



Girl, Reborn (An Ella Dark FBI Suspense Thriller—Book 21)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: FBI Agent Ella Dark has studied serial killers from the time she could read, devastated by the murder of her own father, and has gained an encyclopedic knowledge of murderers. A victim of a new killer is found dead, an ancient water clock mysteriously dripping on her body—and Ella knows she has precious little time to decode this killer's riddle, and stop him before he finds his next target...

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ricky Toledo clawed his way out of the blackness, the sticky, drooling nothing of a bender-induced coma. A marching band stomped through his skull and the vinegary tang of garbage squeezed his throat, like he'd spent last night rummaging through dumpsters mouth-first. Christ, how much rot-gut had he guzzled last night? Brain cells fried on rocket fuel masquerading as whiskey.

Snapshots flashed behind his eyes, all blurry round the edges. Pounding shots at the bar until the wee hours. Laughing with those fat-cat donors he called friends, faces smeared like greasepaint. Then getting the bright idea to take the party to the stripclub, hooting and hollering and smashing bottles. Drinking until the stars spun, unable to tell up from down. So pickled he couldn't feel the breeze.

Yeah, that was his last clear memory before the world slid sideways into oblivion.

He must've really done a number on himself this time – even for him. He felt like someone had switched his bones for cinderblocks. Either that or he'd been flattened by a truck and this was some kind of between-world dreamstate where he couldn't move his limbs but could still feel pain.

Ricky tried to shift again, but nothing much happened. Just a twitch of the shoulder. His eyelids resisted fluttering open, glued together with some devil's-brew combo of hangover sweat and eye boogers.

The first thing that struck him was the chill. His sodden clothes, usually pressed to perfection for council meetings, clung to him like a second skin. It was August the last time he checked, and unless he'd been unconscious for a month, he doubted Virginia ever got this cold in the summer.

Gooseflesh prickled his arms, and his teeth chattered. Where the hell was he? Did he leave a window open, pass out half in some alleyway? His mouth felt like it was stuffed with steel wool, and his tongue probed around for an answer. Came up with nothing but the stale film of too many cigarettes.

Slowly, other sensations filtered in: The rock-hard surface digging into his back. The smell of mold and damp concrete. And everywhere, the cold, settling deep into his bones. What the hell was going on? None of this added up to any kind of sense – not even by the whacked-out mathematics of his usual binges.

Ricky willed his eyes open, lids creaking apart like a rusty gate. He blinked water out of them as his vision adjusted to the darkness. Pitch is goddamn black. Couldn't see his own hand in front of his face. But he could feel rough stone under his fingers, chilly and slightly damp to the touch.

This was not his bed, nor his office at City Hall.

He tried to move again, straining with all his pickled might. But his arms and legs were dead weight. Leaden. Pinned at his sides by some unseen force. Ricky's heart rate surged into overdrive as adrenaline rose to chase away the last dregs of hangover. Something was very wrong here.

And then he heard it.

Water.

Echoing off close walls. The sound burrowed into his eardrums, insidious as a rattler's hiss.

Where was it coming from? His head lolled, neck muscles creaking, as he tried to get his bearings in the black. But it was everywhere and nowhere, impossible to pinpoint.

Then, a new sensation registered: pain. Sharp, stuttering bolts of it, arcing up his legs. Ricky gasped, then bit back a whimper. What the hell? Did he bust them up somehow, falling down drunk? Christ knows he'd taken plenty of headers in his misspent life, but nothing felt right about this.

Another noise joined the steady drip of water: a low groan, ragged around the edges. It took Ricky a minute to realize it was coming from his own throat.

His tongue probed a split lip, the coppery tang of blood mixing with stomach acid.

This was not a dream, nor some drink-induced hallucination. The pain, the restraints, the water at his feet – this was his reality.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, vague shapes swam into focus. Walls, close and curving around him. A high ceiling is lost in shadow. And just at the edge of his bleary sight, two hulking objects. One looked like a basin, something bulky and solid squatting over him. The other – his own legs.

But not.

His feet disappeared into a mass of something at the bottom of the basin. Solid and greyish in the gloom. It was recognizable as a human, man-made shape, but the rationale part of his brain struggled to accept what his eyeballs were telling him.

His feet were sealed in a block of solid concrete.

A lance of pure, gut-wrenching terror shot through him. Icy comprehension crashed over him in a frigid wave. He didn't bust up his legs, didn't injure himself in a drunken fall. Someone had done this to him. Knocked him out, dragged him here, to this dank hole. And they'd done this to him.

Ricky thrashed against his bonds, bellowing hoarsely into the blackness as the water continued to trickle in steadily from above. But the hard stone encasing him held fast, immovable and impassive. His ankles ached fiercely where the cement block squeezed, but Ricky couldn't command any control of them. He craned his neck, searching desperately for an exit, an escape hatch, any goddamn way out of whatever the hell this was. But there was only the suffocating blackness of a tomb.

'Help!' The word tore from Ricky's throat. 'God, help me. Someone! Please!'

But his cries dissolved into the ether. His pleas were drowned out by the dripping water.

Nobody was coming.

The water was up to his chin now, and the gnawing fear in Ricky's gut solidified into sure knowledge that was he going to die in here.

In that moment, Ricky saw his life unspool behind his lids in a mocking film strip. All those late nights schmoozing at rubber chicken dinners, pressing the flesh, making promises he couldn't keep. Fighting with his ex-girlfriend in their kitchen until she stormed out. Missing his mother's birthday, spending too much time hunched over zoning laws, disappointing his friends for the umpteenth time.

He'd failed them all, over and over, and this was the final punchline to a joke only the devil could laugh at.

The cops would find him pruned up and white as a fish belly, eyes bulging. Some ignominious end for a man who should be at the top of his game.

'I'm sorry,' he rasped to no one, hot tears tracking down his stubbled cheeks. 'God, I'm so sorry.'

For letting everyone down. For trying to play the hero politician instead of the good brother. He'd make different choices if he had it to do over – to be there more, nag less. To chase fewer highs. What he wouldn't give for one more shot, one more chance to do right by the few people who held him dear.

As the rising water reached his chin, Ricky squeezed his eyes shut and sent up one last prayer. That those he loved would find peace and purpose outside his wreckage.

And then his body seized in its concrete coffin, straining for one last precious gasp, but there was only choking, spluttering agony – water heavy in his lungs, a taunting void as the cold took him down.

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Ella Dark leaned on the balcony railing as she waited for the caffeine to kick in. Three days since she'd gotten back from Delaware. Three days of mandated 'rest and recovery' that was already driving her cuckoo. Seventy-two hours to stew in her own juices, but this time, she'd had someone to share that downtime with.

Luca Hawkins. Her blue-eyed devil, new agent extraordinaire. The Bureau's freshest piece of meat, and one that Ella didn't mind spending some serious time with.

Sure, he was easy on the eyes – a regular Adonis with sweet-as-sugar features. But it was more than that. The guy had a brain to match the brawn. They could jaw for hours, swapping theories, arguing profiles. He matched her quip for quip, gave as good as he got. In Luca, Ella'd found a kindred spirit; someone who got the job, lived the job, same as her. The fact that he filled out a suit like nobody's business was just icing on the cake.

She thought back to their night at that club in Delaware. They'd caught the psycho the press had since dubbed the Laughingstock Killer – as creative a moniker as ever – and as they were riding high on adrenaline, Luca's lips met hers. Everything else fell away. No protocol, no crime scene cleaners. Just then, the rest of the world be damned.

Christ. She dragged a hand down her face and made her way into the kitchen. They'd kissed. So what? It didn't mean a thing, especially as they hadn't done it since despite several opportunities to do so. And besides, Ella had bigger fish to fry right now.

Like Mia Ripley, the Thelma to her Louise. Well, if Thelma was a hard-bitten ball-buster with all the tact of a hammer to the face. They'd been through the wars, her

and Mia. Come out the other side with a few more scars and a lot less faith in humanity.

But the past few months? It had been some next-level insanity, even for them.

It started with Logan Nash, the scumbag who'd offed Ella's dad all those years ago. The old hitman had wound up dead in a safe house, brains rearranged by a 9mm PMC Bronze one-fifteen grain bullet. Then Randall Carter, the ex-Bureau Chief who'd had it in for her and Mia since day one. Ella's ex-boyfriend had been attacked too, but the last finality on the list was Trevor Garbett, Mia's douchebag of an ex-husband. Old Trevor had a history for blackmailing Mia out of money, until someone introduced his forehead to the business end of a Glock .17.

Three stiff, all with one thing in common: they'd all upset her and Mia at some point.

They had a murderous guardian angel on their side, but the identity of this vigilante triggerman was still a mystery. At least, unofficially.

It was the kind of thing a twisted mind might do for the person they loved, and the only person who fit the bill was Martin Godfrey – Mia's boyfriend. She'd seen the attacker on both CCTV footage and in the flesh, and the murky silhouette she saw was a perfect match for Martin.

Ella pieced it together, saw the pattern staring her in the face. Martin had worked for the police, FBI and military in the past, so he had access, opportunity. So Ella had gone to her partner, laid it all out. The photos, the timeline. Braced for impact.

But Mia? Mia exploded. Ranted and raved, called Ella every name in the book, then some. Accused her of trying to tank her happiness, of being jealous. It was a masterclass in denial, and Ella had a front-row seat. That same day, Martin Godfrey

had disappeared without a word.

That was the last she'd seen of Mia. Three days of radio silence, phone calls and texts pinging into the void.

Ella turned from her balcony and slumped into her chair at the kitchen table. The caffeine was hitting her system like a freight train but barely touching the dread threatening to erupt in her gut.

What now? Crawl back to Mia? Apologize?

She doubted it would do any good. Mia was as stubborn as a mule, and chances were she was probably still living in denial. It wasn't the first time they'd gone a few rounds, but this deep freeze was new territory. Three days of zip, zilch, nada.

Ella grabbed her phone and hovered her thumb over Mia's number, only a hair's breadth from craving for probably the twentieth time since Monday.

But pride was a funny thing. It could prop you up one minute, kick your legs out the next. And Ella's was built like a Jenga tower – one wrong move and the whole thing would come crashing down.

Besides, how'd that conversation even go? 'Hey partner, sorry for accusing your boy-toy of murder. My bad. Friends?'

Ella snorted. Right.

Still, the niggling worry remained, like a hangnail she couldn't stop picking. Mia was out there, maybe in the clutches of a killer. As far as Ella knew, Martin was still on the loose. What if he had Mia in his sights? Or what if they'd reconciled, thus thrusting Mia straight into the lion's den?

Christ, she needed a distraction before she drove herself insane.

Ella cracked open her laptop. Jabbed her password in like the keys had personally wronged her. If she couldn't fix this mess with Mia, she could at least pretend to be productive. She clicked over to her email, the new message icon cheerfully informing her she had a metric ton of unread crap. Joy.

Ella started skimming, deleting anything that smacked of pointless bureaucracy. Quarterly expense report? Delete. Sensitivity training? Delete. Mandatory feedback survey? Delete with extreme prejudice.

But then a name caught her eye, nestled between two read messages like a viper in the grass.

Mia Ripley. And next to it, a little green dot. The universal sign for 'online'.

Ella's heart stuttered, clicked into double-time. Online meant connected. Online meant at home.

The cursor hovered, trembling with the force of her hesitation. Did she really want to kick this particular hornet's nest? Rip the stitches out of a wound that had barely begun to scab?

But the alternative – Mia, alone with a liar at best and a murderer at worst – was too much to swallow.

Screw it.

Ella slammed the laptop shut, decision made. She snatched her keys off the counter and was out of the door in a hot minute.

If Mia was in trouble, if Ella had put her there with her big mouth and half-cocked assumptions, then apologies could wait.

She had a partner to save first.

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Ella clenched harder on the wheel as she swung into Mia's driveway, the mansion rising up like a middle finger to subtlety. Ostentatious columns and overcompensating square footage – the place stuck out like a pig at a bar mitzvah among the few modest lakeside homes that she'd passed along the way.

A quick scan revealed Mia's vintage Mustang with its cherry-red paint job, but no sign of Martin's four-wheel dad-mobile.

Ella killed the engine, relief and apprehension playing tug-o-war in her chest. At least Mia was flying solo. For now.

She levered herself out of the car and made her way to Mia's front door. She hated how each step toward the door felt like wading through wet cement. Dread and déjà vu clinging like a cheap perfume. How many times had she knocked on this same slab of overpriced mahogany, coffees in one hand and case files in the other? Too many to count.

But there would be no wisecracking or caffeine overloads this time. Just a tension you could bend steel around.

Ella hesitated, fist poised to knock on the glass – the first of two barriers between her and her partner. The hell was she even gonna say? No idea, but she'd always had a thing for improvisation.

She rapped once, twice.

Silence. Then the crackle of the intercom.

‘Who is it?’

Ella rolled her eyes. ‘You know damn well who it is, Mia. I’m standing right in front of your fancy-ass camera.’

A beat. Two.

‘The hell do you want, Ella?’

Ouch. Full name, no inflection. This was about to be as painful as a root canal without anesthetic.

Ella leaned in, one hand braced on the doorframe. ‘To talk. Clear the air. Make sure you’re still breathing and not bobbing face-down in that lake behind me.’

‘I’m fine.’

”Right. So fine, you’ve been ghosting me for days.” Ella pinched the bridge of her nose, suddenly weary down to the marrow. ”Just open up, please. Five minutes. That’s all I’m asking.”

The line went dead and for a heart-stopping few seconds, Ella thought Mia had pulled the plug. But then the front door swung open, revealing her erstwhile partner on the other side of the glass. Mia looked like ten miles of bad road: rough skin, dark circles, deeper frown lines. But she was alive and whole, and for that, Ella could’ve wept.

‘Five minutes,’ Mia said flatly.

Ella opened her mouth, ready to launch into the spiel she’d been rehearsing the whole drive over – but the words evaporated as she took in the glass door still firmly shut between them.

‘Seriously? You’re gonna make me grovel through glass?’

Mia just crossed her arms. Take it or leave it, the posture said. And Ella was in no position to be picky.

‘Alright. Fine.’ She scrubbed a hand over her face, suddenly feeling like she’d aged twenty years since she pulled up. ‘I’m sorry, Mia. For...all of it. I was out of line, jumping to conclusions like that. I should have come to you first or considered that you knew Martin better than I ever could. I screwed up.’

Mia’s jaw twitched, but she said nothing. Ella soldiered on.

‘It’s just – it fit. The deaths, the timing, the things I’d seen. It wasn’t just a shot in the dark. But I know how it sounded. How it looked. I accused your boyfriend of being a murderer.’

Mia flinched like she’d been slapped. ‘Accused?’ The word dripped venom, sizzled where it landed. ‘Pretty sure you did more than accuse, Dark.’

The comment hit like a punch to the gut. Fair, but it stung all the same.

‘I know, I know. And I’m sorry. More sorry than I can say. But Mia...I’m begging you. Just tell me I’m crazy. Tell me there’s nothing to it, that Martin’s not guilty.’

Mia’s silence stretched like taffy. Ella watched her partner’s face, looking for a tell. A twitch, a flicker. Anything to betray the thoughts churning behind that stony mask. But Mia had a hell of a poker face. Always had. It’s what made her such a damn good agent – and such an infuriating friend.

Friend. Is that what they’d still be, after all this? After the accusations, the radio silence? She wasn’t so sure. And yet – something niggled at the base of her skull. A

persistent itch she couldn't quite scratch. Because for all Mia's stony silence, for all her righteous fury, there was something else lurking in those bloodshot eyes. Something that looked a hell of a lot like fear.

The realization hit Ella like a bat to the skull.

She straightened up and rested her palms on the glass.

'You found him, didn't you?'

A muscle jumped in Mia's jaw. For a second, Ella thought she'd crack. Spill the secret festering between them. But then those shutters slammed down, and Mia's eyes went flat. Dead.

'I think you should go,' Mia said. Four words, toneless. A verbal kick to the teeth.

Ella's stomach plummeted. She backed away from the glass, all the while trying to read beyond Mia's mask of whatever the hell she was trying to portray.

Ella asked, 'Martin. When you looked at him, what did you see?'

But there was nothing. Just the cold, hard wall Ella had been flinging herself against for days. She searched that impassive expression, looking for a crack, just as Mia herself had taught her to do. Desperately seeking a glimmer of the wisecracking, ball-busting broad she'd trusted with her life. With her darkest secrets.

But there was only a stranger staring back. A woman carved from ice.

Ella's throat closed. Tears burned the backs of her eyes. She blinked them back with practiced ease.

‘Okay,’ she said. She stepped back, hands curling into fists. Forced herself to meet that flat, flinty gaze. ‘I’ll go. Please be careful.’

Mia’s stare drilled into Ella like a jackhammer. The seconds ticked by. What was probably five seconds felt like an eternity. Her gut churned, firing up questions Ella didn’t want to answer. Had she just torched more than a partnership? A friendship forged in the fires of shared blood, sweat, and tears?

Mia was mere months from hanging up her holster. From trading in her Glock for a piña colodas and sandy beaches. An easy life, hard-earned. And Ella had just kicked that sandcastle all to hell.

Maybe she should’ve kept her trap shut. Let sleeping dogs lie, let the chips fall. But then, that had never been her style. Not when lives were on the line. Not when Mia’s life was on the line.

The door slammed shut like a coffin lid, and Ella stood there, vision blurring as tears threatened to stage a coup. She blinked them back and choked down the glass in her throat.

This might be it. This could be the last she ever saw of Mia Ripley, the woman who’d taught her how to read the creases of a person’s forehead, how to slip into an empty house without breaking protocol, how to uncover a person’s life story from their thumb. The woman who’d plucked her from behind a desk and given her a job that teenaged Ella would never have believed was possible. Mia had been more than a mentor, more than a partner. She’d been the big sister Ella never had, the voice of reason in a world gone mad. They’d seen each other through hell and back, stitched up each other’s wounds, and chased away each other’s demons with cheap whiskey and cheaper humor. Mia had been there for Ella when no one else was, had believed in her when she couldn’t believe in herself. Had dragged her out of more metaphorical gutters than she could count.

And now, with a few ill-chosen words, Ella might have torched it all. Reduced a bond forged in blood and bullets to ashes in the wind.

Ella turned around and stumbled back to her car, legs heavy as lead. She slid behind the wheel and fished her phone from her pocket with numb fingers. The screen blurred and danced, but she managed to tap out a message.

Need to talk. You around?

She hit send before she could second-guess herself. Luca's response pinged back instantly, as if he'd been waiting for her SOS.

Yes, please. Going out of my mind here.

Ella cranked the engine and peeled away. The sprawling estate receded in her rearview, and all Ella could do was ask herself the questions that still scurried around her head. Was Mia going to be okay? Did she know something that Ella didn't? And was Martin still out there?

There was a hurt in her chest that no amount of distance could ease. Their connection had crossed a line, and Ella wasn't sure if they could ever uncross it.

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Luca's apartment was a minimalist's wet dream. Spartan chic, clean lines, enough floor space to park a tank. The only signs of life were a framed Boston Celtics jersey on the wall, an espresso machine gleaming like a showroom Porsche, and a single bookshelf crammed with FBI mandatory reading and, much to her surprise, romance novels. Guess there was more to Luca Hawkins than she thought.

But interior decorating and questionable reading tastes aside, Ella was here to lick her wounds and regroup, not play Martha Stewart after the morning she'd had.

She stomped into the living room, ignoring the twinge in her back that could have been an injury from last week or last year. By now, she'd stopped paying the aches any mind. Everything hurt and everything sucked, but the pounding in her skull drowned out all the other complaints. Ella made a beeline for the couch, collapsed onto it, and planted her feet on the table.

Luca emerged from the kitchen with a wide grin on his male model mug. 'What is this, your grandma's porch? Shoes.'

Ella popped her head up and spied her dirty Nikes. Dammit. She couldn't even get the basics right anymore. She kicked them off and said, 'Sorry, my bad.'

'Forgiven. Now, what's eating you up?'

Ella cracked an eye, grunted something that could've passed as a human sound with enough stretch. She wanted to spill this whole mess out from the start, but she couldn't even cast her mind back far enough to discern the beginning. It felt like this whole thing had begun the day she accepted the rank of Special Agent.

‘Ripley,’ Ella said. In a way, that one word covered everything.

Luca strolled in with two steaming mugs big enough to swim in. ‘Sounds like you need a Luca Special. Here, go nuts.’ He set the cups down on the table in front of her then took a seat beside her. Close enough to smell the shower gel.

‘What’s a Luca special?’

‘Two coffees.’

Ella took one sniffed, wary as a stray eyeballing a hamburger in an alley. ‘What’s in it? Should I be worried?’

‘I don’t mess around with java. Two different single-origin roasts, hand-picked for peak flavor. A little Sumatran for the bass notes, some Ethiopian for the high end. Finished with a twist of orange zest to make those taste buds sit up and sing.’

Ella stared at him as though he might sprout a second head. She reached out and rested two fingers against his brow. ‘Are you okay? Do you have a temperature?’

He clutched her wrist and gently pushed it aside. ‘If you want to touch me, you only need to ask.’

Despite herself, Ella felt her lips twitch. Damn him. Smug pretty-boy thought he was slick with the charm offensive, wearing her down with caffeine and quips.

‘Is that right?’

Luca shrugged. ‘Hush and tell me what’s so urgent you had to interrupt my busy morning.’

Ella scanned the room and saw nothing but domestic normalcy at every compass point. ‘You were busy?’

He pulled his laptop up from beside the couch. ‘Emails. Some of us actually read them.’

‘Ah,’ Ella said. She sipped the coffee and had to physically stop herself from groaning out loud. It was perfect, because of course it was. Rich and robust, with a bright zing that made her eyes snap open and her brain kick into high gear. Leave it to Luca to know exactly how she needed it – hot, strong, with just the right amount of sweet.

Just like, she thought. Nope. She shoved that thought back into the box it sprang from, welded the lid shut for good measure. Not going there. She and Luca were partners, that was it. Never mind the stolen glances, the “accidental” touches, the tension ratcheting up in their few short interactions. They had a good thing going here, and she’d be damned if she let her overactive libido screw it up.

Even if his mere proximity set her nerves to sizzling and made it hard to remember why dipping into the company ink was a bad idea. Even if the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled made her think horrible, treacherous thoughts about playing connect-the-dots with her tongue.

Ella slurped the coffee, using the mug to hide the flush climbing up her neck. From the heat. Definitely the heat and not the six-foot-something distraction sprawled out next to her in sweatpants that defined everything.

”So,” Luca said, dragging the word out. ”You gonna spill, or do I have to work for it?”

‘You want the list? Pull up a chair.’

Luca glanced down. 'I'm on a chair.'

'It was a figure of speech.'

'Start with the greatest hits. I can fill the rest in from there.'

Ella sighed, set the mug aside before she cracked the ceramic from clenching too hard. 'Mia's still pissed about the whole Martin thing. Won't return my calls, won't drop the ice queen act.'

Luca made a noise halfway between a cough and a grunt, the universal dude sound for "that sucks". 'Can you blame her? You accused her boyfriend of being a murderer.'

'He is,' Ella bit out. 'But apparently eighteen months of keeping each other alive is no match for Vitamin D.'

'You'd think she'd at least hear you out, what with you two being the wonder twins and all.'

"You'd think." Ella couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. It stung like a bitch, the cold shoulder, the silent accusation. She and Mia had been through hell and back, stitched each other up and dragged each other through the shit more times than she could count. They were each other's bulletproof vests, each other's ride or die. To have that questioned, thrown in her face over some silver fox with a hero complex, was a punch to the teeth.

Luca shifted, bumping her knee with his. Ella tried not to glance at the point of contact for fear he might retreat. She stayed put, soaking in his heat, his solidity. Stupid. Reckless. But it settled something inside her.

Luca, because he had some kind of sixth sense for knowing when to poke a bear, pried further. 'Look, I'm on your side here, but are you certain that this Martin guy is guilty? I mean, there are rumors all around HQ about Carter's death. Some people are saying it was a political thing.'

Ella's molars creaked from how hard she clenched. 'That or I've lost my mind.'

He shrugged. 'Well...'

Ella shot him a look. 'I have not lost my mind. We caught Carter's attacker on CCTV footage. Hell, I saw the guy with my own eyes. It was Martin freaking Godfrey, one-hundred percent.'

Luca made another one of those man noises, all constipated concern. 'So, why don't we tell the director? Drum up some manpower and get this guy found?'

Ella shook her head. 'The director won't take it seriously, plus what evidence do I have? Some grainy CCTV footage? My own word? Edis already had me in the office last week and told me to stay away from this.'

'This Martin guy, maybe he's... you know. Working through some stuff.'

'Like?'

'I don't know him, never met the man, but you said he was a military man and a field agent at one point?'

'Yeah. That's how Mia met him.'

'Two types of frontlines. That's gonna leave a mark on the psyche.'

Ella didn't know where Luca was going with this. Truth be told, she hadn't stopped to consider the why of Martin's actions, because she'd stopped understanding psychos' motivations ten cases ago.

'So you think Martin might be doing this for what, redemption?'

'I'm just spit balling here, but I reckon Martin's lost a few people along the way. Comrades, colleagues. He's gonna have that survival instinct, that protective instinct. Call me crazy, but he might be doing this to... protect you. To show you how much he cares.'

'Which means he's messed up in the head. What happens when the objects of his affection don't return his love? What if he and Mia broke up? Then what would he do?'

Luca scratched his jaw and said, 'He'd turn on her.'

'Exactly. Plus, Martin killed three people. We can argue for hours whether they deserved it or not, but we can't say murder is wrong in one breath and then say praise them in another.'

Ella didn't go into the story about Logan Nash, the man who assassinated her father. When Ella found his body slumped in a storage cupboard, she felt like the rug of justice had been pulled from under her feet.

Luca went quiet, drumming blunt fingers against his own mug. She waited, watching his profile out of the corner of her eye. That blade of a nose, the stubborn set of his jaw under a dusting of stubble. Those pretty boy lines that Ella prayed wouldn't fall prey to the stress of the job.

'I don't want to tell you your business here, El. But you ever think maybe you're too

close to this one?’

She whipped around to face him. ‘And I’m just supposed to let Mia fend for herself?’

”Hear me out. Mia’s your girl, I get it. But this is Mia Ripley. She’s up there with Douglas, Ressler. The woman’s no idiot. Her papers are mandatory reading for newbies at the Academy. Last year, she gave us a talk on how to profile someone based on their thumbs.”

‘What’s your point?’

‘That Ripley knows the human mind, probably a lot better than we do. Martin’s the overprotective one, right? And, well... No one likes a hypocrite.’

Ella felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. Luca didn’t know the half of it, but damned if he didn’t try his best to turn that pessimism upside down.

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right,’ Ella conceded. ‘Mia can handle herself. Hell, she’s probably the best shot in the Bureau. Woman could shoot the wings off a fly.’

‘No kidding?’

‘Nope. I once saw her shoot a guy in the ass. She said it was an accident, but...’

Ella’s phone exploded into a violent buzz. She fished into her pocket, pulled it out. The display flashed ”EDIS”, and Ella felt her stomach sink to her toes.

‘Director wants me,’ Ella said.

Luca gestured for her to answer, then strode off to the corner. A gesture of privacy.

Ella braced herself and swiped to answer.

This was it. Back to the grind.

‘Morning, sir,’ she said.

‘Ella, need you at HQ, immediately.’ Edis’ tone was a barbed wire rasp, all gravel and no nonsense. She could hear the roar of voices in the background, like he was stepping out of a White House briefing. Maybe he was.

‘I can be there in twenty. What’s the situation?’

‘The situation is a damn mess. I can’t speak much here, but someone close to me is...’ The Director trailed off.

‘Got it.’ Ella knew better than to demand details over the phone. ‘But sir, you know I should be on R and R until tomorrow?’

‘I’m going to have to call an audible. Consider your pay doubled for the next month. I need my best on this yesterday, we clear?’

Ella took a deep breath. Perfect. A solo mission on top of this whole soap opera with Mia and Martin. The universe must be busting a gut laughing at her right now.

‘Understood, sir.’

The line went dead. Across the room, Luca was watching her with wide eyes, brows drawn together in a question mark.

‘Duty calls?’ he asked.

Ella groaned, hauling herself upright on protesting joints. 'Looks like. Edis wants me in the office, says it can't wait.'

Luca made a sympathetic noise. He knew as well as she did that it was a bad move to reject a summons from the Big Man. Probably another sick puppy crawling out of the woodwork, looking to make a name for themselves in the most gruesome way possible.

But before Ella could launch into a full-blown bitch fest, Luca's own phone started buzzing and chirping like a digital aviary.

He glanced at the display and his eyebrows made a bid for his hairline.

He answered with a brisk 'Hawkins' and then lapsed into a series of clipped 'yes sirs' and 'no sirs' and 'right away sirs'. Ella watched, foot tapping impatiently, as Luca hmm'd and uh-huh'd his way through what sounded like a one-sided ass chewing.

Finally, after an eternity and a half, he hung up and slipped the phone back into his pocket. When he turned back to Ella, there was a manic gleam in his eye.

'What?' she asked. 'What's with the face?'

'That was Edis,' Luca told her, grinning like a loon. 'Guess you're stuck with me at least one more time.'

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Twenty minutes later, Ella and Luca barrelled into HQ in tandem. Ella caught a few curious glances coming their way as they moved through the halls, although she guessed most of them were eyeing up the new face at her side. The place was a buzzing, seething mass of suits and pencil skirts, all scurrying to their designated corners. Another day, another dollar in the Fed factory.

Usually, Ripley would be leading the charge, but today it was just Ella and the new kid. Or not so new anymore. Somewhere between the shared coffee and the crime scene banter, Luca had wormed his way past her defenses. Into her orbit, her space. The Mia-shaped hole in her life.

Ella shook it off. No time for a pity party, not when there was work to be done.

‘Think he’s gonna ream us for that stunt with the Laughingstock guy?’ Luca asked.

Ella jabbed a finger at the elevator call button. ‘The breaking and entering? Maybe.’

‘Got the job done, though.’ The elevator dinged, doors gliding open like silver jaws. They stepped inside and aimed for the top floor.

‘It did. And I’m sure Edis’ll thank you for keeping him neck deep in paperwork and ass coverage for the next month.’

Luca leaned against the mirrored wall. ‘If you want an omelet, you gotta break a few eggs.’

Ella eyed him from top to bottom. Always with the lip, this one. The boyish charm,

the easy wit. Lethal combo for a girl with a weakness for pretty things with sharp edges. ‘Listen to you, Hawkins. You crack one case and think you’re Sherlock.’

He shot up straight and smoothed a crease on his jacket. ‘Kidding. I’m just praying that Edis likes me enough to let that little oversight slide.’

Ella rolled her eyes so hard they threatened to pop out of her skull. The sad part was, he wasn’t wrong. Luca Hawkins could charm the habit of a nun, and their resident bulldog of a boss was no exception. From what Ella had seen so far, the man had a real soft spot for his blue-eyed protégé. Used to be Ella in that position, but she guessed even people had their shelf lives. She couldn’t deny that it stung a little.

The elevator shuddered to a halt, doors sliding open to reveal the top floor in all its wood-paneled glory. Edis’ lair, the inner sanctum. Where cases were made and broken, where careers lived and died on the whims of a tiny tin god with a receding hairline and a chip on his shoulder.

Ella squared her shoulders, lifted her chin. Beside her, Luca straightened up, game face sliding into place. The cocky rookie subsumed by the keen-eyed professional, a lawman to his core. It still surprised her sometimes, how easily he flipped that switch. The competence, the drive, hidden behind a mask of easy smiles and aw-shucks charm.

She had a feeling she’d barely scratched the surface of this kid – a thought both exciting and terrifying.

No more time to dwell. Edis’ office loomed at the end of the hall. Ella marched forward, reached the door, and didn’t bother knocking. Edis was expecting them, and hesitation was a trigger for his contempt.

‘Sir,’ Ella said. Luca echoed the greeting behind her.

Edis glanced up from the open case file on his desk. His watery eyes narrowed behind rimless glasses. He looked every inch the bureaucratic warlord, from his power tie to his overstuffed office chair. The proverbial bull in a china cabinet, and this was his personal shop.

‘Agents,’ he gruffed, waving them towards the chairs in front of his desk. A summons, an order couched as an invitation.

Ella sank into one, Luca into the other. Edis wasted no time, sliding two casefiles across his desk. Manila, thick enough to choke a horse.

‘We got a situation. A bad one.’

Ella accepted the folder and began leafing through. She skimmed the overview on the front page.

Name: Ricky Toledo.

Gender: Male.

Age: 45

Location: Liberty Grove, Virginia.

Liberty Grove, Ella thought. Barely twenty miles from where she grew up in Abingdon.

‘Ricky Toledo,’ Edis continued. ‘A local councilman in Liberty Grove – a place I’m sure you’re familiar with, Miss Dark.’

‘I am, sir.’ Liberty Grove was a town in purgatory. A country town to the bone, but

some people wanted to drag it into the 21st century and give it a suburban makeover. Liberty Grove was a man who couldn't decide if he wanted to retire in peace or dye his hair and go full mid-life crisis. And that made for some big disagreements amongst the Liberty Grove faithfuls.

'Good. And not only was Ricky a senate in the making, but he was a buddy of mine.' Edis retained a straight face, even delivering the details of his so-called friend's demise. What a lifetime in law enforcement did to a man.

'I'm sorry to hear that, sir,' Luca said.

Edis waved off the sympathy. 'We've always had a great relationship with the councilors in Virginia, and Ricky was my number one.'

Ella looked up, fixing Edis with a hard stare. 'Not to be blunt, sir, but this seems like local PD's problem. What's our angle?'

'Ricky wasn't just some PTA blowhard,' Edis rumbled. 'Boy had his eye on a Senate seat and probably the White House someday. Local PD alerted me this morning, and because there might be a political angle here, I promised them I'd send my best.'

Ella went back to the case file and flipped to the 8x10 glossy photos paperclipped to the inside cover. There he was. Ricky Toledo. Sprawled face-down in a muddy field. Limbs akimbo, head lolling at an unnatural angle. She held them closer, looking for abrasions, bruises, bullet holes – anything that might suggest how this man died.

Nothing jumped out at her, apart from the fact that Ricky Toledo was soaked from head to toe.

Luca beat her to it. 'What's with the water damage?'

‘PD don’t know. Ricky was discovered in a field, nowhere near any bodies of water.’

‘Rain water?’ Luca asked.

‘It’s August in Virginia, too,’ Edis said. He aimed for stern but it came off comical. Ella benched the few ideas that cropped up. She wanted to hear Luca’s thoughts before she penciled in any likelihoods of how this dead man ended up soaking wet.

‘This case is political dynamite, and I need my A-team on it. You two up for the challenge?’

And just like that, the focus shifted. The bait dangled, and damned if they weren’t hooked like a couple of prize bass.

‘I want you two on the next flight. Hit the ground running, start pulling threads. Rick’s got enemies, and they’ll be all too happy to shut this investigation down if it doesn’t fit their narrative.’

‘The feds coming to the rescue, is that the play?’ Luca asked.

‘The play is justice, Agent Hawkins. I want the son of a bitch who did this squirming on a hook for all to see. I owe Rick that much.’

Ella closed the file with a snap. Top brass playing hot potato with a headline-grabbing homicide, a tale as old as time. But orders were orders, and the faster they cracked this case, the sooner she could get back to her regularly scheduled dumpster fire of a life.

She pushed to her feet, Luca rising with her like they were attached by strings. ‘We’ll jump on it, sir. Anything else we should know before we hit the road?’

Edis pinned them both with a beady glare, his mouth puckering like he'd bitten into a lemon. 'Yes. You two have both seen the memo about the updates to your cells?'

Ella froze, fighting the urge to side-eye Luca. She glanced at her email daily but usually deleted a lot of it, especially the ones with legal-sounding subject titles.

But Luca just nodded, smooth as ever. 'Of course, sir.'

'Miss Dark?' Edis asked.

'Uh.' She patted her cell phone in her pocket as though it might jolt the answer into her brain. 'I have not.'

Edis harrumphed. 'Well, the new update to your cells comes with GPS tracking. Your phones will now broadcast your location at all times to select personnel.'

Ella's hackles rose, but she tamped down the knee-jerk indignation. 'GPS tracking? Why?'

'It's nothing to concern yourselves with. It's a legal measure to help us confirm your movements, so lawyers and defense attorneys can't dismiss our evidence.'

It was no secret that the higher-ups had a hard-on for micromanaging their grunts, so she guessed GPS tracking was just the latest leash they'd cooked up to keep their dogs in line. As if tapping their phones and reading their emails wasn't bad enough, now they wanted to track their every move like wayward toddlers in a mall.

But she bit her tongue. It was probably for the best, all things considered.

She gave Edis a tight nod, already mentally cataloging which burners to swap into rotation should she need to. 'Got it loud and clear, sir.'

Edis waved them away, his attention already back on the files scattered across his desk like confetti at a murder scene. "I want updates on the hour and this son of a bitch in bracelets by the weekend. Toledo's already getting the martyr treatment in the press, and I don't need this snowballing into a national incident on my watch."

She and Luca made their escape while the making was good and headed back the hallway. Ella waited until they were safely ensconced in the elevator, the doors whooshing shut behind them, before rounding on Luca with fire in her eyes.

'GPS tracking? What, like we're on parole or something?'

Luca chopped her on the shoulder. 'It's a good idea. You know how many field agents go missing every year?'

'How many?'

'More than one, which is enough to justify GPS tracking.'

'What if I stop off to get pizza? The FBI's gonna know about it before the chef does.'

'I think you sometimes forget you're a public servant. But anyway, are you okay with this? Heading down to your old stomping grounds, chasing ghosts and politicians?'

Ella looked away, suddenly fascinated by the scuff marks on her boots. It was an innocent question, but it hit a little too close to home. Liberty Grove was less than an hour from where she'd grown up, in the house where she found her dad's body as a five-year-old girl. A place she could count the times she'd returned on one hand.

'I'll be fine,' she said, feigning bravado. 'It's just another scumbag to put in the ground.'

Luca studied her for a long moment, those blue eyes seeing right through her bullcrap. But he let it slide, bumping her shoulder with his own instead. 'Damn straight. And you've got me riding shotgun this time. What could possibly go wrong?'

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Martin Godfrey slumped low in the driver's seat of the jacked-up sedan he'd bought for a hundred dollars from old unfriendly Bob at the lot back in Pinehill. It was the perfect camouflage. Just another middle-aged drone grinding through the daily drudge, nothing to see here.

