her gaze lost in the dance of shadows thrown by the flickering candlelight. She leaned forward, elbows on knees, her dark eyes reflecting an internal struggle. "Caldwell's alibi is Swiss cheese – full of holes but not quite satisfying."

"Come on, Morgan," Derik said, trying to infuse some warmth into the chill that had settled between them. "We've got him. The guy writes about corruption, lives it, breathes it. He can't prove where he was the past two nights, and now he won't talk without his lawyer. That's not innocence; that's strategy."

She shook her head, a strand of dark hair falling across her face. "It doesn't sit right."

Her fingers traced the intricate ink on her arm, a tactile reminder of past battles, both personal and professional. "The teddy bear parts... Henry has no kids. No nieces, no nephews. It's too personal for him, too random."

"Maybe it's symbolic," Derik offered, but his words hung uncertainly in the air, like mist over a morning field.

"Symbolic?" Morgan scoffed lightly, despite the gravity of their conversation. "A grown man leaving behind fragments of a child's toy at murder scenes? We're missing something."

Derik sighed, leaning back against the worn leather of the couch. "You're the smartest agent I know, Morgan. If you think there's more to it, then there probably is." His green eyes held hers, a silent pledge of trust and support. "But for now, we caught the guy who's been killing these women. That's a win, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Morgan murmured, pushing to her feet. She paced before the cold fireplace, each step a testament to her restlessness. "We've got a cage, Derik, but I'm not convinced we've got the right beast."

Morgan's fingers drummed against the side table, a rhythmic pulse that mirrored the tumult of thoughts crashing through her mind. Derik's assurance seemed to fade into the walls, his presence just another shadow in the dimly lit room. She was about to turn off the lamp when the piercing shrill of her phone cut through the silence.

"Cross," she answered briskly, her voice steady despite the late hour and the undercurrent of fatigue.

"Agent Cross, it's Officer Smith." The line crackled with urgency. "We've got a situation. A woman just came into the ER, critical condition. Hit and run."

Morgan straightened, the weariness momentarily forgotten. "Details, Smith."

"Mid-thirties, no ID. But that's not the odd part." There was a pause, a breath taken on the other end that hinted at the gravity of what was to come. "She had a teddy bear arm stuffed in her jacket pocket."

The words hit Morgan like an icy blast, chilling her from within. Her hand tightened around the phone. "I'm on my way." She hung up without another word and met Derik's concerned eyes. "He's still out there."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

The door slammed against the wall as he burst into the safety of his own house, the thud reverberating like a drumbeat in tune with his wildly pounding heart. His chest heaved with the exertion and the exhilaration of what he had just accomplished. A smile unfurled across his lips, broad and undeniably satisfied. He did it. He really, truly did it.

His mind replayed the scene: the stolen car, a nondescript silver sedan that was now an accessory to his brand of justice; Lara Quentin, with her blonde hair and the guilt that should have been gnawing at her conscience, lying crumpled on the pavement; the teddy bear charm, a symbol of innocence lost, now a macabre token resting in the pocket of her blazer. And the best part? No one saw a thing.

He glanced down at his hands, expecting to see them trembling with the aftermath of adrenaline, but they were steady. It was as if everything he had done was meant to be, the pieces falling into place with divine precision. This was retribution, his own hands doling out the punishment that the corrupt system refused to administer.

Stepping further into the living room, he allowed himself to savor the rush, the sense of empowerment that coursed through him. Lara hadn't been dead when he had leaned over her broken form, whispering his justification into her ear, but the damage was irrevocable. Even then, as life clung stubbornly to her, he knew it was only a matter of time. There was no doubt in his mind that by now, she would have succumbed to the injuries he so carefully delivered.

In the silence of his living room, he felt a kinship with the shadows that danced on the walls, each flicker a silent witness to the transformation he had undergone. Once, he might have flinched at the thought of taking a life, but those days were long gone.

Now, he was the arbiter of fate, the scales of justice tipping under the weight of his convictions.

Lara Quentin, the courthouse secretary, had turned a blind eye once too often, her silence as damning as the deeds of those she protected. She was a cog in the mechanism of corruption, and he had just ground it to a halt. In his mind's eye, he could still see the terror that had flickered in her eyes—a terror that mirrored the helplessness he had felt once upon a time. That helplessness was now power, and with each breath, he drew more of it into his lungs.

As the high began to wane, he walked over to the mantle, where a single photograph stood. The image of his little brother Frankie stared back at him, eyes full of hope that the world never fulfilled. They took Frankie, swallowed him whole with their lies and deceit, and now he was gone—all because of them, because of their corrupt world.

He straightened up, resolve hardening like steel within him. For Frankie, for justice, he would continue this crusade. The world would be a better place—one purged soul at a time.

He paced, the worn floorboards creaking under his weight, a frenetic energy coursing through his veins. The smile that had stretched across his face mere moments ago was now a tight line, his thoughts a whirlwind of vindication and contempt. Lara Quentin, his so-called friend, had been a fool to think her complicity would go unnoticed, unpunished. He had snorted, a sound laced with derision. Her silence, her inaction, had made her as culpable as the rest - the lawyers, the judges, the entire rotten edifice of the justice system.

"Should've known better," he muttered to himself, shaking his head. She had thought she was safe behind her desk, shuffling papers for the monsters dressed in suits, their hands as dirty as the criminals they defended. But she hadn't been safe. Not from him. He had seen through her charade, the way she'd averted her eyes, feigned ignorance

to the deals made in hushed tones within the court's marbled halls. A cog in a corrupt machine indeed - and he had been the wrench thrown into its gears.

The adrenaline slowly ebbed, but the satisfaction remained, simmering like a low flame within him. He felt cleaner somehow, purged by the act of retribution. The world, too, was cleaner without Lara's silent consent perpetuating the cycle of injustice. Each step he took around the room was measured, deliberate, symbolic of the order he was restoring to a world in chaos.

Henry Caldwell. The name floated into his consciousness, unbidden but not unwelcome. Henry, the journalist who fancied himself a crusader, exposing corruption with the might of his pen. Yet even he had gotten taken. Might be charged with crimes if the whispers were true - crimes that Henry thought himself above. Crimes that proved no one was untouchable.

"Even you, Henry," he whispered, almost fondly. "You'll understand. You have to."

The idea that Henry could end up behind bars, disgraced, didn't disturb him. It was necessary, all part of the grand design. When the dust settled, when the story of his own making unfolded, Henry would see the truth. He would see the necessity of what had been done, of what still needed to be done. And maybe, just maybe, Henry would write his redemption song from a cell.

His pacing slowed; his breathing steadied. He was the tip of the spear, the hand of justice itself. And there were more out there, many more, who cloaked themselves in the guise of righteousness while feeding on society's decay. His mission was clear, his resolve unshakeable.

A smirk played at the corner of his mouth, his mind already sifting through the faces of those who believed themselves invulnerable. With each name that surfaced, the smirk widened, the flame of retribution burning brighter.



Yes, the world would be a better place - he had made sure of it.

His heart still thundering in his chest, the man halted mid-stride. The rush of his recent actions began to wane, replaced by a different kind of urgency—a deeper, more personal call to arms. He found himself drawn towards the mantle, where amid the sparse decor rested a single framed photo. His hands, still tingling with the residue of adrenaline, lifted the picture into the trembling light. Frankie's smile, forever captured in innocence and youth, was a stark contrast to the dark wave of emotion that crashed over him.