But he wasn't idling, wasn't scrolling Twitter or sipping a third-wave cold brew while the minutes ticked by. No, his gaze was trained on one house in particular – a sprawling colonial five doors down, all brick and wrought iron and professionally manicured lawns. Mia Ripley's southern belle mansion, so at odds with her true nature. A wolf in porcelain skin, a hard-nosed Fed hiding behind the picket fences and Stepfordian smiles.

Not that the facade had fooled him, not for a second. He'd seen past the soft curves and fluttering lashes to the steel core beneath, the scar tissue and jagged edges that made her so perfect for him. A dark soul to match his own, a broken thing he could piece back together in his own image.

But now it was all falling apart.

And it was all her fault.

Ella Dark. Mia's partner, her shadow, the gnat buzzing in his ear for days now. Always there, always watching, those shrewd eyes seeing too much. Digging in all the wrong places, connecting dots that should've stayed scattered.

She was the reason Mia had turned from him. The reason those once-adoring eyes now held only fear and revulsion. He'd seen it in that cramped storage unit where

he'd come face to face with Mia since disappearing.

The way Mia had looked at him, like he was a stranger. A monster.

As if she had any right to judge. As if her hands were any cleaner. They were the same, him and her. Forged in blood and bound by unspeakable acts. They were destined to be one, but Ella had poisoned her against him. Filled her head with lies, with doubts. Twisted their love into something ugly.

He'd catch glimpses of them sometimes when he'd circle the block in the dead of night while Mia thought he was fishing or exercising or resting at home. Ella's characterless Honda parked crookedly in the driveway, takeout containers littering the porch. The two women framed in the window, heads bent together over a case file or a bottle of wine. Scheming, plotting. Conspiring to rip away the only good thing he'd ever known.

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. He'd done everything for Mia, laid waste to the enemies that dared threaten her. Nash, Carter, Trevor. He'd even tried to take out Ella's ex so she could have a stress-free life, but Ella had responded like he was committing some cardinal sin by removing her enemies.

Martin had been Mia's dark knight, but now she looked at him like he was something to be scraped off her shoe, and it was all Ella's doing.

He'd tried to fix it. Tried to erase the evidence and burn away the ties that bound him to his righteous crusade. But it was too late. Mia had seen, Mia knew.

And now his love, his light, his very reason for being, was slipping through his fingers like so much blood-tinged sand.

But there was still a chance. Still a way to salvage this, to bring Mia back to his side

where she belonged. He just had to remove the thorn in his side, pluck out the poisoned barb that had set this whole sorry mess in motion.

The only way to make Mia see, to make her understand. The depth of his devotion, the lengths he'd go to keep her safe. To keep her his.

He'd thought about it, of course. Dreamed about it, a persistent fantasy playing behind his eyelids in every spare moment. How he'd do it. Quick and clean, a bullet between those knowing eyes? Or slow and messy, a blade across that slender throat, a mirror of the first crime scene that had brought them together so long ago?

In the end, it didn't matter. The method was inconsequential, just the window dressing on the main event. What mattered was the outcome – Mia free. Free to love him, to let the darkness bind them once more.

He'd have to plan it carefully. Cover his tracks and leave no trace. But that was alright, because there was a part of him, small and tight and pulsing, that relished the challenge. The chance to match wits with a worthy adversary, to prove himself once and for all.

Mia would understand.

Ella Dark had to die.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella slouched in the airplane seat, case files scattered across the table like a macabre twist on airplane reading material. The recycled air of the cabin stuck in her throat, stale as a week-old donut. Luca sat across from her, legs folded up like a pretzel. He had the case file open on his lap, crime scene photos fanned out like some grisly deck of cards.

Then he glanced up and caught Ella an expression that was half anticipation, half intestinal distress.

‘What’s up with your face?’ Ella asked. ‘Peanut allergy?’

Luca glanced out of the window. There was still an airport on the other side.

‘I’m not what you’d call a frequent flyer.’

‘Don’t like it?’

‘I prefer my travels at sea level. Don’t we have a boat?’

‘We don’t even have a stationary cupboard.’ Luca was riding the wave of realization. The one where he discovered that the Bureau was less conspiracies and cover-ups and more expired coffee creamer. It was an office just like any other, just an office whose name everybody knew.

‘Touché. Well, get ready. I might be a real diva for the next hour.’

Ella would be lying if she said she wasn’t a little charmed. It was such a contrast to

the usual Bureau blowhards, so quick to posture and peacock. Luca had confidence where it mattered, but it was leavened with an endearing dorkiness.

‘I can live with that.’ She stabbed the paperwork in front of her. ‘But more importantly, we’ve got a dead politician to avenge.’

‘That we do.’ Luca skipped through his folder, laid a few documents out on the table between him and Ella. ‘Not a whole lot to go on right now. No toxicology report. No official cause of death.’

‘Let’s start with what we know. Ricky Toledo, rising star in the glamorous world of small-pond politics. Charismatic and ambitious judging by the few stories I read about him on the way here.’

‘Eyebrows you could slice your hand on. Quintessential golden boy.’

Ella pulled up a few pre-death photos of Ricky Toledo on her cell. ‘He certainly looks the part. Suit pressed within an inch of its life, smile that belongs on a car salesman. Just the right mix of trustworthy and sleazy.’

Luca spun one of the crime scene photos around. It was a close-up of Ricky’s lower half. ‘Look at the bottom of his jeans. Ripped, scuffed. What’s the deal there, you think?’

‘Could be where the killer dragged him through the mud? He was found in the middle of a field. Given the lack of blood, Ricky was killed elsewhere then dumped in that field.’

Luca’s gaze was far away, that keenly honed mind whirring behind his sculpted features. It was a look Ella had come to know well over the past week – the hallmark of a Hawkins brainstorm, the thrill of theory taking hold.

It did something to her, that look. Something that she struggled to place and definitely shouldn't consider, given their professional arrangement. She banished it to the back of her brain for later examination. Or never. Definitely never.

'Well,' Luca said slowly, drawing the word out like taffy. 'We can probably rule out accident. I don't care how dumb you are, you don't just stumble into a field by accident.'

'Or stumble into a river and forget how to swim. We still need to figure out how Ricky ended up drenched.'

Then the plane began to rumble to life. It rolled around to its take-off position while Luca death-gripped the armrest like it was the only thing between him and oblivion.

Ella snorted, something almost like amusement tugging at the corners of her mouth. 'Get used to this part, Hawkins. Sometimes I imagine how astronauts feel when they're going vertical. Must be hell on the stomach.'

'Don't,' Luca said.

Ella leaned around the table and kicked him. 'What's wrong? You're about twenty times more likely to die in a car crash than a plane crash.'

'That's called empirical probability. You don't ride a plane every day.'

'Close enough,' Ella said.

'That's like saying only one person has ever died from drinking and driving and juggling, so it's statistically safer than plain old drink-driving.'

"That's why I keep juggling balls in my car." Ella leaned forward as the plane began

its ascent. "Eyes up. Look at me, partner. So our killer targeted a politician, maybe driven by a personal grudge. It might even be an assassination. You know why this is bad news for us?"

They hit the air at one-eighty miles per hour. Ella didn't even feel the gut-churn anymore. Across from her, Luca sat with one eye closed, like he was at the peak of a rollercoaster drop.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Because this isn't a serial killer, so everything we know goes out of the window.'

'Bingo. What drives a serial killer might not drive this unsub, so we're going to have to mix things up.'

The plane hit its cruising altitude with a final jolt. Luca exhaled through his nose, a controlled release of the breath he'd been holding hostage in his lungs. His color improved from green to merely sallow, and he peeled his grip off the armrest one finger at a time.

'See, Hawkins. Nothing to worry about. And I've always got my juggling balls in case things go south.'

Luca shot her a baleful glare, the effect somewhat ruined by the sweat still beading his upper lip. 'Funny. You should take that show on the road.'

'That's plan B.'

He grumbled something uncomplimentary under his breath but his shoulders notched down a few degrees from around his ears. He even managed to pry his gaze away from the window and back to the grim spectacle spread across the table.

Progress. Small steps.

Ella decided to throw him a bone, steer the conversation back to safer waters. Namely, the bloated corpse of Ricky Toledo and the sick twist who'd left him in that field like so much rubbish.

'Okay, so we've got a high-profile victim, a showy dump site, and an unsub with a hard-on for flare. Not exactly a shrinking violet.'

Luca nodded, latching onto the case details like a drowning man to a rope. 'The dump site is pretty interesting. Why the middle of a field? If he wanted to hide him, he could have picked a more secluded location. What's Liberty Grove like for rivers, mountains, woods?'

'Several of all of them. No shortage of places to dump a body that you didn't want found.'

'So our killer wanted him seen,' Luca said.

'Agreed. It just begs the question why. The killer had to know dropping a body in a place like that would bring the heat down fast.'

'Maybe that's the point.' Luca shuffled through the photos, considered each with that keen, hawkish gaze of his. 'Maybe he wants the attention. The notoriety. But the real rush comes after. When he takes his trophy out into the world and displays it for all to see.'

'Catch me if you can,' Ella muttered. She'd seen it before, the hubris of the truly deranged. The ones who thought they were invincible right up until the cuffs snapped closed.

She studied the pic of Ricky sprawled in the dirt, clothes ruined, skin marbled blue. 'Still doesn't explain the waterlogged wardrobe. If you're gonna pose a body, why not keep him clean? Make a real pretty picture for the 6 o'clock news?'

'Unless that's part of the message,' Luca said. 'If he's trying to trash Toledo's political party, he probably wants him to look like trash too. Imagine the hit their image would take.'

Ella turned Luca's theory over in her mind like a rock in a tumbler. The kid had a point. A golden boy like Ricky, left to rot in a field like a dead rat? It was a statement and a half. The kind of thing that could torpedo a whole political party in a heartbeat.

'Okay, so we've got an unsub with a taste for the theatrical and a hard-on for humiliation.' She ticked off the points on her fingers, the picture coalescing in her mind's eye. 'He's organized, meticulous. To pull off an abduction like this, he had to have a plan. A location. He's not some crackpot swiping at random.'

Luca nodded. 'Ricky was a big guy, in good shape. Our unsub had to have a way to subdue him quietly, get him under control without a fight.'

'Could be drugs. Could be a gun.'

'Which means he's confident. Comfortable getting up close and personal. Maybe even charming.' Luca's mouth twisted. 'The kind of guy who could blend in at a fundraiser or a campaign stop. Work a crowd.'

Ella felt her own lip curl in distaste. The idea of this creep pressing flesh and glad-handing his way into Ricky's orbit made her skin crawl. But it fit. Like a key sliding home in a lock.

'So we might be looking for a wolf in sheep's clothing. Fan-frigging-tastic.'

Ella could see the questions pinging around her partner's skull like pinballs. The whys and hows and what-the-everloving-hells. She knew the feeling. Every answered query just spawned a dozen more. The hydra's heads of a burgeoning investigation.

But that was the job. Peel back the layers of the rotten onion until you reached the weeping, putrid core. And try not to breathe too deeply in the process.

'When we hit the ground, I want to get eyes on the dump site ASAP,' she told him said. 'The scene techs have probably trampled all over it by now, but we might get lucky. Catch something they missed.'

'Like what?' Luca asked, wincing as a particularly rough patch of air nearly launched him out of his seat.

'Footprints. Tire treads. Hell, a monogrammed handkerchief if the universe is feeling generous.' Ella shrugged, cracking her neck with a satisfying pop. 'At this point, I'll take anything that narrows down the suspect pool. Because let's be honest, who in this country doesn't want to kill one politician or another?'

Luca bit his lip and asked, 'Do they?'

'Don't you watch the news?'

'Never.'

'Well, get ready for a slab of rural America. Hope you packed your waders.'

Liberty Grove. A stone's throw away from her old haunts. She had a feeling it was going to be one hell of a homecoming.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella squinted against the harsh glare of the sun as she took in the scene before her. A dead farm field stretched out in all directions, the grass brown and brittle underfoot. It looked like it hadn't seen a drop of rain in months, maybe years. The land was cracked and parched, with only a few withered stalks poking up like skeletal fingers grasping at the sky.

Welcome home, indeed.

'Charming spot,' Luca said. 'Very Steinbeck chic. All we're missing is the Dust Bowl and some starving migrants.'

Up ahead, the 'POLICE LINE – DO NOT CROSS' tape fluttered in the anemic breeze. Ella led the way across the sun-baked field with Luca in tow. A few officers milled about like black ants on a carcass, snapping photos and bagging evidence. Numbered markers dotted the ground where Ricky Toledo had been sprawled not two hours before. A macabre game of connect-the-dots.

A man detached himself from the swarm of uniforms and ambled over when the agents arrived. He had a face like a catcher's mitt; tanned skin, leathery wrinkles, squint lines. A bushy mustache bristled above his upper lip, more salt than pepper, and his polyester uniform shirt strained across a paunch that spoke to a few too many roadside diner breakfasts.

'Agents? Feds?' His voice was a Texas drawl slowly stewed in Virginia twang, the vowels as flat as his feet. 'I'm Sheriff Clem Tucker. Glad ya'll could make it down here on such short notice.'

Ella shook his proffered hand, the skin rough and callused against her own. ‘Good to meet you, Sheriff. Wish it were under better circumstances.’

Clem grunted something that sounded like a rusty hinge. ‘Ain’t that always the way. Quiet town like this, we don’t see a whole lotta excitement. ”Specially not of the homicide variety.’

‘I can imagine.’ Ella scanned the horizon, the empty fields and dilapidated outbuildings. ‘I’m from Abingdon, a few miles away. If it’s anything like there, everybody probably knows everybody.’

‘Abingdon girl, you say?’ Tucker smoothed his moustache. ‘Well, welcome back. This place probably looks a ton different than when you last saw it.’

‘Sure does.’ Ella hadn’t seen this town in damn near twenty years, and even to her fool-proof memory, the place looked like alien terrain.

”Most folks have been here longer than God. S’why this whole thing’s got us more balled up than a beaver in a drainpipe.” Clem spat a brown stream of tobacco juice that narrowly missed Ella’s boot.

‘So walk us through it,’ she said, steering them back on track. ‘What do we know so far?’

Clem scratched his raspy stubble. ‘Not a whole lot, truth be told. Got the call around six this mornin’ from Carl Jessup over yonder.’ He jerked his chin at a decrepit farmhouse slumping tiredly against the gray sky. ‘Says he was doin’ his usual rounds when he stumbled across the body. Damn near soiled himself.’

‘I bet,’ Luca said. ‘And the vic? What’s his story?’

‘Ricky Toledo, hotshot politician outta Bristol.’ Clem shook his head, something like grudging respect in the set of his jaw. ‘Big name, even around here.’

The details snagging in Ella’s brain like a fish hook. ‘Bristol? Toledo didn’t live in Liberty Grove?’

‘Like hell he was. ‘Toledo was a city boy. Wouldn’t know which end of a tractor was up. Didn’t have no business bein’ in these parts, far as I can figure.’

Curiouser and curiouser. Ella gnawed her lip, the unanswered questions piling up like cordwood. If Toledo wasn’t a local, then how the hell did he end up in the middle of Farmer Bob’s back forty? And more importantly, who’d wanted him dead badly enough to dump him here?

She glanced at Luca, saw the same dark speculation reflected on his chewed lip. ‘Alright, first things first. We need to pin down Toledo’s last known whereabouts. Retrace his steps, figure out if he came here willingly or if somebody brought him.’

‘Yeah,’ said Luca. ‘He might have been here schmoozing voters, pretending he was a man of the people.’

Tucker said, ‘Unlikely. If someone like him was in town, everyone’d know.’

Ella took the info on board. ‘You mentioned a farmer found him?’

‘Yup. Carl Jessup. He’s just back there.’

‘We need to talk to him, see if he remembers anything unusual.’

‘You got it. C’mon, I’ll take ya over. He’s white as a ghost, so go easy on him.’ Clem set off across the field, his shoulders bowed like he was walking into a stiff

wind. Ella fell into step beside him, Luca bringing up the rear.

As they trudged through the dead grass, Ella couldn't help but notice the sheer lifelessness of the land. It was like all the moisture had been sucked out of the earth, leaving behind nothing but dust and tumbleweeds. Even the air felt stale, like it hadn't been breathed in years.

Carl Jessup was sitting on an overturned milk crate amid a patch of particularly crispy vegetation. He had the wizened, sunbaked look of a man who'd spent his whole life with his hands in the dirt, skin as tough and grooved as old leather. Faded denim overalls hung off his spare frame and a sweat-stained John Deere cap was pulled low over his creased forehead.

Ella moved in. "Mr. Jessup? I'm Agent Dark, and this is Agent Hawkins. We're with the FBI. Mind if we ask you a few questions?"

Carl's watery blue eyes flicked up to meet hers, then darted away just as quickly. 'Y-yeah. I mean, no. I don't mind. Anything I can do to help.'

Ella crouched down to his level, ignoring the protestations of her knees. Luca hovered at her shoulder. 'We understand you're the one who found Mr. Toledo this morning. Can you walk us through what happened?'

Carl's hands twisted together and his knuckles turned bloodless. 'I was just doing my rounds, y'know? Checking the crops, making sure the irrigation lines were clear. Not that it matters much these days. Ain't hardly anything left to water.'

Ella noted the tangent but filed it away for later. One mystery at a time. 'And that's when you found the body?'

'Ayuh.' Carl shuddered. 'Nearly stumbled right over him. He was just lying there, all

twisted up like a pretzel.'

'Did you recognize him?' Luca asked gently. 'Realize who he was?'

'Maybe not at first, what with him being all...' He made a vague gesture. 'But yeah. Didn't take more than a second or two to click. Hard not to know Ricky Toledo 'round these parts. Man's face was plastered on every billboard and bus bench from here to Richmond.'

'He was a popular guy then?' Ella kept her tone carefully neutral, not wanting to lead the witness. Let Carl fill in the blanks himself.

The old farmer barked another laugh, this one edged with something sharper. Angrier. 'Popular. Yeah, you could say that. Boy could charm the stripes off a zebra. Always showing up at town meetings, shaking hands and kissing babies. Making big promises about how he was gonna put Liberty Grove back on the map.'

There was a wealth of bitterness packed into those words. Ella made a mental note to dig into that particular vein later. See what kind of grudges Slick Rick had been nursing in his rise to power.

'What did you do after you found him?' she asked, steering them back on track. 'After you realized who he was?'

Carl seemed to deflate, all the righteous anger draining out of him like pus from a lanced boil. 'I hightailed it back to the house and called the sheriff. Didn't know what else to do. I mean, it ain't every day you find a dead body in your lot.'

Ella couldn't find anything to latch onto. It was all by-the-books body-discovery. She needed more. Needed to understand what made a man like Toledo tick, what kind of enemies he'd made on his rocket ride to the top.

But before that, she needed to know why Carl's land looked like something out of Blade Runner.

'Mr. Jessup,' she began, picking each word with care. 'You mentioned earlier that your crops were struggling. That there wasn't much left to water these days.'

Carl's expression went hard as slate. 'Ain't hardly anything left to water, period. Whole damn county's drying up like a raisin in the sun.'

'Why?'

The old farmer's throat worked as he swallowed, his eyes darting away to stare out over the desiccated fields. For a long moment, Ella thought he might not answer, might clam up tighter than a virgin's knees in church.

But then he sighed and said, 'It's the dam. The one they built upriver.'

Well now. A dam upriver, cutting off the lifeblood of the land. Ella's mind spun, the threads of possibility weaving together in a tapestry of motive and opportunity.

She glanced at Luca, saw the same dawning realization kindling in his eyes. The dam, the body, the beleaguered farmers left high and dry while fat cats like Toledo played politics. It was like a set-up to a bad joke.

Or a murder.

'This dam,' Luca said. 'When did it go up?'

Carl scratched his stubbled chin. 'Bout a year ago, give or take. Told us it was for the greater good, that we'd all benefit in the long run. Buncha nonsense. Ain't nothin' benefited 'round here except the weeds.'

‘Did Toledo have anything to do with it?’

A shadow passed over Carl’s face, and his mouth thinned to a grim slash. ”Damn right he did. Boy was the one leadin” the charge, promisin” the moon and stars to anybody who’d listen. Had folks downright hypnotized with his fancy words and big city dreams.”

‘But not you,’ Ella guessed.

Carl harrumphed. ‘I’ve lived too long to fall for that kind of crap. Knew Toledo was trouble the minute he rolled into town, smilin” with those fake teeth. But folks ”round here, they was desperate. Woulda believed anythin’ if it meant a little hope.’

Ella digested it. A slick politician making promises he couldn”t keep, a town withering on the vine, a convenient corpse left to rot in a dead man”s field.

‘This dam. What’s it done, exactly?’

‘Brought a drought, and a damn curse. Blocked off our main water supply, so we’re parching down here while guys in Bristol are drowning in it. And it hasn’t rained in God knows how long.’

Ella glanced over the field at the spot where Toledo”s body had been found.

Drowning.

‘Surely it can’t be legal to cut off water to a whole town?’ she asked.

‘Like hell is it legal. Legislation says that in times of a drought, the higher-paying towns get priority. That’ll be Bristol.’

Ella was about to press further when the chirp of a radio cut through the thick air. Tucker unclipped the device from his belt and barked into it. There was a burst of static, then a follow voice filed the frequency.

‘Sheriff, coroner is ready with the body.’

‘Ten-four,’ Tucker said, then turned to Ella and Luca. ‘Body’s ready for viewing, if you folks are interested in seeing what a dead politician looks like.’

Ella felt a familiar itch kindle under her skin. The thrill of a lead begging to be chased. A dam. A body. A drenched victim with no obvious cause of death.

It was an explosive mix, one that could give her answers before this whole thing spiraled out of control.

She needed to see the body. Needed to look into the face of Ricky Toledo and try to divine what secrets he’d taken to his watery grave.

‘You ready?’ She nudged Luca.

‘Just try and stop me.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Jessup. You’ve been a great help.’

The game was officially afoot now. And Ella had never been one to back down from a challenge.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella slouched against the wall of the coroner's office lobby. There was a radio playing somewhere, and it chafed her last nerve like a cheese grater to the frontal lobe. The place had all the ambiance of a dentist's waiting room complete with wilting ficus in the corner and chairs upholstered in an eye-gouging pattern – visual assault in furniture form.

Luca was flipping through his notebook in a chair beside her. He nudged her and said, 'What do you make of this dam situation?'

'Could be anything. Assassination, jilted mistress, some fundraiser faux pas.'

'No. I mean the dam. The thing that caused this drought.'

Ella chewed her cheek as she mulled it over. The dam. The albatross around Liberty Grove's neck, apparently. Choking the life out of the land like a concrete noose.

'It's a raw deal, that's for sure. I'm not sure what Toledo sold these people, but whatever he promised, he delivered a kick in the teeth instead.'

'Right. If he had a hand in the construction of that dam, it means we've got a suspect pool the size of the goddamn Potomac.'

. 'My money's on something personal. Toledo had enemies, sure. Goes with the territory. But this?' She waved a hand, encompassing the dingy lobby, the body waiting for them down the hall. 'This feels like more than politics. More than business.'

The receptionist, a tight-faced woman with a hairsprayed helmet, cleared her throat pointedly. "The coroner will see you now." She jabbed a button, and the heavy security door buzzed open.

She pushed off the wall, Luca unfolding himself from the chair with a liquid grace that had her mouth going dry. Damn him and his genetic blessings. It just wasn't fair.

The stench of antiseptic and industrial-grade bleach smacked Ella in the sinuses as they navigated the labyrinth of halls. She breathed deep, letting the antiseptic burn scour away the stale lobby air. It was a smell that had become perversely comforting over the years, a twisted sort of welcome mat for the weekly waltzes with death.

The door to the autopsy room loomed before them, as imposing and ominous as the gates of hell. Ella's hand hesitated on the knob for the space of a heartbeat, a flutter of trepidation in her chest. Stupid. Just another day at the office for her, another peek behind the veil to poke at the leftovers of human cruelty.

No big deal. Nothing to get jittery over.

She wrenched the door open, and Luca fell beside her as they crossed the threshold into the chilly, white-tiled box of a room. The light beat down on the stainless steel table in the center. The draped figure atop it was as still and silent as the grave. And beside the body was a white-haired scarecrow of a man in a lab coat.

'Welcome, Agents,' the coroner wheezed. He had the weathered look of a man who'd spent decades elbow-deep in society's grim leavings and come out the other side cracking wise about it over a beer at the local dive. 'I'm Dr. Harris Fenneman, chief medical examiner.'

'Agent Ella Dark. This is my partner, Agent Luca Hawkins.' Ella went for the handshake but then thought better of it. Probably best not to make physical contact

with someone who spent their days sifting through human innards. ‘Thanks for seeing us on short notice.’

‘Seeing as you brought me such an interesting case, I suppose I can make an exception.’ Fenneman’s eyes gleamed behind bifocals as he led them over to the gurney. ‘I just got finished twenty minutes ago.’

Luca shifted beside her. Poor boy wasn’t quite used to dancing with death on the daily yet.

Fenneman snapped on a pair of gloves and placed a hand on the white sheet that concealed the body. Ella steeled herself for the reveal. No matter how many corpses she’d cataloged over the years, that first glimpse was always a gut punch straight to the soul.

She eyeballed Luca and he gave her his best I’m ready nod. Showtime.

”Alright, Doc,” she said. ”Walk us through it.”

‘Okay, we’ll start with the obvious.’

Fenneman whipped back the sheet, revealing Ricky Toledo’s bloated corpse. His skin was tallow pale, his sunken eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling tiles. Ella’s throat clenched as she took in the ruin of the golden boy politician, but she didn’t allow herself to look away. She forced her gaze over every tragic inch, each purple-black bruise and waterlogged limb. This was his vigil, and she’d bear witness.

Even with the Y-incision marring his torso and his skin gone grey and waxy with death’s pallor, Ricky Toledo was still a remarkably handsome man. Strong jaw, patrician nose, hair artfully tousled like he’d just rolled out of bed after a marathon session of mattress Olympics.

Ella swallowed past the sudden stone in her throat. Sent up a silent prayer to whatever tarnished saint watched over the souls of the violently departed. I'm sorry, buddy. No one deserves to go out like this.

Under the wrenching pity, another realization was horning in – a tickle at the back of her brain, an alarm bell muffled by a pillow. Something wasn't right here. Something beyond the obvious wrongness of the body on the slab.

Then it hit her like a smack to the sinuses.

An odd smell. Chemical. Brackish. Out of place, even amongst the sense-assaulting chokehold of death.

Luca leaned in and immediately recoiled, clearly catching the same thing. 'Christ, what died in here? Besides the obvious.'

Fenneman's lips thinned to a grim slash. 'I noticed that as well. Most unusual, given the circumstances. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Preliminary C.O.D. is drowning.'

'Drowning,' Ella repeated.

The coroner traced Toledo's bloated lungs with a finger. He had the practiced moves of a man well-versed in the art of reading a corpse. 'Asphyxiation. Pulmonary edema, to be exact. Including what we call in the trade a foam cone. But in layman's terms, he drowned, and not just that, but Mr. Toledo here was submerged underwater long after he'd expired.'

Ella latched onto that. 'He was held underwater after death?'

'Yes indeed. His lungs retained an incredible amount of water, enough to expand

them and damage his ribcage. The body only begins to inhale water post-mortem. During the act of drowning, it fights to keep water out.'

Ella cataloged the details. Toledo's killer had ensured he was well and truly dead before bringing him up for air. Watery overkill.

'Time of death?'

'Around midnight last night.'

'Any other injuries of note?' Luca asked, craning to get a better look. 'Defensive wounds, bruising, anything to suggest he fought back?'

'Most intriguing that you should ask.' Fenneman circled to the foot of the gurney and peeled back the sheet further to expose Toledo's legs. Angry red bands marched around his ankles, the flesh scraped raw in places. 'Note the distinct patterning here, the linear abrasions concentrated over the malleoli.'

Ella and Luca shared a look. A piece slots into place with a rusty click.

'He was restrained,' Ella said. Not a question. 'Tied up before he took his last swim.'

'So it would seem. And speaking of swims...' Fenneman consulted the chart, traced a liver-spotted finger down the toxicology report. 'Mr. Toledo's ethanol levels were through the roof. Blood alcohol content of 0.26. For reference, 0.08 is legally drunk and 0.4 is pushing coffin-territory.'

Luca said, "So Toledo was absolutely plastered."

'You could say that again,' said Fenneman. "But more importantly, I found traces of Flunitrazepam in his system."

Ella stiffened. "Flunitrazepam? As in Rohypnol?"

"Got it in one."

The vise around Ella's ribs tightened a notch. Rohypnol. Flunitrazepam. Skeezy fratboy knockout juice, the date rapist's weapon of choice. But dosed high enough, it'd take down a bull moose, let alone a tipsy politician.

An ugly picture was starting to take shape. Toledo, three sheets to the wind and flying high as a kite. Probably cruising the bar scene, gladhanding his constituents, his adoring public.

Easy pickings for an opportunistic killer.

Slip a little something into his drink, wait for him to start pinwheeling, then spirit him away. No fuss, no muss. Drown him at your leisure and dump the body without so much as a peep.

It wouldn't be quick or clean, but it was coldly efficient.

Ella's gaze strayed down, down, catching on the ring of mottled purple circling Toledo's ankles. Bruises in a near-perfect band, like cheap anklets.

'Doc, these contusions here,' she said. 'Any idea what could have caused them? Fetters? Zip ties?'

Fenneman checked his notes and said, "It's certainly pre-mortem bruising, but I couldn't say exactly what caused them. There were no traces of any foreign substances or elements down there. However, I will say that whatever held his ankles together was quite malleable. The material rubbed against his skin, causing these chafe marks."

Ella stared down at Toledo's ruined body as her brain spun in feverish circles. Ankle abrasions. Drowning. Poisoning. A big-shot politician who'd dried out an entire town.

And that bizarre smell. It tickled her nostrils and set off quiet alarm bells. She rounded on Fenneman, fixing him with a look that demanded answers.

The coroner hemmed and hawed, clearly reluctant to speculate beyond his pay grade. But Ella just crossed her arms and waited. Finally, Fenneman caved like a sandcastle at high tide.

'If I had to hazard a guess – and mind you, this is pure conjecture – I'd say it's indicative of stagnant water. The kind that's been sitting for a while, breeding all manner of unsavory anaerobic bacteria.' He plucked off his glasses, polished them on his lapel. A nervous tic if Ella had ever seen one. 'Combined with the mineral tang, it suggests an enclosed space with high iron content.'

And just like that, the final tumbler fell and the lock sprang open. Ella could see it clear as a blood spatter on a white tile. Ricky Toledo, sloshed out of his mind and dosed to the gills, easy pickings for a predator with an agenda. Hauled off to God knows where, some dank pit where the water waited, cold and black as a spider's heart. Bound like a prisoner to the gallows, fully conscious as they closed over his head, as he sucked vile fluid instead of air.

'He wasn't just drowned,' Luca said hoarsely. 'He was—'

'Weighed down,' Ella finished. 'The unsub bound his feet and threw him in a well or cistern to drown like vermin.'

Luca raked a hand through his hair, leaving it mussed and spiky. 'Concrete shoes.'

Silence descended for a minute. A thousand questions were crowding Ella's tongue, begging for voice. But for once, she found herself at a loss for what came next.

But Luca continued, 'And that means, not only did our killer leave poor Toledo to die, but he stayed close enough to drag him out once the job was done.'

'Our killer watched him drown,' Ella said. 'Left him to fester, then plucked him out and dumped him in a field.'

Why was the next logical question, but the word seemed inadequate in the face of such cruelty.

She thought back to Carl Jessup's haunted eyes, the ravaged fields, the dam looming like a death sentence over Liberty Grove. All that anger, all that bitterness left to curdle in the Virginia sun.

Could a desperate farmer have done this? Maybe a group of desperate farmers? Sacrifice this big-talking city boy like something out of the Wicker Man?

Ella blew out a breath, feeling like she'd aged a decade in the last ten minutes. Ricky Toledo lay still and silent, taking his secrets to a watery grave six feet deep and lined with concrete, but Ella had never been one for letting the dead keep their mysteries. One way or another, she'd drag the truth up from the depths and into the light. Even if it half-drowned her in the process.

'Hawkins,' she said. 'We've got a lot of work to do.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella slouched against the desk in the cramped office she and Luca had commandeered at the Liberty Grove precinct. The A.C. sputtered asthmatically, and asbestos hung in the air like tinsel. How this joint hadn't been condemned by the health department was anybody's guess – probably some old-boy network at work, keeping the place limping along out of pure spite.

Home sweet home for the foreseeable future, but that was the job. It couldn't always be Miami high-rises and L.A. mansions. Sometimes it was mold-choked backrooms and creaky small-town cop shops. Hunt monsters, put them in the ground, rinse and repeat.

A glamorous life. No wonder every cop she'd ever met had a drinking problem.

But hey, being holed up in here beat roasting her ass off in the midday sun while she waited for Luca to finish charming the locals. His pretty mug opened doors hers tended to slam in her face, so she left him to it.

Ella shook off that cheerful thought and turned her attention back to the task at hand – namely, plumbing the depths of Ricky Toledo's closet for skeletons that might point to his untimely demise. According to her online research, the man had more smiling photos than a used car salesman, grip-and-grin shots with everyone from elementary school cherubs to blue-haired grannies. Kid knew how to work a crowd, she'd give him that much. But like any politician worth the polyester of his cheap suit, he was no doubt packing scandals like candy on Halloween. It was just a matter of prying up the right floorboards to find where the bodies were buried.

Her eyes started to cross from reading between the lines of Toledo's social media

pages, a study in calculated folksiness if she'd ever seen one. Childhood snaps of good ol' Ricky hoeing the back forty, palling around with ruddy-cheeked farmhands. Fast forward a decade and there he was at Yale, collar popped and oozing a lacrosse bro smarm so thick you could grease a skillet with it. Rubbing elbows with the future Masters of the Universe, no doubt learning the secret handshake and the best way to short a stock over single malt scotch.

A meteoric rise, the proverbial rocket strapped to his ass. One that made a brief pit stop in the public defender's office – just long enough to snag some photo ops with weeping widows and wrongly accused – before vaulting into Adams County politics with all the subtlety and grace of a cannonball into a wading pool. A few terms on City Council, shaking the right hands and flashing those white teeth, and he was all set to Make Bristol Great Again.

At least until someone decided to cast their vote via murder.

Ella gnawed the end of her pen until the plastic creaked in warning. It didn't add up. There were no overt threats in Toledo's inbox, no rage-fueled screeds or garden-variety crackpot keyboard warriors. His credit card had no unusual charges, no red flags tripped with the banks. The mistress line item was conspicuously absent, though Ella had no doubt it existed in some tax-sheltered island haven's ledger. He was a single man, no wife or children to speak of.

So who'd want a glad-handing empty suit like Ricky Toledo dead badly enough to go the concrete shoes route? And what message were they trying to send by dumping him in a town as dry as the Sahara?

The office door banged open and Luca sailed through with a six-pack of bottled water dangling from each hand like the world's saddest barbells. He plunked them down on the desk.

‘What’s this, planning for the apocalypse?’

Luca snorted. ‘Might as well be. If you want coffee, you gotta use bottled water. I just got my ear chewed off by some woman for running the tap.’

Ella fought the urge to laugh. ‘You never been in a drought before?’

‘I thought they only happened in California.’

‘Apparently not. Did you find anything useful on the street?’

‘Loads, but it was the same old story every time. People around here think Toledo was as corrupt as it gets. Bribes, misusing funds, all that kind of stuff. And he was the one who championed this dam up in Bristol. Said it would reduce water costs down here, benefit the environment, even create jobs.’

Odd, Ella thought. That was the polar opposite of what she’d found online. ‘Anything solid?’

‘No. Just rumor and trust me, it happened kinda stuff.’

Ella fished a bottle from the collection and cracked the seal. It was tepid and tasted vaguely of nickels, but it beat the alternative.

‘Alright, let’s go through it one more time. Just so we’re on the same page.’

Luca pushed a hand through his hair, a few strands falling artfully over his forehead. Damn him and his effortless coif.

‘Ricky Toledo,’ he said, ticking off the points on fingers. ‘Big fish in a small pond. Golden boy of Bristol with his eye on a senate seat.’

Ella nodded, digging a finger into her temple where a headache was starting to pound. 'He's from Bristol. That's his constituency. Only he winds up in a dead cornfield fifteen miles south in Liberty Grove – which, by the way, is a misnomer if I've ever heard one.'

'Nothing free about it,' Luca agreed. 'Especially not the water, apparently. That dam upriver's choking them out.'

She hummed, pieces clicking together in the jigsaw of her brain. 'So we've got a town full of pissed off farmers, a politician with more slime than spine, and a whole lot of bad blood between them. Recipe for murder soup.'

'You thinking this was some kind of revenge kill? Locals making an example out of the guy who screwed them?'

It tracked. Rage and desperation made for one hell of a toxic cocktail. And God knows these folks had reason enough to want Toledo to suffer.

But something about it didn't sit right. A niggling little itch at the back of her brain, a sense of a picture not quite in focus.

'Could be,' she allowed. 'But it feels...I dunno. Too easy? I mean, drowning a man and dumping his body sends a message for sure. But why not just cap him and call it a day? Why go to all the trouble of, dosing him, snatching him, watching him drown and then dumping him out here?'

'Did you find anything out about him online?' Luca asked. 'Any thongs in his dirty laundry?'

She was too professional to throw her pen at him, but Lord, was it tempting. 'No. A few posts about him being a grade-A scumbag, but plenty of the opposite too. Tons of

people singing his praises, especially up in Bristol.'

'Peachy.'

She pushed away from the desk with a growl, pacing to the grimy window and back again. Three steps each way, like a chicken scratching out its coop. Someone had painted the glass with whitewash years ago, and no one had bothered to scrape it off. Not much of a view even if she could see through it, she reckoned. Just another back alley in a dehydrating town.

Times like this she wished she smoked. Or drank heavily. Or had some unhealthy addiction she could cling to for hope.

But all she had was a partner who kept slanting her looks when he thought she wouldn't notice, some Mayberry reject's freeze-dried coffee crystals, and a dead politician nobody seemed to give two shits about beyond how photogenic he'd be in his casket.

Ella blew out a breath and planted her hands on the desk, leaning over the scattering of papers and gory eight-by-tens like a general surveying a war map.

'Okay, let's think this through. Toledo turns up dead fifteen miles from home. We don't know where he was when his killer abducted him, or where he was killed, and the water in his lungs isn't from any river or lake or reservoir.'