The system had chewed up and spat out his little brother—a casualty of its insatiable hunger for power and control. Frankie had been nothing but a pawn, an insignificant piece to be sacrificed in their grand chess game. His demise had been inevitable once he'd been caught in their web, his fate sealed by the gavel of corruption. Anger bubbled beneath his skin like hot tar, searing his very soul with its intensity. Frankie, who had wanted nothing more than to find some semblance of justice in a world that offered none.

He gently set the photo back on the mantle, his eyes never leaving Frankie's face. A vow, unspoken yet resolute, formed within him. He would cleanse the filth from this world—one corrupt soul at a time. For Frankie, and all the other lost innocents who had been devoured by the monstrous machine of so-called 'justice'.

With each memory of his brother, his resolve hardened like steel. This was no longer just a mission; it was a crusade. They—the lawyers, the judges, every last one draped in the robes of deceit—would come to know fear as they had instilled it in countless others. They would look over their shoulders, taste the paranoia that gnawed at their victims' peace. And when they least expected it, justice would come for them too.

As the shadows in the room grew longer, the man's silhouette melded with the encroaching darkness. In this moment of quiet contemplation, there was clarity.

Frankie's death would not be in vain; it would be the beacon that guided his hand. For in this corrupt world that took his little brother away, he would be the harbinger of a new order.

"Justice," he whispered, the word a sacred oath that lingered in the air. "For you, Frankie."

The man turned away from the mantle, his figure rigid with determination. As night fell, wrapping the house in silence, he knew the path ahead was soaked in blood and shadow. But it was a path he would walk willingly, led by the memory of his brother and fueled by the burning need to make the world a better place.

"Rest now, little brother," he murmured into the stillness. "Watch over me. I will finish what you started."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan hurried through the empty hospital corridors. The late hour had drained the usual hustle and bustle from the halls, leaving a silence that only magnified Morgan's sense of unease. Derik matched her pace, his presence a silent pillar of support. Lara Quentin, the latest victim in a string of calculated murders, lay ahead in the intensive care unit, her life hanging on the edge of a knife.

The two agents had been thrown into a labyrinth of violence and enigma, where each turn seemed to lead deeper into darkness. Now, as they approached Lara's guarded room, that darkness felt all too literal. Morgan's mind was a swirling storm of dread and determination; she had to see Lara, had to understand what had led the killer to this young woman—a court secretary entangled in a deadly game she never sought to play.

They rounded another corner, and the ICU came into sight. A pair of uniformed officers stood sentinel outside the door, their eyes sharp beneath the fluorescent lights. Doctors and nurses moved like ghosts through the ward, their faces etched with the fatigue of night shifts and lives held in balance.

"Agent Cross," one of the officers nodded, stepping aside to allow them passage.

"Officer," Morgan acknowledged curtly, her dark hair framing a face set in stone. Derik offered a brief nod as they slipped past the threshold.

Within, machines beeped a haunting symphony, tethering Lara Quentin to the realm of the living. Wires and tubes snaked across her bruised body, and beneath the bandages and medical tape, the remnants of innocence and fear mingled. The sight clawed at Morgan's insides, a visceral reminder of stakes that were all too personal.

"Look at her," Morgan whispered, her voice barely rising above the hum of life-preserving equipment. "She's so young."

Derik's gaze lingered on Lara's still form, green eyes reflecting sorrow. "We'll find who did this, Morgan. We're going to make sure they pay."

As they stepped out into the corridor, the click of Morgan's boots resumed, each step a promise. They would delve into the darkness, shine light on secrets long buried, and chase down a killer hiding behind teddy bear tokens and journalistic guises.

Morgan's gaze was steely as she absorbed the sterile chill of the hospital's intensive care unit. The beeping of monitors and hushed footsteps of medical staff formed a grim soundtrack to the scene before her. A nurse, her scrubs stretched tight over broad shoulders, glanced up from a chart, her eyes weary but alert.

"Agent Cross?" she asked, recognizing Morgan's authoritative presence.

"Tell me about Lara Quentin," Morgan demanded, dispensing with pleasantries.

The nurse sighed, a sound of frustration mingled with compassion. "She's in a coma. Head trauma and internal injuries. It's too early to say, but the odds aren't great." She paused, her professional mask slipping just enough to reveal her humanity. "It's heartbreaking—she's so young."

Morgan felt a knot tighten in her stomach, a mix of anger and sorrow. Lara Quentin, another life hanging by a thread in this sick game.

"Thank you," Morgan replied curtly.

She turned toward the uniformed figure lingering just up the hall, his posture rigid with the tension of the night's events. Officer Smith—a man she was starting to

recognize quite well.

"Officer Smith," Morgan greeted him, her voice low.

"Agent Cross." He nodded gravely, stepping aside into the quiet seclusion of an adjacent alcove. "Forensics has the bear. They're pretty sure it's the same M.O. as the others."

"Any leads on the vehicle?" Morgan asked, her mind already sifting through the possibilities, searching for that elusive break in the case.

"Nothing yet. Hit-and-run on her street. No witnesses. We're combing through surveillance footage from the area, but it's like looking for a needle in a haystack at midnight." His words were tinged with frustration, mirroring Morgan's own impatience.

"Keep me updated," Morgan instructed, her tone leaving no room for delay. Officer Smith nodded, understanding the urgency that drove her. With every victim, time became their enemy, and Morgan was all too aware of the stakes.

Morgan's gaze snapped to the commotion at the entrance of the ICU. A middle-aged man, his face flushed with distress, was being restrained by a pair of stern-faced nurses. His voice pitched in desperation as he struggled against their firm grips.

"I need to see her! You don't understand—I have to be there when she wakes up!"

The urgency in his plea caught Morgan's attention. She exchanged a glance with Derik, who nodded, and they made their way towards the unfolding drama. The sterile scent of antiseptic did nothing to mask the sharp tang of fear that seemed to emanate from the man.

"Sir, please calm down," one nurse said, her attempt at soothing clearly having the opposite effect.

"Who is he?" Morgan murmured to Derik as they approached.

"Looks like we're about to find out."

The man's eyes darted around wildly until they landed on Morgan and Derik approaching. Sensing authority, he visibly tried to compose himself, though his hands still trembled.

"Agent Cross, Derik Greene, FBI," Morgan announced, flashing her badge. "What's your name?"

"John Richmond," he gasped out between breaths, the fight seemingly draining from him under Morgan's steady gaze. "I'm a defense lawyer—I know Lara Quentin. We... we have a relationship."

"Mr. Richmond," Derik interjected with a kind yet firm tone, "what makes you think this is your fault?"

The man's eyes welled with tears, his shoulders slumping as if the weight of the world had just settled upon them. He looked past them, towards the closed door where Lara lay comatose, before bringing his defeated gaze back to meet Morgan's.

"Because it is," he whispered. "It all circles back to me."

Morgan's instincts screamed at the pain behind his words, and she knew there was more to this than just a guilty conscience. She held his gaze, searching for the truth in the depths of his distress.

"Let's find somewhere to talk," she suggested, signaling to the nurses that they would handle it from here. The nurses nodded, releasing their hold on Richmond, but not before casting wary glances at Morgan and Derik, as if questioning their decision.

As Richmond composed himself, Morgan caught Derik's eye. They both knew there was a deeper story—one that might just lead them closer to understanding the twisted path of the teddy bear killer.