'Right.' Luca scooted his chair closer to the desk. He picked up a crime scene photo and tilted it to the light. 'Doc says it's from stagnant H₂O, the kind you find in places where water ain't flowing too good.'

'That means our killer would've needed a place to carry out his little passion play. Somewhere private, isolated. With a water source rank enough to cling to Ricky like

eau de stagnant.'

'Agreed. No way that kind of odor comes from anything but sitting water.'

'So, a vat? A tank?'

Ella thought of Elisa Lam, the young tourist who'd ended up in a hotel water tank about a decade ago. When the authorities pulled her out, apparently she smelled like absolute hell.

'How many of those are gonna be in a place like this?'

Fair point. Liberty Grove wasn't exactly an industrial hub. A bunch of farms, a feed store, a truly tragic little strip that passed for downtown. Unless their killer was hiding out in some prepper's bunker, his choices were limited.

Luca began hammering away at his laptop. Ella turned back to the whitewashed window and lost herself in the stain. She replayed the route into town, the dusty roads and wilting fields. The occasional glint of tin, the hulked-out silhouette of a grain silo. The grimy windows of a warehouse long abandoned, an empty parking lot devouring itself in brittle weeds and some kind of graveyard for trains.

Minutes passed, ticked by on the water-stained wall clock above. Ella paced, too amped to sit. Gnawing on her thumbnail as she looped the small room, thoughts racing like greyhounds after a rabbit.

Outside the grimy windows, the dusty streets of Liberty Grove baked under a merciless sun. Ella made out a bleak little grid of storefronts and squat houses, as withered as the folks who scraped by there. It was the kind of place people ended up, not where they escaped to. An hour to the east was the carbon copy town of Abingdon, the place Ella swore she'd never die in.

For a long moment, the only sound was Luca clacking on his keyboard. But then he jolted upright like he'd been struck with a cattle prod.

'Hold the phone, partner. I think we might be thinking too deeply about this.'

Ella swiveled to face him. 'Do tell.'

'You checked Toledo's home life, right?'

'Of course. Single, unmarried, no kids. Lived alone.'

Luca spun his laptop to face her and tapped the screen. It was a satellite view of something. An odd shape yawned in full-color display, all turquoise water and flagstone lip.

She hustled over and took a closer look. The side panel read: 152 Hemlock Lane Bristol, VA 24201.

'What am I looking at?'

'You're looking at a clapboard colonial that screams tax evasion, but more importantly, you're looking at Ricky Toledo's house.'

Ella squinted, then suddenly the bottom dropped out of her stomach. It couldn't be. It was too easy, too obvious. And yet there it was in lurid technicolor, begging her to investigate it in the flesh.

It was a beautiful home on the outskirts of Bristol.

And it had one hell of a swimming pool.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

The sun hung high and hot as Ella and Luca whipped along the dusty back roads, eating up the miles between Liberty Grove and Ricky Toledo's estate. On paper, this whole thing was a long shot. Following a hunch based on a blurry satellite image was no way to collar a killer. And Ella couldn't shake the feeling that they were about to shake a tree full of rotten apples right down on their fool heads.

But if being sensible was a requirement for the job, she'd have hung up her badge before her first field assignment. The juiciest leads were always the ones marinated in poor choices and served with a side of gut instinct.

So she sat with it, let it ripen like fruit in the sun.

Beside her, Luca drummed his fingers on the armrest. 'So, working theory: If Toledo was the ultimate bachelor, living that single life in the 'burbs, our killer could've followed him home from some campaign stop or fundraiser. Waited for the right moment, then—'

'Bam.' Ella mimed a blow to the head. 'Lights out, Councilman. Drag him out back for a little moonlight swim, watch him sink, then haul ass to Liberty Grove to dump the body.'

'The water smell could've been from his pool if it hadn't been cleaned in a while. Or if the unsub held him under in the shallow end and stirred up all the grunge.'

'Hell of a way to go.' Ella hung a sharp left onto Hemlock Lane. The SUV's struts protested as they bounced over the supersized speed bumps. Apparently the well-heeled of Bristol didn't appreciate plebes joyriding through their manicured slice of

heaven. The wrought iron fences and electronic locks made that crystal clear.

‘Up here,’ Luca said.

Toledo’s place rose up like a cardboard cutout against the too-blue sky. Even half-obscured by a gauntlet of towering magnolias, Toledo’s sprawling plantation-style manse was a behemoth. Buttermilk-yellow with black shutters and honest-to-god Corinthian columns. Like the beautiful bastard lovechild of Twelve Oaks and a McMansion. The attached three-car garage probably cost more than Ella’s entire apartment complex.

Ella killed the engine and the sudden quiet rang like a struck gong. For a long moment, they just sat, staring up at the colossus of new money and old values. Then Luca said, ‘Smack my ass. Toledo wasn’t shy about flashing the cash.’

‘Boy probably had to beat donors off with a stick.’ Ella popped the door. ‘Alright, that’s enough rubbernecking. Let’s take a look at this place, see if there are any footprints or scuff marks or a driver’s license that fell out of our killer’s pocket.’

‘I like the optimism,’ Luca said and piled out. Ella followed, and the heat slapped her in the face as soon as her boots hit the gravel and sweat sprang up like a rash at her hairline. God Almighty. No wonder this town was withering on the vine.

Luca seemed to be faring no better, tugging at his t-shirt like it offended him as they slogged their way up the long drive. But somehow, he managed to pull it off well, whereas Ella felt like a melting wax statue.

The house loomed larger with each step, the empty windows staring down like a skull’s eye sockets. No movement behind the blinds, no sweet iced tea sweating on the porch rail. Just an echoing stillness, a mausoleum’s hush. The front door was solid oak, stained a deep mahogany, with a heavy brass knocker that probably cost

more than Ella's car.

Luca raised a fist to bang on it, but Ella stopped him with a look. 'Something tells me Toledo isn't gonna answer, what with him being dead and all.'

Luca rolled his eyes. 'Procedure, Agent Dark. I know it's a foreign concept, but we gotta at least pretend this is all above board.' But he stepped back, ceding the point.

'The pool is round the back.'

Ella skirted around the side of the house, following the decorative stone path to the back gate. Eight-foot, wrought iron, with pointed finials marching along the top like a row of spears. The latch was a heavy padlock, solid as a rock.

Ella reached out to give it an experimental tug, but it didn't budge. She glanced up, gauging the height, the distance between posts. Doable, but not exactly discreet.

'You sure about this?' Luca's voice at her elbow made her startle. He was giving her one of those looks, the kind that read her intentions without the need for words. 'We're being GPS tracked, remember?'

Ella raked a hand through the sweaty tangles of her hair. Luca was right. She needed to explain every move she made to the top brass, but the secrets of the dead had a way of staying buried if someone didn't dig them up.

'We've got probable cause coming out our ears,' she said firmly. 'A dead politician, a hinky crime scene, and a pool that may or may not be ground zero for this whole mess. No way a judge wouldn't sign off on this.'

Luca still looked skeptical, but she could see him wavering. He wanted this as bad as she did. Wanted to feel the thrill of the hunt, the pieces falling into place. And he

trusted her, God help him. Trusted her to steer them right.

‘You’re the boss, boss.’

Ella flashed him a grin. ‘Duly noted. Now give me a boost, Hawkins. Time’s a-wasting.’

He laced his fingers together and braced himself against the gate. Ella stepped into the makeshift stirrup, grabbing onto his shoulders for balance. The rasp of his stubble was electric against her palms.

‘On three,’ she said. ‘One, two—’

Luca heaved and Ella pushed off, launching herself up and over in one smooth motion. She caught the top of the gate and swung her legs over, dropping lightly to the manicured grass on the other side. The shock traveled up her bones, but she stuck the landing in a way that’d make her old gymnast teacher proud.

”Alley-oop,” she called back, dusting her hands on her trousers. ”Your turn.”

Luca backed up a few steps, then took a running leap at the gate. Those long legs eating up the distance like it was nothing. He grabbed the top and heaved himself over in one powerful surge. Ella absolutely did not stop to appreciate the flex of his shoulders, because she was a professional.

He landed beside her with a thump then straightened up. ‘And the other kids laughed when I took ballet.’

‘Well, who’s laughing now?’

Luca surveyed his new environment and said, ‘Toledo certainly was. Look at this

place.'

Ella took in the backyard, fingers instinctively hovering millimeters from her holster. The place was a humdinger. The pool dominated the yard; a sunken kidney of glassy turquoise so pristine it looked almost fake. It was ringed with a poured concrete patio dotted with high-end outdoor furniture – chaise lounges, glass-topped tables, a massive stainless steel grill that probably had its own zip code.

But what caught Ella's eye was the pool house squatting at the far end, a miniature version of the main domicile. Stucco walls, red roof, picture windows black and lifeless.

She jerked her chin towards it. 'What do you think? Secret love shack?'

Luca tried the handle on the door leading into the house but it was locked. 'Only one way to find out, and getting in the main house is out of the question.'

They picked their way around the pool, alert for any sign of life. Ella's hand hovered over her holster, not quite touching but ready to draw at a moment's notice. The door to the pool house was ajar, just a crack. Ella nudged it open with her toe, peering into the cool dimness within. It wasn't much more than a single room, barely big enough for the daybed shoved against one wall and the mini-fridge humming in the corner.

Luca moved past her, eyes scanning the walls, the floor. What were they looking for? A dropped wallet? A matchbook? A handkerchief with the killer's name stitched into the fabric?

But the room offered up no clues, no smoking gun. Just dust motes dancing in the slanted bars of light and the faint tang of chlorine hanging in the air.

'Definitely not a love shack,' Luca said.

They did one last sweep of the room but came up empty. No bloodstains, no boot prints. Just a sad little bonus space for a man who already had too much.

They stepped back into the punishing sunlight, temporarily blinded. Ella raised a hand to shield her eyes and squinted at the pool. The surface glimmered placidly, not so much as a ripple marring its mirror-like sheen.

‘This pool,’ Ella said. ‘It’s been sanitized within an inch of its life.’

‘And it’s got a filter system, still running,’ Luca pointed. ‘Only thing we’re liable to find is an errant Band-Aid or a’

Then Luca’s head whipped around, towards the sliding glass door he’d tried to prize open before heading to the pool house.

‘You hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

Ella went still, straining her senses. At first there was nothing but the buzz of cicadas and the low hum of central air, but then – there. The creak of hinges, the soft shush of rubber soles on tile.

A sudden, sharp snap behind them – a lock dislodging, a heel scuffing a tiled floor. They whirled as one, hands flying to holsters.

The back door gaped wide, a rectangle of cool, shadowed dark. And framed in that void, trembling like a baby deer from nose to toes – a woman. Not a witness, and sure as hell not a ring of angry farmers here to clear up any evidence. She was young, mid-twenties at most, with dark hair scraped back into a severe bun and a pinched expression. Latina, if Ella had to guess, with the kind of bone structure that spoke of

indigenous ancestors.

And she was wearing a starched blue uniform with 'Purely Spotless Inc.' stitched over the breast pocket.

The woman stopped short at the sight of them, eyes going wide. Her hands flew up in an instinctive gesture of surrender. 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

Ella took a beat to holster her weapon, palms out, expression arranged in something she prayed was close to harmless.

'FBI. We didn't mean to spook you.'

'I – I'm sorry, you can't be back here. This is private property,' she trembled.

'We're well aware, ma'am,' Luca said, smooth as Kentucky bourbon over ice. 'I'm Agent Hawkins with the FBI, this is my partner Agent Dark. We're investigating the murder of the gentleman who owns this property.'

The maid – housekeeper, domestic engineer, whatever – blanched at the comment. She swayed on her feet, blood draining from her face so fast Ella wondered if she might faint dead away. 'Murder?'

Ella gentled her tone, telegraphed her movements slow and soothing as she ghosted closer. 'That's right. Ricky Toledo. Found dead this morning. We think he might've been killed here.'

'Mr. Toledo? He's... dead?'

'I'm afraid so, Miss...?' Luca let the question hang.

‘Alma,’ she said faintly. ‘Alma Ruiz. I’m Mr. Toledo’s housekeeper. Or...’

Her face crumpled, but she visibly got hold of herself. Smoothed out into the professional mask of the service class.

‘We’re sorry to be the bearers of bad news,’ Ella said. ‘Could we ask you a few questions about Mr. Toledo?’

Alma pressed two fingers against her eyes then glanced up at the sun. She slid the door open further and gestured for the agents to come inside.

‘Come,’ Alma said. ‘We have a lot to talk about.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella followed Alma into the house, Luca close at her heels. She led them through a maze of gleaming hardwood and tasteful neutrals with unsure steps, like she was a stranger in this home she'd presumably cleaned a hundred times.

But Ella couldn't blame her. The place had an unlived-in quality, more mausoleum than man cave. They entered a gleaming kitchen that looked like it had been transplanted straight from a Pottery Barn catalog. Stainless steel and marble at every turn, with a professional grade espresso machine hulking on the counter like a chrome gargoyle. Alma gestured for them to sit at the massive island, but Ella remained standing, too amped up to sit. Alma did the same, hugging herself or holding herself together. Ella couldn't tell.

She gentled her approach, kept her body language loose and unthreatening. The last thing they needed was Alma bolting like a spooked deer.

'When was the last time you saw Mr. Toledo, Alma?' Ella asked.

The housekeeper twisted her fingers together. 'Two days ago. He was...he seemed fine. Normal.' She shook her head, a ripple of dark hair escaping her severe bun. 'I don't understand how this could happen.'

Ella bit back a sigh. Money might buy a lot of things, but it couldn't stop a bullet or a blade or a pair of concrete shoes.

'Did he have any meetings scheduled for last night? Any events on the calendar?'

Alma's forehead creased. 'I...I don't know. I only come by twice a week to clean and

maintain the pool. I don't have access to his personal schedule.'

Ella and Luca exchanged a weighted glance. If the pool was serviced that regularly, there was no way Toledo had been drowned in it. The water would've been fresh as a daisy, not the stagnant cesspit that had clung to his bloated corpse.

Another dead end. Another thread snipped before it could even start to unspool.

Ella tamped down on the frustration bubbling in her gut. Beside her, Luca shifted subtly, angling himself towards Alma like a flower seeking sun. Laying on the golden boy routine like a second skin.

'I know this must be a terrible shock,' he murmured, 'and we hate to press you at such a difficult time. But anything you can tell us, anything at all...it could make a world of difference in finding who did this.'

'Look, I hardly saw Mr. Toledo. He doesn't come home until I leave, so we only saw each other in passing.'

Alma wavered. Her gaze darted to Ella, then skittered away. She watched the girl carefully, clocking the minute tremors, the flares of her nostrils. Alma was a delicate little fawn, with her fluttering pulse and liquid eyes. She was chewing on words unsaid, as though there some secret was trying to claw free.

The woman had something she wanted to say but didn't.

'Alma,' she said, quiet but firm. A velvet glove over an iron fist. 'Is there something you're not telling us?'

The housekeeper flinched like she'd been slapped. For a long, airless moment Ella thought she might shatter altogether, might collapse into glittering shards right there

on the imported tile.

The housekeeper blinked, pulled back from whatever far shore she'd been walking.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'Yes, there's something else.'

Ella and Luca shared a look, a crackle of anticipation. Of dread, laced with the promise of revelation.

'Something I probably should have told the police a long time ago. But I was just so scared, so sure they wouldn't...that he'd...'

She trailed off, lost in some distant hell of memory and menace. Luca made an encouraging noise that steered her back on track.

'Follow me,' Alma said.

And then she was up, moving. A slip of shadow, a drift of lemon polish and lavender Fabulouso on the stale air. She led them out of the kitchen and down a narrow hallway, footsteps hushed on the plush carpeting. They passed a series of closed doors – bedrooms, bathrooms, linen closets filled with overpriced sheets – before stopping at one Ella would've pegged for a broom cupboard.

Alma produced a key from her pocket with shaking fingers and slotted it home. The lock disengaged with an audible snick, and the door swung inward on well-oiled hinges.

The room beyond was barely larger than a walk-in closet. Nearly every inch of wall space was taken up by floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with industrial-sized bottles of bleach, ammonia, drain cleaner. An arsenal of chemical warfare.

But Alma ignored the hazmat supplies, crossing straight to the far wall on unsteady legs.

There, at waist height, was a built-in row of drawers. The kind handymen installed for stashing extension cords and spare outlet covers. All the fiddly bits that kept a house humming.

Alma pulled one open, and the runners shrieked in protest.

‘I collect Mr. Toledo’s mail,’ she said. Her voice was far away, faded and brittle as an old photograph. Ella edged closer, trying to see over the other woman’s hunched shoulders. Alma was clutching something in one hand. An envelope, Ella realized.

No, more than one. A thick stack of them stuffed haphazardly into the drawer like the world’s most depressing game of Tetris.

‘Every few weeks, like clockwork, these...these would come. I tried to throw them away, at first. Thought if I got rid of them he’d never have to know. Never have to see the horrible things they said.’

With shaking fingers, Alma plucked the first envelope free. Held it out to Ella, a wax-sealed warrant for a guilty conscience.

Ella took it gingerly, hyperaware of the potential for prints, for trace. Up close she could see the scrawl of Ricky Toledo’s name and address, the lack of return labels. She slid the single sheet free with a rasp of dry paper on dry paper.

The sheet inside was unremarkable. Plain white copy paper, the kind that jammed a thousand printers a day. But there, in stark black strokes like spilled ink – a message. Short, crude, with the choppy print of a child’s scrawl.

YOU'RE DEAD.

'Jesus,' Luca breathed at her elbow. He'd pried open another envelope to reveal a matching threat, this one even pithier.

WATCH YOUR BACK.

Ella rifled through the rest with rising horror. Each one worse than the last, a vicious promise repeated ad nauseum.

DIE DIE DIE.

YOU MADE A MISTAKE.

TRECHEROUS SCUM.

Death threats. Dozens of them, spanning God only knew how long. A concentrated campaign of terror, all aimed squarely at Ricky Toledo's smug, grinning face.

Ella looked up and met Luca's grim expression. His jaw pulsed, the muscles jumping like a livewire. This changed things. Shifted the playing field in a direction she wasn't sure she liked.

'Did Mr. Toledo ever see these?' Luca asked, holding up a particularly lurid SLIT UR THROAT.

Alma shook her head miserably. 'No. I...I couldn't. He had so much on his plate already, the campaign, the council. I didn't want to add to his stress.'

Unbelievable. The guy had death threats on his ass and he was just bopping along, blissfully unaware. And Toledo wasn't just some two-bit hood clipped over a drug

deal – he was a public figure with potential enemies swarming out of the wallpaper.

Luca said, ‘Alma, do you have any idea who these might be from? Any major enemies? Any strange faces hanging around here?’

‘No. None. I don’t know about the man’s work life at all.’

‘You did the right thing. Bringing these to us,’ Ella said. ‘I know it couldn’t have been easy, living with this hanging over you. But I promise you, we’re going to get to the bottom of this.’

She pulled out her cell phone and snapped a series of photos, making sure to get multiple angles on the handwriting. If they could match it to a suspect, tie a name to the rage, then they might just figure out who drowned this politician and dumped him in a field.

A spark of excitement fizzed in her chest. They had a thread. Not just a thread – a whole tangle of them, just waiting to be unraveled. It was something. More than something – it was the first solid break they’d caught since clapping eyes on Toledo’s soggy corpse.

Luca was still talking to Alma in low, soothing tones, easing as much information out of her as he could without sending her over the edge. Ella left him to it – he had the better bedside manner by a country mile.

She thumbed through her contacts until she found the one she wanted. Amelia Chau, digital wunderkind and queen of the Cyber Division. If anyone could wring a viable lead out of this mess, it was her. The woman had never met a firewall she couldn’t scale or a data trail she couldn’t follow.

Ella wandered out into the hallway, hit the call button and brought the phone to her

ear. It rang once, twice. Then a click and a rush of white noise.

‘If it isn’t my favorite Luddite,’ Amelia chirped. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘Amelia, I need a favor.’

A dramatic gasp down the line. ‘Miss Dark, admitting she needs help? Hold the front page.’

”Can the sass, and I’ll get you a six-pack of Mountain Dew.”

A considering pause. Then, ‘Twelve-pack.’

‘Done.’

‘Alright, lay it on me.’

‘I’ve got some handwriting I need analyzing. If I send you a bunch of pictures, can you work your magic?’

Amelia said, ‘Just to remind you, I’m not actually a wizard. I can’t just snap my fingers and divine some rando’s identity from a grocery list.’

‘Nothing so pedestrian. I’ve got a fistful of death threats. Condense search results down to the Virginia area. Within fifty miles of a town called Liberty Grove.’

‘Zip ‘em over. I’ll put them through the usual databases.’

Relief loosened the snarled mess of Ella’s shoulders. Amelia was flighty and sarcastic and fueled primarily by junk food, but she was also the best there was. If anyone could crack this coconut, it was her.

‘Thanks, Am. I owe you one.’

‘More like a dozen, but who’s counting?’ Keys clattered like rainfall through the speaker. ‘Give me an hour.’

‘Roger that. Over and out.’ Ella moved to end the call, but then Amelia’s voice crackled through again, gone suddenly soft and hesitant. Stripped of her usual caustic wit.

‘Hey, uh. Ella?’

Something in Ella’s chest went tight. Dread pooled like battery acid. ‘Yeah?’

A staticky sigh, like Amelia, was scrubbing her face with one hand. ”You”re not with Mia Ripley by any chance, are you?”

Her blood ran cold. ‘No. She”s...’ Ella decided not to go into the finer details. ‘She’s not with me.’

Amelia’s pause was telling. Weighted. A palpable shift in gravity.

‘It”s just...the Director called me about an hour ago. Asking me to track her phone, ping her last location.’

Ella’s fingers went numb. ‘Track her? What the hell for?’

Another pause. Heavier this time, loaded with something Ella couldn”t parse. Didn”t want to parse.

‘She’s not answering her calls. Her phone is off, so we can’t get a trace. And she’s not at home.’

The words hit her like a block of wood to the skull. Ella's brain rattled, jumping from one imagined scenario to another. Ella actually staggered, one hand shooting out to steady herself against the wall.

'Mia's... missing?' she asked.

'Yes. I thought you might have-'

'No,' Ella cut her off. She thought of the last time they'd spoken, the last words they'd hurled at each other in the heat of anger and betrayal. 'I saw her this morning. About five hours ago.'

This wasn't happening. Couldn't be happening. The universe wasn't that cruel to snatch her best friend out from under her. There had to be some mistake. A crossed wire, a miscommunication. Mia was probably holed up in some fleabag motel, drowning her sorrows in a bottle of Johnnie Walker. Licking her wounds and cursing Ella's name.

She couldn't fall apart. Not here, not now. Not with Ricky Toledo's killer still on the loose and Luca waiting for her to take point. She had a job to do.

And she had to believe – had to trust – that wherever Mia was, she could take care of herself. That she was safe, and whole, and would come swanning back into the office with a cocky grin and a fresh stack of paperwork before retiring for good in a few months.

She had to, because if she didn't.

Ella shook her head. Rejecting the thought before it could take root, sink poisonous claws into her psyche. She pulled the phone back to her ear, dragged the ragged pieces of herself into something resembling a functioning human.

‘Keep me posted,’ she gritted out. ‘Both on the handwriting and...and Mia. The second you hear anything.’

Amelia’s voice was gentle, almost pitying. ‘You know I will. Speak soon.’

She ended the call and let her hand fall to her side. The phone dangled from her limp fingers, suddenly ten times heavier. A millstone around her neck, dragging her into an abyss with no bottom.

Mia was missing.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Marcus Ayers' eyes snapped open and all he saw was black. Pitch goddamn black, like he was trapped inside a coffin. First came the cold, like he was rising to the surface of a frozen lake. Then the shivering began. Barely perceptible tremors rippling through abused muscles. Then grew in intensity until his teeth clacked together like a crazed windup toy.

Next the pain. It emanated from his skull in sickening waves, and any attempt at movement lanced a spike of agony through his temples.

What the hell had he done last night? This was the mother of all hangovers. The kind that made a man swear off the sauce for good and take up the cloth. Except he didn't remember drinking. Didn't remember much of anything really. Just vague impressions. Blurred images seen through fogged glass.

He tried to lift a hand to his pounding head, to ease the jackhammer doing its level best to split his skull, but his arm wouldn't cooperate, wouldn't budge an inch no matter how he strained. With rising panic he realized he couldn't move his legs either, or any part of himself; he was chained up and immobile in the oppressive dark, bindings biting into the tender skin of his wrists, ankles, everywhere.

His engineer's mind spun uselessly, trying to make sense of the senseless. This had to be a dream, a nightmare, some sadistic trick of the subconscious, because there was no way this could be reality.

He'd drifted off at his desk, that was it, fallen asleep hunched over blueprints and geologic surveys; the pressure, the late nights, they'd taken their toll, his overworked brain conjuring terrors to punish him for his dedication.

That's all this was, all it could be; any minute now Marjorie would come clicking in on her Manolo Blahniks to rouse him, cluck her tongue and remind him he had a perfectly serviceable bed at home, if he remembered how to find it.

But – the dripping. That slow, maddening plunk plunk plunk boring into his skull, strange, out of place. Marjorie was militant about leaks, ran a tight ship in their sleek LEED-certified offices, eco-friendly down to the bone. No way she'd let a drippy faucet get past her radar.

And he was wet, wasn't he? Damp and shivering in clinging clothes. The cold, the pervasive seep of it, all wrong. Desk naps were known to be hell on the spine, but not like this.

No, much as he railed against it, the truth was unavoidable; this was no dream, no catnap gone wrong, the pain too sharp, the details too vivid, mind-numbing terror obliterating any lingering drowsiness. Marcus was in trouble, real honest-to-Christ trouble, and he had to get a grip, focus past the screaming in his head long enough to figure a way out of this.

Was he underground? Stuck in a cave or a mine shaft, lost in the labyrinth of tunnels that honeycombed the bedrock? He'd seen enough of them, poking through blueprints and surveys. The forgotten places, left to rot while the world went on spinning overhead.

But that didn't explain why he was bound in this hole. This wasn't an accident or a drunken wrong turn. This was planned, purposeful. Someone's design, as intricate and merciless as the inner workings of a watch.

A cold finger of dread worked its way up Marcus's spine, but the rational part of his brain screamed that there was a way out of this.

First, take stock: extremities compromised, body uncooperative, but his head was clearing. Okay, he could work with that, use the old gray matter for something other than gibbering. What did he know? What could he trust? His senses, that's what; the data did not lie, so inventory those, one by one, like ticking items off a quality assurance checklist.

Sight was useless, impenetrable black pressing in on all sides, no shapes or shadows to orient himself, but smell – smell was doable. He sucked in a shuddering breath through his nose and instantly wished he hadn't; a gag-inducing miasma flooded his sinuses, dank, musty, the stagnant funk of still waters left to fester.

And beneath that... something chemical, astringent, familiar but maddeningly elusive. Chlorine maybe, or a caustic cousin, the kind of noxious brew no sane soul would willingly marinate in.

Sound then: drip, plunk, drip, that ceaseless cadence worming into his eardrums, the audio equivalent of Chinese water torture. He strained past it, listening, reaching. The distant slap of water on something. Stone, perhaps. Containment of some sort, but the dimensions were impossible to judge in this disorienting void.

And a rusty hinge whine, a hollow clang of metal on metal.

Panic surged through him like an electric current. Any illusion of rationality was suddenly ripped to shreds. Marcus thrashed and bucked like a hooked fish, mad with the need to be free. Limbs juddered against his bonds, skin rubbing raw, ragged, bleeding under the assault. To hell with logic, with calm. There was no room for that now, no space for anything but the primal imperative to move and fight and survive.

His flailing flipped some hidden switch behind his eyeballs, because his environment suddenly swam into focus. The murky outlines solidified into a grim reality, and up above, he saw a dome-shaped ceiling lost in gloom. Curving walls glistening with

damp. A pumping mechanism chugging away in the corner. A pistol gleaming like an executioner's axe.

And dead center, looming over his splayed form like a hulking sentinel – a glass monolith.

Cylindrical, massive, a single sheet of curved transparency stretching floor to ceiling. This was what cocooned him in his watery prison.

No, not glass, or not entirely; there was metal too, rivets, seams, the dull glint of stainless circumscribing the casing's base and apex. And there, etched into the facing panel, was an array of symbols and glyphs.

At first glance, it was all random.

But no. There was a pattern there. A logic. His oxygen-starved brain groped for significance, because those shapes, they looking hauntingly familiar.

Suddenly, understanding slammed into him with the force of a rogue wave.

One was the Egyptian symbol Clepsydra.

Otherwise known as a water clock.

But this was the most messed up, bastardized version of a water clock he'd ever seen.

He'd studied these things, spent hours poring over diagrams and descriptions until his eyes crossed. Marveling at the ingenuity of the ancients, the way they'd harnessed the most basic elements to mark the passage of time. Egyptians had used these clocks to tell the time, to utilize the predictable flow of water to track the passage of hours, sun up to sun down and back again.

Only this one, this jury-rigged monstrosity, was designed for a darker purpose. Ticking down to a different sort of hour.

His last.

The glyphs blurred, jumped, resolved into stark clarity as his eyes adjusted to the gloom—not glyphs after all, but numbers, hash marks meticulously notched into the casing's face, a scale of some kind.

12.

11.

10.

9.

8.

Marcus assumed it went down further, but he couldn't see beyond the water's dark surface.

The markings. The water, rising with mechanical regularity. His guts turned to ice as he overlaid the scene with a diagram from an old reference book, a schematic that had once fascinated him with its elegant simplicity.

Each etching was an hour.

The increments between, minutes.

All of them adding up to a countdown, red digits flashing towards zero. Towards the

moment when the water closed over his head and the world went away, as neat and inescapable as lights out.

Compressed air hissed from the base as more of the noxious fluid was pumped into his transparent sarcophagus. Marcus's mind tracked the ruthless arithmetic: rate times volume equals dead engineer. Drowned like a rat in a high-tech barrel.

His gut clenched as the true horror of the situation sank in. This was no mere captivity, no crude revenge fantasy. It was torture by fluid dynamics, a calculated construct playing to his most primal fear – the inexorable march of time, meted out drip by maddening drip. Death by the very fundamental principles that had been his *raison d'être*.

It was almost elegant in its cruelty. Poetic, if he'd had a single lyrical bone in his body. But all higher thought was obliterated by the animal shriek of his primal brain. By the icy claws of terror ripping through his viscera as the water crept toward the next hashmark.

He tried to call up schematics in his head, overlay this evil machine with something familiar, something solvable. Archimedes' screw, a gravel filter, anything to tame the impossible into engineering.

But for once, the numbers failed him. The comforting solidity of immutable laws dissolved into the sloshing chaos of his tomb.

Marcus screamed then. A hoarse, broken sound that barely registered above the dripping. He bellowed and thrashed and pleaded, dignity be damned. Let his captor think him craven, pathetic, a worm wailing in the mud. If it earned him one more second, one more gasping breath, it would be worth it.

But no one came. No one heard. He was alone, forsaken, abandoned to drown in this

demented fishbowl. And with a final, sickening click, the magnitude of his doom settled over him.

He was going to die here.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella stormed back into the precinct with the threatening letters tucked under her arm, each one carefully sealed in an evidence bag to preserve any trace of the sick freak who'd penned them.

But even as she moved with purpose, her mind was a million miles away, spinning like a hamster wheel on speed.

Mia. Missing. The words circled round and round like a skipping record needle. Her partner, her rock, the one constant in the shitstorm of her life – AWOL.

It couldn't be real. Couldn't be happening. Not now, not like this. They were fighting, yeah, caught in the fallout of secrets kept and lines crossed. But Mia was a goddamn force of nature, indestructible, unbreakable. It didn't make a lick of sense. She didn't do damsel in distress. The only way she'd disappear is if she was no longer bound by her own willpower.

Martin. Martin goddamn Godfrey. It had to be him.

But what could she do? She was four-hundred miles away, and she had a killer to catch. Part of her thought about ditching this place and heading home. Start at Mia's house, follow the trail, try and uncover where exactly the stupid old hag might have vanished to.

She booted up her ancient laptop and stabbed the keys harder than necessary. Anything to keep her hands busy while her mind spun. And Luca, bless his pretty-boy heart, clocked her mood in two seconds flat.

‘You okay, Ella? You look like someone just peed in your cereal.’

‘That’s just my face.’ She smacked the side of the monitor, muttered a curse as the cursor froze midscreen.

‘Hey, c’mon. Was it something at Toledo’s place?’

‘No. I mean, yeah.’ A lie, bold-faced as brass balls. But the truth wasn’t an option. Not when she could barely admit it to herself.

‘Really.’ Luca’s tone said he wasn’t buying her bullshit, not for a red cent. ‘You know I can read you like a book.’

Damn him. Damn his quick eyes and his keen instincts and his uncanny knack for ferreting out her soft spots. She couldn’t afford this, not now. Couldn’t risk cracking open the vault of her messed-up psyche when there was a killer to catch.

‘I’m fine.’ She infused the words with steel. ‘Just... something on the phone.’

Luca’s eyebrows shot up his head. ‘Wanna narrow that down?’

‘I said I’m fine.’ It came out harsher than she’d intended. Luca blinked, hand falling away. Guilt twinged in Ella’s chest, but she pushed it down. Shoved it into the overflowing box labeled ‘stuff to deal with never.’

She didn’t have time for this. Didn’t have the luxury of falling apart, of leaning on someone else’s strength. She’d handle her business like she always did – alone.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘Don’t sweat it. We all have our bitch days.’

Ella accepted the backhanded justification. Then said, ‘Just...man the fort for a sec, okay? I gotta make a call.’

Luca hesitated, clearly torn between pushing and giving her space. But in the end, he conceded defeat. ‘Whatever you say, boss.’

She ducked into the hall, pulling out her phone with clumsy fingers. Scrolled through her contacts until she found the one she wanted – Mia’s house sitter, Rafe Portillo.

The guy was a godsend, always ready to swoop in at a moment’s notice when a case demanded Mia’s undivided attention. Which was pretty much always – life in the Bureau didn’t exactly lend itself to a regular plant-watering schedule. He lived on the farm that backed onto Mia’s garden, so he could have eyes on her house going forward.

Ella hit the call button, pacing a tight circuit as it rang once, twice. On the third, Rafe picked up.

‘Hello, Rafe speaking.’

‘Rafe. It’s Ella Dark. Mia’s partner.’

A beat of startled silence. Then: ‘Ella? Ah, of course. What can I do for you?’

She could picture him now, the confusion scrawled across his expressive face. She’d only met him a handful of times, passed like ships in Mia’s chic Beacon Hill digs. But he’d always struck her as a good guy. Salt of the earth, for all the froufrou trappings of his gig.

‘I need to ask you something. About Mia.’

‘Shoot.’

‘Have you seen her today?’

‘No,’ Rafe said. ‘Won’t be seeing her until Friday.’

‘Heard from her today?’

‘No. Sorry. Why?’

Ella debated how much to tell him. She didn’t want to worry him, but at the same time, he could be her eyes back in D.C. in case Mia miraculously reappeared.

‘Mia’s gone AWOL. The Bureau are looking for her.’

‘You’re kidding?’ Rafe said. A burst of static came down the line. ‘Give me twenty minutes. I’ll head over to her place and check.’

The wave of gratitude that crashed over her was dizzying. She couldn’t afford to give into it, to feel anything. But damn if this man wasn’t a godsend.

‘That would be great. Thank you.’

‘Leave it with me. Call you back soon.’

She punched End Call before the lump in her throat could betray her, stuffed her phone back in her pocket like it burned. Took a deep, shuddery breath and held it until her lungs screamed uncle.

Then she pushed off the wall and stared down the briefing room door like it was an enemy combatant. Showtime.

She strode back into the office, game face firmly in place. Luca looked up as she approached, a question in his eyes, but he had the decency to avoid it.

‘Hawkins.’ Her voice held all the warmth of a January grave. ‘Sorry for being a bitch two minutes back. I feel like a fool.’

‘Shush. We got something.’

‘We do?’

‘Your friend Amelia called me while you were out. Said she had a hit on the handwriting.’

Ella blinked, wrongfooted. ‘She called you?’

Something unreadable flickered across Luca’s face, there and gone too quick to parse. ‘Uh, yeah. She said she couldn’t reach you.’

Ella frowned and dug out her phone again. Sure enough, there was a missed call from Amelia, time-stamped less than five minutes ago. Amelia giving updates to Luca instead of her. It was a strange feeling. A hot rush of some tangled emotion swept through her, one she didn’t care to examine too closely.

‘What did she say?’

‘To impart glad tidings and solve our case for us, turns out. She ran our scratch samples through FISH. Got a match within ten minutes.’

‘...FISH?’

Luca huffed a laugh. ‘Forensic Information System for Handwriting. Some

newfangled Fed thing, catalogs writing samples from all over. Suspects, persons of interest, your mailman. You name it, it's in there.'

Huh. Ella chewed the inside of her cheek, digesting that. Luca made it feel like she'd been asleep for the past two years. Maybe she really ought to start checking her memos.

'And Cyber Crimes has access to this thing?'

'Them and God, sounds like. Point is, your pal ran the numbers and came up cherries. Vault blew wide open. Here, look. She's emailed the info over.'

Luca navigated to his inbox, double-clicked, pulled up a photocopy of some official document.

'Court records. Divorce proceedings, to be exact. And check out the signatures at the bottom.' Luca's finger traced the cramped, spidery scrawls. 'Look familiar?'

Damn. It was dead on.

The handwriting on the decree was a dead ringer for their deranged epistler. Same off-kilter slant, same mangled serifs. Trying to pass itself off as normal, respectable. And failing miserably.

'Amelia said that whoever wrote those letters tried to disguise their handwriting, but the occasional real letter slipped through.'

'We've got a name?' Her hackles were up, bloodhound on the scent.

Luca tapped the bottom of the page. 'Vernon Creed. Ring any bells?'

Ella frowned, turning it over. Sounded vaguely familiar, in that nebulous politician way. 'No. He local?'

'Bristol native. Lost his bid for re-election to the city council last year. Three guesses who he lost it to.'

'Toledo.' She didn't even have to ask. The shape of it was forming in her mind's eye, the tangled skein of motive and opportunity. Ella's veins began to pulse with molten energy. A million tiny sparks danced up her forearms.

Was this their unsub?

'So Creed's what, a sore loser? Figures he'll even the score from beyond the political grave?'

'Could be. But whatever it is, we need to visit this guy right now.'

A scorned councilman, ousted by a hot new face on the scene. Death threats in the mail. Drowned and discarded like vermin. Ella was all but ready to run to the parking lot.

'Grab his address,' she said. 'Let's go dig up some bones.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella swung the SUV onto Maple Drive, the street that Vernon Creed called home. The homes here sat somewhere between lavish and pretentious. Manicured lawns, neutral siding. Not a plastic flamingo or garden gnome out of place.

She pulled up to the curb outside Creed's Tudor-style four-bedder and killed the engine. Beside her, Luca jerked forward in his seat, barely avoiding a close encounter of the dashboard kind.

'Jesus, Ell. When did you pass your driving test?'

Ella surveyed her destination. Multiple cars on the driveway. Movement in the windows. Someone was home. 'Next week,' she said.

Luca shut up real quick, but she could feel his gaze boring into the side of her head. Profiling her, no doubt. Trying to suss out what had crawled up her ass and died.

'Let's just get this over with,' she bit out. Before I completely lose my shit, she didn't add.

'On it.'

'Get your trigger finger ready. Something tells me Creed's the kind of sleaze who'll try and run.'

They climbed out of the car and started up the flagstone walk. Creed's place was a study in conspicuous consumption – easily the most extravagant house in the street. The kind of joint that screamed 'I have more money than everyone else here and I'm

not afraid to prove it.'

And proving it he was. As they approached, Ella could hear the tinkle of ice in highball glasses, the raucous laughter of the well-lubricated. She exchanged a glance with Luca, eyebrows climbing into her hairline.

'Sounds like one hell of a wake,' she muttered.

'Maybe it's that kind of party,' Luca said.

This felt wrong, off-key. What kind of scumbag threw a backyard get-together mere hours after his political rival turned up in a cornfield with a gullet full of stagnant water?

They rounded the corner of the house, following the sound of forced frivolity. And there, in all his gin-blossomed glory, was Vernon Creed in his backyard. Holding court in a circle of glad-handing toadies, a smarmy grin plastered across his punchable face.

He was a tall drink of water, Creed; gangly limbs, bulging Adam's apple, like a praying mantis in a three-piece suit. Steel-gray hair coiffed within an inch of its life, a set of pearly veneers that belonged in a toothpaste ad.

And that smile, Christ. It stretched his face all wrong, twisting his features into something just to the left of human. Like a cheap Halloween mask, a poor simulacrum of a real boy aping the motions without a lick of genuine emotion.

She hated him on sight.

Ella didn't bother with niceties. The lack of a fence around the perimeter provided her alarmingly-easy access to this public figure. She sauntered toward Creed like a

sawtooth cat on the prowl, Luca scrambling to keep up. The assorted lackeys scattered at her approach, clearly sensing the oncoming storm.

But Creed just stood there, grinning into the teeth of her fury. Like some kind of demented jack-o-lantern that didn't know it was about to get smashed.

‘Vernon Creed?’ She barked, slapping the flat of her badge against her palm. ‘Agents Dark and Hawkins, FBI, working with Liberty Grove PD. We need to have a word.’

Creed's smile slipped microscopically, but he hitched it back into place with the ease of long practice. ‘FBI? To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘Cut the crap, Creed. You know exactly why we're here.’ She reached into her pocket and pulled out one of the evidence bags. ‘Look familiar?’

Creed didn't so much as flinch. He cocked his head, eyes wide with studied innocence, then he turned to his hangers-on and made a shooing motion. ‘Alright, boys. This is grown-up talk. Why don't you all head inside, help yourselves to the good stuff in the study? I'll be along shortly.’

The group dispersed with reluctant grumbles, shooting curious glances over their shoulders as they filed into the house. Creed watched them go, then turned back to Ella and Luca. His eyes glinted with a sort of cruel amusement, like they were bugs he was considering pulling the wings off of.

‘So,’ Luca said, ‘the letter. Or letters.’

‘Ah. Those.’ He plucked the bag from her fingers, turning it over with casual disdain. ‘What can I say? Campaigns get heated, tensions run high. I may have gotten a bit...carried away in the moment.’

Ella was suddenly lost for words. He was actually trying to justify it. Brush it off like a parking ticket.

‘A bit carried away,’ Luca repeated. ‘That’s what you call threatening a man’s life?’

Creed shrugged and handed the bag back. ‘What can I say? Politics is a blood sport. But it’s all just words, boys and girls. Part of the game. Toledo gave as good as he got.’

Ella saw red. She took a step forward, getting right up in his smug face. ‘The game. Right. Is that what you call it? Just a bit of friendly attempted murder between pals?’

Creed held up his hands, placating. But she didn’t miss the way his eyes darted nervously to his sycophants, now hovering at the edges of the scene like well-dressed buzzards.

‘Okay, okay. I admit, I may have crossed a line with those letters. Got a bit too deep in the roleplay. But c’mon. You don’t actually think I had anything to do with Ricky’s death...do you?’

Ella stared at him long and hard, taking his measure. He fidgeted under her gaze, beads of sweat springing up along his hairline despite the mild afternoon. Fear or guilt?

There was a vicious sort of satisfaction in his voice. This was a man who held a grudge, who nursed his resentments like a fine wine.

But was he a killer? That was the million-dollar question.

It was plausible, she had to admit. Creed was the quintessential hollow man, all smarm and no spine. He probably got his kicks kicking puppies and shorting the wait

staff. Sending nasty-grams to his rivals was likely the extent of his testicular fortitude.

She struggled to picture him getting his hands dirty, not directly. Couldn't picture him lashing Toledo's limp body to a concrete block and chucking it down a well.

But then again, never underestimate the wrath of a mediocre man outshone. Or what he might pay to see a threat removed.

'I don't know, Creed. You tell me. Maybe penning a few poison valentines wasn't enough for you. Maybe you needed to take it to the next level, really seal the deal.'

It was a twist of the knife to see which way he jerked. And jerk he did, like a puppet with its strings yanked.

'That...that's absurd,' he spluttered. 'I'm not a murderer. Are you out of your mind?'

Ella let the silence stretch. Luca took up position at her flank. Together, they waited for Creed to break.

Finally, he cracked. 'Look, think what you want about me. I'm no saint. But I didn't kill Ricky, and I can prove it.'

Ella raised one skeptical brow. 'Oh? This ought to be good. Whip it out, Creed. Bedazzle me.'

If he noted the double entendre he didn't show it, too busy fumbling for his phone. He swiped and tapped with increasing agitation before finally thrusting the device under her nose.

It was an e-ticket.

‘There! See? I was at a conference in Miami until this morning. I got back at one AM. You can check with the airline, the hotel. I must’ve been seen by dozens of people. Hundreds!’

Well, crap. Of all the things she’d expected, an actual honest-to-God alibi wasn’t one of them.

Ella grimaced, but dutifully noted down the flight number and hotel anyway. She’d have Amelia run it down, confirm he wasn’t just blowing smoke up her ass. But in her gut, she knew he was telling the truth. Maybe for the first time in his life.

Creed wasn’t their guy. He was just another pissant politician, all bark and no bite. Plenty slimy enough to talk big, to make threats and pound his chest. But at the end of the day, he didn’t have the sack to get his hands dirty – or to get too close to the action at all.

Dammit to hell.

‘Fine,’ she bit out, shoving his phone back into his sweaty palm. ‘You’re off the hook, for now. But I’d keep that ticket handy if I were you. Some cops might be round later to double-check everything.’

Creed blanched, stammering some half-assed protestation.

‘What’s with the party, anyway?’ Luca jumped in.

‘Nothing to do with Toledo,’ Creed said. ‘But I won’t lie. It’s a bonus.’

Ella couldn’t listen anymore, not unless she wanted to get written up for punching a person of interest. She turned away, mentally cataloging the next avenue to explore, the next lead to chase down. Staying here any longer would just be a waste of their

time.

And her rapidly fraying nerves.

‘You guys wanna take some water?’ Creed called out. ‘I heard it’s dry as a bone down there in Liberty.’

Ella spun around and got in his face, suddenly not caring about this hypothetical write-up. ‘You think that’s funny? People are struggling down there.’

Creed threw his hands up and said, ‘Hey, I’m being serious. I got family down there. You wanna blame someone? Blame Toledo. He’s the one who championed the dam up here.’

The dam. That freaking dam. Looming over everything like a bad omen. Choking the life out of Liberty Grove even as it lined the pockets of Bristol’s elite.

”So let me get this straight,” she said. ”You and your cronies, what fought the good fight? Tried to put the kibosh on Toledo’s little hydro-dictatorship?”

Creed spread his hands in a parody of sincerity. ‘Hey, we did our best. Lodged objections, lobbied for oversight, the whole nine. But Ricky, he was relentless. Steamrolled right over us, greasing palms and glad-handing until he got his way.’

He leaned in, conspiratorial. ‘See, Ricky’s district included the dam. All those juicy kickbacks and construction contracts? Lined his war chest real nice. Never mind the little people downstream.’

Ella’s fingers began to twitch, and not just because she wanted to slap Creed for getting too close. It actually fit. Slotting neatly into the bigger picture like a blood-tacky puzzle piece. Toledo using his constituency as a goddamn ATM, funneling

misery into his re-election fund.

And now those chickens had come home to roost, drowned and dumped and left to bloat.

‘Right,’ she bit out. ‘Well, thanks for the history lesson. We’ll be in touch.’

Creed sketched a mocking little salute. ‘Happy to help, Agent Dark. Anything for our boys in blue.’

It was all Ella could do not to roll her eyes clean out of her skull. She spun on her heel and stalked away. Luca kept up with her, wisely keeping his mouth shut until they were back at the car.

‘So. That was...’

‘A load of crap,’ Ella supplied as she yanked open the car door. ‘Creed’s practically creaming himself that Toledo’s dead.’

‘I hate to say it,’ Luca said, ‘but Creed’s not our guy. I mean, don’t get me wrong, he’s a weasel and a half. But a killer? If he’d offed Toledo, he wouldn’t be celebrating like that. He’d be laying low.’

Ella climbed into the car and thumped her skull against the headrest.

‘Agreed. Killing Toledo would take actual backbone, something resembling principles. Ol’ Creed’s a bottom feeder, cares about nothing but his own scaly hide.’

She jammed the key into the ignition a bit harder than warranted. She was just about to jam the car into gear and peel out in a totally unprofessional spray of gravel when something caught her eye.

A flicker of shadow, there and gone in her peripheral vision.

She whipped around. But the street was deserted, just a bucolic stretch of Stepford-esque suburbia. Manicured lawns, picket fences, not a soul in sight.

Except – there. The barest flutter of darkness, an afterimage seared on her retinas.

Someone had been watching. She felt it in her bones. A prickling certainty that had the hairs on her nape standing to attention. Beside her, Luca stiffened, clocking her sudden spike in tension.

‘Ella? What-‘

‘Didn’t you see that?’ She scanned the tree line, the empty sidewalk, senses straining. ‘There was someone there, I swear it.’

”Of course, there was someone there. This is a residential area.”

‘No. I mean, someone was watching us.’

‘Yeah. Probably one of those snakes in suits from Creed’s circle jerk.’

Ella conceded. She opted for rationale this time. Exhaustion played tricks. Stressed minds spun phantoms out of shadows. She knew this.

There was no figure lurking in the rhododendrons, no faceless specter dogging her heels. Just the sick, spiraling confluence of grief and fear and worry. The toxic sludge of her own demons, clotting her reason like mud in a fuel line.

She had to get a grip. Had to grit her teeth and power through, claw back the ground she’d lost. Leads didn’t chase themselves, killers didn’t spontaneously develop

consciences. The sooner she got this case out of the way, the sooner she could get to what really mattered.

Finding Mia.

‘Lunch?’ asked Luca. ‘I could eat a horse.’

Ella couldn’t remember eating anything in days, but she couldn’t deny her partner sustenance. ‘Alright.’

So she stomped the gas and pointed them towards the dusty, emaciated limbo of Liberty Grove. Back to the withered crops and desiccated lives and the hollow-eyed desperation of a town circling the drain.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella thought that the town center of Liberty Grove was one tumbleweed short of a spaghetti western. The place was a postcard from the apocalypse, and she guessed that was what happened when Mother Nature didn't make with the aqua. Folks packed up and chased the rain.

She parked on the cracked sidewalk of what passed for a main square. She and Luca got out and began their search for food that wasn't biscuits that had been festering on a kitchen counter. Ella doubted she could stomach much. She survived mostly on a diet of stress and worry these days. It was good for the waistline but not for the heart.

'It's like the world ended out here,' Luca said. 'Clint Eastwood could jump out at any second.'

'Or Leatherface.'

'Was it always like this? Or has the drought done a number on this place?'

'It was never this bad, from what I remember. I guess the drought was the straw that broke the camel's back.'

'Shame. This town has character. Or it could.'

The lonely caw of a crow broke the silence as they ambled down the dusty street. Ella eyeballed shops, most of which were either closed or boarded up for good. She heard the wheeze of a busted screen door somewhere in the distance.

But then her ears pricked up – the thin, reedy strains of an acoustic guitar, warbling

from the town square. She glanced off to the side and saw a busker on the corner, sitting on a crate with an open case in front of him. He was old, leathery and sun-weathered, with a wild tangle of beard streaked with gray.

But it wasn't the musician that caught Ella's eye. It was the structure behind him, rising from the concrete like a relic from a forgotten age.

At first glance, it could've been a fountain, one of those sad municipal numbers that collected more trash than coins. Tiered basins, scummy with mineralized scale, an abstract figure perched on top like a malnourished pigeon.

But there was something off about it, something that niggled at the base of Ella's brain stem. The shape of it, the placement of what should have been pools. She nudged Luca and made a beeline towards it.

Up close, the oddity of the structure was even more apparent. The basins were bone-dry, not so much as a trickle of water to be found. And the statue was no modernist bird or cavorting cherub.

It was a clock face, the hands frozen at a quarter past three.

Mid-way through some country number, the busker muted his guitar and nodded at the agents. 'Afternoon, folks. You're not from around here.'

'Correct,' Ella said. 'You a local?'

'The name's Clyde,' the busker said as he strummed what Ella's brain recognized as an E chord. 'Been here since God was a pup.'

'Do you take requests?' she asked.

‘Sure do.’

‘Can you tell me about this fountain?’

Clyde laughed like it was the first joke he’d heard in years. In a place like this, maybe it was. ‘This ain’t no fountain, lady. It’s a gen-u-ine water clock, just like the old timers used.’

Ella cocked her head, studying the odd structure with narrowed eyes. A water clock, huh? In the middle of Podunk, USA? What were the odds? She glanced at Luca, saw the same curiosity reflected on his chiseled mug.

Clyde strummed another lazy chord, and the twang reverberated in the dusty air. ‘So what brings a coupla suits like you to our little slice of paradise? Lemme guess – Toledo.’

Ella’s gaze snapped to him with hackles raised. ‘What makes you say that?’

A dry rasp of a chuckle left Clyde’s throat, like leaves skittering across the pavement. ‘Word travels fast around here, little lady. ”Specially when it involves our dearly departed councilman takin’ a dirt nap in Jessup’s cornfield.’

Ella tamped down a sigh. Of course. Same old song, different verse – just like back in Abingdon. A bunch of bored housewives and gossipers blathering over the back fence like it was their job. She should’ve known better than to expect anything else. She jerked her chin back at the ersatz timepiece.

‘So what’s the deal with this thing, anyway?’ Not exactly your typical town square decor.’

‘Nope.’ Clyde popped the ”p”. ‘S”posed to be some kinda art installation. City

council commissioned it 'bout five years back, wanted to "beautify" the place and make it a "destination". Load of crap if you ask me.'

Luca spoke up. 'You know a lot about this thing.'

'I've been buskin" this corner since Carter was in office, figured it was only fittin" I learn the history of my stage, so to speak.'

'A water clock.' Ella shared a glance with Luca, who looked equally intrigued. 'How"s that work, exactly?'

Clyde leaned back, settled in for a yarn. 'Well, see, the water drips down from that there spout, trickles through all the gears and whatnot. Keeps the whole contraption turning, nice and steady. But that was before the drought sucked us dry.'

Ella studied the mechanism with new eyes, tried to imagine it in its heyday. Water coursing through its veins, gears clacking and spinning, a marvel of ancient ingenuity. Hard to believe such a thing could exist out here, in the armpit of nowhere.

All roads seemed to lead back to water – or the lack of it. A town withering on the vine, sucked dry by bureaucrats and fat cats funneling the lifeblood upstream.

'What do you know about Mr. Toledo?' she asked.

'I'll tell you what I know if you tell me who you people are.'

Ella flashed her badge. 'FBI. Special Agent Ella Dark. This is my partner, Agent Hawkins.'

'Sheesh,' Clyde said as he lay his guitar on his lap. 'Butter my butt and call me a biscuit. Figured that sleazeball would catch a case of the deads sooner or later, but

didn't think he rated the big guns.'

'Lotta people had cause to want Toledo six feet under,' Luca said. 'But somebody decided to speed up the process. You hear anything about that?'

The busker adjusted the machine head for his low E string. Maybe he was about to bust out a thrash number, Ella thought.

'See, Toledo, he was always a snake. Had a real gift for the gab, could talk a dog off a meat wagon. Few years back, he comes rolling into town, all shiny shoes and big promises. Gonna put Liberty Grove back on the map, he says. Gonna bring jobs and money and hope back to this dried up ol' husk of a town.'

'And he didn't deliver,' Luca said.

'Not even close.' The busker spat. 'Sold us down the river, quite literally. Went and cut a deal with some big-shot developer, got 'em to build a dam upriver. Promised it'd regulate the water flow, keep us from flooding come spring melt. What it did was choke us off at the knees, left us high and dry while he pranced off to the next town he could fleece.'

It was an old story, as worn and weary as the cracked leather of the busker's boots. The rich getting richer, the poor getting screwed. A tale as old as time, and just as bitter.

But there was something else niggling at her. She thought of the water clock, its intricate gears and empty veins. The perfect machine, bled dry by the machinations of evil men.

And she thought of Ricky Toledo, bloated and fish-belly white. Drowned in the very water he'd dammed up and sold off. It was a vicious irony that reeked, dare she

suggest it, poetic justice.

‘You know anyone who might want to hurt him? Maybe some local gossip?’

‘Lotta angry folks ’round these parts, missy. Lotta grudges nursed long and bitter. Lotta scores never quite settled. Man like Toledo, he made enemies like a dog makes fleas. And in a town like this...well. Take your pick.’

Ella fished out her wallet and dropped a few bills in Clyde’s open case. ‘Thanks, Clyde. You’ve been a real help.’

Clyde’s grabbed his guitar again and plucked out a surprisingly jaunty tune. ‘Anytime, folks. Sure you don’t wanna make a request before you skedaddle?’

Luca asked, ‘You know any Slayer?’

‘I do not, but I’ll learn it for tomorrow if you come back here.’

‘Deal,’ Luca said.

‘You take care now.’

Clyde’s gravelly croon followed them down the cracked sidewalk as they left him to his one-man concert. Ella scanned the ramshackle storefronts – a depressing collection of pawn shops and payday loans with a few struggling mom and pops hanging on by their fingernails. The bustling heart of Liberty Grove, population who-the-hell-cares.

But Ella’s mind was already spinning ahead, assembling pieces, clicking them into place like a jigsaw puzzle soaked in blood.

Ricky Toledo, dead and drowned. The ghost of his sins come back to haunt him, to drag him down into the deep dark places he'd consigned so many others.

The dam, the displaced farmers. A thousand acres of bitterness, sown by one man's greed and reaped with a vengeance.

And at the center of it all, the water clock. The heart of Liberty Grove, choked off and bled dry. A symbol of everything lost, everything stolen.

Ella could feel it, thrumming under her skin like a second pulse. The certainty, the knowledge that she was close. That the key was within her grasp, if only she could find the right lock.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Jeremiah Clancy wiped the sweat from his brow with a calloused hand and squinting against the merciless sun. Goddamn Virginia summer, hot as Satan's asshole and twice as dry.

But he couldn't complain, not really. Not when this little off-the-books job was paying better than any legit gig he'd scraped up in months. The kind of cash-in-hand deal that lined a man's pockets real nice, no Uncle Sam or the old ball-and-chain sniffing around for their cut. Music to a working man's ears.

Sure, it was a little unorthodox. So what if it was kinda sketchy? So what if he had to drive an hour out of his way? Money was money. And in Jeremiah's world, that was the only thing that mattered.

He stepped back and surveyed his handiwork with a critical eye. The old farmhouse that loomed had seen better days, that was for damn sure. But Jeremiah had never been one to back down from a challenge.

Even if that challenge involved bricking up an old root cellar door in the middle of nowhere for some rich douche with more money than sense.

He turned back to the farmhouse's weathered clapboard, the old oak door he was fitting into a newly bricked frame. The damn thing was heavy as sin, solid as the day it was hung. They didn't make them like this anymore, all particle board and flimsy veneer. This was craftsmanship, the kind of woodwork that'd outlast the cockroaches.

The new owner had been really particular about keeping it. He had a real hard-on for

”maintaining the historical character” or some such bullcrap. Weird, but whatever. As long as the check cleared, Jeremiah would brick up the goddamn Taj Mahal if that”s what the man wanted.

Jeremiah hefted another brick and slapped some mortar on with a trowel. The repetitive motions were soothing, almost meditative. There was something satisfying about good, honest labor. About working with his hands, watching something take shape under his touch. Even if that something was just a slapdash patch job, covering up a door to nowhere.

He shook his head. Rich people. Who knew what went on in their heads?

Jeremiah had just started shimming it square when a shadow fell across his boots. He glanced up.

Speak of the devil. There was the man himself, a tall drink of water in pressed chinos and a crisp white polo. Trent something-or-other, one of those double-barrel surnames that screamed old money.

‘Hotter than hell out here, huh?’ Trent thrust a glass of iced tea under Jeremiah’s nose. Condensation beaded the sides then dripped onto the parched earth. ‘Thought you could use a little refreshment.’

Jeremiah hesitated. He wasn”t in the habit of taking handouts from his employers, no matter how tempting. Blurred the lines, made things muddy. A man had his pride, after all. And who the hell offered their contractors iced tea? It was usually coffee or beer or nothing.

But Christ Almighty, he was parched. Mouth dry as a dirt road, tongue practically sticking to the roof of it. And that tea looked cool as a mountain stream, with a slice of lemon floating in its amber depths like a promise.

‘Mighty kind of you,’ he said, reaching for the glass. ‘Much obliged.’

‘Least I can do.’ Trent’s smile widened. ‘You’re out here busting your hump in this heat, making my little fixer-upper shine. Gotta take care of the help, am I right?’

There was something off about the way he said it, but Jeremiah shook it off, too grateful of the refreshment to read into things. He raised the glass in a little salute, then tipped it back. The tea was ambrosia on his parched throat, icy and sweet with just a hint of bitter. He gulped it down greedily, draining half the glass in one long pull.

And for a moment, everything was perfect. The heat faded away, the ache in his muscles easing like a knot coming undone. He could almost forget where he was, could almost pretend he was back home on his mama’s porch, watching the fireflies dance in the gathering dusk.

‘If you need anything else, just say the word.’ And Trent made his way back into the house.

Jeremiah wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, set the glass down and returned to the job. He checked the level again, made a minor adjustment. Perfectionism was a point of pride, even on these under-the-table gigs. Folks might say he was rough around the edges, but no one could deny the quality of his craft.

He lost himself in the work, in the satisfying rasp of brick on mortar, the solid thunk of the oak settling into place. A few taps with the rubber mallet and it sat flush, snug in its new frame like it had always been there. The sun roasted his back like a laser beam, but he was used to it. Twenty years humping lumber and swinging hammers had left him lean and tough as old leather.

The repetitive squeeze and glide of the trigger was almost hypnotic as he laid down a

neat bead of sealant around the edges. Smooth, even strokes, just like his old man had taught him. The old man might've been a mean son of a bitch, but he knew his way around a job site. Jeremiah had learned from the best.

He was just putting the finishing touches on the weatherstripping when it hit him.

A wave of dizziness so sudden and intense, it nearly knocked him on his ass. He staggered, bracing a hand against the door to keep from faceplanting into his freshly mortared bricks.

What the hell?

He'd always been steady as a surgeon, a necessity in this line of work. But now his coordination was shot. Limbs heavy and slow like he was moving through molasses.

Jeremiah shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. Vertigo, maybe? He'd had a bout of it a few years back, some inner ear thing that left him puking his guts up for days. But this felt different. Deeper, somehow. Like the ground was tilting under his feet, the world going soft and sideways.

He blinked hard, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand. Christ, maybe it was sunstroke. He'd been out here for hours, cooking his brain in the relentless August heat. Or dehydration – that iced tea might've taken the edge off, but it was no substitute for good old H₂O.

He ambled towards the house in search of respite from the heat and a good overdose of water – as rare as it was around these parts. But his legs wouldn't cooperate. His tongue felt thick, and unwieldy in his mouth, like it was coated in fuzz.

Then the dizziness crested as darkness crowded the edges of his vision. He lurched sideways and his shoulder slammed into the unforgiving brick. Pain shot through his

arm, but it was distant, muted. Unimportant against the rising tide of panic flooding his chest.

He needed to get inside. Needed to sit down, put his head between his knees. Maybe call his old lady, tell her – something.

No. No way. He was fine. He was just just tired, is all. Overheated. He'd rest for a minute, catch his breath. Then he'd finish up and get the hell out of here, go home to Diane, and avoid the sun for the rest of his life.

He pushed off the wall, willing his legs to hold him up. One step, two. He could do this.

But the world tilted and spun like a carnival ride cranked up to eleven. Jeremiah's stomach lurched, and he swallowed hard against the sour flood of bile rising in his throat. His knees buckled, balance deserting him entirely.

Jeremiah wanted to scream and cry for help, but his vocal cords were paralyzed. He could only watch in mute horror as his traitorous body folded like a house of cards, knees buckling and pitching him face-first into the dirt.

The impact forced a grunt from his lungs. He lay there, cheek mashed into the sun-baked earth, trying desperately to move, to crawl, to do anything. But he was a prisoner in his own skin, betrayed by blood and bone.

A shadow fell over him. He didn't need to look up to know who it was. Could feel that cold gaze prickling along his spine like icicles dragging over a grave.

'Looks like you could use some water,' the man said.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella stared down at her plate as she pushed a limp French fry through a congealing puddle of ketchup. Her stomach was in knots, twisted up tighter than a hangman's noose. Between Mia's disappearance, Martin's twisted mind games, and this whole sordid mess with Toledo, her appetite had apparently decided to pack its bags and flee for greener pastures.

She sipped her Diet Coke, the fizz burning her throat on the way down. Across the booth, Luca was tucking into his plate with gusto as he attacked a veritable mountain of meat like it had personally insulted his mother. It was a heaping pile that made Ella's arteries constrict just looking at it. Steak, chicken, sausages – was that gammon in there too? The whole barnyard, sizzling in an ocean of its own grease.

‘Jesus, Hawkins. That’s quite the middle finger to vegetarians.’

Luca grinned around a mouthful of steak. He swallowed, then stabbed an emphatic fork at his plate. ‘Keto, baby. No carbs, all protein. Tricks your body into burning fat for fuel instead of sugar.’

She squinted at the carnivorous catastrophe masquerading as a meal. It was like a Greatest Hits of Old MacDonald's farm.

‘No one's eaten that much meat since the Jurassic era.’

‘Just call me Lucasaurus.’

‘You're supposed to eat vegetables too. And fiber.’

‘Cows eat greens, I eat cows. The circle of life.’

Now that Ella thought about it, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Luca chow down on fries or a bun or anything that wasn’t basically still mooing. And there was no denying the results spoke for themselves as the man was cut like a diamond. Hard planes and ridges that any male-appreciating specimen would quiver over.

Nope. She derailed that train of thought before it could barrel into Inappropriate Town. They were partners, friends, end of story. She wasn’t about to screw that up over some passing hormones and Luca’s irritatingly symmetrical face.

Luckily, Luca saved her from the gutter her mind was about to splash in as he pushed his plate aside. ‘So, I’ve been thinking. About the case.’

‘Do tell.’

He leaned forward, forearms braced on the sticky Formica. ‘Maybe we ought to put a behavioral profile of our unsub together. I know we might not be dealing with a serial killer, but it’ll still help narrow down suspects. Then we get this profile out to cops in Bristol, Virginia State, a couple of towns on the border of here.’

She hummed in agreement. ‘True that. We start throwing darts at the board, we’re gonna look like the wall at a frat house on a Friday night.’

‘Exactly. Toledo wasn’t exactly Mr. Congeniality, so we need to narrow the suspect pool down as much as possible.’

Ella gnawed her lip as she considered it. He had a point. Flying blind was getting them nowhere fast, just groping for clues in the dark. Time to shine a little light on the subject.

‘Alright then. Show me what you can do, Hawkins.’

Luca ticked off points on his fingers. ‘He”s organized, meticulous. Has to be to pull off a grab like this without leaving a trace. He”s a modest, unassuming-looking guy. This isn”t some wiry Tim Burton-looking creep with a pentagram on his forehead.’

Ella nodded. ‘He”s comfortable with close contact, getting right up in his victim”s face. He”s physically capable. Strong enough to wrestle a grown man, even a sloppy drunk one.’

‘And he”s got access to a vehicle, something big enough to transport a body.’ Luca added. ‘Probably a local, someone who knows the area well enough to navigate back roads, avoid traffic cameras.’

‘Narrows it down.’ Ella said wryly. ‘To just about every guy in a twenty-mile radius.’

Before her tirade could gain momentum, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She fished it out and found an unknown number calling.

She jabbed her finger at the screen. ‘Agent Dark,’ she answered.

‘Ella, it’s me.’ Sheriff Tucker’s voice. ‘Stop what you’re doing and get here.’

Her stomach dropped like a stone. ‘Get where?’

‘Riverbed beside the old Millston farm, half a mile from where we found Toledo.’

‘I’ll find it. What’s there?’ She met Luca”s gaze while dread and resignation chased each other across his face.

‘We’ve got another body.’

She swallowed hard and willed steel into her spine. 'We're on it, Chief. We'll head over now.'

Ella hung up, jumped to her feet and grabbed her jacket. 'Break time's over, Hawkins.'

Luca threw his cutlery down next to a half-eaten chicken breast and climbed out of his chair. 'What? What do we have?'

'Looks like our profile might come in useful after all. Because we've got ourselves a serial killer.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella stood at the edge of the dried-up riverbed, staring down at the corpse like it was a Rorschach test. What do you see, Agent Dark? A dead man or your own failure splayed out in the mud?

The body lay face-down, limbs akimbo like a limp puppet. Water still seeped from the sodden clothes, turning the parched earth to sludge. The air was thick with the cloying stench of river muck and encroaching decay. This body, whoever this poor gentleman was, had been discarded at the river's edge. What passed for a river, anyway. It was a sad excuse for itself, more mud than flow. Drought had taken its toll here too, leaving behind nothing but memories and silt.

Ella's heart gave that familiar sympathetic twinge, the one that came no matter how many stiff she'd clocked over the years. Every vic deserved a moment of respect, even if it was just a beat of silence before the circus rolled in.

Sheriff Tucker lumbered over, looking about as cheerful as a man with hemorrhoids at a rodeo. 'Ain't this a peach of a situation,' he drawled. 'Y'all feds show up and bodies start dropping like flies at a bug zapper.'

'What can I say?' Ella crouched down, snapping on latex gloves. 'It's what we do?'

Luca joined her then asked the sheriff, 'Any ID on this guy?'

Tucker shook his head. 'Nada. No wallet, no phone. Whoever dumped him stripped him clean as a whistle.'

'Who called it in?'

‘Dog walker found him ’bout twenty minutes ago. Fido needed to take a leak, found more than he bargained for.’

Ella nodded absently as she studied the victim. Male, mid-forties if she had to guess. Clothes still damp, clinging to rapidly cooling flesh. ‘He hasn’t been here long,’ she murmured. ‘Dumped recently. Within the last couple hours, tops.’

‘Yeah. The heat would have dried him out if he’d been here longer than an hour.’

‘An hour?’ Luca asked. ‘So our killer’s getting bolder. Or more desperate.’

Ella turned back to the body. Two vics in as many days, both drowned and dumped like yesterday’s trash. She studied the corpse with a critical eye, and to her trained eye, he didn’t look local. His clothes were too nice, too crisp. The kind of threads you’d find in a boutique, not the Piggly Wiggly.

‘Hey,’ she called out to Tucker. ‘You or your boys recognize this guy?’

The sheriff conferred with his deputies, then shook his head. ‘Not a soul. And in a town this size, that’s sayin’ something.’

‘Another out-of-towner,’ Luca said.

The vic’s hands were soft, uncalled. Nails manicured to perfection, cuticles trimmed with surgical precision. His thumb was unblemished, lacking the telltale ridge of someone who spent their days typing or texting.

‘Office worker,’ she murmured. ‘But not management, given the threads. Mia would have a field day with these thumbs.’

The thought of her missing partner sent a pang through her chest, but she shoved it

aside. Focus, Dark. One disaster at a time.

‘So we’ve got another city slicker,’ Luca said. ‘What’s the connection to Toledo? Why drag them out to Nowheresville just to dump them?’

‘Million-dollar question, Hawkins.’ Ella stood, brushing off her knees. ‘We need to ID this guy ASAP. See how he fits into the bigger picture.’

Luca raised an eyebrow. ‘How? Our killer’s not exactly leaving breadcrumbs.’

Ella’s lips quirked in a humorless smile. ‘There’s always a way, rookie. You just gotta know where to look.’

She circled the body, eyes scanning every inch. There had to be something, some clue the killer had overlooked. No one was perfect, not even meticulous psychos with a hard-on for drowning out-of-towners.

Ella hummed thoughtfully as she turned back to the body. She ran a gloved finger along the man’s arm, feeling for identifying marks or scars. Nothing. But as she reached his forearm, she paused. She gently rolled his sleeve up and there, peeking out – ink.

Three names, artfully scripted across pale flesh. Julie, Amber, Harley.

‘Family,’ she murmured. ‘Wife and daughters, maybe?’

Luca leaned in for a closer look. ‘Good catch. But without ID, how do we track them down?’

‘Welcome to the digital age, Hawkins. Personalities are written on our faces, and personalities reveal the person underneath.’ She stood, brushing dirt from her knees.

‘We get back to the precinct, cross-reference these names with missing persons reports and social media profiles. Guarantee you we’ll find a frantic wife wondering why hubby never made it home from his business trip.’

‘So you’re not just a pretty face,’ Luca said.

‘No one’s ever said that before.’ Ella turned to Tucker. ‘We need to get this body to the ME, ASAP. Full workup – tox screen, trace evidence, the works. And I want photos of every inch of him.’

Tucker nodded, already barking orders at his deputies. As the flurry of activity swirled around them, Ella found her gaze drawn back to the victim’s lifeless form. Another piece in this twisted puzzle, another life cut short.

Two victims. Two puzzle pieces in a game she was only beginning to understand. But she’d crack it wide open, come hell or high water.

High water, she thought. If she were a betting woman, she’d bet everything she owned that high water was the backbone to this entire mess.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella had been staring at her laptop screen so long she half expected the damn thing to blink first. She'd been at it for hours, burning through databases like a chain smoker on death row. Her world had narrowed to the glowing screen in front of her and the three names etched in flesh.

Julie. Amber. Harley.

Family names, had to be. Unless their John Doe was some kind of sicko with a thing for stripper monikers. But Ella's gut said differently, and her gut had a Ph.D. in reading stiff. Those names were etched with love, not lust. The kind of permanent reminder a man carries when his heart walks around outside his body, wrapped up in pigtailed and training bras.

Her eyes felt like they'd been rolled in sand, her back was screaming bloody murder, and her ass had gone numb about two hours ago. But Ella Dark didn't know the meaning of quit. She'd crack this nut if it killed her, and at this rate, it just might.

Missing persons came up dry. She'd checked every database from here to Timbuktu, cross-referencing those three names against every Jane, John, and Jimmy Doe in the system. Nothing.

Social media had been a wasteland. She'd combed through every high-profile network she could think of, even goddamn LinkedIn, looking for any combination of those names. Either this family was living off the grid, Amish-style, or they were ghosts haunting the margins of their victim's skin.

Next, she dove into the criminal records. Ella figured that by some small miracle, one

of them might have a rap sheet, but apparently this was the Brady Bunch of tattoo subjects. Not so much as a parking ticket or an overdue library book to anyone named Julie, Amber or Harley within twenty miles in the past few years.

The sex offender registry was another dead end. Ella wasn't sure whether to be relieved or frustrated. On the one hand, at least their vic wasn't some kiddie-diddler who'd gotten his just desserts. On the other, it left her right back at square one, up the creek without so much as a pool noodle.

She was eyeballs-deep in the DMV database, usually good for at least a chuckle at the godawful license photos, when Luca appeared at her elbow. He was brandishing a styrofoam cup that smelled like it had been brewed in Satan's jockstrap.

'Thought you could use a pick-me-up,' he said, waving the cup under her nose like a fan trying to revive a swooning Southern belle.

'Thanks. You didn't run the tap, did you?'

'I did not. This is pure Evian. I checked missing persons, by the way. No mention of any forty-something male missing between here and Bristol.'

She took a swig of coffee and immediately regretted it. Christ, it tasted like someone had wrung out a mechanic's oil rag into a mug. But it was hot and caffeinated, and right now, that was all that mattered.

Ella set the cup aside, making a mental note to use it as paint stripper later. 'So we've got bupkis.'

'The king of bupkis.'

Ella laced herself with more caffeine then drummed her fingers on the table. If the

usual channels were coming up empty, time to get creative. She dove into public records, property taxes, anything that might ping off those three names.

She checked business licenses, figuring maybe one of them owned a shop or a restaurant. Nothing. School records came up empty too, not a single Amber or Harley enrolled in any school around these parts. She even dug into marriage licenses, thinking maybe Julie was a blushing bride who'd recently taken the plunge. But apparently, love was dead in this neck of the woods, because that well was dry as the riverbed this vic had cropped up in.

Ella was about ready to put her fist through the screen when a thought hit her like a slug to the solar plexus. The voter registration database. It was a long shot, but at this point she was ready to take a ouija board to a cemetery if it meant breaking this case open.

She input the search parameters, held her breath as the system churned. For a long moment there was nothing but the whir of her laptop's fan and her own thundering pulse in her ears.

Then – paydirt.

'Got you, you son of a bitch,' she breathed, sitting up so fast her vertebrae popped like firecrackers.

Luca ambled over. 'Give us some good news.'

There it was, black and white and beautiful as a supermodel's smile. A family in Bristol, registered to vote at 1255 Sycamore Lane. Julie Ayers, 42. Amber Ayers, 19. Harley Ayers, 17.