Morgan guided the distraught lawyer to a quiet corner of the bustling hospital, away from prying ears and sympathetic stares. The sterile white walls seemed to close in around them as John Richmond's confession poured out in hushed, frantic tones.

"Talk to me, John. Start at the beginning," Morgan urged, her voice level but firm, a stark contrast to his trembling form.

He clutched at his chest, breaths stuttering like a man on the verge of drowning. "Lara, she... She saw things, things she shouldn't have. In the courthouse, during a high-stakes trial."

"Go on," Morgan prompted, her gaze never wavering from his pain-stricken face.

"I was swaying the jury. It was subtle, but Lara caught on. She confronted me afterward." His hands trembled. "I convinced her not to say anything. Persuaded her to turn a blind eye."

"By playing on her fears?" Morgan asked, piecing together the moral quandary Lara must have found herself in.

"Yes," he admitted, the word barely audible. "She was so unsure, so vulnerable. I used that. Made her believe silence was for the best."

"Was it?" Morgan's question hung in the air, sharp as a blade.

"No. God, no." Richmond buried his face in his hands, the very picture of regret.

Morgan watched, the cogs in her mind turning at full speed. This could be the break they needed, but there was more to uncover, emotions be damned.

"Did Lara share her fears with you? About someone finding out what she knew?"

Richmond nodded, a tear escaping down his cheek. "She was terrified of the killer. Said if he discovered she'd seen something, she'd be next. And now..." His voice cracked. "Now look where we are."

"John, why come here right after the attack?" It wasn't just professional curiosity; Morgan sensed this man's guilt ran deep.

"Because I had to know she was alive. To see her." He searched Morgan's eyes, desperate for something she wasn't sure she could give. "I feel like this is all my fault. If I hadn't pulled her into this..."

"Your fear brought you here," Morgan concluded aloud, her tone softer than before yet still edged with the authority of an agent who had seen too much to take words at face value.

"Can you... Can you ever forgive someone like me?" Richmond's plea was raw, seeking absolution from a stranger bound by duty and justice.

Forgiveness wasn't hers to give, not really. But understanding the human condition, the choices made under pressure, that was part of the job. "Right now, John, I need facts more than anything else. We'll deal with blame later." Her response was diplomatic, leaving room for the law to decide his fate.



Richmond swallowed hard, nodding in acquiescence. He understood the silent contract between them: his honesty for her pursuit of the truth.

Morgan turned away momentarily, taking in the complexity of the situation. A web of guilt, fear, and moral ambiguity lay before her, and she was about to untangle it, strand by precarious strand. Morgan's fingers clenched into fists as she stepped away from John Richmond, her nails digging crescents into her palms. Anger simmered beneath the surface of her usually unflappable demeanor. The lawyer's confession twisted inside her like a knife—his actions had endangered Lara, and yet here he stood, his guilt splattered at their feet, expecting absolution.

"Let's step outside," Morgan muttered to Derik, her voice low but urgent. They navigated through the sterile hospital halls, the bright fluorescent lights casting everything in a harsh, unforgiving glow. She could feel the weight of Derik's gaze on her, full of concern and expectation.

"Talk to me," Derik urged once they were out of earshot.

She exhaled sharply, releasing some of her tightly coiled tension. "Richmond's story... it lines up with what we know about Lara. But damn it, Derik, his cowardice might have cost that girl her life."

"Can't argue with you there," Derik replied, his green eyes reflecting a mix of empathy and frustration. "But we can't lose focus. There's a bigger picture here."

"Right." Morgan pressed her lips together, her mind racing. "Caldwell. If he's not our guy, and I'm starting to believe he isn't, then who at Dependence News had motive and opportunity?"

"Someone close enough to the victims... someone with knowledge of their cases," Derik added, piecing together the puzzle alongside her.

"Exactly." Morgan's resolve hardened like steel. "We need to talk to Caldwell again, see if he can point us toward anyone with a grudge against these women. It's time to shake the tree, see what falls out."

"Then let's not waste any more time," Derik said, determination lighting his features.

Morgan nodded, her mind already leaping ahead to the confrontation with the journalist. They would peel back the layers of this conspiracy, expose the rot at its heart. Whoever was using Henry Caldwell's pulpit to preach their twisted retribution would answer for their crimes.

The two agents moved with purpose, each step carrying them closer to the truth—and to a killer hiding in plain sight.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's gaze was unwavering as she observed Henry Caldwell, his once-triumphant posture now slumped in resignation. The sterile lights of the FBI headquarters flickered overhead, casting a harsh glow on the journalist's drawn features. Beside him, a lawyer, all sharp angles and tailored suit, whispered something that didn't seem to penetrate the fog surrounding Caldwell.

"Mr. Caldwell," Morgan began, her voice steady and authoritative, "we regret the circumstances of your apprehension. However, given your focus on judicial corruption, it placed you squarely within our sights." She watched for a reaction, any hint of guilt or defiance, but found none.

Henry met her eyes, his passivity a stark contrast to the fervor with which he usually pursued his stories. "I get it, Agent Cross," he said, his voice devoid of its usual edge. "You're looking for a killer in my backyard. Just not me."

"Exactly," Derik chimed in, leaning forward. His green eyes searched Henry's face, seeking truth in every crease and furrow. "We have reason to believe someone at Dependence News is behind these murders."

Henry's brows lifted ever so slightly. "That's a serious accusation," he noted, but the statement lacked force.

"Serious times," Morgan replied curtly. She could sense the unspoken communication between Henry and his lawyer, a silent exchange of strategy and reassurance.

"Another victim was almost added to the list tonight," Morgan continued, letting the gravity of the situation hang in the air. "Lara Quentin was nearly killed in a hit and

run. She survived."

Recognition flickered across Henry's features like a shadow passing. "Lara? Of course, I know her. She's around the courthouse often—"

"Any idea why anyone would target her?" Derik asked, his curiosity piqued as he leaned in closer.

"Can't say," Henry replied, shaking his head slowly. "She's just a secretary, isn't she? Why her?"

"Secretaries hear things," Morgan stated flatly, her mind already running through the possibilities. Lara Quentin had been on the periphery of their investigation, a name amongst many, but now she was a pivotal piece of the puzzle—a potential witness turned victim.

"Seems like this killer is trying to send a message," Derik suggested, glancing at Morgan, who nodded in agreement.

"Indeed," Morgan said, locking eyes with Henry, trying to shake loose any detail from the journalist's methodical mind. "The question is, what's the message, and who's really listening?" Morgan stepped closer to Henry, noting the weariness etched in the creases of his face. "Who else is close to Lara at the office?"

"Carrie, the receptionist," he said first. "And Gavin," Henry added, a flicker of something undefinable crossing his features.

"Gavin?" Derik chimed in, flipping open his notebook.

Henry nodded. "Gavin Merritt. Young reporter. I took him under my wing when he started—showed him the ropes."

"Tell us about him," Morgan insisted, her gaze unwavering. She watched as Henry's eyes softened at the mention of his protégé.

"Passionate doesn't quite capture it," Henry began, leaning back in his chair. "Gavin... he has this zeal for exposing corruption, for setting things right." He chuckled lightly. "Reminds me of myself a decade ago. But murder?" Henry shook his head firmly. "No, that's not Gavin."

"Everyone has a breaking point, Henry," Morgan countered, her dark eyes searching his.

"Maybe so," Henry conceded, "But Gavin's driven by his ideals, not violence."