And Marcus Ayers, 45.

Ella's heart kicked against her ribs like it was trying to break out and run a marathon. This was it. This had to be their guy. Unless there was another family in Bristol with the exact same names tattooed on some other poor schmuck's arm, in which case she was gonna need a lot more coffee and possibly a lobotomy.

'Marcus Ayers,' Ella said. 'Find out what you can about him.'

Luca jumped back to his laptop. 'On it. What d'you wanna know?'

'Tax records, employment history, what color underwear he wore on Tuesdays. I want it all, and I want it now.'

Luca was already in motion. 'One Freddy Mercury special coming up.'

Ella ignored the quip, too busy digging deeper into Marcus Ayers' digital footprint. Middle management type from the looks of it. Civil engineer, steady job with the city. No social media presence to speak of, which explained why her earlier searches came up empty. Just another Joe Schmoe trying to make his way in the world, keeping his head down and his nose clean.

So why the hell did he end up face down in a dried-up riverbed?

She was about to dive into his financials, see if maybe he'd been playing fast and loose with the city's coffers, when Luca banged his hand on the table like a drumroll. She'd only ever seen him do that when the Celtics landed a three-pointer.

'Ella, you're gonna want to see this. Might want to sit down first, though.'

'I am sitting down.' She wheeled over to his side of the table and gawped at his screen. It was a news article, dated about a year back. Some puff piece about infrastructure improvements in Bristol, the kind of thing that usually put her to sleep

faster than a triple dose of NyQuil.

Ricky goddamn Toledo.

The headline screamed at her in 72-point font: 'COUNCILMAN TOLEDO brEAKS GROUND ON NEW DAM PROJECT.'

And right underneath, in slightly smaller type that might as well have been written in neon: 'City Engineer Marcus Ayers to Oversee Construction.'

Ella's blood ran cold, then hot, then did a little jig somewhere in between. Two vics, both with ties to that damn dam. It couldn't be a coincidence. No way, no how. Not unless the universe had suddenly developed a sick sense of humor and a fondness for drowning civil servants.

'Son of a bitch,' she breathed. 'We've got ourselves a pattern.'

'Looks like somebody's got a bone to pick with the boys from Bristol. And they're picking it with extreme prejudice.'

Ella pushed back from the desk. They had motive now, or at least the beginnings of one. Somebody with a grudge against the dam project, against the men who'd brought it to fruition. Someone who'd watched their town dry up and wither while Bristol flourished, and decided to even the score.

But why now? Why wait until the damage was done, the town already strangled and left to rot on the vine? Why not sabotage the project from the get-go, or target the bigwigs while the cement was still wet?

No. There had to be more to it. Some piece of the puzzle they were still missing.

If Ayers and Toledo were connected through the dam, there had to be others. Other bigwigs, other decision makers who'd had a hand in Liberty Grove's slow death. A whole cabal of suits and ties who'd signed off on choking the life out of a town for the sake of progress and profit.

Two bodies. Two men connected to the dam that was slowly choking the life out of Liberty Grove. A town full of folks with motive to kill, and a killer with a flair for the poetic. Drowning the men responsible for their drought, a beautiful symmetry that made her skin crawl.

'Come on. We need to tell Marcus' wife the news. Then we need to find out who else might have had a hand in building this dam.'

There were stones yet unturned, leads yet unchased. And somewhere out there, a killer was watching, waiting. Planning their next move in this deadly game of cat and mouse.

But Ella Dark wasn't about to let them win.

Virginia was her state, and she'd be damned if she let a serial killer roam free here.

Game on.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella stood on the Ayers” porch, eyeballing the place like it might sprout fangs and bite her. The house was a real slice of suburban paradise, with its crisp white siding and manicured hedges. The kind of joint where the HOA probably measured your grass with a ruler and fined you if it grew a millimeter too high.

She hated this part of the job. Hated it with the burning passion of a thousand suns. Dropping the A-bomb on some poor family, watching their world implode in real-time. It was enough to make her want to chuck her badge in the nearest river and take up basket weaving.

Luca fidgeted beside her, looking about as comfortable as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. ‘You want me to do the talking?’ he asked.

Ella shook her head. The rookie was doing great, and the last thing she wanted was to douse his fire by throwing him into the deep end. ‘It’s fine. I’m the bearer of bad news. It’s my cross to bear.’

She raised her fist to knock, then hesitated. How many doors had she darkened over the years? How many lives had she shattered with a few choice words? Sometimes, she felt less like a cop and more like the Grim Reaper”s personal secretary.

Luca cleared his throat. ‘You gonna knock, or should I go fetch a battering ram?’

Ella shot him a look that could curdle milk. ‘Keep your pants on, Hawkins. I’m working up to it.’

She sucked in a breath, steeling herself, then gently rapped on the door.

For a long moment, nothing. Then the muffled sound of footsteps, and the door swung open.

Julie Ayers was a knockout, the kind of woman who made Ella feel like yesterday's leftovers wrapped in a dirty dish towel. All legs and curves poured into yoga pants and a silk blouse that probably cost more than Ella's monthly rent. Her hair was artfully tousled in that 'I woke up like this' way that actually took three hours and a team of stylists to achieve.

She blinked at them, confusion wrinkling her perfect brow. 'Can I help you?'

Ella flashed her badge. 'Mrs. Ayers? I'm Special Agent Ella Dark, and this is my partner, Agent Hawkins. We're with the FBI. We need to talk to you about your husband, Marcus.'

Julie's eyes narrowed, suspicion blooming like a toxic flower. 'Marcus? What about him?'

'Ma'am, when was the last time you saw your husband?'

Julie shrugged, the movement graceful as a ballet dancer. 'Yesterday morning, I think? He left for work early, said he had a big project due.'

Ella blinked, thrown for a loop. She'd been bracing for tears, for the anguished wails of a woman who knew, deep down, that her world was about to shatter. But Julie looked about as concerned as if Ella had asked about the weather.

'You're not worried that he didn't come home last night?'

Julie's laugh was musical. Like wind chimes in a summer breeze. 'Oh, honey. Marcus works late all the time. Sometimes he doesn't stumble home until the next

afternoon, dead on his feet. I've learned not to wait up.'

Ella's stomach twisted into a vicious knot. This was worse, so much worse. Usually, the partners of missing people expect bad news to show up on their doorstep eventually. How did you tell someone their loved one was never coming home when it was the last thing they expected?

She opened her mouth, but before she could drop the bomb, Luca stepped in.

'Mrs. Ayers,' he said, his voice gentle as a padre at confession. 'I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but we found your husband's body this morning. He's dead, ma'am.'

The world seemed to stop. The birds fell silent, the breeze died, even the sun seemed to dim. For a heartbeat, Julie just stared, uncomprehending. The woman was probably weighing up the likelihood of this being a dream or a prank or a case of mistaken identity.

Then Julie's face crumpled like wet cardboard.

'No,' she whispered. 'No, that's not... He can't be...'

And then she was falling, her legs giving out like someone had cut her strings. Luca lunged forward, catching her before she could hit the ground. He lowered her gently, murmuring soothing nonsense as Julie began to wail.

It was a sound Ella had heard too many times before. The keening cry of a soul in agony, of a heart breaking in real-time. It cut through her like a serrated knife, leaving ragged edges that would never quite heal.

As Julie sobbed into Luca's shoulder, Ella stood frozen on the porch. She watched the scene unfold like it was happening to someone else, in some other life. In that

moment, she would”ve given anything to be anywhere else. To be anyone else.

‘We’re sorry,’ Ella said, already fully aware that any word or action was futile. Julie was broken and would stay broken until her dying day.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella perched on the edge of a cream leather sofa that probably cost more than her yearly salary, feeling about as comfortable as a nun in a strip club. The Ayers' living room was a spread straight out of Better Homes and Gardens; sleek lines; muted tones, pops of color that screamed 'I have a decorator and you don't.' The kind of place where you'd feel guilty leaving a water ring on the coffee table.

Luca sat beside her, looking like he was trying not to touch anything for fear it might disintegrate under his working-class fingers. Julie Ayers huddled in an armchair across from them with a tissue clutched in her perfectly manicured hand like a tiny white flag of surrender.

Ella cleared her throat. 'Mrs. Ayers, I know this is difficult, but we need to ask you some questions about Marcus.'

Julie nodded, dabbing at eyes that were already puffy and red. 'Of course. Anything to help.'

'Your husband seems like he was a great man,' Ella said, wincing internally at the past tense. She hated how death turned people into 'was' instead of 'is,' how it relegated them to history books before the ink on their death certificates was even dry.

'He was,' Julie whispered. 'The best. I still can't believe...' She trailed off, fresh tears welling up.

Ella's chest tightened. She'd seen this scene play out a hundred times, in a hundred different living rooms. The stunned disbelief, the dawning horror as reality set in. It

never got easier. Never hurt less to watch someone's world implode in real time.

Julie took a shuddering breath, visibly pulling herself together. 'What... what happened to Marcus? How did he...?' She couldn't finish the sentence.

Ella steeled herself. This was always the worst part. 'We found his body near a dried-up riverbed in Liberty Grove.'

Julie's head snapped up, confusion momentarily overtaking her grief. 'Liberty Grove? But that's miles from here. What on earth was he doing there?'

'That's what we're trying to figure out,' Ella said, leaning forward slightly. She kept her voice gentle, but firm. Professional. Don't let the empathy bleed through too much, or you'll drown in it. 'We think it might have something to do with the dam project he was working on.'

'The dam?' Julie's brow furrowed, creating little lines of bewilderment amidst the tear tracks. 'What about it?'

Ella shared a glance with Luca. Her eyes held a warning: tread carefully.

'Mrs. Ayers,' Ella began, choosing her words with the care of a bomb disposal expert. 'Marcus hasn't been the only target. We've found... another victim, also connected to the dam project. We believe there might be a link.'

Julie's eyes widened, a fresh wave of tears spilling over. 'Oh God,' she whispered. 'Oh God, no. You mean... someone did this on purpose? Someone... killed my husband?'

The raw anguish in her voice hit Ella like a physical blow. She'd heard that tone too many times, seen that realization dawn in too many eyes. The moment when

”accident” or ”tragedy” became ”murder” and the world tilted on its axis.

‘We’re still investigating,’ Ella said, trying to soften the blow. ‘But yes, we believe Marcus was targeted. That’s why we need your help. Can you tell us anything about his work on the project? Any details that might seem relevant?’

Julie let out a watery laugh. ”Honey, I barely understood half of what Marcus said about his work. It was all data and engineering speak. Flow rates and environmental impact assessments, and God knows what else. But I know the project paid him very well.”

Of course it did, Ella thought. A flicker of cynicism cutting through her empathy. Nothing motivates quite like a fat paycheck. How many lives had been ruined, how many corners cut, all in the name of the almighty dollar?

‘Did Marcus ever mention anyone who opposed the dam?’ Ella pressed. ‘Anyone who might have threatened him or expressed strong disagreement with the project?’

Julie’s gaze drifted, focusing on some middle distance. Ella could see the gears turning behind those teary eyes, sifting through memories, searching for anything that might help. There was something there, some nugget of information the widow wasn’t sharing. Whether she was holding back intentionally or just struggling to recall, Ella couldn’t tell.

‘Julie. I know this is incredibly difficult. I can’t imagine the pain you’re going through right now. But even the smallest detail could help us catch your husband’s killer. Anything you can remember, no matter how insignificant it might seem...’

Julie stood abruptly, the motion so sudden it made both agents flinch. Without a word, she disappeared from the room, leaving Ella and Luca to exchange bewildered looks.

‘The hell?’ Luca whispered. ‘Something you said?’

‘Maybe you should have done the talking after all.’

Luca bit his lip. ‘Poor woman just lost her husband. She’s gotta tell two kids their dad is never coming home. Makes sense she might be a little weird.’

The seconds ticked by. Ella gave the poor woman a moment to collect herself. Just when she was about to suggest they go look for Julie, the widow reappeared, clutching a small USB stick in her hand. She shook as she approached the monstrosity of a smart TV that dominated one wall. It was top-of-the-line, of course, probably with more features than a space shuttle. She fumbled with the USB port as she struggled to insert the tiny device.

‘Here, let me,’ Luca said gently, rising to help. Julie relinquished the USB stick with visible relief, sinking back into her armchair as Luca deftly plugged it in.

‘I recorded this,’ Julie croaked. ‘Marcus was going to be on the news. He was so excited. Wanted the girls to see their dad on TV.’ A fresh wave of tears spilled down her cheeks.

The screen flickered to life, filling with the crisp graphics of a local news channel. A perky anchor with teeth so white they probably glowed in the dark was mid-sentence: ‘...controversial dam project that’s set to revitalize the region.’

The scene cut to Marcus Ayers, looking alive and well in a hard hat and reflective vest. The sight of him, vibrant and animated, was jarring after seeing his waterlogged corpse. Ella felt a twinge in her chest, the same one she always got when confronted with the “before” of a victim. The reminder that this wasn’t just a body, a case file, a problem to be solved. This was a person with hopes and dreams and a future that had been violently ripped away.

Marcus was gesturing at some blueprints, spouting technical jargon that might as well have been Martian for all Ella understood. Something about ‘hydroelectric potential’ and ‘sustainable water management.’

Julie let out a choked sob. ‘He was so passionate about it,’ she whispered. ‘Said it was going to change everything, make the whole region better.’

Ella frowned. ‘He really believed that? That it would help everyone?’

”Oh yes. Marcus was... an idealist. He truly thought this project would bring prosperity to the entire area, Liberty Grove included.”

If Marcus truly believed in the project’s benefits, then either Toledo had lied to him about the plans, or something had gone terribly awry in the execution.

But Ella nodded sympathetically, even as her mind raced. Passion could be a double-edged sword. For every person inspired by a project like this, there was usually someone else who saw it as a threat.

As if on cue, the report shifted. The anchor’s voice took on a more somber tone, the kind news readers used when they were about to drop a ‘but’ the size of Everest.

‘But not everyone is thrilled about the dam’s construction. Environmental groups and some local residents have raised concerns about the project’s impact on the surrounding ecosystem and neighboring communities.’

The camera panned to a scruffy-looking man with a beard that could house small wildlife. He was brandishing a sign that read ‘DAMS = DEATH’ in jagged red letters that looked like they’d been painted with blood. His eyes blazed with the fervor of the truly committed, the kind of look Ella had seen on the faces of zealots and true believers. It rarely led anywhere good.

‘This dam is an ecological disaster waiting to happen,’ the man ranted, spittle flying from his lips. ‘It’s going to destroy habitats, disrupt migration patterns, and for what? So some fat cats in Bristol can line their pockets? They’re stealing our water, killing our land, all in the name of so-called progress. Well, I’ve got news for them – we won’t stand for it.’

A chyron flashed across the bottom of the screen: ‘Lawrence Holbrook, Environmental Activist.’

Ella’s pulse quickened as adrenaline flooded her system. This guy had motive written all over him, big as a billboard and twice as loud. The passion in his voice, the fire in his eyes – it was the kind of conviction that could easily tip over into violence if pushed too far.

The report continued, cutting back to Marcus, who dismissed the environmental concerns with practiced ease. ‘We’ve conducted extensive impact studies,’ he was saying. ‘The benefits to the region far outweigh any potential drawbacks. This dam is going to bring jobs, clean energy, and economic growth to an area that desperately needs it.’

The contrast between Marcus’s polished corporate speak and Holbrook’s raw emotion was stark. Two men, two visions for the future, clashing like tectonic plates. And somewhere in the collision, Marcus Ayers had ended up dead in a dry riverbed.

Ella turned back to Julie, who was staring at the screen with a mixture of grief and bewilderment. Fresh tears streamed down her face, but there was something else in her eyes now. A dawning realization, perhaps, that her husband had been caught up in something bigger and more dangerous than she’d ever imagined.

‘Mrs. Ayers,’ Ella said gently. ‘Did Marcus ever mention this man? Lawrence Holbrook?’

Julie shook her head, her gaze still fixed on the now-frozen image of her dead husband. ‘No, I... I don’t think so. There were protesters, sometimes. At public meetings, or outside his office. But Marcus never seemed worried. He said it was just part of the job, that people always resist change at first.’ She let out a bitter laugh. ‘Oh God, do you think he...? Could that man have...?’

‘We don’t know anything for certain,’ Luca jumped in. ‘But we’re going to find out. I promise you, Mrs. Ayers, we’ll get to the bottom of this.’

Ella nodded as she plotted their next move. Vernon Holbrook was a lead, and a damn good one. A vocal opponent of the dam, with a public platform and a clear grudge against the project’s leadership. It wasn’t proof, but it was far more than they’d had an hour ago.

‘Thank you for showing us this, Mrs. Ayers.’ Ella stood, but instead of heading straight for the door, she moved towards Julie and took her hand. ‘I know this is hell. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through right now. But I promise you, we’re going to do everything in our power to find out what happened to Marcus.’

Luca joined them, his usual jokey demeanor replaced by genuine concern. ‘We’re here for you, ma’am. Whatever you need, day or night. Here’s my card – call anytime, even if it’s just to talk.’

‘We can arrange for a victim support counselor to come by,’ Ella offered. ‘Someone to help with the practical stuff, you know? And to be there for you and the girls.’

At the mention of her daughters, Julie’s face crumpled. ‘Oh God, how am I going to tell them? How do I explain that their daddy’s never coming home?’

Ella squeezed her hand, wishing she had better answers. ‘One step at a time, Julie. Let us help you through this. You’re not alone.’

They stayed a few minutes longer, offering what comfort they could. But the job was calling, and a potential suspect was out there. As they finally made their way out, Ella felt the familiar shift – from compassionate human back to driven agent.

The suburban quiet hit them like a wall as they stepped outside. Ella was on her phone before they'd even reached the car.

'Tucker? It's Ella. Listen up, we've got a lead.' She yanked open the driver's side door. 'I need everything you can dig up on a Lawrence Holbrook. Environmental activist, vocal opponent of the dam project. And put out an APB on his vehicle while you're at it.'

She listened for a moment as Tucker mentioned something about jurisdiction. Then she said, 'To hell with jurisdiction. I want to meet this guy for myself.'

She ended the call with a vicious jab of her thumb as Luca slid into the passenger seat.

'So,' he said, eyebrow raised. 'I'm guessing we're not heading back to the station for coffee and donuts?'

Ella's lips twisted into something that might have been a smile on a less grim day. 'Lawrence Holbrook. Environmental crusader who opposed this dam. He's got motive coming out of his ears. And that kind of passion, that level of commitment to a cause? It can make people do crazy things.'

'People have murdered for less.'

'Exactly. So we need to find this Lawrence Holbrook guy before the dead in Liberty Grove outnumber the living.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella pointed the car back towards Liberty Grove and floored the gas. This was the part of rural Virginia she missed the most. Rolling hills, zero traffic, empty roads that didn't care if you broke the speed limit. Living in D.C. for the past, God knows how long, she'd forgotten the simple joy of covering five miles in five minutes.

But her Formula 1 roleplay was just a distraction from her swirling thoughts. The case, the killer, the goddamn drought.

And lurking beneath it all, like a shark circling in dark waters, was the thought of Mia.

She cursed under her breath as she remembered Rafe Portillo, Mia's dog walker, hadn't called her back. Another loose end in a case that was rapidly unraveling like a cheap sweater. She made a mental note to ring him when she got a spare moment, which at this rate would be sometime next century.

Luca cleared his throat, breaking into her brooding like a wrecking ball through drywall.

'You know, the more I think about it, the more this guy seems like a vigilante than your garden-variety psycho. He's not killing for kicks; he's serving up some ice-cold revenge to the folks who screwed over Liberty Grove.'

The rookie had a point, much as she hated to admit it. If she'd watched her hometown shrivel up and blow away while some suit-and-tie brigade in Bristol got fat off the misery, she might've been tempted to dispense a little frontier justice herself. Hell, part of her – the part that still longed for a less responsible life in

Abingdon – almost understood the rage that could drive a man to murder.

But she'd sworn an oath, planted her flag on the side of law and order, and last she checked, it didn't come with a sliding scale of acceptable homicide.

'Murder's murder, Hawkins. Doesn't matter if you're wearing a green hood or Armani. You kill someone, you pay the price.'

Luca shifted in his seat. Uncomfortable. Like he was sitting on tacks. 'But doesn't motive count for something? This guy, he's not killing for kicks. He's trying to right a wrong.'

'Right a wrong? By creating more wrongs?'

'I'm just saying, maybe it's not as black and white as we think. These guys he killed, they weren't innocents. They destroyed lives. Whole communities.'

'Where do we draw the line, huh? Who gets to decide which crimes deserve death? You? Me? Some eco-warrior with a grudge?'

Luca fell silent. Finally, he spoke. Soft. Thoughtful. 'But still, doesn't it make you angry? What they did to Liberty Grove?'

'Of course it does. This is my home. These are my people. But anger doesn't justify murder. Never has and never will. It's what separates us from the animals.'

'What a minefield,' Luca said.

'Someone once told me that bullets solve problems but create new ones. If you let every injustice in this job eat at you, you'll have ulcers the size of Texas.'

Luca turned the air con up to the max then said, 'Sorry for dipping into morality and ethics. I was just curious.'

'Those topics are best avoided.'

Just as Luca opened his mouth to speak again, Ella's phone erupted in a violent buzz in the cup holder.

'Let me,' Luca said. He manhandled Ella's phone, answered the call and turned it to loudspeaker. 'Hawkins and Dark.'

'We got him.' Tucker's voice crackled through the speaker, triumph evident even through the static that made him sound like he was calling from the bottom of a well.

'Got who?' Ella shouted back.

'Lawrence Holbrook, apprehended in Millsville. Uniforms got a hit on his plates at a grocery store. He was filling up his tank and loading up on granola bars.'

The adrenaline rush was more potent than mainlining espresso. With any luck, they might have just found their eco-warrior-turned-murderer.

'Hold him tight and text me the address, Sheriff,' Ella ordered.

'You got it. Holbrook ain't going nowhere.'

'Great work. We're on our way.'

Luca hung up and slapped his palm on the dashboard. 'Yes! We got the son of a bitch. Teamwork makes the dream work.'

Ella's mind raced ahead, synapses firing faster than an Uzi on full auto as she formulated questions, planned her attack, envisioned the dozens of ways she could make Lawrence Holbrook squirm under the hot lights of an interrogation room. She'd crack him open like a ripe watermelon, spill his guts across the table and pick through the mess until she found the truth.

Her new pal was about to learn there are no heroes and villains in this world. Just the law and those who broke it.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

He sat beside his creation; a behemoth of steel and glass that dominated the cavernous space. The steady drip of water echoed off the walls like a metronome counting down the final moments of a life. His life's work, this monstrous device, hummed with potential energy. A cycle, endless and unforgiving as the river that had shaped his town – and now, his vengeance.

Some might call him a monster. A vigilante. A killer. But they didn't understand. Couldn't understand. This wasn't about revenge, not really. It was about balance. About setting things right in a world gone so terribly wrong.

He rose to his feet, moved over to a workbench and ran his fingers over the implements laid out with surgical precision. Zip ties. Duct tape. Enough sedatives to take down a city. The tools of his new trade.

Once, he had built things. Homes, schools, bridges. Now he built only this – a machine of retribution, a monument to justice long delayed but finally delivered.

The irony wasn't lost on him. Using the very skills that had once been meant to create, now turned to destruction. But wasn't that always the way? The most devastating weapons were often those designed for peace.

A sudden memory hit him like a punch to the temple. He was a child again, no more than nine or ten, splashing in the shallows of the same river where he'd dumped Ayers not a few hours ago. The summer sun beat down, the water cool against his skin. Paradise, until it wasn't.

One misstep. That was all it took. His foot sank into the muddy bottom, trapped as

surely as if it had been set in concrete. Panic bloomed in his chest as he lost his balance, toppling face-first into the current.

Water rushed into his nose, his mouth, his lungs. He thrashed wildly, fingers clawing at nothing, lungs burning for air they couldn't reach. The world narrowed to a pinpoint of agony, every cell in his body screaming for oxygen. His vision began to darken at the edges, the fight slowly leaving his limbs.

In that moment, suspended between life and death, he understood true terror. The absolute certainty that this was it, that his short life would end here, in the murky depths of a river that had always seemed so benign.

Then, salvation. A hand gripping his arm, hauling him to the surface. Air, sweet and painful, filling his abused lungs. He coughed and retched, expelling river water as his rescuer pounded his back.

He shook his head, banishing the memory. That was then. This was now. And now, just a few feet away, another man was about to experience that same exquisite agony.

The builder's muffled cries reached his ears. Desperate pleas for mercy bubbling up through the rising water. He didn't bother to respond. What was there to say? The man had sealed his own fate the moment he agreed to work on that damned dam. He was in a watery grave of his own making now. No one was coming to help him.

He couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for the builder. Not after everything that had happened. Not after watching his town wither and die, its lifeblood diverted to feed the insatiable greed of men in faraway offices.

His mind drifted to the others. Toledo had been almost laughably easy. A spiked drink at a fundraiser, a helping hand to the 'inebriated' councilman, guiding him to a waiting car. The man had been unconscious before they'd even left the parking lot.

The engineer, Ayers, had required only slightly more effort. He'd waited outside Ayers' office, watching the windows for signs of movement. When Ayers finally emerged, bleary-eyed and exhausted from another late night, it took little effort to approach him under the guise of a concerned colleague. One quick jab with a syringe full of sedative, and another domino fell.

And now the builder. The man who had poured the concrete, who had shaped the very instrument of their town's destruction with his own hands. He'd put up more of a fight than the others, trying to crawl to freedom, trying to power through the inebriation.

But in the end, they all fell. They all paid.

It all came back to the dam. That monstrosity of concrete and steel that had reshaped the landscape and doomed a community. The same project he had been offered a part in, all those years ago. The job he had turned down, taking what he thought was the moral high ground.

If only he had known then what he knew now. That his refusal would change nothing, that they would find someone else to do the work. Someone with fewer scruples, someone who didn't care about the consequences.

Maybe if he had taken the job, he could have sabotaged it from within. Could have prevented this slow-motion disaster that had unfolded over the past year.

But that was the past. This was the present. And in the present, justice was being served, one life at a time.

The builder's struggles were growing weaker now. It wouldn't be long. And when it was over, when the last bubble of air escaped those greedy lungs, the cycle would begin anew.

The next name on his list was already chosen. The next trap is already set. It was a constant cycle, repeating ad infinitum, like the endless flow of a river. One life extinguished, another taken. A balance restored, however briefly, before the wheel turned again.

He checked his watch. Almost time. The builder would be gone soon, joining Toledo and Ayers in whatever afterlife awaited men who sold their souls for profit. And then – well, the list was long, but he was patient.

He'd waited this long. He could wait a little longer.

As he sat in the growing silence, broken only by the steady drip of water, he allowed his mind to wander. To the future, to the past. To the moment everything had changed.

It hadn't been sudden. That was the cruel irony of it all. If the dam had burst, if it had been a catastrophic failure that wiped the town off the map in one fell swoop, perhaps it would have been easier to bear. A tragedy, yes, but a swift one. Clean, in its own way.

But this? This slow, inexorable decline? It was torture of the most exquisite kind.

First, it was just the river. Lower than usual, they said. Nothing to worry about. Just a dry spell. It'll pick up again next season.

But it didn't.

The crops began to fail. Livestock grew thin and sickly. Wells ran dry. And all the while, that damned dam stood like a monument to progress, holding back the lifeblood of the community.

He remembered the town meetings. The angry voices, the desperate pleas. Surely something could be done? Surely someone would listen?

But no one did. Or if they did, they didn't care. The water kept flowing to Bristol, to the golf courses and the artificial lakes and the immaculate lawns of the wealthy. And Liberty Grove withered on the vine.

Farms foreclosed. Businesses shuttered. People left, seeking opportunity elsewhere. Those who stayed grew harder, more desperate with each passing day.

And through it all, the men responsible – men like Toledo, like Ayers, like the builder currently drawing his last, watery breaths – they prospered. They celebrated their 'visionary project' and patted themselves on the back for a job well done.

Well. They weren't celebrating now.

They had brought this upon themselves, he thought. They had damned a river, and in doing so, had damned themselves.

Now, it was time for them to reap what they had sown.

The water would rise. Justice would be served.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Millsville was the kind of town that made Liberty Grove look like Las Vegas. One long stretch of asphalt masquerading as Main Street, flanked by buildings so weathered they might crumble if you sneezed too hard. The squad car sat in front of the only stoplight in town, a rusted relic that probably hadn't changed colors since Nixon was in office.

Ella squinted through the shimmering heat waves rising off the pavement. There he was, Lawrence Holbrook, environmental crusader extraordinaire, stuffed in the back of a Crown Vic like last week's garbage.

'Show time,' Ella muttered, climbing out of the car. 'Ready to meet our local Lorax?'

'Just try and stop me,' Luca said.

Holbrook looked like he'd stepped straight out of a time machine set to Woodstock '69. His hair was a wild tangle of grey-streaked brown, barely contained by a frayed bandana. His beard could've housed small wildlife. The guy was all angles and edges, sharp elbows and knobby knees poking out from threadbare jeans and a tie-dye shirt that had seen better days.

As they drew closer, Holbrook's eyes locked onto them. Sharp. Alert. Not the glazed-over look of your typical tree-hugger riding a permanent high. The car door was open, and Holbrook's gangly legs were hanging outside.

'Lawrence Holbrook?' Ella flashed her badge. 'I'm Special Agent Dark, this is my partner Agent Hawkins. FBI.'

Holbrook's eyebrows shot up, disappearing into the jungle of his hair. 'FBI? Come to plant evidence on me?'

'Plant evidence? I haven't done that in weeks,' Ella said as she sized him up, trying to gauge if this scarecrow of a man could be their killer. He was wiry, sure, with the kind of sinewy strength that came from years of chaining yourself to bulldozers. But was he capable of subduing a grown man? Tying concrete to his ankles and hauling him downstream? The jury was still out. 'Mind telling us what brings you to the thriving metropolis of Millsville?'

Holbrook snorted. 'Thriving? Good one. I'm here to protest the new strip mall they're building on Elm. Like this town needs another temple to consumerism.'

Something flickered across Holbrook's face. A shadow of the passion she'd seen in that old footage. But it was gone as quick as it came, replaced by a weary cynicism.

'What about this dam? The one you protested last year?'

'Oh yeah, that old thing,' he said, waving a hand dismissively. 'Ancient history now.'

'That's what war criminals say.'

Holbrook shrugged. 'Too big for someone like me to make a difference.'

Ella pressed on, fishing for a reaction. 'It's still causing a whole lot of present-day problems for folks around Liberty Grove. You telling me you just... gave up on that fight?'

Holbrook's laugh was as dry as the riverbed they'd found Marcus Ayers in. 'What's the point? Can't fight city hall, can't fight progress, can't fight human greed. The dam's built. The damage is done. All the protests in the world won't bring that town

back to life.'

The defeat in his voice was palpable. This wasn't the fire-breathing radical she'd expected. This was a man who'd had the fight beaten out of him by years of losing battles.

Luca jumped in, his tone deceptively casual. 'So where were you this afternoon, Mr. Holbrook? Around two, three o'clock?'

'Right here in lovely downtown Millsville,' Holbrook drawled. 'Been up and down this street all day, trying to drum up support for the anti-strip mall petition. Not that anyone in this ghost town gives a rat's ass.'

Ella's eyes narrowed. 'That's quite the alibi. I'm sure you won't mind if we check the CCTV from the businesses around here to verify that?'

Holbrook spread his hands as far as the cuffs would allow. 'Be my guest. I've got nothing to hide.'

And that was the kicker. He really didn't seem to. The fire she'd seen in that old news report, the righteous anger that could drive a man to murder – it was gone. Snuffed out like a candle in a hurricane. Whatever passion had once driven Lawrence Holbrook, it had long since curdled into bitter resignation.

Ella's gut twisted. This wasn't their guy. The killer they were after was still out there, still driven by that unholy mix of rage and purpose that turned men into monsters.

'Mr. Holbrook,' she said, leaning in close. 'You've been in the trenches of this fight for a long time. Is there anyone else you can think of who might have a serious grudge against the people behind that dam? Someone who might have... taken things

too far?’

Holbrook barked out a laugh. ‘Take your pick. Half the county’s got reason to want those bastards six feet under. But most folks around here are too beaten down to do much more than bitch about it over beers at the VFW. Hell, even the mayor was outspoken at first. Fat lot of good that did.’

Ella latched onto that. ‘The Mayor? Of Liberty Grove?’

‘Yeah. Ol’ what’s-his-name. Greg Dawson.’

She turned to Luca. He gave her one of his textbook we-might-have-something-here looks. ‘Greg Dawson. He opposed it too?’

‘Big time. Talked a big game about fighting the dam, protecting the little guy. Then as soon as they built it, he did a complete one-eighty. Started yapping about how it was gonna bring jobs and prosperity. Promised he’d make sure Liberty Grove got its fair share of the benefits.’

‘And that never happened.’

Holbrook spat on the ground. ‘Load of crap, of course. Town kept drying up, people kept leaving. Last I heard, Dawson got run out of office and went into hiding. Guess he finally figured out you can’t drink empty promises.’

A disgraced former mayor with ties to the dam project. It was tenuous, but it was more than they’d had five minutes ago.

Ella waved over a couple of uniforms. ‘Boys, do me a favor. Double-check Holbrook’s alibi. I want to know if he so much as sneezed without someone seeing it.’

The cops nodded, all business. No questions asked. That's what Ella liked about small-town law enforcement – they knew when to shut up and follow orders.

She turned back to Holbrook, still crammed in the back of the squad car like a hippie sardine. 'Stick to protesting strip malls, Holbrook. It's safer for everyone that way. Especially you.'

Holbrook just shrugged, already retreating back into his shell of disillusionment.

Ella nodded to Luca, and they headed back to their car. The sun was starting to dip, painting the sky in shades of bruised purple and angry red. Fitting, she thought.

'Well, that was about as useful as tits on a bull,' Luca muttered as they walked. 'Guy's got all the killer instinct of a declawed kitten.'

'Yeah,' Ella agreed, fishing her keys out of her pocket. 'No fire left in the belly. Plus, that alibi's probably tighter than a knot. Marcus Ayers was drowned and dumped within the past few hours. If Holbrook has been here all day...'

They reached the car, the metal hot enough to fry an egg on. Ella yanked open the door. 'We need to talk to this Greg Dawson character. Former mayor, probably disgraced. Might be trying to make amends with the townsfolk by offing the people that dried the place up.'

'Didn't you hear Holbrook? Dawson's in hiding. Probably halfway to Mexico by now, if he's got any sense.'

Ella grinned. 'That's why we're going to have to get creative.'

Greg Dawson. Former mayor turned pariah. A man with secrets, hiding from a town that probably wanted his head on a platter. Wherever this guy was, Ella was going to

root him out.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella's eyeballs felt like they'd been sandblasted and dipped in battery acid. Hours of staring at screens had left her vision fuzzy, her head pounding like a jackhammer operated by a vengeful ex. She blinked hard, trying to focus on the monitor that seemed hellbent on melting her retinas.

Across the room, Luca stood before their makeshift war board. It was a nightmare of photos and red string, like a spider on meth had tried its hand at modern art. He muttered to himself, connecting invisible dots that existed only in the fever dream of a desperate Fed.

'Any luck over there, Picasso?' Ella called out, rubbing her temples.

Luca grunted, not bothering to turn around. 'If by luck you mean I've discovered new and exciting ways to go cross-eyed, then yeah. I'm swimming in it. You?'

'Nothing.' Ella spat. 'Really struggling to find Greg Dawson's address. He's not on the main databases.'

'The perks of being in power.'

She dove back in. Fingers flying over keys like she was defusing a bomb. DMV records? Nothing but a trail of unpaid parking tickets and a license expired quicker than milk left on a radiator. Tax records? It might as well have been written in hieroglyphics. Voter registration? Greg Dawson was a ghost, ironically.

Ella was about ready to introduce her forehead to the nearest wall when something caught her eye. A glimmer in the digital haystack.

And there it was, buried under a mountain of bureaucratic privileges – an unpaid parking violation.

174 Macbeth Avenue.

She committed it to memory, but even as triumph flared in her chest, reality doused it faster than a fire hose at a book burning.

Holbrook's words echoed. A broken record of bad news. Dawson was in hiding. That address might lead to nothing but cobwebs.

The door banged open, startling both agents like rookies at their first crime scene. Sheriff Tucker lumbered in, filling the doorframe like a bear squeezed into a polyester suit.

'Got some news for ya, Agents,' he announced. Mustache twitching like an electrocuted caterpillar.

Ella swiveled. Hope and dread wrestling in her gut. "Let's hear it, Sheriff. Good news, I hope. My quota of disappointment's already topped out."

Tucker's face was a blank slate. Poker player with a royal flush. 'Holbrook's alibi checks out. Guy's been parked on that street all day, annoying the piss out of anyone who'd listen.'

Ella's shoulders slumped. Another lead evaporated. Desert mirage. 'Well, that's peachy. Thanks, Sheriff. At least we can scratch one name off our list.'

'Sheriff, you know a Greg Dawson?' Luca tore himself away from the Rorschach nightmare of their evidence board.

Tucker's eyebrows shot up, achieving orbit. 'Dawson? 'Course I know him. Or knew him. Guy hasn't shown his face 'round here in about a year.'

'Yeah. We heard he vanished.'

Tucker's face darkened like a thundercloud rolling in. 'Dawson lied through his teeth. Made all kinds of promises about that damn dam. Jobs, prosperity, water for all. Turns out the only thing flowing was the crap from his mouth.'

Ella's heart sank. Titanic after its ice cube mishap. If Dawson had truly vanished, they were back to square one. But something didn't add up. If he was their killer, he had to be nearby. Can't drown folks from a beach in Cancun.

Luca asked, 'Any idea where Dawson might've gone to ground? Got any bolt-holes in town?'

Tucker scratched his chin. Sandpaper on wood. 'Well, there were always rumors about that bar he owned. Moonshine or some such. Word was, he used it to funnel cash under the table. Some kinda shell company nonsense.'

'Shell company?' Ella's ears perked up. She knew a scent when she caught one.

'Way I heard it, Dawson set up the bar under his cousin's name. Used it to launder campaign contributions, maybe grease a few palms. You know how politics is, especially in places like this.'

Ella moved to her laptop so fast the keyboard might have started smoking. 'Moonshine, you say? That's the name of the bar?'

'Yeah. Dingy little place over on Pinewood.'