Derik scribbled notes before glancing up. "His work—has it ever gotten personal for him?"

"Journalism is always personal if you're doing it right," Henry replied, then paused, considering his words. "But Gavin keeps a tight lid on whatever brews underneath. He's focused, maybe even more now than ever."

"More now than ever?" Derik echoed, catching the implicit meaning.

"His drive," Henry explained. "It's like he's channeling everything into his work."

Morgan leaned against the cold, metal table, her gaze fixed on Henry Caldwell. "Gavin," she began, her voice level despite the gravity of her question. "Did he have any children? Or did he ever lose someone close to him?"

Henry's eyes flickered with hesitation, and for a moment, a heavy silence filled the sterile interrogation room. Then he nodded slowly, the faintest hint of sorrow creasing his brow. "Yes, actually," he answered. "He had a little brother. After

Gavin's parents died in an accident, he fought tooth and nail to be the boy's guardian."

"Let me guess," Morgan interjected, her suspicion sharpening. "The system didn't see it his way?"

"Right." Henry's voice was tinged with bitterness. "They placed his brother in foster care instead. Tragic, really."

"Tragic how?" Derik prompted, leaning forward.

"His brother... he didn't make it. Died in the foster home, an accident on the playground or something like that," Henry confided, a pained look crossing his features.

Morgan felt a shock ripple through her. She straightened up, her tattoos stretching with the movement. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely." Henry's certainty was palpable. "It only happened a few weeks ago. But Gavin—he seemed to cope surprisingly well. Threw himself into his work more than ever."

"More than ever," Morgan echoed quietly, a chill settling over her. She exchanged a glance with Derik, reading the same disquiet reflected in his eyes. The pieces were beginning to coalesce into a grim picture—one where loss and grief could morph into something much darker.

Morgan's mind whirled as she paced the sterile corridor outside the interrogation room, her footsteps echoing with a rhythm that matched the racing of her heart. No, Gavin wasn't coping—he was plotting. Each piece of evidence, every whisper of grief transformed in her head into a map of his descent. She could see him sitting alone, surrounded by the ghosts of his loss, his anger at the justice system boiling over into a

silent scream for retribution.

"Derik," Morgan said, turning on her heel to face her partner, who had been trailing her with his own thoughts churning. "The teddy bear remnants at each scene—it's not just a twisted signature. It's symbolic. A lost child, a broken family... it's all personal for Gavin."

"Jesus, you think he's been planning this since his brother died?" Derik's eyes widened as the horror of the possibility settled between them.

"Think about it," Morgan pressed on, her tattoos almost coming alive with the intensity of her conviction. "A justice system that took everything from him, piece by piece. For Gavin, those victims represented the very institution that failed him. He's been punishing them, one by one."

"Damn," Derik muttered, running a hand through his hair. "But why Lara Quentin?"

"Because they were friends. She told him about the incident with John."

"She became a target," Derik finished, his voice grim.

"Exactly." Morgan's gaze sharpened, and she pushed off the wall with newfound determination. "But he didn't finish the job. Lara survived. That means he'll try again—or worse, he'll move on to the next name on his list."

"Then let's go," Derik concurred, already moving towards the exit.

"Right behind you," Morgan confirmed, her dark clothing a shadow as she followed swiftly. The weight of urgency bore down on her shoulders like a physical force, propelling her forward.

They burst through the doors of the FBI headquarters, the cool night air doing nothing to temper the heat of the chase that burned within them. They had to find Gavin Merritt before the darkness in him claimed another life—before the justice he sought twisted into further injustice.

"Let's end this," Morgan vowed, her voice a low promise to the night, to the victims, and to a little boy whose death had set this tragic chain in motion. They stepped into the car, tires screeching as they peeled away from the curb, racing against the clock and a killer's rage.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel, each turn towards Gavin Merritt's house winding the tension tighter in her chest. The night was a blanket thrown over the world, smothering every hope of light. She could feel Derik's eyes on her, his presence a steady counterbalance to the storm brewing in her mind.

"Plan's simple," Morgan began, breaking the silence with her sharp, no-nonsense tone. "Get in, get answers, get out. We aim for peaceful, but stay ready for anything else."

"Peaceful," Derik echoed, his voice laced with skepticism. "With Gavin? The guy who thinks he's the avenging angel for his dead brother?"

"Hope is not a plan, but it's a start," Morgan shot back, her gaze never leaving the dark road ahead.

They drove on, the engine's hum and the soft whirl of tires against asphalt the only sounds piercing the quiet. It was the calm before the storm, a moment suspended in time where everything still seemed possible—even a resolution without bloodshed.

The car slid into silence again, the weight of unspoken words hanging between them like a heavy fog. Derik shifted in his seat, the leather creaking under him as if it too sensed the gravity of what was to come.

"Morgan," Derik's tone had changed—softer now, hesitant. "Before we do this... I need to know. There's something you're not telling me."

She kept her eyes on the road, focusing on the hypnotic yellow lines that seemed to

stretch on forever. Her heart hammered in her chest, a silent admission of truth to his accusation.

"Derik, this isn't the time—"

"No," he interrupted, firm yet gentle. "Whatever it is, whatever you're carrying, you don't have to do it alone. We've been through hell and high water together. Remember?"

A ghost of a smile threatened to break through Morgan's stoic facade. Trust and betrayal, their dance as old as time itself, had woven a complex tapestry between them. He was right; they had seen darkness few others could comprehend. Morgan glanced at the rearview mirror, catching a glimpse of Derik's profile bathed in the intermittent glow of streetlights. "Why bring this up now, Derik?" she asked, her voice steady despite the undercurrent of fatigue from the night's grim parade.

"Because," Derik said, turning to face her with eyes that held an earnestness she'd come to rely on, "if things go south with Gavin, I need you to know you're not alone in this."

"Things have gone south before," Morgan countered, her words clipped like the rounds she'd chambered countless times. "We handled it then. We'll handle it now."

Derik merely nodded, the weight of their shared history pressing down on the silence between them.

As they approached Gavin Merritt's house, Morgan's keen eyes scanned the surroundings. The building loomed ahead, its dark silhouette a stark contrast against the moonlit sky—ominous and foreboding. It was a husk of memories, the overgrown lawn whispering tales of neglect and a past that had been allowed to wither.

She parked the car a few houses down, the engine's cessation marking the transition from planning to action. She surveyed the dilapidated facade. Morgan felt the familiar surge of adrenaline, the kind that sharpened her senses and honed her focus; this was where it would end, one way or another.

The darkness seemed to seep from the windows, voids that promised no welcome. The house, once a symbol of suburban normalcy, now stood as a testament to the decay wrought by tragedy. Gavin had grown up here, played in that yard, unknowing of the future that would claw away his innocence and replace it with rage.

Morgan led Derik across the unkempt lawn, the night air thick with tension. They reached the porch where shadows played tricks on their eyes, and Morgan's hand hovered over her holster, ready for any eventuality. She banged on the door and shouted, "FBI."

At first, there was only silence. The sound of the wind. Morgan was sure no one would answer, that he was hiding in there like a coward.

But then, the door creaked open, revealing Gavin Merritt. His attempt at casualness was betrayed by the tightness around his eyes and the slight tremor in his hands. "Oh, hello," he said, his voice steady despite the undercurrent of anxiety. "What brings you here so late?"

"May we come in?" Morgan asked, her tone measured but assertive.

"Of course," Gavin acquiesced, stepping aside to grant them entry.

The interior of the house felt like a mausoleum, cold and still. The walls were lined with frames, each capturing moments frozen in time—smiling parents, a younger Gavin, and a child with bright eyes, all gone now except for the man who stood before them. The silence hung heavy, filled with the unspoken grief of a family

annihilated.

"Nice pictures," Derik commented, though his eyes remained vigilant.

"Thank you," Gavin replied, though his gaze didn't linger on the memories encased in glass.

Morgan cut to the chase. "We need to talk about Lara Quentin," she stated, watching Gavin's face for any flicker of reaction.

His expression tensed subtly, then smoothed into a mask of detachment. "I heard about the accident, a colleague called me. Terrible thing to happen to someone so young... and she was my friend, too. I don't know how I'll go on without her, you know?"

"Except Lara isn't dead," Morgan countered sharply, her eyes never leaving his face.

Gavin's facade faltered for a moment before he regained control. "Isn't she? My mistake." His voice was flat, too controlled.

"Curious mistake to make," Morgan pressed, stepping closer. "Why would you think she was dead?"

Gavin's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, the first real sign of the fear gnawing at him from within. "Just rumors, I guess. You know how people talk," he deflected, but his body language screamed otherwise.

Morgan's instincts hummed with alertness, her every sense tuned to the man before her. She'd witnessed enough liars to recognize one standing right in front of her.

"Rumors, huh?" Derik chimed in, his tone skeptical. "Seems like more than just

rumors are floating around these days."

Gavin's calm veneer shattered like thin ice under the weight of Morgan's stare. Panic flickered in his eyes, a wild animal caught in a trap, as realization dawned on him. The atmosphere, already tense, became electrified with the charge of imminent danger. Gavin's fear metastasized into desperate aggression, his body coiling like a spring.

"Rumors die hard, don't they, Gavin?" Morgan said, her voice steady but her muscles tight, ready for anything.

He didn't answer; instead, his gaze flicked to a side table, to a ceramic vase atop it. In an instant, his hand shot out, seizing the vase and hurling it towards Morgan's head with unexpected force. She ducked, the vase shattering against the wall where her head had been seconds before.

"Derik!" she shouted, even as Gavin bolted, his footsteps pounding against the worn carpet.

The chase was on, chaotic and violent as Gavin threw obstacles in their path—overturning furniture, ripping down curtains. Morgan and Derik pursued, adrenaline fueling their steps as they navigated the narrow hallways of the dilapidated house. Picture frames crashed to the ground from the walls, the smiling faces of a family long gone splintering beneath their feet.

"Left!" Derik called out as Gavin disappeared around a corner, his breaths coming in harsh pants. Morgan followed, her dark hair whipping behind her as she moved with the practiced ease of someone who knows their body is a weapon.

They plunged through cluttered rooms, dodging decayed toys and stacks of newspapers that spoke of a life stuck in the past. Dust motes danced in the beams of

their flashlights, creating a surreal backdrop to the violence unfolding.

"Split up," Morgan commanded as they entered a wider space, a living room that smelled of mildew and regret. She veered right, Derik left, both seeking to cut off Gavin's escape routes.

Through a kitchen littered with dirty dishes and expired dreams, Morgan advanced. A knife clattered to the floor as Gavin swept an arm across a countertop, buying himself precious seconds. Morgan didn't flinch, her focus razor-sharp as she cleared the distance between them.

"Stop, Gavin! It's over!" Her voice was authoritative, commanding, but the young journalist was beyond reason, propelled by a grief-twisted logic only he understood.

A fist collided with Derik's jaw in the semi-darkness, a crunch of bone and sinew that echoed through the narrow corridor. Morgan's head whipped around just in time to see her partner's tall frame crumple to the ground, his eyes rolling back as he collapsed into unconsciousness.

"Derik!" she cried out, her voice a mix of anger and concern. She dropped beside him, her trained fingers quickly checking for a pulse. It was strong, steady—thank God—but there was no time to spare.

"Agent down!" Morgan barked into her radio, the device crackling with her urgency. "I need backup at 5472 Willow Lane. Suspect is on foot, inside the house. Surround the premises!"

With one last glance at Derik's still form, she forced herself up and dashed in the direction Gavin had fled—up the stairs. Adrenaline surged through her veins, sharpening her senses, focusing her mind with the clarity of a predator closing in on its prey.

The chase led her to a door slightly ajar, light spilling onto the hallway's carpet. Morgan nudged it open with the barrel of her gun, peering into a room frozen in another era. Toys lay scattered across the floor, a model airplane hung from the ceiling, and posters of long-forgotten cartoons adorned the walls. This was Frankie's sanctuary, untouched by time or grief.

"Gavin! Come out," Morgan commanded, her tone even but authoritative.

Her eyes darted across the room, searching for any sign of movement, any hint of where he might be hiding. But silence greeted her, the heavy kind that pressed down on the chest and filled the air with unspoken dread.

"Think about what you're doing," she continued, taking measured steps into the room, her weapon leading the way. "This isn't what Frankie would've wanted."

No response came, only the quiet mocking her. The atmosphere felt charged, every corner of the childhood haven now a potential cover for a desperate man with nothing left to lose. Morgan knew the stakes; she had been at this deadly game long enough to understand its cruel twists.

She moved further in, her senses on high alert, knowing full well that Gavin could emerge at any moment, ready to fight with the ferocity of a cornered animal. Each step was calculated, each breath controlled—the hunter's dance performed with lethal grace.

"Come out, Gavin," Morgan repeated, this time her voice softer—a plea wrapped in the guise of an order. "Let's end this without any more bloodshed."

Still, the room remained silent, save for the distant sound of sirens growing ever closer. Backup was on its way, but in this moment, it was just Morgan and the ghost of the boy who once played here, the innocence lost forever in the shadow of tragedy.

Morgan scanned the room, her eyes halting on a ripped teddy bear lying under a dusty dresser. The gash across its stomach spilled synthetic fluff onto the wooden floor—a stark contrast to the violence that had just unfolded. She felt the weight of every child's smile that room once hosted, now tainted by the horrors of adulthood.

"Frankie deserved better than this," she said, her voice tinged with empathy and steel as she took another cautious step forward. "You think you're avenging him, Gavin, but revenge is a dark path that only leads to more pain."

Her words seemed to dissolve into the silence that cloaked the room, heavy with the ghosts of innocence lost. Somewhere in the shadows, she knew Gavin was listening, his breaths likely shallow with anxiety and fear.

"Your brother's memory doesn't have to be stained with blood," Morgan continued, her gaze never leaving the corners where darkness lingered. "It's not too late to stop this."

As if summoned by her call to conscience, Gavin erupted from the shadows behind the closet door, his face twisted with desperation and anger. With a guttural cry, he lunged at Morgan, his hands aiming for her throat. Instinctively, she sidestepped, barely avoiding his grasp as adrenaline surged through her veins.

"Damn you, Gavin!" Morgan grunted, as they crashed into a small table, sending childhood trophies clattering to the ground.

Gavin's rage was palpable, his fists swinging wildly, each blow carrying the weight of his anguish. Morgan deflected his attacks with precision, her training taking over, but she could feel the raw emotional energy fueling his assault.

"Stop!" she yelled, dodging a particularly vicious strike. "I understand your pain, but this isn't justice!"