She threw the details into the search box. Info on the bar popped up faster than a jack-in-the-box on speed.

BUSINESS NAME: MOONSHINE PUBLIC HOUSE.

OWNER: MALCOLM DAWSON

STATUS: NO LONGER IN OPERATION.

‘Looks like it closed down.’ Ella dug in a little deeper. ‘A few months back by the looks of things.’

‘No kidding,’ said Tucker. ‘Guess that shows how often I get out that way. It’s on the edge of town, don’t pass by it much.’

A closed-down bar. Disgraced politician. Creative bookkeeping. Thin, but it was all they had. Ella made a decision faster than a gunslinger at high noon.

‘Hawkins,’ she barked, standing so fast her chair nearly toppled. ‘Take a drive by Dawson’s registered address. On the off chance our boy’s holed up there feeling homesick.’

Luca nodded and grabbed his jacket. ‘All over it. What about you?’

Ella snatched up her gun and checked the clip. It was all in the muscle memory. ‘I’m gonna check out this bar. If Dawson’s in town, that’s as good a place as any to start looking.’

‘You need backup?’ asked the Sheriff.

‘Stay here,’ Ella said. ‘Fast track the autopsy and forensic reports for Ayers. See if

there's anything we can grab onto.'

'Will do. Just be careful out there. Folks 'round here, they got long memories and short tempers when it comes to Dawson. You start kicking over rocks, no telling what might crawl out.'

'Trust us,' Ella said and made for the door. As she strode out, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was walking into something bigger than a simple murder case. Something that smelt of old secrets and fresh blood.

One way or another, she was going to find Greg Dawson. And when she did, things were gonna get real interesting, real fast.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Moonshine Public House loomed before Ella like a corpse at an open-casket funeral. Plywood sheets covered the windows, a 'CLOSED' sign dangling crookedly from a rusty nail. The neon sign that once beckoned thirsty souls now hung dark and lifeless as a hanged man's eyes.

Ella stood in the deserted lot. This place reeked of secrets, the kind that festered in dark corners and ate away at a town's soul. She'd seen it before, in a hundred podunk burgs just like this one. But something about Liberty Grove got under her skin like an itch she couldn't scratch.

Her phone buzzed. Luca, checking in.

'Dawson's house is a bust,' his text read. 'No car, no lights.'

Frustration bubbled up like acid reflux, but if Dawson wasn't at home, it meant he had to be somewhere else. Maybe in the building right in front of her.

She eyed the wooden fence surrounding the bar's back lot. Six feet of weathered planks between her and potential answers. In her Academy days, she'd have cleared it without breaking a sweat. Now, with a few more years and a helluva lot more cynicism under her belt, she approached it with the wary respect of a woman who knew her limits.

One hand on the top, a quick boost, and she was over. She landed with the grace of a cat burglar, her knees protesting only slightly. That's when she saw it – a detail that set off every finely-honed instinct she'd cultivated over years of chasing humanity's worst.

Cigarette butts. A small mound of them huddled near the back door like conspirators at a clandestine meeting. Fresh, too. The kind of litter that would've scattered to the four winds if they'd been there more than a day or two.

A familiar rush of adrenaline came surging. She wasn't chasing ghosts after all. Someone had been here recently enough to leave their nicotine-stained calling card.

The back door hung askew with rusted and neglected hinges. It beckoned to her like a come-hither glance from a femme fatale in some pulp novel. Ella sized it up, weighing her options. Procedure dictated she call for backup, wait for the cavalry to arrive before storming the potential hideout of a deranged killer.

But the procedure could go to hell. People were dying, their lungs filling with water while bureaucrats twiddled their thumbs. She didn't have time to dot every "i" and cross every "t".

Ella took a deep breath, centering herself. Then she hit the door with her shoulder, channeling every ounce of pent-up frustration into the impact. The wood splintered with a satisfying crack, swinging inward to reveal the bar's murky interior.

The stench hit her like a physical force – stale beer, moldy peanuts, and the lingering ghosts of a thousand broken dreams. Ella blinked rapidly, willing her eyes to adjust to the gloom. Her hand found her Glock, and she trained it on the darkness up ahead.

The kitchen stretched out before her in a graveyard of abandoned cookware. Dust coated every surface, thick enough to write her name in. Ella moved through the space like a wraith, each footstep muffled by years of accumulated grime. Her nerves sang with tension, because in places like this, danger lurked in every shadow. One false move, and she'd be dancing with the devil before she could blink. The thought should have terrified her, but instead, it sent a perverse thrill down her spine. This was where she thrived – in the thick of it, where instinct and training merged into a

finely-honed weapon.

The door to the main bar area loomed ahead. A portal to potential answers or certain doom. Ella's hand tightened on her Glock, finger resting just outside the trigger guard. She pressed her ear to the old wood and strained for any sign of life beyond.

At first, nothing but the hollow silence of abandonment.

Then – a creak.

Faint, barely audible, but unmistakable. The sound of weight shifting on old floorboards.

Ella's spine stiffened, every muscle coiling like a spring ready to release. She wasn't alone.

Another sound. A clink of glass on wood. Someone was in there, waiting for her, having no doubt heard her intrusion.

This was it. The moment where everything could go sideways faster than a greased pig at a county fair. But there was no backing down now. Not when she was this close.

The floorboards creaked again, closer this time. Whoever was in there was moving towards the door. Towards her.

It was now or never.

Ella pressed her back against the wall, took a steadying breath, then burst through it like the angel of death coming to collect.

The words died in her throat, strangled by the sight before her.

A man stood behind the bar, trembling like a junkie in withdrawal. But it wasn't his presence that stopped Ella cold. It was the gun in his hand, pointed straight at her chest with the unsteady aim of the truly desperate.

For a heartbeat, time seemed to crystallize. Ella's finger hovered over her trigger, muscle memory warring with the analytical part of her brain that screamed this wasn't their killer. Maybe some junkie or squatter. One wrong move and this dump would have a fresh coat of paint – blood red, straight from the tap.

Then recognition slammed into her like a freight train, nearly knocking the wind from her lungs.

It was the same man she was looking at pictures of an hour ago. A man who'd made big promises for this town and never delivered.

'Greg Dawson?' she asked.

He was a far cry from the slick politician she'd seen in news clips. His face was a roadmap of misery, eyes sunken and haunted in a way that spoke of sleepless nights and whiskey-soaked regrets. A scraggly beard clung to his jawline, more patchwork quilt than fashionable stubble. He looked like he'd been put through a wood chipper and reassembled by a blind man with a grudge.

'Who the hell are you?' Dawson's voice cracked, his gun hand shaking so badly Ella was surprised he could keep it pointed in her general direction.

'Special Agent Ella Dark, FBI.' She kept her tone steady, soothing, like she was talking down a jumper on a ledge. Every instinct screamed at her to disarm him, to take control of the situation. But something in Dawson's eyes – a mixture of fear and

bone-deep exhaustion – told her that aggression would only make things worse. ‘I’m here to help, Mr. Dawson. Why don’t you put that gun down so we can talk?’

Dawson blinked, his addled brain visibly struggling to process the situation. Then, much to Ella’s amazement, he sagged. The gun clattered to the bar top, and Dawson collapsed into one of the chairs. It was a sorry sight. A lone man in an empty bar, nothing but stale alcohol and an unplugged jukebox for company.

‘FBI,’ he mumbled, the fight draining out of him faster than beer from a punctured keg. ‘Christ. Guess my number’s finally up, huh?’

Ella lowered her own weapon, but didn’t holster it. Not yet. The situation was too volatile, balanced on a knife’s edge between resolution and catastrophe. ‘No one’s number is up, Mr. Dawson. I just want to talk.’

She pulled up a bar stool, its legs scraping across the floor with a sound like fingernails on a chalkboard. Dawson looked all the world like a beaten dog waiting for the next kick. The sight stirred something in Ella’s chest – not quite pity, but a grim understanding. She’d seen that look before, on the faces of men and women who’d hit rock bottom and kept on digging.

‘So talk,’ Dawson said, his voice as hollow as his eyes.

‘Two homicides. Two men from Bristol, drowned and left in this town. Your town.’

‘Hah. My town? Half of this place wants me dead.’

Ella noted Dawson’s dismissal of the two murders. ‘I’m sure they do, but I’m more interested in these aforementioned homicides.’

‘Yeah, I heard about them. Even a hermit like me gets the news.’

‘Any thoughts on them?’ Ella asked.

Dawson gripped the edge of the table like a drunk about to fall off his chair. ‘I don’t know much. Just what the news reported.’

Ella decided to fill in the blanks for him and see if this creature knew more than he was letting on. ‘Two men, one left in a cornfield, one left in a dried riverbed. Both men worked on the dam project up in Bristol.’

Dawson seemed to shrink further into himself, like a man watching his own funeral from the sidelines.

‘Jesus,’ he whispered, the word more prayer than exclamation. ‘It’s all connected, isn’t it? The dam, the drought, now this? It’s like the whole town’s under a curse.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to figure out,’ Ella said. The bar top was sticky under her elbows, years of spilled drinks creating a geologic layer of grime. ‘And I think you might be able to help. You were mayor when all this started. You must know something.’

Dawson barked out a laugh. ‘Know something? Lady, I know everything. And that’s why I’m holed up in this godforsaken dump like a rat in a trap.’

‘Why here?’ Ella glanced around the abandoned bar, taking in the dust-covered bottles and the faded posters on the walls. Ghosts of better times, when the taps flowed and laughter drowned out the jukebox. ‘Why not skip town, start fresh somewhere else?’

‘With what?’ Dawson spread his arms, encompassing the desolation. The gesture was pure theater, a remnant of the politician he used to be. ‘No job, no money, can’t even go home without some yahoo chucking garbage through my windows. This place,’ he

patted the table like an old friend, 'it's all I got left. My cousin's name on the deed, so no one's looking for me here.'

Ella felt a twinge of something. Not quite pity – she'd seen too much, done too much, to waste energy on feeling sorry for fallen big shots. But there was a certain tragedy to it all. The mighty brought low, reduced to hiding out in the husk of their former glory.

'Tell me about the drought,' she pressed. There'd be time for philosophy later, preferably over a bottle of something strong enough to strip paint. 'How bad is it, really?'

Dawson's eyes took on a faraway look, like he was seeing ghosts dance across the empty bar. 'Bad? It's a goddamn catastrophe. Farms drying up. Businesses folding left and right. You can smell the desperation on folks. It's like the whole town's slowly dying of thirst – and most of them blame me.'

The picture that formed wasn't pretty. A town on its knees, people are driven to desperation by forces beyond their control. It was fertile ground for the kind of rage that birthed killers.

Dawson ran a hand through his thinning hair. 'And the worst part? We never saw it coming. The dam was supposed to regulate water flow, benefit everyone. But somewhere along the line, things went sideways. I've got my suspicions. Toledo and his Bristol cronies, they pulled some strings. Suddenly, the water allocation shifted. Bristol's getting more than their fair share, while we're left high and dry.'

'You're saying this was intentional?' Ella pressed.

Dawson's eyes darted around like he was checking for eavesdroppers. 'Can't prove it, but yeah. Toledo talked a big game about helping everyone, but I think he played

us from the start. Knew exactly what he was doing. And now? Bristol's got green lawns and full reservoirs, while we're watching our town turn to dust.'

'But killing the people behind the dam won't change anything, will it?' she mused, more to herself than to Dawson. 'If anything, it'll just make martyrs out of them.'

'Exactly.' Dawson nodded, a spark of his old political acumen shining through the haze. 'If what you're saying is true, when whoever's doing this isn't trying to fix anything. This is pure revenge, plain and simple.'

A chill ran down Ella's spine, setting every nerve ending on high alert. She'd been so focused on motive, on trying to understand the killer's endgame, she'd missed the forest for the trees. This wasn't about justice or change. It was about pain. About making the people responsible suffer the way Liberty Grove was suffering.

It was the kind of rage that couldn't be reasoned with, couldn't be bargained down or plea-dealed away. The kind that would burn the world to ashes just to watch the flames dance.

Ella leaned back. Her eyes never left Dawson's face, reading every twitch and tic like a polygraph. 'Where were you last night, Mr. Mayor? And this afternoon?'

'Where do you think? Right here in this dump.'

'Anyone who can confirm that touching alibi?'

'Yeah, the security cameras out back. Still work, if you can believe it. They'll catch me sneaking out for smokes.'

Ella's eyebrow twitched. 'I'll need to see that footage.'

‘Knock yourself out, Agent. I’ve got nothing to hide except a bunch of empty bottles.’

Somehow, Ella doubted that. She nodded, but in her gut, Ella knew Dawson wasn’t their guy. Killers came in all shapes and sizes, but this broken-down shell of a man didn’t have the fire in his belly to drown a kitten, let alone two grown men.

Just as she opened her mouth to press further, Dawson’s eyes flicked to the window. His face went slack, like he’d seen a ghost dancing on his front lawn. He rose out of his chair to take a look.

‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ he muttered. ”And here’s me thinking you came alone.”

Ella’s hackles rose faster than a cat in a dog pound. ‘I did.’

She was at the window in two heartbeats, gun already in hand. There, in the gathering twilight, stood a figure. Shadowy and indistinct, but undeniably there.

And it was the same silhouette she’d glimpsed outside Creed’s place, watching her with the patience of a spider in its web.

‘Son of a bitch,’ she hissed. She was out of the back door before her brain could form a coherent thought, her feet pounding the gravel like she was running from the devil himself. She hopped back over the wall, rushed around to the front of building and – nothing.

The figure had vanished.

Melted into the darkness like a bad dream at sunrise.

She spun in a slow circle, every nerve screaming for action. But there was nothing.

Just an empty lot and the nagging feeling that she'd missed something crucial.

Who the hell was following her?

And more importantly, why?

Ella's phone suddenly shrieked like a banshee, nearly giving her a heart attack. Luca's name flashed on the screen, probably checking in like the good partner he was.

She swiped to answer, words tumbling out before he could get a syllable in edgewise. 'I'm fine, Hawkins. False alarm on Dawson. Guy's about as dangerous as toilet paper.'

'Yeah, about that...' Luca's voice crackled through. 'Dawson's definitely not our killer.'

'I know. I just told you-'

'Because another body just dropped.'

Ella wasn't sure she heard him right. Her brain short-circuited, struggling to compute.

Two victims in one day?

'Are you kidding me?'

'No. You better get here. Things just went from bad to biblical.'

Liberty Grove's psycho wasn't just making a statement anymore. They weren't just escalating – they were going supernova.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella stood in the middle of what might as well have been a graveyard. Rows of skeletal trees stretched as far as the eye could see, their gnarled branches reaching for a sky that hadn't dropped a lick of rain in months. This orchard used to be the pride of Liberty Grove, apparently, and now it was just another casualty of the drought that was strangling the life out of everything it touched.

The sun beat down like a sadistic prison guard, baking the cracked earth and turning the air into a shimmering mirage. Ella could feel sweat trickling down her spine, soaking into her shirt like a junkie's last hit. But it wasn't the heat that had her stomach doing backflips.

No, that honor belonged to the poor bastard sprawled out at her feet.

Another vic. Another life snuffed out by their mystery killer with a hard-on for drowning folks. Ella's eyes swept over the body, cataloging details in her machine-brain that unfortunately didn't have an empathy off switch. No matter how many stiffs she'd seen over the years – and Christ, she'd seen enough to fill a small town cemetery – it never got easier. Each one was a grim reminder of how cheap life could be in a world gone mad.

The victim was mid-thirties if she had to guess. Lean and wiry, the kind of build you got from honest work, not some overpriced gym membership. His clothes were filthy, caked with dirt and sweat; the calloused hands of a man who'd never known a day when he wasn't busting his ass just to keep food on the table.

And he was soaking wet. Every inch of him drenched, like he'd decided to take a swim fully clothed. Only there wasn't a body of water for miles, and the only liquid

this poor sap had been swimming in lately was six feet of terror before his lungs filled up and the lights went out.

She tore her gaze away from the corpse and scanned the crime scene. Luca was there, swapping details with some officers. Sheriff Tucker and his boys milled around, faces grim as pallbearers at a funeral. They all knew the score. This wasn't just another body; it was an escalation, a message written in flesh and blood.

Tucker lumbered over with a plastic evidence bag clutched in his meaty paw. 'Well, at least we know his name,' he grunted, flashing a driver's license through the clear plastic. 'Jeremiah Clancy.'

Ella's eyes narrowed as she studied the photo. Same guy, alright. Only in the picture, his eyes weren't glazed over with death's final surprise. 'Where'd you find it?'

"On the body. The wallet was still in his back pocket."

Odd, Ella thought. Their killer was either getting cockier or sloppier. 'Leaving ID on the vic is a rookie move, the kind of thing that gets you caught faster than you can say 'life without parole.' Unless...'

'Unless he wants us to know who they are,' Luca said as he arrived. 'It's part of the message.'

'Right. This is no accident. Our unsub's putting everyone on notice.' Ella leaned down to get a better a closer look at this Jeremiah Clancy gentleman. No visible wounds, no ligature marks, nothing to suggest a struggle. Just another drowned rat dumped like yesterday's trash. 'Yeah. Looks like our buddy's sticking to his playbook, at least in terms of approach and disposal.'

'He's escalating. Fast. Three vics in what, two days? This is a spree, not a serial.'

‘Tell me about it.’ Ella stood, brushing dirt from her knees. Her mind raced, piecing together the puzzle with the grim determination of a woman who knew the clock was ticking. ‘I think he knows we’re here. Trying to finish his hit list before we can shut him down.’

‘Christ.’ Luca ran a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up like he’d jammed his finger in a light socket. ‘So what’s the play? We’re running out of time, and this psycho’s running up the body count like he’s going for a high score.’

‘We go hard, we go fast. Put out an APB for anyone reported missing in the last couple hours. Canvas the town, shake down every lowlife and scumbag who might’ve seen something. I want eyes and ears on every street corner, every back alley, every goddamn rat hole in this dried-up excuse for a town.’

She turned to Tucker, who’d been hovering nearby like a vulture waiting for the main course. ‘Sheriff, I need your boys to hit the pavement. Talk to Clancy’s family, friends, co-workers. Find out where he was last seen, who he was with, what he had for breakfast this morning. I want to know everything about this guy, down to what brand of toilet paper he used. A guy like this wouldn’t be easy to subdue.’

Tucker nodded, already barking orders into his radio. Ella watched him go, a gnawing emptiness settling in her gut like a bad case of indigestion. She was good at her job – damn good – but right now she felt about as useful as screen doors on a submarine.

‘What aren’t you telling me?’ Luca’s voice cut through her brooding like a knife through butter.

Ella met his gaze, seeing the worry etched in the lines around his eyes. For a split second, she considered lying. Putting on the tough-as-nails Fed act and pretending everything was under control. But Luca deserved better than that. Hell, they all did.

‘We’re already too late,’ she said. ‘Clancy here? He’s been dead for hours. Rigor’s already setting in. And I’d bet my badge that our killer’s got his next vic picked out and trussed up like a Christmas turkey, concrete shoes and all.’

Luca’s face fell, understanding dawning like the world’s ugliest sunrise. ‘You think he’s got another one? Right now?’

‘I’d stake my life on it. This guy, he’s not just killing for kicks. He’s on a mission. And he won’t stop until he’s crossed every name off his list or we put him in the ground.’

Somewhere out there, another poor guy was about to take a permanent bath, and Ella was here, standing around her thumb up her ass, no closer to catching this sicko than they had been when the first body dropped.

‘So what do we do?’ Luca asked.

A hundred possibilities ran through Ella’s head. They knew what connected these victims, but connections didn’t always lead to the common denominator. Especially when those common denominators were numerous.

‘If we can’t find him, we try and protect who we can. We find out who worked on this dam, put them under watch, then pray that forensics find something useful on Ayers or Clancy.’

‘We better get going,’ Luca said, ‘before this town turns into a mass grave.’

They weren’t just racing against the clock anymore. They were racing against a ticking time bomb with a waterproof fuse.

And time was running out faster than water in a cracked dam.

Ella's phone suddenly buzzed to life. Ella snatched it up and the name on the screen sent a jolt through her system stronger than any drug.

Rafe. Mia's dog walker. The guy she'd tasked with being her eyes and ears back in D.C.

She jabbed the answer button so hard she nearly cracked the screen. 'Talk to me, Rafe.'

His voice came through tinny and breathless, like he'd just run a marathon. 'Ella? Sorry for the delay. It's bad. Real bad.'

Ella's gut clenched tighter than a miser's fist. 'Spit it out, Rafe. What's going on? Have you found Mia?'

'I've been to her place, waited around. Nothing. No sign of her. Her phone isn't on. Some of her stuff is gone. It's like she's fallen off the face of the earth.'

The world tilted sideways, going fuzzy at the edges. Ella's free hand found the hood of the car, steadying herself as the ground seemed to lurch beneath her feet.

Mia. Well and truly missing.

The words bounced around her skull like pinballs in a machine gone haywire. This wasn't happening. Couldn't be happening. Mia was indestructible, a force of nature in black boots and a bad attitude. She didn't just disappear.

Unless someone made her disappear.

'Rafe,' she managed. 'I need you to listen carefully. Call the local PD. Report her missing. Then call our office, tell them... tell them Agent Ripley is MIA and

potentially in danger. Use those exact words, you got it?’

‘Y-yeah, of course. But what’s going on? Is Mia in some kind of trouble?’

‘Trouble doesn’t begin to cover it. Just call and report her missing, and be careful. The guy who might have her... he’s dangerous. Ex-military, ex-Fed. Don’t try to play hero, you hear me?’

She ended the call before he could respond, her mind already racing five steps ahead. Mia was missing. Mia was in danger. And here she was, stuck in the ass-end of nowhere, chasing a killer who liked to play splash park with his victims.

For a split second, Ella considered dropping everything. Hopping in the car and tearing ass back to D.C., come hell or high water. But the cop in her, the part that lived and breathed the job, knew she couldn’t. Not with a spree killer on the loose and bodies piling up like cordwood.

She was well and truly fucked. Caught between a rock and a hard place, with a psycho on one side and a potential dead best friend on the other.

Luca’s voice cut through the fog of panic. ‘Ell? What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

She turned to him, seeing the concern etched in the lines around his eyes. In that moment, she made a decision. Come hell or high water, she was going to catch this drowning-happy son of a bitch. And then she was going to tear the world apart brick by brick until she found Mia.

‘Nothing’s wrong, Hawkins. Now, let’s find this son of a bitch.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Consciousness seeped back into Frank Hollister's brain like water through cracked concrete. Slow. Inexorable. Bringing with it a tidal wave of confusion and pain that threatened to drag him back under.

His head throbbed with the fury of a thousand hangovers. Each heartbeat was a sledgehammer to his temples. He tried to open his eyes, but his lids felt welded shut, gummed up with what felt like a mixture of salt and sand.

Where the hell was he?

The last clear memory he had was standing at the control panel of the Bristol Dam, same as he'd done nearly every day for the past year. Adjusting flow rates, monitoring pressure gauges, keeping the lifeblood of the region flowing smooth as silk. It was a job he took pride in, even if most folks didn't give a damn about the man behind the faucet.

Now – this?

Slowly, agonizingly, his senses began to tune in. Cold. So damn cold it felt like his bones were made of ice. And wet. Not the clean, crisp wetness of fresh snowmelt, but something fouler. Stagnant. Like he'd been dumped in a swamp and left to pickle.

The smell hit him next. Chlorine, burning his nostrils. But underneath that chemical tang lurked something worse. The reek of standing water gone bad, of algae and rot and things best left undisturbed.

Frank's stomach roiled. He swallowed hard, fighting the urge to vomit. Bad enough

to be... wherever the hell this was. Puking would only make it worse.

He forced his eyes open, blinking away the crust of unconsciousness. At first, all he saw was darkness. But as his vision adjusted, shapes began to emerge from the gloom. Curved walls. A dim, watery light filtering from somewhere above.

‘What the f...?’ The words came out as a croak, his throat raw as if he’d been gargling gravel.

Frank had worked in water control for a quarter century. He knew water like some men knew their wives. Knew its moods, its temperament, the way it could be both life-giver and destroyer. And right now, every instinct honed over those long years was screaming that something was very, very wrong.

He tried to move, to walk, but his legs wouldn’t cooperate. It was like they were encased in lead, dead weight dragging him down.

Then he looked down and saw it beneath the pool of water at his knees.

Concrete. Solid blocks of it, encasing his feet and ankles like some twisted parody of oversized shoes. He reached down, fingers scrabbling at the rough surface, but it was no use. Whatever bound the concrete to his legs was tight as a noose.

‘Hello?’ His voice came out as a croak. Marcus cleared his throat and tried again. ‘Is anyone there? What the hell is going on?’

Only silence answered him. Well, silence and the steady drip, drip, drip of water from somewhere above.

As his eyes continued to adjust, Marcus began to make out more details of his prison. It was like no place he’d ever seen before, and yet there was something maddeningly

familiar about it. The curved walls, the way the water flowed. The walls were featureless – except for one thing.

Numbers.

Etched into the wall before him like some kind of measuring stick. One through twelve, as regular as the face of a clock. His head was level with the eight. Above, more numbers stretching upward into darkness.

This wasn't just a well or a pool or a vat of water.

It was an execution chamber.

This was real. Too real. The kind of nightmare you can't wake up from because you're already awake and living it. The icy water lapped at his thighs, each ripple a caress from death itself. The concrete blocks gripped his legs like the hands of corpses, dragging him down into a watery grave.

'Help! For the love of God, somebody help me!'

His cries bounced back at him, mocking, distorted. A chorus of the damned in this chamber of horrors. No one was coming. No one could hear him in this drowning machine, this monument to some psychopath's twisted imagination.

Frank's eyes bulged, darting wildly like those of a trapped animal. The walls seemed to pulse and writhe in the dim light, alive with shadows that danced and leered. Faces formed in the patterns of damp stone – sneering, laughing, reveling in his terror. He knew they weren't real, couldn't be real, but that knowledge did nothing to quell the primal fear that gripped him.

He thrashed against his bonds, heedless of the way the concrete tore at his flesh.

Blood clouded the water around his legs, and some dark part of his mind whispered that he was just making it easier for whatever might be lurking in the depths. Sharks. Piranhas. Monsters with too many teeth and an appetite for fear.

‘Why?’ he screamed. ‘What do you want from me?’

Silence answered him. Just the steady drip, drip, drip of water from above. Chinese water torture with a drowning chaser. Each drop was a ticking clock, counting down the seconds until the water closed over his head and the world went dark.

Who could have built this nightmare? It was like no water system he’d ever encountered, and he’d seen them all. Reservoirs, dams, underground cisterns – none of them came close to this hellish contraption.

The dam. The thought hit him like a sledgehammer to the sternum, driving what little air remained from his lungs. This had to be connected to the deaths he’d read about. Toledo. Ayers. Now him. Both of them worked on the dam project, both of them.

‘Oh, Jesus,’ he wheezed. ‘This is about the dam. The drought.’

He tried to focus, to think logically about his predicament, but terror clouded his mind like murky water. This couldn’t be happening. Things like this didn’t happen in real life. They happened in movies, in nightmares, not to middle-aged dam operators from Bristol.

And yet, here he was.

Frank thought of his family. His wife, Sarah, probably wondering why he was late for dinner. His daughter, excited about her upcoming college graduation. Would they ever know what happened to him? Or would he simply disappear, another missing person file gathering dust in some police station?

The idea of never seeing them again, of leaving them with nothing but questions and grief, was almost worse than the prospect of drowning. Almost.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered, though he knew they couldn’t hear him. ‘I’m so damn sorry.’

But sorry wouldn’t save him now. Not from the water slowly creeping up his neck. Not from the fate that had been sealed the moment he’d taken that job at the dam.

Frank Hollister, dam operator, husband, father, began to weep. And still, the water rose.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella Dark stared at the evidence board like it was a winning lottery ticket written in hieroglyphics. Her eyes burned, gritty as sandpaper from too many hours of staring at crime scene photos and chicken-scratch notes. The precinct coffee, a brew that could strip paint at twenty paces, had long since lost its punch. Now, it just sat in her gut like battery acid, eating away at what little remained of her patience.

The board was a nightmare collage of death and drought. Victim photos, map pins, red string connecting the dots like a demented spider's web. It should've made sense by now. Should've revealed its secrets like a cheap stripper at last call. But the pieces refused to fit, mocking her with their stubborn resistance to logic.

Faces stared back at her. Toledo, smug as a cat in the cream. Ayers, all pocket protector and nervous smile. Clancy, rough-hewn and weathered as old leather. Three dead men with a dam and a watery grave in common.

Luca materialized at her elbow and put a hand on her shoulder. Under other circumstances, such contact might get her heart fluttering, but right now it did nothing.

'Anything new?' he asked.

'Yeah, I cracked the whole case wide open. Turns out it was Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead pipe. We can all go home now.'

'Cute.' Luca rolled his eyes. They were running on fumes now, and gallows humor was the only thing keeping Ella from screaming into the void. 'I've got guys looking into people who worked on the dam. Any name that crops up, we'll get a squad car

outside their house. Tucker said we might have to call in help from some other districts.'

'Good job,' Ella said. 'What if we're dealing with someone who's never interacted with the victims until the last two days? What if there is no personal connection?'

'Then we're at the mercy of forensics. Maybe we should run it down one more time, see if we missed anything?'

'Or maybe we'll drive ourselves even crazier than we already are.'

Luca grabbed a marker and made for the whiteboard anyway. Ella sighed but guessed it was all they could do right now. No stone unturned and all that jazz, even if it felt like they were just rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

'Alright, let's start from the top. Victim one: Ricky Toledo.' Luca began scrawling in handwriting that could make even a doctor squint. He scrawled Toledo's name in bold letters. 'Slick politician, championed the dam project like it was the second coming. Probably kissed a few babies and pocketed more than a few kickbacks along the way. Found face-down in a cornfield.'

Ella nodded, her mind conjuring up the image of Toledo's bloated corpse. 'No wife or kids. Lived alone in that palace in Bristol. Last seen alive leaving a fundraiser around 10PM the night he died. Tox screen showed his blood alcohol level was through the roof. Body was drenched, but with no water source nearby. Died around midnight last night.'

'Don't forget the smell on Toledo,' Luca added. 'Like stagnant water.'

'Yeah. Lab couldn't pinpoint the source, just said it was some kind of stagnant water. Not from any river or lake in the area.'

Luca nodded, moving on. 'Victim two: Marcus Ayers. Engineer who designed the dam. Left to rot in a riverbed that hasn't seen water in an age. According to his wife, she last saw him the previous morning heading to work. God knows when or where the unsub abducted him.'

'And Ayers was found in the old riverbed on the south side of town. Same deal as Toledo – soaking wet, no water source in sight. Concrete blocks ziptied to his ankles.'

'Lab's still analyzing the concrete, seeing if they can trace it,' Luca said.

'Let's not hold our breath,' Ella muttered. 'This guy's too smart to leave that kind of trail. What about the latest vic? Jeremiah Clancy?'

Luca attacked the whiteboard again. 'Construction worker, 38. Found in Peterson's old apple orchard earlier today. Same MO as the others – drowned, dumped in a place hit hard by the drought. Married, two kids. Worked for Blueridge Construction, the company that got the contract to build the dam. According to his boss, Clancy was one of the foremen on the project.'

'Jesus,' Ella breathed. 'So we've got the politician who pushed for the dam, the engineer who designed it, and now one of the guys who actually built the thing. Our killer's working his way down the food chain.'

'Looks that way. Clancy was last seen leaving his house this morning around seven AM, but his boss said he was on vacation this week.'

'Odd,' Ella said.

'Right? Maybe Clancy was doing something he shouldn't. An affair?'

‘What kind of affair needs a week off work?’

‘Dunno. Never had one.’

She turned back to the board, eyes scanning the details they’d laid out. Three victims, all connected to the dam. All drowned and dumped in Liberty Grove. The motive was there, but the identity of the perpetrator was still far away. Who hated this dam so much they’d kill for it?

As if in answer to her unspoken question, the door banged open, admitting Sheriff Tucker. The man looked like he’d been ridden hard and put away wet, his usually crisp uniform rumpled and stained. He slammed a stack of papers on the nearest desk.

‘Got the autopsy results on Ayers,’ he grunted. ‘Hot off the presses.’

Ella snatched the file, flipping it open with more force than necessary. Her eyes scanned the medical jargon, translating it into something resembling English. ‘Nothing new,’ she muttered. ‘Same COD as Toledo. Lungs full of water, no other trauma. Time of death around 8AM this morning.’

Tucker nodded so fast his jowls wobbled. ‘Clancy’s prelim report just came in too. ME puts his time of death at roughly 4PM this afternoon.’

Something tickled the back of Ella’s brain. A whisper of connection, faint as a butterfly’s wings but definitely there.

Toledo. Ayers. Clancy.

The names seemed to pulse on the whiteboard. The fog of exhaustion burned away, replaced by crystal-clear focus. Every detail, every scrap of information they’d gathered during their time in Liberty Grove, flashed through her mind in rapid

succession.

The dump sites – cornfield, riverbed, orchard. All ravaged by drought, yes, but was there more to it? She visualized a map of the town, the locations pulsing like nodes in a circuit. A triangle. No, a circle. The victims forming points on an invisible clock face spread across the town.

The water. Always water. Victims drowned, then dumped in the driest parts of town. A sick joke? A message? Both?

And underlying it all, the steady tick-tock of time passing. Lives ending. Water flowing.

Tick. Tock. Drip. Drop.

The pieces began to shift, rearranging themselves like some cosmic Rubik's Cube. Ella's heart rate kicked up a notch, adrenaline flooding her system. She could feel it, the answer, hovering just out of reach. Like trying to grab smoke, but with each attempt, the shape became clearer, more defined.

Water. Time. Death.

The three elements swirled in her mind, merging and separating, dancing around each other in a macabre waltz. And then, like a lightning bolt splitting the sky, it hit her.

Time of death.

Midnight for Toledo. Eight AM for Ayers. Four PM for Clancy. Regular eight-hour intervals, precise as a metronome. Not random. Not opportunistic.

Planned.

Timed.

‘Son of a bitch,’ she breathed.

Luca perked up, sensing the change in the air. ‘What? What is it?’

Ella snatched the marker from his hand, nearly taking off a finger in the process. She scrawled the times of death next to each victim’s name.

‘It’s a clock,’ she rasped. ‘A goddamn clock. Every eight hours, like clockwork. A cycle of victims, constantly being replaced.’

Tucker and Luca crowded around the board. ‘Christ, Ella. The clock,’ Luca said. ‘The water clock in the town.’

Pieces fell into place with the satisfying click of tumblers in a lock. The steady drip of time, lives snuffed out like tears in the rain. A killer obsessed with water in a town dying of thirst. It was poetry, sick and twisted as a pretzel in hell.

It all led back to that monstrosity of metal and gears. A symbol of progress turned harbinger of doom.

‘Goddammit, Hawkins, I could kiss you.’

‘You think the killer’s using it somehow? As inspiration or-’

‘Don’t know,’ Ella cut him off, already moving towards the door. ‘But I’m gonna find out. You two stay put. I need to see that thing again.’

But Ella was already gone, out the door and into the night. She was onto something big, could feel it in her bones. And somewhere out there, a killer was watching,

waiting for the next tick of his demented timepiece.

The hunt was on.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella skidded into the dried-up backside of Liberty Grove's town square. She ditched the car and made the rest of the journey on foot, each step bringing her closer to that damn water clock. The night air was thick as molasses, heavy with the promise of rain that never came. Just another broken promise in a town full of them.

Her lungs burned, muscles screaming in protest, but Ella pushed on. She'd run herself into the ground if that's what it took to crack this case. The faces of the victims flashed through her mind with each pounding step. Toledo. Ayers. Clancy. Dead men walking, right up until the moment they weren't walking anymore.

The square loomed ahead, a sorry excuse for a public gathering spot if there ever was one. Scraggly trees and patchy grass surrounded the clock like mourners at a funeral. Streetlights flickered weakly, as if even they couldn't be bothered to shine in this godforsaken town.

And there it was, the star of the show – that monstrosity of metal and gears, ticking away the minutes of a dying town. It stood in the center of the square like some alien artifact, with its gleaming brass and intricate machinery. In better times, it might've been impressive. Now, it just looked like a middle finger to a place that couldn't even keep its taps running.

Somewhere to her left, the busker stirred in his sleep. He jolted awake when he sensed the presence of another soul. Ella guessed the poor guy didn't have a home to go to. Or maybe sleeping here was preferable to his domestic life. Both thoughts were terrifying.

'You again,' Clyde breathed. 'Back for an encore?'

Ella ignored him, laser-focused on the clock. She circled it slowly, keen eyes dragging over every inch of pitted metal and scummy glass. Some cop's mind instinct itched at the base of her skull, screaming that the answer was here. This overgrown sideshow attraction was the key to everything – killer, victims, the whole ball of wax. She just had to find it.

The clock was a marvel of engineering, she had to admit. A goddamn work of art. Gears meshed together in an intricate dance, pipes and valves snaking around like metal vines.

But art didn't explain the bodies piling up like clockwork.

The basins squatted empty, dry enough to spit cotton. No water gurgling between levels, no gears grinding their teeth to the beat of passing hours.

And there, at the bottom of the final tank, something glimmered wetly. A drop of moisture in this desert at the end of the world. Ella leaned in, every nerve howling like they'd been dipped in battery acid. Her hand snaked out; poked the oily smear. Came away damp and chill.

She raised glistening fingers and sniffed.

Inside Ella's skull, synapses crackled like downed power lines. Neurons fired faster than a junkie with the shakes. And shining bright as a supernova through the mental shitstorm, a single word:

Signature.

Every serial killer had one. An element of the crime that didn't need to be present but was.

And if you figured out the signature, you could figure out the person behind it.

From deep in the morass of memory, a hundred half-forgotten historical cases bubbled to the surface.

Smearer, '87. Taxidermist who posed vics like hunting trophies; used his embalming kit for the wet work.

Choker, '92. Garroted streetwalkers with piano wire kept their vocal cords as sick souvenirs, buried beneath the family Steinway.

Scrapbook, '98. Soccer mom by day, scrapbooking psycho by night; pasted her victim's obituaries into an album, annotated with cutesy stickers and sparkly gel pen.

Every one of those psychopaths had a signature. A calling card. Some crucial piece of themselves they just couldn't help weaving into their twisted games.

And here she was, staring this unsub's signature right in the face.

The killer was drowning his victims in a giant water clock.

That's why the perfect timing. That's why the strange smell – because this killer is reusing the same water every time. Water that had squeezed the life out of three people, and judging by the midnight hour closing in, soon to be a fourth.