Their struggle was a dance of survival, desperation meeting determination, each move a test of wills. Gavin's eyes burned with undiluted fear, a mirror to the terror his brother must have felt in his final moments. Morgan knew she couldn't let that fear overpower her own resolve; she had to end this before it ended her.

Morgan's fist connected with Gavin's jaw, a satisfying crack splitting the air as he staggered backward. She didn't bask in the moment; there was no time. His back hit the wall with a thud, the impact rattling the framed pictures of a happier past that hung crookedly there. He lunged forward again, but Morgan was ready—years of training and nights filled with the echoes of her prison cell had honed her reflexes to a razor's edge.

"Enough, Gavin," she breathed, ducking beneath his wild swing and driving her elbow into his midsection. The blow forced the air from his lungs, and for a moment, his eyes widened with shock rather than fury. It was all Morgan needed. With a swift move, she swept his legs out from under him, his body thudding against the carpet.

Gavin tried to rise, but Morgan was already upon him, pinning him with her knee pressed against his back, her hands wrenching his arms behind him. Her breath came in ragged gasps, yet her grip was unyielding. "It's over," she declared, the weight of her authority as heavy as the handcuffs she clicked onto his wrists one by one.

Secured, Gavin ceased struggling, his chest heaving against the floor. Morgan stood slowly, her muscles protesting after the fierce battle. The room was silent except for their labored breathing—a stark contrast to the chaos that had reigned just moments before. She stepped back, surveying the man who lay defeated before her. This was the endgame, her chase culminating in this final, bitter victory.

Her eyes flitted around the room, resting on the torn teddy bear, its stuffing spilling out like the innocence lost in this twisted vendetta. Morgan's heart clenched; she could almost hear the echo of children's laughter that once filled this space, now

replaced by the ghosts of vengeance.

"Frankie deserved better than this," she whispered, not sure if she was speaking to Gavin or reminding herself of the stakes that had driven them both to this point. "You both did."

"You know nothing," Gavin said. "Frankie was my brother. My responsibility. And they took him from me!"

His voice echoed through the room, filling it with the raw pain of his loss. But beneath the anguish and grief, there was a hint of something else—regret, perhaps, or guilt.

"The system failed him... it needs to be rewritten. Those people I killed—they were all corrupt."

"They might have been," Morgan conceded, a bitter edge to her words. "But you're no better than them. You're much worse, Gavin. You don't get to decide who lives or dies."

"Those weren't innocents!" Gavin spat back, a snarl contorting his youthful face. "They were part of a system that destroyed us!"

Morgan sighed heavily, shaking her head. "Being part of a flawed system doesn't make one

evil, Gavin. What about those they left behind? Their families, their children? Just like Frankie, they're victims too." Her voice was steady and clear despite her fatigue. "You had a chance to expose the corruption. Instead, you became part of it."

Gavin craned his neck to look at Morgan, his eyes now devoid of the fiery rage that

fuelled him before. The silence between them throbbed with unspoken words. "I did what I had to," he muttered through gritted teeth.

"No," Morgan said, meeting his gaze with an unwavering stare. "You did what you wanted. And now you're going to jail."

She turned away from the shattered remnants of a childhood long gone, signaling the officers who rushed in at her call. As they took Gavin into custody, Morgan lingered for a moment longer, the image of the ripped teddy bear imprinting itself in her memory.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan stepped into the bustling FBI headquarters, her muscles aching with the kind of fatigue that only comes from a night spent outsmarting death. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting long, clean shadows over the polished floors—a sharp contrast to the grim darkness where they had finally cornered Gavin Merritt. Derik walked beside her, his presence a silent reassurance.

Heads turned as they passed, eyes filled with a mixture of respect and something akin to awe. The chaos of the previous night—the fear, the adrenaline, the sheer determination it took to apprehend a killer—had already morphed into office legend. Morgan kept her expression unreadable, but she couldn't ignore the small surge of pride. They had done it; they had stopped a man on a twisted quest for vengeance before he could strike again.

Assistant Director Mueller broke away from a cluster of agents, his approach signaling the unofficial debriefing they both knew was coming. He was a tall, imposing figure, the lines on his face etched by years of service and authority. Today, though, his usual stern demeanor softened just enough to let genuine admiration show through.

"Job well done," he said, shaking their hands with a firm grip that spoke more than his words ever could. "You both did excellent work apprehending Gavin Merritt." His voice carried the weight of experience, acknowledgment from a man who understood the cost of their victory better than most.

"Thank you, sir," Morgan replied, her voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions. It wasn't just about catching Merritt. It was about proving herself, about reclaiming a piece of the identity that had been tarnished by false accusations and a

past that refused to stay buried.

Mueller gave them a nod, as if he recognized the unspoken thoughts. The approval of their colleagues, the subtle shift in regard within the ranks—it was all part of the dance they did, a delicate balance between duty and personal redemption. For now, they were on solid ground, but Morgan knew all too well how quickly the sands could shift beneath her feet.

She caught Derik's eye, and they shared a moment of silent communication that needed no translation. Exhaustion clung to them like a second skin, but beneath it was the undeniable relief of having made it through the fire, together.

The assistant director moved on, leaving them amidst the hum of activity that never really ceased within these walls. Morgan felt the weight of the badge on her hip, a reminder of the oath she'd taken and the path that lay ahead. She was an agent, yes, but she was also a woman forged by adversity, driven by a need for justice that went deeper than any case file could capture.

Today, they were heroes. Tomorrow, the fight would begin anew. But for now, Morgan allowed herself to breathe, to feel the satisfaction of a job well done wash over her, even if only for a fleeting moment.

Morgan's gaze met Derik's across the bustling sea of desks and monitors; both sets of eyes held a storm that had nothing to do with triumph, and everything to do with survival. As if on cue, Derik's hand rose, his fingers lightly tracing the stark white of the bandage wrapped around his head—a beacon of their recent clash with death.

"Hey," she called out softly, her voice steady despite the chaos of last night still echoing in her mind.

"Hey," he replied, offering a half-smile that didn't quite reach his green eyes. His

gesture was subtle, but it spoke volumes of the violence they'd endured, the close calls that were now etched into their bones.

Assistant Director Mueller's frame loomed into view, his shadow casting over their shared moment. Concern furrowed his brow as he observed Derik's wound. "That looks serious, Greene. You might want to get that checked out again."

Derik straightened, his posture taking on the professional rigidity taught to them from day one at Quantico. "I'll be fine," he insisted, his words clipped but not without warmth. "Just a scratch." He managed to draw a chuckle from a nearby agent, breaking the tension with practiced ease.

Morgan watched as Mueller nodded, seemingly satisfied with Derik's response. There was an unspoken acknowledgement between them, a recognition of the hazards of their job, and the risks they took without hesitation. Morgan felt it then, the subtle lift in the air, a buoyancy brought on by the camaraderie and support of their team. It was a fleeting feeling, one she clung to like a lifeline.

"Good," Mueller said gruffly, a smile threatening to break through his usually stoic demeanor. "We need agents like you, ready to bounce back."

"Always," Derik replied, but Morgan caught the quick glance he shot her way—the silent promise that they were in this together, no matter what bruises they carried or the darkness they faced.

Morgan's fingers still felt the echo of her pistol's grip as she holstered it back at the office, the weight a constant assurance against her hip. The chaos of the night had settled into a heavy silence that clung to her like the remnants of a nightmare. Derik was saying something, his voice barely piercing through the fog of her thoughts.