Ella's molars ground together like tectonic plates, the pressure in her skull mounting to migraine levels. This hunk of junk was the linchpin, the masterstroke in a symphony of murder. But how did it help her find her unsub?

She whirled on Clyde, advancing on him like a thunderhead rolling in. 'Clyde, you said you knew everything about this clock.'

‘I do,’ the busker said.’

‘Who made it?’

Clyde’s tongue darted out. ‘Uh, well, I don’t know the person myself, but I know of ‘em.’

‘I don’t care if they’re on your Christmas list. I need a name.’

‘Lemme see... Sawyer. Yeah, that’s it. Riley Sawyer. Local artiste, fancied themselves some kinda deep thinker. All about the ”hidden meanings” and such. I don’t really-’

”Riley Sawyer.” Ella interrupted. She rolled the name around her mouth, tasting its shape. ”This Sawyer character. Are they still breathing? More importantly, they live nearby?”

Clyde scratched at his scraggly beard. ‘Yeah, yeah, I reckon so. Got a little place up on Hangman’s Hill, last I heard. One of them commune shacks from the hippie days.’

Hangman’s Hill. Sounded about as inviting as a proctology exam with a cactus. But if Riley Sawyer was there, so was Ella. With bells on and an arrest warrant in hand.

‘Much obliged, Clyde. You might’ve just helped catch a killer. Drinks are on me if I make it outta this alive.’

Ella rushed back to her car, pulled out her phone and punched Luca’s number with fingers that itched to be wrapped around a killer’s throat instead. The line rang once, twice, three times.

‘Come on, rookie,’ she growled, ‘pick up the damn-‘

‘Hawkins,’ Luca’s voice came through.

‘I got a name. Riley Sawyer. Lives up on Hangman’s Hill. I need an exact address, and I need it five minutes ago.’

The sound of furious typing filled the line. ‘Hangman’s Hill. Who names these places?’

‘Less commentary, more address-finding.’

‘Got it,’ Luca said. ‘Riley Sawyer, lives at 13 Gallows Road. Ten minutes from the town square if you obey traffic laws.’

‘So three minutes away. How far from the precinct?’

‘Two miles. Why? Who is this Riley Sawyer person?’

‘Meet me there. I’ll fill you in when we get there.’

‘On it,’ Luca said. ‘See you in five.’

‘Gear up. We might be about to come face to face with our water-happy friend. And something tells me they’re not going to come quietly.’

Ella ended the call, tossing the phone aside as she focused on the road ahead. Hangman’s Hill was on the horizon. The perfect place for a killer to hole up, she thought. Isolated, defensible, with a name that’d make even the bravest meter reader think twice about knocking.

She’d had about enough of this dried-up town. It was time to bring this case home.

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The road dead-ended at a dilapidated cottage that looked like it'd been shat out the back end of the sixties. Mold furred the clapboards; the roof sagged like a hammock for elephants. A single sputtering bulb illuminated the porch, moth-swarmed and flickering.

Ella nosed the car into a weed-choked rut and killed the engine. Crickets buzzed; something hooted mournfully in the trees. The air smelled green and fecund, thick enough to choke on.

Luca pulled up a heartbeat later. Ella checked her Glock, jumped out of the car then summoned Luca behind a bush.

'Hawkins,' she whispered. 'Riley Sawyer is the person who made the water clock in town. That's our killer's signature. He's drowning his vics inside a much larger version.'

'That's a reach, Ella. How do you know? He might just be drowning them in a bath.'

'Because it connects too well. And Riley Sawyer – the man in that house – made that little water clock in town. If he made one, he could make another.'

'You sure about this? Maybe we should call for backup, get Tucker's boys in on this party.'

'No. More people means more attention. We can't give Riley the chance to split.'

Luca conceded the point with a nod. He checked his piece with quick movement.

‘Alright then, lead the way.’

They slunk towards the shack at the end of the lane like cats on the prowl. Ella was fueled by an IV drip of pure adrenaline. The night pressed in close, hot and heavy as a lover’s breath. She licked salt from her upper lip and tried to slow her thundering pulse. No dice. This was the part that got her blood singing. The wire-walk between justice and mayhem.

As they neared, something tickled Ella’s brain. She hissed at Luca. ‘Hawkins, you get a snap of this Riley Sawyer character? Anything from the archives to give us a heads up on what we’re walking into here?’

Luca shook his head. ‘Nada. No priors, no mug shot, not even a driver’s license on file. Our mystery man’s a freakin’ ghost.’

‘Fabulous.’ Ella checked her watch and swore under her breath. Nearly 11PM. Their unsub, if he stuck to pattern, would be picking his next target within the hour. Another lamb for the slaughter, tethered by concrete shoes at the bottom of that infernal clock.

No way was she letting that happen. Not on her watch.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she muttered. ‘I know a serial killer when I see one. And I got a feeling our psycho pal’s right behind that door.’

They crept up the sagging porch steps, avoiding the rotted boards that looked like they’d give up the ghost under a stiff breeze. The shack was little more than a lean-to, really, slapped together from bits of tin and prayers. One strong huff and a puff would blow it over. But Ella knew better than to judge a book by its dilapidated cover. Some of the worst monsters wore the most unassuming meat suits.

She exchanged a glance and a nod with Luca. He took up position on the other side of the door, hand hovering over his holster. Ella sucked in a breath, released it slow. Her fingers flexed once, twice, a tell she'd never quite shaken. Beneath the cool mask of professional detachment, a dark thrill shivered up her spine. This was her drug of choice – the acrid tang of fear-sweat on another predator's trail.

She raised her fist and pounded on the door.

Silence. Then, the unmistakable snick of a lock turning. Ella's muscles tensed, ready to spring into action. Luca's hand dropped to his gun.

The door swung open with an agonized creak. Ella braced for impact, for a blur of movement as their unsub tried to make a break for it.

What she got instead stopped her dead in her tracks.

On the threshold stood a stooped little old lady. White-haired, rosy-cheeked, buried in a floral housecoat that looked older than sin. She peered up at them through thick spectacles with a polite smile creasing her face like a dry riverbed.

Ella blinked. Shook her head as if to clear it. This had to be a joke. A mistake. A batty granny pulled to the party by a cop's shaky scrawl. A mother, maybe. Hell, a sister. Anyone but the artist known as Riley Sawyer.

She opened her mouth, but the words stuck in her craw like a wad of day-old gum. 'Uh, hello. We're looking for Riley Sawyer?'

The old woman's smile widened. Dentures flashed white as bleached bones. 'Well, you found her, sugar. Riley Sawyer, in the flesh. What can I do for you folks?'

No. No goddamned way. There had to be a hidden camera somewhere. A gaggle of

deputies snickering in the bushes. Candid Camera on crack.

But as Ella stared into those watery blue eyes, she saw nothing but earnest helpfulness. This wasn't some twisted joke. This was real. This sweet, doddering old thing was their mastermind, their Hieronymus Bosch with a hard-on for hydrology?

It didn't compute. Ella's gut sank like a mobster's stool pigeon, her case collapsing like a sandcastle at high tide. No way was Grandma Moses here was muscling grown men into concrete and throwing them down a giant water torture device. The sheer logistics boggled the mind.

She caught Luca's eye and shook her head imperceptibly. He looked as poleaxed as she felt, but covered it with his usual aw-shucks grin. Kid was quick; had to give him that.

Ella cleared her throat. 'Ah, yes, Ms. Sawyer. I'm Special Agent Dark. This is my partner, Agent Hawkins. I understand you, ah, designed the town's water clock?'

The old dame's face crinkled in a geriatric approximation of delight. 'Sure did, sweetie. My finest work, if I do say so myself. An artiste's gotta leave her mark, you know? A little something for the town to remember ol' Riley by.'

Luca stepped forward, using every inch of that leading-man charm. 'Ms. Sawyer, would you mind if we stepped inside? We just have a few questions about this marvelous clock of yours.'

Riley all but glowed. 'Why of course, honey! Come right on in. I know it's late, but I'll put on a pot of coffee. It's so rare I get visitors, 'specially such handsome ones.'

Every nerve of Ella's howled that this was a dead end. A waste of time she didn't have. But what was the alternative? There were no other leads to chase, and if Ms.

Daisy here wasn't their unsub, she might know something about the water clock that could lead Ella to the real killer.

So against every cop instinct screaming in her skull, Ella followed Riley and Luca into the musty gloom.

Tick tock. The countdown churned on. And somewhere out there, a real monster was trolling for fresh meat to feed his machine.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella stood on the threshold of Riley Sawyer's living room, trying not to breathe too deeply. The place was a time capsule, a snapshot of a bygone era preserved in amber and cat hair. Doilies on every surface, chintz curtains gone yellow with age, and the funk of Ben-Gay and Metamucil thick as a winter coat.

But she didn't have time to dwell on the decor, or the way the floral upholstery seemed to reach for her like grabby hands. Not with a killer on the loose and the clock ticking down to the next splash party.

'Coffee, dears?' Riley chirped. Apparently, small-town hospitality even extended to law enforcement showing up at nearly midnight.

'We'd love some,' Ella lied. The minutes were counting down, but she'd choke down coffee if it got her the answers she needed. Every second they delayed, their unsub was that much closer to tying up the next John Q. Public for a long walk off a short pier.

Luca shot her a look, one eyebrow raised. She could practically hear him thinking it: Is this really the time for a tea party? But he held his tongue, ever the good soldier. She just hoped he was ready to move when the time came.

Riley tottered into the room, a tray of mismatched mugs clutched in her gnarled hands. She set them down on the coffee table with a clatter, amber liquid slopping over the rims.

Mighty kind of you, Riley. This is just what we needed. But I'm afraid we don't have long. Clock's ticking, and we could really use your help.'

‘Of course, dear.’ Riley eased back into a recliner that wheezed like a two-pack-a-day smoker. Guileless as a lamb in a world full of wolves. ‘Anything for our boys in blue. Or lady, as it were.’

Ella leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She aimed for gentle urgency, projecting earnest need like a lighthouse beam. ‘That water clock of yours, the one in the town square? It’s a real marvel. A work of art. Must’ve been a hell of an undertaking.’

‘Oh yes. My pièce de résistance, that old thing.’

‘You built that thing all on your own?’ Ella pressed. Whoever their unsub was, he knew how to build a water clock. Riley might not be their killer, but maybe there was another clock-builder in town.

Riley’s eyes twinkled with sly mirth. ‘Ha. Built it? I didn’t build anything.’

Ella and Luca exchanged a look. ‘You didn’t?’

‘No, no. I can barely put shelves up. I just designed her, planned out every cog and wheel, but the actual building, well...’

‘You had some help,’ Luca supplied, smooth as Kentucky bourbon over ice. He flashed those pearly whites, a gleam to make the silver screen stars of old green with envy. ‘No shame in that. A visionary needs a good pair of hands to bring their dreams to life.’

The old woman preened like a bluebird in spring. ‘Aren’t you a charmer? But yes, I couldn’t have done it without my contractor. A real artist, that one. Mind like a steel trap and hands that could shape stone like it was clay.’

Ella's pulse kicked into overdrive. This was it, the thread they'd been scrabbling for. She shot Luca a loaded glance and saw her own heightened focus reflected back. They were locked on now, two dogs on a scent.

'He sounds like a real find,' Ella said, keeping her tone light even as her gut churned with dread. 'We'd love to pick his brain, if you have a name. Just for our records, you understand. Gotta dot those bureaucratic i's and cross the t's.'

'Of course, of course. Red tape, I get it.' Riley braced her hands on the arms of the chair, levered herself up with a grunt. 'Hang on a minute, I've got the original blueprints around here somewhere...'

As the old woman shuffled over to a side table crammed with papers and tchotchkes, Ella's foot resumed its manic tap dance. They were so close, the answer almost close enough to taste. If she could just get that name, that crucial missing piece.

'Aha!' Riley straightened up with a triumphant grin and a roll of yellowed papers clutched in one knobby fist. 'Knew these old things were squirreled away here, just needed a bit of digging.'

She tottered back, plopped the bundle down on the coffee table between them. She slid off the ancient rubber band, gingerly unfurling the pages like a sacred scroll.

Ella and Luca bent over the blueprints. To Ella's untrained eye, it looked like a foreign language, all swooping lines and arcane symbols. But it was clearly the work of a master, each angle and join planned out with loving exactitude.

And there, in the bottom corner, a looping scrawl that hit her like a nail gun to the eyeballs.

Contracted Builder: Seth Baxter.

Distantly, she heard Luca saying something, keeping up the casual patter, but the words washed over her unheeded. Her mind was already spinning out, latching onto this new name. Seth Baxter. Was this their man?

‘Seth Baxter,’ she said, fighting to keep her voice level. ‘He a local fellow?’

Riley nodded, all benevolent Grandma doling out wisdom. ‘Oh sure, the Baxters were around here for generations. Salt of the earth types, you know. Good, churchgoing folk. Seth’s sister was one of my best pals. Seth, though, he’s always been a bit different. Quieter. More intense-like.’

Something in her voice, a catch hidden beneath the gossipy flow. Ella pounced on it like a cat on a waning mouse. ‘Sounds like you know him pretty well.’

‘Oh, well enough, I suppose. Our families go way back. I’ve known Seth since he was knee-high to a grasshopper.’ Her watery blue eyes took on a faraway cast, peering back into a history Ella could only guess at. ‘He’s had a rough go of it, poor boy. Especially this last year or so.’

‘How so?’

Riley sighed, a sound like October wind through bare branches. She suddenly looked every minute of her considerable age. ‘It’s just been one thing after another, you know? First the drought, crops withering in the fields, the land turning to dust. Then that damned fool dam going up, siphoning off what little water we had left. Half the town up and left, no way to make a living anymore.’

The trickle turned to a stream. The gears turned. Pieces clicking into something resembling a picture.

‘And Seth, he what? Lost his livelihood? Got squeezed out with the rest of the little

guys?’

‘If only it were that simple.’ Riley took off her glasses and polished them on her cardigan. ‘No, Seth, he had roots here. Stayed put when others ran. He had his sister to think about, you see. Jessie. Bright little thing, a real green thumb. She’d taken over the family farm, poured her heart and soul into that place.’

Ella didn’t need to be psychic to see where this was going. That cold stream was a river now, dread pooling in her gut. Beside her, Luca went preternaturally still.

‘What happened to her?’ Luca asked softly. ‘Jessie?’

Riley’s chin wobbled, and tears sprung to rheumy eyes. ‘Oh, it was awful. Just awful. She fought so hard, you see. Tried everything to keep that farm running. Even with the drought, the dust, the whole town turning into a tinderbox. But it wasn’t enough. It was never going to be enough.’

Riley swiped at tears that hadn’t yet come but no doubt would in a few seconds. ‘When the bank foreclosed, I thought that would be the end of it. Heartbreak, sure, but they’d bounce back. They always did, those two. Thick as thieves, they were. But Jessie, she... she couldn’t see a way through. Couldn’t face another day in this godforsaken dustbowl.’

‘What did she do?’ Ella’s mouth was as dry as the cracked earth outside.

The old woman suddenly crumpled. ‘Poor Jessie, she walked straight into Gullywash Creek with stones in her pockets. Seth found her, you know. Just floating there, like an angel fallen to earth. Hasn’t been right since. Not that anyone could blame him.’

The bottom dropped out of Ella’s stomach. Suicide. The great motivator, the final push over the brink into madness. How many times had she seen it, the corrosive

grief eating away at the mind like acid? She'd stood over the bodies, pieced together the shattered lives left behind. It never got easier. And now Seth Baxter, unmoored by loss, set adrift in a world turned to salt and ash.

'When?' she croaked. It felt like her throat was stuffed with wet cement. 'When did this happen?'

Riley shook her head. 'Eight, nine months back? Maybe more. Time, it loses meaning when you get to my age. But I remember the service. Closed casket. And Seth, just standing there, still as a stone angel. Not a tear on him, but those eyes... Lordy, I'll never forget those eyes.'

Eight months. The words tolled in Ella's head like a funeral bell. Eight months for the grief to curdle, for the helplessness to alchemize into rage. Eight months to plan, to build, to set the gears of vengeance whirring.

More than enough time for a broken man to break the world in turn.

Now, Ella knew without a shadow of a doubt that Seth Baxter was responsible for these murders.

She needed to act – and fast.

'Riley, I need you to listen very carefully now. This isn't idle curiosity or some procedural fishing expedition. Seth Baxter... I believe he's involved in something awful. Something that's already cost lives and is poised to take more if I don't stop him.'

The old woman gaped at her. 'What? No, that's not... Seth wouldn't... Are you accusing him of being some kind of, of criminal?'

‘Killer,’ Ella corrected grimly. She hated it, hated dumping this on a civilian, but time was running out. They needed to move now, or another body would be bobbing to the surface before dawn. ‘At least three dead, all tied to that damn dam. And I think he’s got a fourth in the works, probably as we speak.’

‘That’s impossible.’ The denial rang hollow even to Riley’s ears. Her hands twisted together. ‘Seth’s a good boy. A giver. He’s never so much as jaywalked.’

There was no time to go back to the precinct and get this man’s address. Tucker and his men were all keeping guard of people who worked on the dam. If Ella wanted to find Seth Baxter before he claimed another victim, she needed Riley to spill the facts.

‘Grief changes people. Loss twists them up inside, breaks something vital.’ Ella gentled her voice, fighting to find a balance between compassion and steel. ‘I’ve seen it too many times, good folks driven to unthinkable acts. Their pain eats away at them until there’s nothing left but the hunger to make someone else hurt like they do. Seth’s hurting. He’s drowning in it, has been ever since he pulled his sister out of that creek. And now he’s lashing out, trying to externalize that pain the only way he knows how. With his hands, his know-how, his gift for building.’

‘And the clock,’ Luca murmured. ‘Seth Baxter is using it as a weapon.’

‘What?’ Riley asked. ‘How is that possible?’

‘He’s built a bigger one. A people-sized one. He’s using it to punish those he sees as responsible. The politicians, the fatcats, anyone who had a hand in damming the river and draining this place dry.’

Riley looked like she was going to be sick, one liver-spotted hand pressed to her mouth. ‘Sweet Lord. You really think...?’

‘I’m sorry, truly.’ Ella reached out, covering those trembling fingers with her own. The skin was as delicate as a bird’s wing. ‘I know this is a hell of a thing to take in. Seth’s your friend, your family almost. It’s gut-wrenching to think he’s capable of this. But he’s not well. His mind’s broken, stuck in a loop of vengeance and despair. And if we don’t get to him soon...’

Ella held that anguished gaze, willing the old woman to understand. They needed her, needed that fragile human connection. Without it, they’d be scrabbling in the dark while the clock ran down.

Riley blinked at her, coming back from a thousand miles away. ‘Seth used to live on Herald Street. A couple of miles away.’

There it was. The answer she needed. Ella could have kissed the old woman.

‘House number?’

‘No such thing. It’s the only house on the street.’

Luca sprang to life. He dropped his card on the table. ‘You might have just helped us save a life,’ he said.

Ella rounded on Riley, fixing the old woman with a stare that could cut glass. ‘Stay here. Lock the doors, draw the curtains. Don’t open up for anyone, you hear?’ She was moving towards the front door, tossing the orders over her shoulder. ‘And Riley? If you’ve got a weapon – a gun, a taser, a freaking garlic press – keep it close. If Seth suspects we’re onto him...’

She didn’t finish. She didn’t have to.

‘Good luck,’ Riley called. ‘Give Seth a kick from me.’

They were back outside a second later. Ella checked the time. Ten past eleven.

‘Fifty minutes, Hawkins,’ she said. ‘We can do this.’

‘Let’s go. You’re driving. We’ll get my car later.’

‘All guns blazing. No prisoners. Get in, you find the victim, I’ll take the killer, got it?’

‘Got it.’

And they shot off in a spit of gravel, ready to end the longest night of Ella’s life.

11:20. Almost time.

Beside him loomed his masterpiece – the hydro-mechanical vindication engine he’d dreamed up in grief’s darkest pits. A monstrosity of gears, cogs, pipes, all spinning, churning, gulping down the seconds like a temporal black hole. At the bottom the dam operator – Frank Hollister – gasped and flailed, churning the inky water to froth.

Not long now. The clock knew. It measured poor Frank’s life in drips and drops. Seth closed his eyes and let the sound wash over him. The rattle-clank of the gears, the suck-slurp of the water, the operator’s panicked glugs echoing up the basin. A symphony to make Beethoven weep.

This was it, the culmination. The last spluttering gasp in a year-long opus of vengeance. He’d started at the top, the kings and kingmakers – that smug prick Toledo, poster boy for the New Liberty. Ayers, egghead extraordinaire, with his specs and his clipboards and his fucking flow calculations. Then the builders, the drones. Clancy, foreman to the damned, barking orders and brown-nosing his way to the top.

And now, the cherry on this sundae. Mr. Dam Operator himself, the man with his hand on the spigot. Probably spent his days whistling jaunty, turning dials and yanking levers like some kind of cartoon. Merrily flushing Seth’s home down the cosmic drain.

Well, he wasn’t whistling now. No, those choked-out whimpers had a distinctly un-merry timbre. Seth cocked his head, savoring each watery bleat. He’d replay them later, in the dead hours before dawn. Splice them into his dreams until the only lullaby he knew was the sound of a man drowning.

11:22.

He was good with his hands, always had been. A mason, a maker. He'd built so much over the years – homes, hospitals, even that cute little sculpture ticking away in the town square. But they were empty gestures. This was his true calling, his *pièce de résistance*. A monument to retribution, a machine of judgement. Justice, at long last.

And Jessie would finally rest easy.

When he found her in the creek, it wasn't suicide splayed out in the silt – it was murder. They'd killed her sure as if they'd held her head under themselves. The politicians, the planners, the toadies and enablers. They'd buried her in paperwork and cowardice, damned her with cooked books and cocked-up studies. So much blood on so many soft, uncallused hands.

Well, Seth was an old hand at wet work. And he'd built them a gallows to swing from. All it took was stone, steel, and a drop of madness.

Seth stepped forward and peered over the basin's rim. There was the operator, suspended like an insect in amber. His eyes stared up, unseeing. Dead moons in dead sockets. Seth filed away the image for his mental scrapbook. Another ghost to hang on the family tree. Four down. A matching set to lay at Jessie's worm-gnawed feet.

He turned to his tool table, picked up the hammer and tested its heft. These tools were for insurance mostly, in case one of the Big Four lucked their way out of his contraption. But this time, maybe he'd put the hammer or the hacksaw to use. He could take a souvenir – something to remember Mr. Dam Operator by. A finger, an ear. Something to slip under the pillow and dream dark dreams upon.

Because once Frank Hollister gurgled his last, there'd be no one left. No more cogs in the machine that ground his world to dust. The main players, the shot-callers

who'd signed Liberty's death warrant, they'd all be rotting at the bottom of Seth's masterpiece. Toledo, Ayers, Clancy – a triumvirate of bastards laid low by their own hubris. And now Hollister, the late-shift lackey who'd kept their doomsday clock ticking. His numberless hours at the switch, his countless tugs at the levers. Each one draining a little more life from the land like a vampire sucking marrow from bone.

Well, who had their hand on the valve now?

Seth closed his eyes, let the sweet anticipation wash over him. It'd been a long road, a hard road. Paved with blood and madness and the screams of drowning men. But he'd walked it gladly.

For Jessie. Only ever for Jessie.

His baby sister, his shining star. The one pure thing in a filthy world. He'd cradled her when she was a squalling babe, watched in awe as she took her first wobbling steps. Braided her cornsilk hair and wiped her snotty nose and scared off the monsters under her bed.

And when she'd needed him most, he'd failed her.

Oh, he'd told himself he was helping. Working round the clock, scrambling for jobs that paid more than peanuts. Anything to keep them afloat as the river of red ink rose higher and higher. Jessie would handle the farm, keep their parents' legacy limping along. She had the green thumb, the magic touch with soil and seed. She'd coax life from dust and ashes, keep them solvent for one more season. One more turn of the wheel.

But you can't sow crops with dust, can't irrigate with sweat and prayers. And while Seth broke his back building other people's dreams, his own crumbled around him.

Sometimes, in the darkest hours of the night, he swore he could hear her. Whispering secrets, singing lullabies. A little girl's lilting giggle. It was a sweeter kind of madness. The only scrap of humanity he had left.

He wondered what she'd think of him now. This blood-soaked wraith, this avenging golem built of grief and stone. Would she recoil in horror, flee from the monster wearing her brother's skin? Or would she smile that secret smile and tell him he'd done the right thing?

Seth liked to think she'd understand. She'd see the beauty in this design. All the things he'd built to honor her and sanctify her memory.

Because that's what this was, in the end. A memorial, a tribute. A love letter written in water and blood.

In the basin, Frank Hollister let out a reedy wail. Seth smiled and drank the sound in like fine wine. Yes, plead. Beg. Pray to your uncaring makers, little cog. See what good it does you when the water swallows you down.

11.25.

Already, Hollister's thrashing was weaker. The drowning rattle, the aquatic swan song. Soon, he'd be still and silent. Pinned like a butterfly in Seth's collection.

And then it would be over. The scales balanced. The blood debt paid. The ghosts of Liberty laid to rest in watery graves.

11.27.

‘This is it,’ Ella barked. ‘Herald Street.’

Beside her, Luca gripped the door handle as Ella floored the gas – the smart boy knew better than to backseat navigate.

No picket fences here. No American dream wrapped in a neat little bow. Just darkness stretching out like the hand of God himself, ready to smack down any poor schmuck dumb enough to wander in.

Then Ella saw it. Squatting at the end of the road like a gargoyle with indigestion - Baxter’s den. One house on a dead-end street. Fitting for a killer with a one-way ticket to hell.

The Baxter place. Ella recognized it from Riley’s muddled directions. Quaint, almost charming – if you squinted past the darkness bleeding from its windows. The kind of house the Cleavers would call home before Wally went off the deep end and started drowning the neighbors.

Ella slammed the brakes on, grabbed her Glock and checked her ammo levels. The home was shrouded in darkness. The driveway gaped like an open wound. No signs of life. no car skulking under the carport.

Just a crumbling porch and a door firmly shut.

‘Let’s go. Time is running out.’

She and Luca jumped out and made their way up the brick steps. Old things, rounded by rain and wind. This mausoleum of a place had stood longer than its owner's sanity, that was for damn sure.

Caution to the wind, she pounded a fist on the door. Paint flaked under her knuckles.

Come on, she said to herself. Please don't say we're too late.

Nothing.

But Ella expected as much.

Luca checked his watch. 'Thirty minutes left, Ell.'

'Don't remind me.'

She stepped back, craned her neck. Moonlight glinted off glass; black mirrors staring back. And there – a wink of silver. A window cracked open, casually vulnerable as an unsnipped thread.

'What're you thinking?' Luca. Reading her mind like tea leaves in the bottom of a cup.

'I'm thinking we quit pussyfooting and barge right in.'

'Probable cause. Heard of it?'

It was times like this you had to play fast and loose with the rules. Anything could be probable cause if you believed it enough.

'We've got a trail of bodies and a ticking clock.' Ella was already moving, skirting

the side of the house. ‘Probable cause is staring us in the face.’

Luca hurried to catch up. So professional, so by-the-book you could smell the ink. ‘If this is a dead end...’

‘Then you can stand in line to kick my ass. But right now?’ Ella crouched, braced her hands on the sill. ‘Right now, we’re flying blind. And that window is singing our song.’

Luca huffed – frustration or amusement, she couldn’t tell. But he leaned down, laced his fingers into a step. Ella took the boost. She heaved herself up and hauled ass through the uncanny grace of a contortionist.

The sash squeaked, glass rattled. For a sliver of a second, Ella was a girl again – climbing the trellis under her dad’s window. To scare him, to tell him she loved him. One or the other.

Reality crashed back, cold as the linoleum under her feet. She’d tumbled into a kitchen laced with lemon Formica and nicotine stains. A relic from the days of duck-and-cover, the world poised on the knife-edge of oblivion.

Not much had changed.

Luca followed like her shadow. They rolled to their feet, hands flying to holsters. Ella’s piece sat cold and heavy at her back. Her best friend, her constant companion. She’d introduced its business end to faces of countless psychopaths, and tonight it might just meet another.

Luca jerked his chin, eyes gleaming like new dimes. Ella returned the nod; a soldier reading smoke signals on the wind. They spread out, scoping the lay of the land. The Baxter homestead wasn’t huge – a few rooms, some closets. Easy to clear, if they

kept their heads on a swivel.

But it wasn't the space that worried Ella. It was the silence – that thick, strangling quiet. Like a blanket of spiderwebs thrown over a mirror. If there was a victim on the cusp of drowning in here, he sure as hell didn't seem to mind.

'Seth Baxter, FBI!' Ella called into the dark.

She didn't expect an answer. A ghost didn't pick up its phone.

They flowed from the kitchen into the living room. There was a couch that looked like a beached cetacean. A TV that remembered the Moon landing. Not a whole lot else. No madman in the rafters. No trophies on the coffee table.

Luca materialized at her elbow. A flick of his eyes – upstairs or deeper? She cocked her head towards the hall. They moved as one; well-oiled gears grinding towards resolution.

But the bedroom was a bust, as was the bathroom. They regrouped in the hallway, and Ella holstered her gun.

'Hawkins, this place is barren.'

Time was leaking away. Each vanished second was another nail in some poor dam-worker's coffin. And here they were – chasing dust bunnies while Seth Baxter did the backstroke in someone else's blood.

'You're not kidding. There's barely enough room to swing a cat, let alone host a water machine from hell.'

The house was a goddamn shoebox – every nook and cranny on view like a two-

dollar peep show. If Baxter was drowning people in some murder contraption, he needed a bigger sandbox to do it.

‘Yeah, he doesn’t shit where he eats. If he’s killing people, he’d going it somewhere else. This place is a front, a mask. Someplace to hang his coat and pretend to be a real person.’

‘You think he’s got a secondary location?’

‘I do. You?’

‘There’s no other alternative. But where? He’s local, so it’s gotta be somewhere in Liberty Grove.’

‘Bingo. We need to turn this place upside down. He must have left a breadcrumb here somewhere.’

Luca’s grin could’ve guided ships to shore. ‘I’ll take the high road, you take the low?’

She punched his shoulder and gave him the nod. They scattered like buckshot, a whirlwind of slamming drawers and creaking cupboards. No stone unturned, no mattress unflipped. Hell, Ella would’ve ripped up the floorboards if she thought Seth Baxter might have left a clue between the joists.

Ella swept the kitchen, the detritus of a solitary life. Clutter and cans, a layer of grime, no amount of scrubbing would purge. She pawed through the junk drawer – rubber bands and dull pencils, a handful of dead batteries. Nothing jumped out to bite her in the ass.

The fridge then – center of the universe, a veritable Rosetta Stone of the suburban

underbelly. She wrenched it open, glass rattling in the frame. A six-pack of Schlitz, some moldering Chinese leftovers. She skimmed the take-out menus, the smiling magnets. Nothing screamed "murder lair, next exit."

A calendar hung front and center – one of those charity jobs with the big-eyed mutts and treacly quotes. Sentimental dreck to hide the cracks in the plaster. But the pages were pristine, the squares blank as an alibi. No doctor's visits, no birthdays. Just a white fog of amnesia.

Useless. All of it. Ella shoved the door shut with a grunt of disgust. Crossed to the counter, rooted through the detritus. Bills and junk mail, a nest of rubber bands and orphaned keys.

No maps. No expedient X marking the spot. Just the dust and dross of a life interrupted.

Upstairs, it didn't sound Luca was fairing much better. She could hear him tossing furniture, and God knows what else.

'Ella, up here,' Luca shouted.

She was moving before he finished the sentence, taking the steps two at a time. At the top of the landing, Luca guided her to a door half-hidden in the shadows. Ella cocked her head, frowning. She'd assumed it was a closet, a cubby for moldy sports equipment and moth-eaten winter coats.

'What's this? A closet? And a locked one at that.'

'Not a closet,' he said. 'Look closer.'

Ella did. And felt her pulse kick into overdrive.

There, at the base of the door. A thin line of light. That meant there was a window in there, so it was more than just a closet.

‘Son of a bitch,’ she said.

‘Who lives alone and locks a room?’

Ella jiggled the knob. ‘Someone with something to hide. Someone who might expect the police to come knocking.’

‘You’re the lock expert, Ell. Can you get in?’

Ella pulled out her keyring and dropped to her knees in front of the lock. She found the segment of guitar string – her faithful amateur lockpick – and shoved it inside. She located the tumblers, turned slowly and heard the click.

It never failed.

‘Nothing’s ever locked,’ she said as she pulled the door open.

‘I ever tell you you’re my hero?’

‘Can it. We’ve barely got twenty minutes before the fireworks go off.’

Ella and Luca rose as one and crossed the threshold into the unknown. A crackle of energy ripped over Ella’s skin. The animal awareness of a predator poised to strike.

The room was small, cramped. An afterthought tacked onto the house like a rotten tooth. Sloping ceilings, bookshelves buckling under their own weight. A beaten metal desk hulked in the corner, its surface a junk heap of papers and discarded electronics.

Ella began pacing, then settled on the bookshelf as her starting point. Titles glared out like accusatory fingers.

Fluid Dynamics.

The Art of the Pendulum Clock.

Engineering Marvels of the Ancient World.

Cheery stuff, real feel-good material. She filed through them, searching for some hidden inscription, a love note from a sociopath. But they were as mute and unhelpful as all the other dead ends in this godforsaken burg.

Luca, God bless the boy, had fallen on that metal desk like a starving man on steak. Papers flew in a whirlwind of receipts and scribbled notes. He muttered to himself like a one-man pep rally in the face of dwindling odds. Ella couldn't make out the words but his tone rang clear as a bell – frustrated determination, the hallmark of a hunter on a cold trail.

She left him to his excavation and turned her focus to the walls. Faded photos stared back in a rogues' gallery of Loss, American-style. Generations of Baxters in black and white, overalls and feed store caps. Holding pitchforks, grins slipping in the sun. Just another hard-luck clan scratching a life from the dirt.

Until Seth and Jessie.

There they were, tucked in among the ghosts. Two peas in a pod, a couple of carrion birds roosting on a wire. That same hard, hungry look around the eyes as their forebears. Like they'd been weaned on sour milk and broken promises.

Ella leaned in and snagged her eyes on Jessie, tracing the lines of that fine-boned

face. Just a slip of a thing. Hollow-cheeked, knobs for wrists. The kind of delicate that only comes from too little for too long. These murders – they were all for her. Her death was the catalyst to these. Ella tried not to think of the whole butterfly effect that set these homicides in motion, but she found her mind wandering to faraway places.

She snapped out of it before it could waste more than a few precious seconds. It was time to find a lead before another corpse washed up by the morning.

Through the photos, the faces, the backdrops, the people she had no names for other than Seth and Jessie.

But buried in the jumble, a single photo shone out like a rose in a white field.

Adrenaline shot through her veins. Her blood suddenly rose a few degrees. Sweat burned her forehead.

A photograph of Seth and Jessie, cheek to cheek, haloed by dying sun.

And behind them, a weathered clapboard sign flapped like a hanged man.

Starlit Meadow Farm.

The breath left Ella in a rush. Riley's quavering voice floated up, a half-remembered snippet of local color turned rancid prophecy.

Jessie had taken over the family farm, poured her heart and soul into that place.

Of course. Jessie's farm. Where else would Seth stage his magnum opus? On the very ground that his sister once owned – and now he might have inherited. No way Baxter would've let that farm go. Not after everything, not with his baby sis moldering in

the boneyard. He'd keep it close, hoard it like a dragon with a belly full of gold.

The scene spun out in sepia tones. Seth, broken and reeling, slinking home to lick his wounds, to curl up on a bed rapidly cooling with absence. Alone in this mildewed mausoleum, choking on rage and promising retribution on the bastards who'd stolen his light.

'Uh, Ella?' Luca said.

But Ella was lost. A shiver worked its way down her spine as the pieces fell into place with the sound of tumblers dropping. What better place to kill the people who'd taken his sister?

'Ell?' Luca nudged again.

She whirled, hand halfway to her holster before she registered his tone. Not fear, but grim excitement. 'The farm, Hawkins. That's where Baxter's killing these victims.'

He held a scrap of paper aloft, pinched between two fingers like a squirming rat. 'Yeah. I know.'

'Huh? What?'

'Look.'

She was across the room in three strides, snatching the page from his grip. A battered invoice, speckled with coffee rings and smears of old grease. But the header was clear as the writing on the wall.

INVOICE.

RENOVATION WORKS: STARLIT MEADOW FARM

DESCRIPTION OF WORK: FARMHOUSE DOOR, brICKED UP, MINOR REPAIRS.

PAYMENT: \$1500, CASH ONLY

CONTRACTOR: JEREMIAH CLANCY.

Ella's vision swam. Her heart clambered for freedom from her ribs as her world narrowed to that gritty scrap of paper.

'It's an invoice,' Luca said. 'That's how he got Clancy to the farm. That's why we couldn't pin down Clancy's last whereabouts. Baxter hired him – then killed him.'

Ella checked the time.

11:40.

'Twenty minutes.'

'Enough time to finish this,' Luca said.

They were gone, back through the house, pounding down the stairs. Ella didn't pause until she reached the car. Then, she was sliding behind the wheel with Luca in pursuit.

'Get the address, Hawkins.'

'Got it. It's two miles from here.'

Tires suddenly chewed up the road and spat gravel. They peeled out in a shriek of rubber and burning oil, pointed towards the dying heart of Liberty Grove.

Towards Starlit Meadow Farm, to see this unsub – and his monstrous death machine – in the flesh.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

The car screamed around the final bend, and Starlit Meadow Farm rose from the shadows like a tumor. Ella could feel the tires skidding, fighting for purchase on the washboard ruts. But there wasn't time for caution, for the pussyfooting dance of protocol. Not with a life hanging in the balance, sputtering out its final minutes while they burned rubber.

Up ahead, a gate reared out of the darkness. Chained and padlocked, a paltry 'keep out' to thwart off the sane and sensible.

Too bad Ella had torn up her membership card to that club about fifty dead bodies ago.

She was long past the point of half measures. She didn't even tap the brakes, just gritted her teeth and bore down on the accelerator.

'Jesus, Ell, you're going to...' Luca said as she gripped the handle.

'Buckle up,' said Ella. The gate rushed to meet them as rotted boards and rusted wire filled the windshield. Luca sucked in a sharp breath, hands flying up to brace for impact. But Ella welded herself to the seat and held steady.

The car hit the gate like a battering ram, timbers splintering, metal shrieking. Fragments peppered the glass, the hood, clattered across the roof like a hailstorm in hell. But they were through, the sad remains of the gate crumpled beneath the wheels like so much kindling.

Luca wiped sweat off his head. 'We're alive.'

Ella just grunted, too focused on the task at hand to trade quips. The track curved sharply and she hauled the wheel around, nearly sending them fishtailing into the bone-dry ditch. Ahead, the farm proper swam out of the murk. The pictures on Seth's wall had shown wide-open fields, a spread of healthy crops and rolling pastures.

But this was a graveyard.

Fields lay fallow. Rusted equipment jutted from the overgrowth like the bones of long-dead beasts. And somewhere up ahead, the farmhouse, with chipped paint that was peeling like bad sunburn. Beside it were a few outbuildings in matching states of decay, and off to the left, a silo stabbed into the sky like a concrete middle finger to God and creation.

But no sign of their drowning chamber.

Ella's mind whirled like an overheating engine, possibilities and permutations clicking through at breakneck speed. No way would Baxter build his murder palace out in the open, exposed to the eyes of any passing stranger. He was crazy, not stupid. He'd want privacy, seclusion.

'The barn,' Luca barked. 'Maybe it's in there.'

Ella was already shaking her head. 'No, look at the state of it. It's barely standing up. He'd want something sturdier, more permanent.'

'Silo? That's the only other place.'

It had to be.

Ella said, 'It's got walls, a roof. And how much you wanna bet it goes deep? Real deep.'

She whipped the steering wheel, sending them careening toward the silo's hunched bulk. The tires caught, skidded, plowed furrows in the earth before finding purchase again. Ella didn't let up, didn't dare breathe. Just aimed the Detroit steel at the broad side of Baxter's rural castle and prayed they weren't too late.

The car juddered to a stop mere feet from the silo wall, and they were moving before the engine had time to die. Boots hit dirt, guns swept up, two sides of the same coin minted in blood and gunpowder.

Ella reached the silo first, Luca a half-step behind. She pressed her back to the corrugated steel, held up three fingers, two, one...

Then whipped around, bringing her Glock to bear on the darkness gaping at the threshold.

'FBI!' Her voice bounced back. 'Baxter, hands up!'

Nothing. Just the high, tinkling echo of her own bravado and Luca's movements beside her.

She took a step forward, then another. Let the shadows swallow her whole. The smell hit her like a wave; mold and rat droppings and motor oil and septic grime. The bone-deep reek of a killing floor.

But worse than that, cutting through the miasma like a scalpel – chlorine.

The astringent bite of a swimming pool gone rancid, chemicals left too long to curdle and congeal. The same unholy perfume that clung to their waterlogged stiff. There was no mistaking that bouquet of death.

Ella's finger kissed the trigger. She and Luca fanned out to cover all angles, only

there wasn't much to cover. Just a raw concrete chamber, maybe twenty feet across. Pipes angled up the curving walls in a mad tangle of corroded metal and bursting seams. Puddles spread across the floor, like the whole room was slowly dissolving, melting down to its rotten core. There was a bench of work tools – Baxter's murder kit, Ella reasoned.

But there in the center – a sight that punched the wind from Ella's lungs.

A silo within the silo. A giant cylindrical vat, its metal skin pockmarked with rust and algal blooms. It rose from the floor like a pagan monolith, gears clanked in its depths, the grind of teeth on bone. Water slopped over the lip in fetid waves, the sour odor of a thousand drowned and bloated dreams.

'Ell.' Luca caught her sleeve, dragged her gaze to the base of the machine. 'Look.'

Water. Black and glassy, lapping gently at the lip of the pit.

And bobbing there like a child's toy was a figure.

A man, tethered to some invisible point below the surface. Floating face-up, eyes fixed and staring at the distant ceiling.

She must have made a noise, some bitten-off curse or muffled prayer, because the man's head suddenly snapped towards them. His eyes were wide, rolling, more white than iris. He thrashed against his bonds, churning the water, wordless cries drowned to nothing by the depths.

Ella was moving before her brain caught up, hammering towards the edge with Luca hot on her heels. She skidded to a stop at the lip, fell to her knees and lunged for the man's flailing arm.

‘Help me!’ he gargled. Up close, Ella saw the water was at his neck, his mouth, his nose.

‘You’re safe,’ Ella shouted. ‘Grab my hand.’

The man reached upward, but the distance was too great. Ella couldn’t reach him.

‘Hawkins!’ She threw the name over one shoulder, half-command and half-plea. ‘Need some help here!’

He was there before she’d finished the sentence, already shrugging out of his jacket and kicking off his shoes. ‘Move.’

Then he was diving past her in a blur of coiled grace. The water welcomed him like a jealous lover, swallowing him down with hardly a ripple.

Ella held her breath, counting off the seconds. How long could he stay under? How deep did this thing go? What machinery was under the surface that could drag Luca down?

But then Luca was back, bursting through the surface in a sheet of silver. ‘Concrete,’ he gasped. ‘His feet. He’s locked down.’

As if summoned, Ella’s gaze skittered across the room. Landed on the workbench. She lunged, snatching up anything that looked like it could chew through steel or bone. A hacksaw, heavy-duty pliers, even a wicked-looking hunting knife. She settled on the hacksaw.

‘Hawkins! Catch!’

She hurled the saw, watched it arc and spin. Luca’s hand shot out and snagged the

handle in midair like a barehand catch in the bottom of the ninth then submerged again.

She dug through the rest of the tools, angling for anything she could use. A coil of wire, a crowbar. Bolt cutters, rusted but intact. She snatched them up. No time for subtlety or plans. Ella kicked off her boots, drew in a breath and dropped into the vat.

Icy water engulfed her. Needles stabbing every inch of skin. She gasped, choked, forced her leaden limbs to obey and recalled her old swimming days. Down here, she felt like she'd condemned herself to some kind of watery underworld. There was a feeling of being somewhere other than the plane of reality she was familiar with. She had to imagine that this was how condemned men felt on their way to the gallows.

The victim – whoever he was – threw his head back and clawed for air. Ella's feet couldn't touch the floor in here, so this man was only a few minutes away from sleeping with the fishes given the oncoming drip from above. So she took in a lungful of air, submerged herself, and followed the path down the victim's left leg.

And there it was. A concrete block the size of a cinderblock, strapped to his ankles with what Ella concluded were plastic zip ties. A makeshift anchor, a one-way ticket to a watery grave. Through her hazy vision, she saw a Luca-shaped blur beside her hacking away at the man's ankles.

But one freed leg wouldn't be enough. These concrete blocks could weigh a ton, and hoisting a body out of water with one attached to a foot would be near impossible.

Ella's lungs burned like she'd sucked down a carton of Camels in one go. Every muscle screamed, lactic acid flooding her limbs as she sawed and hacked at the bonds. She gave it everything she could, but then needed to surface for air. She and Luca rose up in tandem, gulped down air then submerged again.

One more time.

And again.

Ella lost count of the surface-dives, the frantic gasps and muttered prayers. Time blurred, melted, lost all meaning in the face of their singular purpose. Save this poor bastard. Stick it to Baxter, one severed restraint at a time.

Then, with a muted snap, Ella's tie gave way. A second later, his other leg snapped free.

A shout of triumph burst from Ella's lungs – or tried to, swallowed by the fetid water. She grabbed hold of their victim, felt Luca do the same on the other side. Together they kicked for the surface, thighs and calves burning with the effort.

They broke the surface in a tangle of limbs and sputtering coughs. The man flailed between them, choking on stale air and staler water. But alive, praise all the angels in heaven. Alive and coughing, chest heaving as he sucked down that sweet oxygen. Together they hauled him to the edge, rolling him onto the dank concrete like a landed fish.

'Breathe,' Luca said as he grabbed the man's wrist. 'We got you. It's over.'

The guy blinked slowly, like a drunk waking up after a three-day bender. He worked his jaw, coughed up another gout of rancid water.

'Wh-Who...?'

'Friends,' Luca said firmly. 'The kind with badges and guns. You're safe now.'

Ella tuned out the reassurances, the painful post-rescue patter. Her focus had

narrowed to a laser, a tunnel with only one exit.

Somewhere out there, Seth Baxter was still breathing free air.

And Ella aimed to fix that, pronto.

The man was here. Close enough to fog a mirror if the slimy little cockroach still breathed. This was his sanctum sanctorum, the black altar where he worshipped the gods of his own derangement. No way would he abandon it, not while there was still dirty work to be done.

‘Stay with him. Get him stable, call medics.’

Luca opened his mouth, but Ella was already stumbling for the door.

‘Good luck,’ he said. ‘Find him.’

‘Trust me.’

Time to end this.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

The dead earth of Starlit Meadow Farm stretched out before Ella like a graveyard in the moonlight. She pounded across the dirt in search of her man, because somewhere out here, Seth Baxter was hiding, waiting.

She scanned the gloom. The farmhouse slumped on one side, its boards ragged as broken teeth. The silo housing the watery death machine hulked on the other. Between the two, the barn listed like a punch-drunk prizefighter, barely on its feet.

But Ella's sights had set on the shadows beyond the derelict structure.

The black maw of woods.

There, in that thick twisted undergrowth. That's where a rabid animal would run.

She was moving before the thought had finished crystalizing. She hoisted her Glock, shook off the drips of water still clinging to it and chased the darkness. Seth was close – so close she could practically smell that acrid reek of sweat and stale adrenaline.

Ella passed the farmhouse, aimed for the woods – but suddenly a shadow detached from the gloom. Fluid, fast. Man-sized and man-shaped. Ella caught a glint of moonlight on metal.

And then it was too late.

Ella pivoted and tried to throw herself clear, but she was a half-second too slow. Something caught her in the shoulder with a sickening crack and white-hot agony

screamed from her arm to her wrist. Her vision strobed red and black as she hit the dusty ground in a graceless sprawl. She scrambled up with a mouthful of copper, but her shadowy attacker was on top of her.

Ella had only a split second to register the man behind the monster.

The gaunt cheeks, the fever-bright eyes rolling like marbles in a can.

Seth Baxter in the wild-eyed flesh.

‘Bitch! You ruined everything!’

Then Seth’s weapon – a hammer – fell like the fist of an angry god. It cracked across her jaw, whited out the world in a nova blast of pain. Ella crashed back and her skull bounced off the ground, extremities gone to putty.

But some cop instinct, pure as the sin that spawned it, had her rolling. The hammer pulverized the soil where her head had been scant seconds before, sending clods of dirt skyward. Ella kicked out and connected with something that cracked like dry kindling. She scrambled to her feet, launched a punch with her good arm that caught Baxter square in the mouth.

Blood sprayed, a tooth dislodged, and Baxter stumbled backward but steadied himself on a barrel of God knows what.

Then Ella leveled her Glock.

Center mass, the largest target. Even half dazed, she couldn’t miss.

‘Drop the weapon, Baxter!’ she breathed through the pain. Her trigger arm was weakened and she was sure there was a concussion swimming somewhere upstairs,

but even so, she had her target locked.

Baxter cocked his head like a dog hearing a whistle. ‘You can’t stop me. I’m going to finish this.’

‘You finish nothing. Drop it.’

Baxter froze, hammer twitching. For a long moment, they just stared at each other down the barrel of her Glock. Two dogs, one bone.

For a single, surreal moment, she thought he might comply. Those mad eyes flickered, some long atrophied shred of rationality struggling to the surface. The hammer wobbled and began to dip.

‘Move and I’ll shoot,’ Ella said. ‘I mean it.’

Baxter’s expression twisted into a mask of pure transcendent rage.

Then he charged like a bull out of a chute. No thought, no strategy – just raw, screeching bloodlust.

Ella squeezed the trigger.

And pulled again.

And pulled and pulled.

Click. Click. Click.

The sound of her death sentence, written in impotent dry-fires. The barrel was wet.

The water. It jammed it up.

Time seemed to slow as Seth barreled down on her, close enough to count the capillaries in his bloodshot eyes. Close enough to read her own stunned incomprehension reflected there.

Reflex took over. Pure primal-brained fight or flight. Ella barely had time to bring her arms up, to brace for collision. They hit the dirt together, Seth's weight crushing every molecule of air from her lungs. Something crunched wetly under the meat. Collarbone, maybe. Or the delicate architecture of her scapula crumpling like tinfoil.

The pain sizzled out every sane thought. Seth rained down a series of wild and uncoordinated blows – the kind of blows she could dodge had this son of a bitch not sent her world spinning on an ambush. Ribs cracked, air whooshed from her lungs in a frothy gout. Her already abused shoulder took the worst of it, bones splintering like brittle tinder.

Ella jackknifed and tried to buck him off, but Baxter had a hundred pounds on her. He rode her like a cowboy on a thrashing bull, bringing down fist and hammer blows into every inch of flesh that she couldn't cover. It clipped her cheek and sent blood sheeting into her eyes. The world suddenly swam out of focus, swallowed by a red tide.

But Ella wasn't going down easy. Time to play dirty. She reached out and clawed at Baxter's face. She dug her nails anywhere she could find purchase, raking eyes, stabbing temples, anything to get the advantage back. After catching something soggy and fleshy with her nail, Baxter bellowed like a branded calf and reared back. Ella torqued her body hard left and rolled them together in a tangle of limbs.

Ella ended up on top, straddling Baxter's chest. She thumped a fist into his throat, and he gagged, hammer falling from his grip. She dove for it, scrabbling in the dirt.

But Baxter recovered too quick, flipped them again with a twist of his hips.

And then it was Ella on her back once more, choking on blood and dust and the stench of Baxter's insanity. He loomed over her, legs pinning her arms, a nightmare figure haloed by the pregnant moon.

The hammer, slick with her own blood, pressed against her chin. 'Not... so... tough,' Baxter cried, punctuating each word with brutal shoves that forced Ella's head back at an impossible angle. She heard vertebrae pop and tendons strain to the snapping point.

Ella bucked, tried to twist away. Brought her knee up hard into Seth's crotch. He grunted, flinched, but didn't let up. The hammer bore down, grinding against her windpipe. Black spots swarmed her vision, lungs screaming for air that couldn't come.

She scrabbled at his wrist, pried at his fingers. But it was like trying to bend rebar, like grappling with a statue that had come horribly to life. Seth was a man possessed, driven by something beyond pain, beyond reason. There was no stopping him, no reaching through the black fog of his rage.

Ella's strength was fading. Her struggles were growing weaker.

The world had narrowed to a tunnel, to the soulless void of Seth's eyes and the cold kiss of steel at her throat.

This was it, the end of the line. No clever play, no last-minute Hail Mary. Just a whimper and a gurgle, then the long fall into the dark.

Except – in that final, fading instant, something flickered across the screen of Ella's mind. A life, her life, unspooling in fits and starts. The whole sordid reel, the good

and the bad, the brutal and the beautiful.

Her dad, broad and beaming on a long-ago afternoon. Dappled sunlight, a soccer ball, the dizzying swoop as he scooped her in her arm. Working a desk at Virginia PD. The Academy, all spit-shined shoes and naïve bravado. Then a slideshow of every psychopath and sicko she'd put in the ground or slammed behind bars. The ones that had slipped through her fingers, scurrying back to the shadows to kill and kill again.

It played out in the space between heartbeats, an entire existence reduced to snapshots and freeze frames. Thirty-odd years of blood and guts and grime, the whole tangled skein of love and loss and sacrifice. What a strange, vicious, wonderful thing it had been, this life of hers. What a wild, careening ride through the underbelly of the world.

A cop's life. The only one she'd ever known.

All those years, all those deaths. And for what? To end here, beaten to a pulp by some backwater whackjob with a murder boner for municipal water rights? Ella supposed there was a certain poetry to it, perhaps a grim sort of symmetry. Live by the gun, die by the blunt instrument. The law of the concrete jungle.

Ella blinked grit from her eyes and focused on Baxter. He stared down at her, lips skinned back from his teeth in a deranged grin. The hammer rose high, eclipsing the moon. A killing blow aimed straight for her temple.

She looked past the hammer, past Baxter. Up to the vault of stars twinkling cold and distant. Fixed her eyes on the brightest one and made a wish. Not for rescue or mercy or even a quick end. Just an acknowledgment, maybe. A final tip of the hat from the universe before the curtain fell.

The hammer fell like a comet, trailing silver. Ella tensed for impact, for the bright

burst of pain and then nothing.

But it never landed.

BANG.

Instead, the night split with a thunderclap. The air sizzled and the stink of cordite singed her nose.

The world exploded. Sound and fury, fire and blood. Seth jerked like a marionette with its strings cut. Shock dawned on his face, stark incomprehension blossoming like a terrible flower.

He looked down. Ella looked down.

A hole, neat as a button, punched through his chest. Right over the heart, like a tag on a specimen jar.

Seth made a noise that in some life might have been human. The hammer collapsed from his hands as they shot out to cradle the steady flow of blood seeping from his torso.

His eyes rolled to whites. He toppled sideways and crashed to earth in a tangle of nerveless limbs and fallen hair, like a fallen scarecrow in a barren field.

Ella blinked. Blinked again. Her muzzy brain struggled to process, to make sense of the sudden shift from imminent death to – what? Resurrection? Miracle? Her gun was jammed. Luca was back in the silo, still tending to their half-drowned victim. There was no one else out here, no one around for at least a mile in every direction in this godforsaken slice of flyover country.

Maybe she'd willed it, channeled some untapped reserve of psychic fuckery and popped his melon like a ketchup packet. Was she was concussed, hallucinating some divine intervention in the form of miraculous ribcage rearrangement?

Or maybe this was it. The end of the line. She was dead, and this was some kind of purgatory pitstop on the way to her final destination. A little bureaucratic snafu before the big judgment call upstairs.

Ella rolled sideways, levered herself painfully up on one elbow. And there, standing tall among the rustling corn, grim as a hangman but twice as welcome. Tall, rangy. A halo of fire writhing around its head. Avenging angel? Valkyrie? Grim Reaper in brown boots?

No. That tread, firm and sure over the spongy ground. Only one person walked with that particular swagger, like they owned every inch of earth they graced.

'Mia?'

The old dog lowered her smoking gun with one eyebrow arched in that 'bitch, please' signature pose.

She strolled closer, as calm as a Sunday drive, and kicked Seth's sprawled legs out of the way. Without a word, she rolled the man over, snapped on a pair of cuffs and put a foot on his back. Judging by Ella's limited vision, the man was still breathing. For how long, she didn't know.

Ella was alive too. Broken to bits and oozing from a dozen spots, but still breathing. Still on the right side of the dirt, despite Baxter's best efforts. And all because Ripley had shown up in the nick of time to save her ass.

But that presented a whole new set of nagging questions. She fixed Ripley with a

look that she hoped conveyed some of the emotions swirling in her gut. It was hard to pull off with blood in your eyes and a piece of tooth bouncing around your mouth, but she gave it her best college try.

‘Mia... how’d you...?’

Ripley fished in her pocket and came out with a familiar black rectangle. She waved it like a winning lottery ticket.

‘GPS tracking,’ Ripley grinned. ‘You should read your memos.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

The farm was a damn circus. Patrol cars, ambulances, rolling code like they were auditioning for the Blues Brothers.

Ella sat in the dirt with Ripley – old faithful Ripley – beside her, watching the mayhem unfold through one swollen eye. The other had puffed shut, thanks to Seth Baxter's sledgehammer love taps. Every inch of her body sang with bright, vicious pain. But she was alive, still sucking air on this side of the grass. Which was more than could be said for Baxter if the paramedics didn't hump it.

Speak of the devils. Two EMTs in navy jumpsuits trundled by with a gurney, heading for the lone figure sprawled in the dirt. Baxter looked small in death – or near-death, at least. Just a sack of busted sticks, oozing the last of his crazy out onto the soil. Part of Ella wished Mia's shot had been a kill shot, putting the mad dog down for good. But the more practical part, the part not running on fumes and fury – that part knew they needed him alive. Needed him to answer for his crimes under the cold fluorescents of a courtroom, not the unblinking stars.

Besides, a bullet was too quick for the likes of Seth Baxter. He deserved to wither away in a concrete box, a long, slow rot with nothing but his demons for company.

So Ella kept her lips zipped as they loaded Baxter up, watched them wheel him off to the waiting ambulance. With any luck, the docs would patch him up just enough to stand trial. Make him relive every grisly murder in exquisite detail before shuttling him off to a lifetime of prison chow and cold, lonely nights.

There were questions aplenty rattling around Ella's swollen skull; a lead ball's worth of who's and how's and what-the-hell's. But she couldn't seem to get her tongue

unglued from the roof of her mouth.

So they sat in silence, watching the blue-and-red light show paint the remnants of Starlit Meadows Farm in gory Technicolor.

But eventually, even a hardcase like Mia had to crack. ‘Looks like you had a good time.’

Ella grunted, tongue still fat and stupid in her mouth. All she could muster was a nod.

Mia heaved a sigh and levered herself upright, then stuck out a hand. ‘C’mon, Dark. You should probably get to a hospital.’

Ella eyed that proffered palm, callused and coffee-stained and gloriously whole. Every cell in her body screamed to take it, to cling to it like a vine in a hurricane. But something held her back. Call it pride, call it stubbornness, call it the bone-deep knowledge that if Mia heaved and she ho”d, Ella would faceplant right back into the dirt like a drunken sorority pledge.

‘Hang on... I.... gimme a second.’

Luca broke free from the rabble of officers nearby and made his way over. He skidded to a stop.

‘Hollister”s stable,’ he reported, a little breathless. ‘Lungs were full of water, but we cleared his airways just in time.’

‘You cleared his airways just in time,’ Ella said. ‘I was busy getting hammered.’

‘Team effort.’ Luca’s gaze shifted to Mia. ‘Guess you were the hero of the day, Agent Ripley.’

Mia nudged Ella's ankle with her foot. 'I'd do anything for this idiot here. At least for the next few months.'

Luca blinked, the hero worship morphing into confusion. Ella caught his eye, gave a minute headshake. Later. She'd fill him in on the whole sordid tale once the dust settled and the adrenaline drained away. For now, they had more pressing concerns. Like the psychopath getting stitched up in the back of a rig and the victim who'd beaten the reaper by a hairsbreadth.

She levered up onto her good elbow. 'What about Baxter?'

'Touch and go. But looks like he'll pull through. At least long enough to see the inside of a jail cell. Ripley here caught him an inch from the heart.'

Ella tried not to grin. 'Something tells me that was no accident.'

Mia shrugged. 'Who knows?'

'I'm gonna go babysit the perp and make sure he gets to the hospital in one piece. Ella, I'll see you at the precinct in the morning, maybe.'

'Good work, kid,' Ripley said. 'Keep this girl in line, will you? I've put too many hours into training her to start over now.'

He sketched a salute and loped off. Ella watched him go, something suspiciously close to affection tugging the corners of her mouth.

When Luca was out of earshot, Mia said, 'Jesus, Dark. They team you up with a male model?'

'Something like that.'

‘I’m old enough to be his mother but sheesh, he looks good wet. You should take that home.’

Her first instinct was to scoff. To affect the same nonchalance Mia wore like armor. She and Luca – they were partners, sure. Friends, even. But anything more? Just a flight of fancy, a daydream fueled by adrenaline and close calls.

Except there was more. A spark, undeniable and electric, arcing between them in the quiet moments. Loaded glances and lingering touches, inside jokes and unspoken understanding. The kind of connection that only came from facing death together.

It terrified Ella to her core. The possibility, the potential. The chance that she might have found something real and profound amid all this madness. It went against every hard-boiled maxim and every grim truism she’d carved into her bones over the years.

But maybe that was the point. Maybe it was time to rewrite the rulebook. Her life had been a series of mights and maybes, almosts and could-have-beens. It was time to embrace the wild card, to take a chance on something more than a gold shield and a lonely bed.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ Ella said. ‘But before we delve into my love life, we need to talk about yours. Where the hell have you been?’

Mia’s face clouded over like a summer storm rolling in. She looked away, jaw working like she was chewing on a particularly gristly piece of gristle.

‘Hiding. You know why.’

Ella didn’t need to be a mind reader to know exactly who Ripley was talking about. The same someone who’d been leaving a trail of bodies in his wake, all with one common denominator – they’d pissed off Mia Ripley.

‘Martin. What the hell’s going on with him? Where is he?’

Mia’s eyes went cold as a morgue slab. ‘Why do you think I’m in this town?’

‘You tailed him? Here?’

‘Yeah. And it was the perfect opportunity to come apologize to you, too.’

Ella thought back to the shadowy figure dogging her steps. The stranger in the residential street, the figure outside the mayor’s bar.

She’d chalked it up to paranoia. To the jittery nerves of a long hunt without rest.

‘Mia, were you here all day? Tailing me since this morning?’

‘No. Just got into this one-horse town ten minutes ago. It was a haul and a half from the city.’

Ice water trickled down Ella’s spine. If Mia wasn’t the one shadowing her every move, that left only one option. One horrible, gut-wrenching possibility.

Martin.

The bastard had been on her tail since the beginning. Watching, waiting, biding his time for the perfect moment to strike.

And she’d played right into his hands. Led him straight to Mia, gift-wrapped her with a shiny bow.

What if he was watching right now?

Ella swallowed hard. She needed to think. To find a way to finish this. To put some distance between her and Ripley before Martin could spring whatever trap he had planned. Needed to keep her safe, even if it meant doing something foolish.

‘Mia.’ Ella caught Ripley’s gaze, held it. Willed her to understand the desperate plea lurking behind her blackened eyes. ‘I need you to do something for me.’

‘Shoot.’

‘I need you to trust me. And I need you to slap me.’

Mia goggled at her like she’d suddenly sprouted wings. Mia searched Ella’s face for the punchline. When it never came, she asked, ‘What?’

Ella surged forward, leaned in close so the desperate rasp of her voice wouldn’t carry.

‘He might be watching. Trust me. And if he sees us together, being pals...’

Ella let it hang. Then saw understanding dawn in Mia’s eyes, slow and horrible as a tumor metastasizing.

‘You’re a real piece of work, you know that?’

‘Learned from the best, didn’t I?’

A ghost of a smile flickered across Mia’s face, there and gone like a stutter of lightning. She squeezed Ella’s hands hard enough to grind the bones to powder. Ella thought of all the wounds she’d accumulated over the years: stabs, bullet holes, burns, bruises. Surely a slap was nothing in comparison.

Then Mia cocked her arm back and let fly.

The crack of flesh on flesh was like a gunshot. Ella's head snapped back, and stars exploded across her vision in sickening spirals. She staggered, then fell on her ass against the dirt.

Damn. Maybe she'd underestimated the power in Mia's palms.

Through the ringing in her ears, she heard Mia's ragged inhale. Saw her square her shoulders, spit a curse that would've made a sailor blush. Then she was striding away.

Somewhere out there, Martin Godfrey was watching.

The trap was set, the pieces in motion. All that was left was to see who'd blink first.

Game on.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:56 am

Ella perched on a gnarled tree root at the river's edge. The water gurgled past, carrying whispers of better days. This spot, just a stone's throw from her childhood home, was etched in her bones deeper than any case file.

She could almost see her dad's silhouette against the early morning mist, rod in hand, patient as the hills. Little Ella, with her knobby knees and pigtails, squealing as she chased minnows in the shallows. Back when the world was simple, when death was just a concept for floating fish and bedtime stories.

'Put 'em back, Daddy!' she'd cry, and Ken would smile that tired smile of his, unhooking another wriggling catch. He always did. Except for that one time. The bloated carp, belly-up and cloudy-eyed. Ella remembered the chill that ran through her, how wrong it felt.

Ken Dark's words echoed across the years: 'Sometimes, sweetheart, things gotta die so others can live. It ain't pretty, but that's nature's way.'

Life, death, the whole damn circle. She didn't get it then; still wasn't sure she did now.

But Ken Dark was ashes, and Ella had too many ghosts to count. Maybe he was right after all. You die, so another mook gets a shot at growing old. The universe demanded its pound of flesh and it didn't much care who paid up.

A few miles away, the city slept the fitful sleep of the guilty. Here in Abingdon, merely a stone's throw away from her childhood home, Ella kept her lonely vigil. Ears tuned for the telltale sign of approaching footsteps.

Waiting for the devil to come calling.

Morbid thoughts for a morbid hour. Ella snorted, winced as her ribs lodged a formal protest. Every inhale was a knife between the vertebrae, a reminder of the business end of Seth Baxter's psychotic love affair with his framing hammer.

But bruises faded. Bones knitted. Ella was a quick study in the art of knocking the dirt off and getting back on the horse.

She wanted to close her eyes. Wanted to sink into the forgiving black and let this shitshow of a day fade into the rearview. But she couldn't. Not yet.

The plan was half-cocked at best and suicidal at worst. Dangle herself like a worm on a hook, wait for the lunatic ex to come sniffing around for bait. Feed him some line about jealousy and betrayal, about broken trust and bridges burned. Let him fill in the blanks with his own twisted logic. Weave a little story about Mia and Ella on the outs, about bad blood and uglier words.

Then see who came calling.

Ella's eyes cut to the black ribbon of river. With her senses dialed to eleven, she cocked an ear to the night. Tree branches creaking like old bones, something skittering through the underbrush.

But no footfall, no sign of the silver-haired psycho with an itchy trigger finger and a twisted sense of love.

Maybe he'd wised up. Cut his losses and hopped the first train to Guatemala. Though Ella doubted it. Men like Martin, they didn't just quit. Not when they thought they were the white knight riding to his lady's rescue.

He'd come. She knew it. He'd come because he couldn't help himself. Because

somewhere in that twisted brain of his, he'd rationalized this little murder spree as an act of love.

And Ella would be waiting. Ready to read him his rights and snap on the cuffs, or take two to the chest for her trouble. Either way, this ended tonight.

The minutes dripped by like cold molasses. Ella watched the hands on her watch tick-tick-tick towards oblivion. A metronome counting off the last seconds of someone's life. Maybe hers, if the twitchy feeling in her gut was anything to go by. Call it cop's intuition, that little voice that whispered "duck" right before the bullets started flying.

But hell, she'd had a good run. And if this was how she punched her ticket, so be it. Taking a psycho off the board was as good a way to go as any. Better than most of the crap she saw on the daily.

Besides, it beat the alternative. The slow fade into obscurity, the long slog of days bleeding into years bleeding into a bottle and a gold watch and not much else. Forty years in and a pat on the head for your trouble. Ella had seen that movie, read that book cover to cover. And it always ended the same – a whimper instead of a bang and a whole lot of nothing to show for it.

So maybe this was better. Quicker, cleaner. A period instead of an ellipsis. And if it kept Mia safe, kept her breathing for another day, another week, to enjoy her rapidly approaching retirement? Well, that was just icing on the cake, wasn't it? If not for Mia, Ella would have been in the ground a long time ago. The least Ella could do is repay the favor.

Ella checked her watch again. Sunrise was nearly on the horizon.

That's when she heard it.

The faintest crunch of pebbles in the dirt. The soft sigh of grass bending underfoot. A

snake sliding through reeds.

Her heart kicked into overdrive. She rose from the grass on silent feet, every nerve ending crackling like electricity.

This was it. The moment of truth.

More footsteps, muffled but unmistakable. The swish of trousers, the click of dress shoes too fancy for a fishing hole. Branches snapping, leaves crunching. A muted curse as something snagged, held fast.

Ella swallowed a hiccup of panicked laughter. Sounded like the old silver fox wasn't much for a moonlit stroll. That made two of them.

She tensed as the footfalls grew closer. Felt the fine hairs on her nape rise in anticipation. Three, two...

Light exploded over the water as the moon broke free of a cloud. Quicksilver brightness flooded the riverbank, banishing the shadows and the man who wore them like a second skin.

'Hello, Martin.' Her voice sounded steadier than she felt, and she sent up a silent prayer of thanks for small mercies. 'Fancy meeting you here.'

Martin froze mid-step. For a moment he was a portrait in shades of shock – eyes wide, mouth hanging slack, one foot dangling foolishly in the air. A caricature of surprise, and it would've been funny if it wasn't so terrifying.

'Agent Dark.' He recovered quickly, she'd give him that much. Smoothed out his expression into something resembling normalcy, even as his gaze flicked to the river, the trees, cataloging escape routes. 'I didn't expect you to be here.'

And I didn't expect to find a murderer creeping around my old fishing spot in the middle of the night. And yet..."

She didn't see the gun until it was already up, already levelled at her center mass. One second, he was a man, albeit a crazy one. The next he was a threat, a loaded weapon with Ella's name carved on the bullets.

'Don't say another word.'

Ella raised her hands, nice and slow. Kept her own piece tucked against the small of her back, out of sight. No need to spook him any more than necessary.

Not yet.

'Okay, okay.' She gentled her tone, rounded the edges until she sounded almost reasonable. 'Take it easy, Martin. Let's talk about this.'

'There's nothing to talk about.'

'Martin, I need to know. You killed three people. You killed a man I wanted to see rot in prison. You tried to murder my ex-boyfriend. You took out a federal director. You executed your partner's ex-husband. Why?'

Something flickered across his face – grief, longing, a terrible sort of hunger. His grip on the gun faltered for a half-second.

'I had to,' he whispered. 'Don't you see? They were hurting her. Holding her back. I couldn't let them... I had to set her free.'

Jesus wept. The twisted logic of a man so far off the reservation, he'd circled back around to sainthood. This was a man beyond reason. He'd lived a life of seeing people die, and now he thought death was the only solution. He'd killed for Mia.

Butchered her demons and left the bodies stacked like cordwood on her doorstep. And in some sick, twisted part of his psyche, he thought it was a gift.

Ella's heart broke a little for Mia then. For the horror of it, the dawning realization that the man she loved was a monster in a mask. That every touch, every word, was just camouflage for the snake coiled beneath.

'She didn't want that, Martin.' Gently, gently. Coaxing him back from the precipice with kid gloves and honey. 'Mia never asked you to do those things.'

But of course she had. Maybe not in words, but in a thousand small ways over their time together. Every flinch when Carter's name came up, every shadow that crossed her face at the mention of Nash or Trevor. Mia wore her damage like a hair shirt, let it chafe her raw and bloody for all the world to see.

And Martin had seen. He'd watched her suffer, watched her bleed. Stood vigil over her pain like a graveyard specter, hungry for every drop.

And in the end, he'd fashioned himself into an angel of mercy. Mia's own personal sin-eater, swallowing down her enemies even as he damned himself.

Ella saw it now, clear as a killing stroke. The sick symbiosis of it, the feedback loop of trauma and revenge. How many times had she counseled victims, talked them off the ledge of their own worst impulses? Warned them of the hollow comfort of vengeance, the gnawing emptiness that came after the trigger was pulled and the body laid to rest?

Martin had skipped straight to the punchline. Had carved out his pound of flesh and called it love.

And Mia – She must've known, on some level. Must've seen the signs, the red flags waving in a stiff wind. But she'd buried it down deep, looked the other way while the

bodies piled up. Because to face the truth was to put a bullet in the brain of her own happily ever after.

‘I know you think you did right by her, Martin. I know you wanted to be her hero.’

‘I am her hero!’ The words came out jagged, edging into hysteria. ‘I saved her. Protected her. And you – you tried to poison her against me. Filled her head with lies.’

‘No, Martin, I didn’t. I just called out what I saw. In the CCTV footage of Carter’s murder. In my ex’s apartment. I saw you.’

‘And then you told Mia everything. Why? Why didn’t you just keep your mouth shut? Now I have to fix everything.’

There was steel in his eyes now mirror. Decision was crystallizing like ice in his veins. Ella saw it happen. A watch spring winding down to the snapping point.

He was going to shoot her. One last obstacle removed, one more body on the pile.

All for love.

For Mia.

Then, from behind Martin – another set of footsteps.

Martin flinched, halfway turning towards the new threat.

And Mia was there.

Her eyes were red and raw. Her face was ashen, lined with a grief too vast for words. She looked like a woman who’d just watched her world crumble.

But her hands were steady on her Glock .17

‘You,’ she said.

He flinched like he’d been slapped. ‘Mia? You’re here. Why...?’

‘I heard you.’ Fresh tears spilled over, tracking through the salt lines of those already shed. ‘I heard everything.’

‘For you. It was all for you.’

‘I never asked for this.’ Her aim never wavered. ‘I didn’t want this. Any of it.’

‘But they were hurting you. The ones who got away. I couldn’t...’ He took a shuddering step towards her, hands outstretched. Supplicating. ‘I love you, Mia. Doesn’t that mean anything?’

‘Love? You call this love?’

‘I was getting them out of the way so we could be together,’ Martin cried.

‘Christ, Martin.’ Revulsion, thick as bile. Dawning horror, shattering her to shrapnel. ‘Listen to yourself. This isn’t love. It’s sickness. Delusion.’

‘You’re only saying that because of her.’ His finger stabbed at Ella. ‘She did this. She poisoned you against me. I’ll fix it, don’t worry. I’ll make it right.’

Then Martin moved. A blur, a lunge. His gun swung up, zeroing in on Ela like a compass needle finding north. The gun barked a deafening blast. A strobe flash followed, then the smell of cordite.

Martin staggered. Swayed. The gun tumbled from slack fingers as he crumpled like a

discarded rag doll.

He hit the ground hard, a sack of meat where a man used to be. Life fled in a crimson gush, staining the grass in the pale moonlight. He left a red trail in his wake, a gory slug path any Boy Scout could follow. Crimson on brown on sickly green river scum. Prettier than it had any right to be in the pre-dawn glow.

But his body kept moving. Martin rolled down the bank in a tangle of expensive suit and cooling flesh. She followed his descent – spatters of red on green, the physics of a body in motion, the final splash as he hit the water.

Then the river got greedy. Inky fingers dragged Martin under, hungry for a taste of fresh kill. One arm flopped up in a macabre farewell before the final curtain. And finally, a bubble of blood burst on the surface – Martin's swan song in crimson.

And Martin – the so-called guardian angel – was gone. The devil himself, spat back to hell.

Ella stared, frozen.

At Mia, looking over the river's edge, her gun still hot in her shaking hands.

Her face was stiff as marble, all color leached out by the violence, the brutality of putting her former lover in the ground.

For a heartbeat, no one breathed.

Especially Martin.

Sometimes, sweetheart, things gotta die so others can live. It ain't pretty, but that's nature's way.

Mia was alive. Ella was alive. The cosmic ledger had been balanced out, red in tooth and claw.

Her old man had been right. This was nature's way.

There'd be hell to pay come morning. Questions and autopsies and reports and recriminations.

But for now, in the hushed stillness of the riverside-turned-slaughterhouse...

Peace.

Ella and Mia. Dark and Ripley.

Until death did them part.

Or not.