"Hey," he nudged her gently, catching her attention. "How about we grab a drink?"

Celebrate?"

She looked at him, his green eyes searching for a spark of enthusiasm in hers. A celebration felt hollow when her mind was a carousel of unsolved puzzles and personal demons. But she nodded, weary. "Sure, let's do it."

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They left the bureau's fortress of grey walls and fluorescent lights behind, trading them for the discreet charm of a quiet bar not far from headquarters. The place was a familiar refuge, its dimly lit corners a stark contrast to the probing spotlights of their profession, the air rich with the scent of aged wood and spirits.

At a corner table, sheltered from the few patrons scattered about, Morgan and Derik sat across from each other. The clink of their glasses should have been a toast to victory, yet it sounded like a tolling bell in Morgan's ears. She tried to smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Here's to putting another monster behind bars," Derik said, lifting his glass higher, though his head remained haunted by the bandage wrapped around it.

"Cheers," Morgan replied, the word brittle on her tongue. She took a sip, the burn of the whiskey trailing down her throat, failing to warm the chill that had taken residence in her bones.

Across from her, Derik's gaze softened, a silent question lingering in the air between them. He knew her too well; knew that even in the midst of success, Morgan's mind was a battlefield where shadows loomed larger than life.

The bar's subdued hum surrounded them, a lullaby for the weary, as Morgan stared through the liquid amber in her glass. Somewhere beyond the clinking of ice and the

murmur of conversations lay the truth she was still chasing—a truth that could shatter everything she believed in.

Morgan traced the rim of her glass, eyes unfocused. She was adrift in a sea of doubt, the steady thrum of the bar's pulse unable to anchor her troubled thoughts. Derik leaned forward, his concern as palpable as the humidity clinging to the air.

"What's on your mind?" he asked, his voice cutting through the din with practiced gentleness. It was the softness of autumn leaves underfoot, a contrast to the harshness that often defined their world.

Morgan sucked in a breath, feeling the weight of revelation heavy on her chest. "Gavin's obsession with cleansing the justice system... it struck a chord with me," she admitted, finally lifting her gaze to meet Derik's earnest green eyes. The words tumbled from her like stones from an avalanche, unstoppable and raw.

"Talk to me," Derik urged, his hand reaching out, hovering over hers but not touching—a silent offer of support.

Her voice wavered slightly, betraying the ironclad composure she wore like armor. "I can't shake the feeling... Someone inside the Bureau framed me." Morgan's admission hung between them, a specter of the past she had tried so hard to bury.

Derik remained silent, a sentinel in the dim glow of the bar, his presence both a comfort and a reminder of all they had endured together. His familiarity with her story did nothing to lessen the gravity of her suspicions. His brow furrowed, understanding the implications of such a claim. It wasn't just about clearing her name; it was about trust, about the very foundation upon which they built their lives.

Morgan could feel the old scars throb, wounds inflicted not by blades or bullets, but by betrayal. She had clawed her way out of a dark place once before, fighting tooth



and nail to prove her innocence. And now, Gavin Merritt's misguided crusade had dredged up ghosts she thought long exorcised.

She knew the risks, understood that scratching at old wounds might draw fresh blood. But the truth was a siren call she couldn't resist. Not when it whispered secrets that could topple giants and crumble institutions. Her resolve hardened, steel reinforcing bone. She would chase this new lead, follow it into the abyss if she must.

"Someone high up... someone untouchable," Morgan continued, her hands clenched tight around the glass. "I can't tell you who. But... I need you to trust me."

As the silence stretched, it was filled with unspoken vows, the kind that bound souls in the darkness. The bar's ambiance faded into nothingness, leaving only the resonance of Morgan's determination, a force unto itself, echoing in the hollows of Derik's unwavering support.

Morgan's gaze held steady as she watched Derik absorb the gravity of her declaration. The low hum of the bar around them seemed to fade into a distant murmur, all attention focussed on the exchange between two souls entwined by more than just their badges.

"Derik, this goes deeper than what we've seen," Morgan stated, her voice firm despite the fatigue that etched lines into her face. "It's not just about clearing my name. It's about finding the rot within, and it's dangerous. I can't have you caught in the crossfire." In the dim light, her tattoos seemed to dance upon her arms, each one a testament to battles fought and scars borne.

Her partner's green eyes locked with hers, an inscrutable expression playing upon his features. Derik Greene had always been the kind to tread carefully in the field of human emotion, yet his resolve was clear as crystal when it came to backing up his partner.

"I don't want you to get hurt because of me," Morgan continued, her words slicing through the clinking of glasses and the low drone of conversation. She leaned forward, elbows on the table, her dark hair framing a face that had seen too much but refused to look away. "I need to do this on my own."

Derik listened intently, his tall frame slightly hunched, as if carrying the weight of their shared history. He remembered too well the sting of betrayal, the taste of whiskey on his tongue as he tried to drown out the memories of his own failings. Yet here he sat, sober and supportive, a testament to the strength found in second chances.

"Your safety is non-negotiable, Derik," Morgan added, her eyes pleading for understanding. There was a fierceness to her, a relentless drive that both intimidated and inspired him. She was a storm in the form of a woman, and he knew better than to stand in her way.

Derik took a moment to process her words, silence stretching between them like a taut wire. Then, he exhaled slowly, nodding his head as if conceding to an unspoken argument. "I get it," he said softly, his voice bearing the warmth of empathy forged in the fires of shared hardships. "But you know I'm here for you, right?"

The sincerity in his tone cut through the fog of Morgan's apprehension like a beacon. For a brief moment, the weight of her burdens eased, and she allowed herself the luxury of trust. It was a rare gift, and one she did not accept lightly.

Morgan's gaze lingered on Derik, the dim light of the bar casting shadows across his features. His eyes held a quiet strength that she had come to lean on more than she cared to admit. She could feel the hum of tension between them, a current charged with things left unsaid and emotions kept at bay.

"Derik," she began, her voice barely above a whisper, "I—"

"Shh," he interrupted gently. His fingers reached out, tracing the line of her jaw with a tenderness that made her breath catch. The world around them seemed to fade into silence.

In that moment, as Morgan looked into Derik's green eyes, all the fear and uncertainty that plagued her stilled. Here was the man who had seen her at her worst and stood by her, the man who knew her scars both inside and out. He had betrayed her once, but in this fractured world, it was their imperfections that wove them tightly together.

Derik leaned in closer, erasing the space between them. His lips met hers in a kiss that was soft, hesitant at first, as if questioning the promise it might hold. Then, it deepened, a mingling of relief and yearning, an acknowledgment of the road they had traveled and the one they were yet to embark upon.

The kiss ended as quietly as it had begun, leaving a lingering warmth that seemed to echo through Morgan's entire being. They pulled back slightly, foreheads resting against each other, sharing breaths and the stillness of the moment.

"Despite everything," Derik murmured, his voice a low rumble, "we've got this, Morgan."

She nodded, the ghost of a smile gracing her lips. In that brief, meaningful exchange, something unbreakable had been forged between them. It was a silent vow, a mutual understanding that whatever lay ahead, they faced it together.

Yet, even as comfort settled in the spaces between them, Morgan felt the weight of her own resolve. Her quest for justice was hers to bear; it was a path she had to walk alone, though Derik's presence would always be a beacon in the dark. And so, with a final squeeze of his hand, she signaled the end of the moment, a pause before stepping back into the fray.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:37 pm*

Morgan's fingers danced across the keyboard in a staccato rhythm, the ambient hum of her computer the only sound piercing the silence. The dim glow from the screen cast an eerie luminescence on the walls of her office, lined with shelves burdened by the weight of countless case files. Her eyes, sharp and unwavering, scanned the monitor as she entered the name that had haunted her for days now: "Cordell."

The search began, a cascade of documents flooding the screen—personnel records, archived operations, internal memos—all pieces of a puzzle she was determined to solve. She leaned forward, her dark hair falling like a curtain to shield her face from any prying eyes that might wander through the late hours of FBI headquarters. Richard Cordell's shadowy past unfolded before her, a tapestry of connections that wove through the fabric of unsolved cases and clandestine dealings.

Morgan's mind worked tirelessly, connecting dots that most would overlook. Her tattoos, a silent testimony to her own tangled history, shifted with each movement. A particular document caught her attention—a cold case file with redactions that screamed of cover-ups and secrets. With a swift click, she added it to her growing list of leads.

"Connections," she muttered to herself, the ink of her pen scrawling across a notepad with the same ruthless efficiency that marked her career.

She drew lines from Cordell's name to various aliases, front companies, and off-the-record operatives. Dates and locations formed an intricate web that hinted at the man's reach within the agency—an influence that both shielded him from scrutiny and allowed him to manipulate from the shadows.

"Gotcha," Morgan whispered, a surge of adrenaline fueling her resolve. Each piece of evidence, each suspicious activity linked to Cordell, fortified her belief that he was the puppet master—the one pulling the strings that once ensnared her in a wrongful conviction. It wasn't just about clearing her father's name anymore; this was personal. Cordell had framed her, taken years of her life, and now she was close to exposing him.

Her notes became more feverish, the lines on the page intersecting in a chaotic yet purposeful manner. Internal communications, dates of unexplained absences, financial anomalies—all forming a damning indictment of a man who once stood atop the FBI hierarchy. The stakes were high, and she knew that every step closer to the truth put her in deeper peril. Yet fear was a luxury she couldn't afford—not when justice was on the line. Each revelation was a step out of the darkness that had shrouded her since her incarceration, each document a potential key to unlocking the mystery of Richard Cordell's true nature.

Morgan's relentless pursuit of the truth continued, her gaze fixed on the screen as she unraveled the complex web spun by a master of deception. There was no turning back now.

Morgan's fingers hovered over the keyboard, her mind racing as she encountered one blocked file after another. Each pathway that seemed promising led to an abrupt end, a digital brick wall that screamed of tampering. The scent of stale coffee mingled with the sharp tang of frustration in the air. She could almost feel the hands of Richard Cordell reaching out from the shadows, obscuring trails and sanitizing records.

"Come on," she muttered to herself, her brows knitting together. There was a pattern here—a sinister tapestry woven by a man so adept at manipulating the system that he'd turned the FBI into his personal game board. Morgan's instincts, honed from years of navigating the murky waters of criminal psychology, knew that Cordell was the key; she just needed to prove it.

She scrawled names, dates, and case numbers across her notepad, connecting them with lines that crisscrossed like scars. Every connection brought her closer to painting a portrait of Cordell, yet each stroke only served to deepen the enigma. He was a mastermind with tendrils stretching into every corner of the Bureau, his influence an invisible force that seemed to mock her from the darkened corners of the room.

As she sifted through the tangled evidence, the piercing ring of her phone shattered the silence. She snatched up the receiver, her voice razor-sharp. "Cross."

"Resign from the FBI immediately." The voice slithered through the line, distorted and mechanical, but dripping with authority.

Morgan's hand tightened around the phone, her pulse throbbing in her ears. The words hung in the air like a guillotine blade, cold and final. It was a clear message from someone who didn't bother disguising their intent or their knowledge of her investigation.

"Who are you to—" She started, but the commanding tone left no room for questions.

"Resign, Agent Cross. This is your last warning." The line crackled with menace, the distortion failing to mask the underlying threat.

Every instinct screamed danger, a primal alertness that surged through her veins. Someone was watching, someone with enough power to monitor her moves and tap her calls. Cordell had eyes everywhere, and now they were fixed on her.

"Is that a threat?" Morgan's voice was ice, her gaze locked onto the shadows that danced across her cluttered desk.

"Consider it advice," the voice replied.

Her pulse thundered in her ears, but Morgan's exterior remained as solid as the desk

before her. This was not just a warning; it was an intimate threat, delivered with the precision of someone who knew exactly how to strike at her core. They were aware of her every move—the late nights spent piecing together the mysteries of Cordell, the connections drawn between cases that should have stayed buried. And now, they had stepped out from the shadows.

"Is my investigation hitting too close to home?" she countered, her tone edged with steel.

The caller's laughter crackled, brief and mirthless. "You're playing a dangerous game, Agent Cross. A game you cannot win."

A chill crept up her spine, the icy tendrils of realization wrapping around her thoughts. This wasn't just about the job anymore. Whoever was on the other end of that call might know about her father's secrets, her unjust imprisonment, or even about her complicated feelings for Derik. Her past was a weapon they could wield with lethal accuracy.

"Your persistence will bring consequences," the voice continued, its distortion doing little to mask the gravity of its message. "We both know you've been down that road before. Do you really want to walk it again?"

Morgan's grip tightened around the phone. The veiled reference to her time behind bars—a period when she was stripped of her badge and her dignity—was a calculated jab designed to unnerve her. But Morgan was made of sterner stuff. She had clawed her way back from the depths once and wouldn't be dragged back down by faceless threats.

"Empty threats won't deter me," she spat out, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the room, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of the intruder in her private world.

"Consider this a courtesy then," came the reply, each word a sharpened dagger aimed

at her resolve. "Resign, or there will be repercussions. Severe ones."

"Is that so—Cordell?"

The line crackled with tension, the silence stretching out like a tightrope. Morgan held her breath, her gaze fixed on the darkened window, half expecting a sniper's bullet to pierce the glass. The name Richard Cordell was a litmus test—if this shadow had any connection to the ex-FBI puppet master, there would be a reaction.

A beat passed, then another. A lifetime seemed to hang in that void. Then, without warning, the call ended with a click as abrupt and final as a coffin lid slamming shut.

Morgan sat frozen, the dial tone a mocking obituary for her attempt at gaining leverage. The caller had hung up at the mere mention of Cordell. It was a small victory but a telling one. Whoever was on the other end knew about Cordell, knew enough to fear the repercussions of even acknowledging his existence.

She leaned back in her chair, her mind racing. The veiled threats, the cryptic warnings—it all pointed to an intricate web with Cordell lurking at its center. This wasn't just about silencing her; it was about protecting someone, someone with enough power to manipulate the Bureau's strings like a seasoned puppeteer.

Her eyes darted to the files scattered across her desk, each one a piece of the puzzle she was slowly assembling. Whoever had called thought they could intimidate her into submission. They were wrong. This call hadn't instilled fear; it had stoked the fires of her resolve. They wanted her to resign, to disappear into the shadows—but Morgan Cross was done being a ghost in her own life.

Cordell had framed her once, stolen ten years from her grasp. He wouldn't get another second. With a newfound urgency, she reached for her notes, the words 'Richard Cordell' burning on the page like a brand. She would find him, unearth his secrets, and expose the rot within. No more running, no more hiding.



It was time to hunt.