



Girl, Reformed (An Ella Dark FBI Suspense Thriller—Book 20)

Author: *Blake Pierce*

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. But when a woman is found dead in an odd wooden contraption, Ella realizes she must decode its significance if she has any chance of catching what is clearly a new serial killer....

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ken Foley's feet slapped against the pavement as he traced the same route he did every morning. Another day, another soul-sucking slog. Pushing papers, crunching numbers, watching the clock tick down to quittin' time. Rinse and repeat, ad nauseum. The grind was enough to make a man want to eat his own shoes.

Even on this bright morning, the Missouri sunrise offered no comfort. Anemic light seeped across the sky like a blood stain as the streets of Dover stretched out before him in a maze of cracked concrete and shuttered storefronts. A few cars rumbled past, headlights mingling with the morning glow. The city was just starting to wake up, shaking off the cobwebs of the night.

Ken checked his watch. Six-thirty in the AM. Stupid o'clock, as his old man might say. He had half a mind to turn around, crawl back into bed, and tell the world to go screw itself.

But the bills weren't going to pay themselves, and the rent was due next week. So here he was, trudging towards another day of corporate drudgery like a good little cog in the machine. It wasn't much, but it was a life.

He came to a stop at the entrance of Chautauqua Park, where the wrought iron gates loomed like the jaws of some great beast. The place was a postcard picture of serenity - sprawling green lawns, towering pines, a glassy lake that reflected the sunrise like a mirror. Ken had walked past it a thousand times on his way to work, never giving it a second glance.

But today, something made him pause.

Maybe it was the way the light hit the water. Maybe it was the sweet scent of pine that wafted on the breeze, a break from the usual city stench of exhaust and stale coffee. Or maybe he was just so desperate for something, anything, to break up the monotony of his life that even a walk in the park seemed like an adventure.

‘Screw it,’ Ken muttered and veered off the sidewalk. He was a few minutes ahead of schedule. Time to live a little.

The park was quiet this early, just a handful of diehards and masochists out and about. A few joggers in neon spandex, pounding the pavement like their lives depended on it. A couple of old-timers out for their morning constitutional, shuffling along with their hands clasped behind their backs. And the obligatory gaggle of dog walkers, letting their mutts violate every tree in sight.

But compared to the usual crowds that swarmed the place on weekends, it was practically a ghost town. Ken liked it that way. He could almost pretend he had the place to himself. His private oasis in the middle of the urban jungle.

He walked along the edge of the lake, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his work trousers that were clearly one size too big, even to a fashion ignoramus like himself. The water was still as glass, broken only by the occasional ripple from a jumping fish or a diving bird. Ken watched a pair of mallards glide across the surface, feathers shimmering in the early morning light. For a guy who spent most of his time trapped in a stuffy office, this was as close to nature as he got.

He found a bench overlooking the water and settled onto it with a sigh. The wood was cool and damp against his backside, but he didn’t mind. It was a small price to pay for a moment of tranquillity before facing the daily grind. He tilted his head back, letting the first rays of sunlight warm his face. Maybe this little detour wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

But Ken's peace was shattered by a shrill beeping. His eyes snapped open, darting around for the source of the noise. It took him a second to realize it was coming from his own damn wrist. His watch alarm, reminding him that he had exactly thirty minutes to haul ass across town and clock in.

He silenced it with a finger jab and heaved himself off the bench, knees popping like bubble wrap. So much for his moment of Zen. He gave the serene lake one last, wistful look before turning to go. That's when something caught his eye.

A flash of movement in the trees, there and gone again in an instant.

Ken froze, his heart doing a funny little skip in his chest. He squinted into the shadows, trying to make out what he'd seen. A deer, maybe? Or just a trick of the light? He took a tentative step forward, then quickly decided this wasn't an issue worth pursuing. He remembered the old saying about curiosity, and in a city like this, it was never truer.

Ken shook his head, chalking it up to an overactive imagination. Too many late-night horror flicks, not enough sleep.

He was about to turn away when he heard it again.

A rustle in the underbrush, followed by a muffled thump.

Ken's mouth went dry. That was no deer. Something – or someone – was definitely moving around in those trees. A junkie looking for a secluded spot to shoot up? A pervert in a trench coat, waiting to flash some poor jogger?

Not his place to investigate, he reminded himself and continued en route.

But some stubborn, stupid part of him wanted to know what was out there. Needed to

reassure himself that it was all in his head. Ken took another step towards the trees, his heart pounding so hard he could feel it in his molars.

That's when the scream split the air like a bolt of lightning.

For a second, Ken thought he must have imagined it. A trick of the mind, a waking nightmare born of too much stress and not enough fiber in his diet.

But then he saw a jogger stumble to a halt. A pair of old timers frozen in their tracks. Even the dogs went still, ears perked and hackles raised.

It wasn't his imagination.

Another scream rang out, and this time there was no mistaking it.

Ken's gut clenched, his palms going clammy with sweat. He should call the cops, let the professionals handle it. He was just a regular schmo, an insurance drone with a beer gut and a receding hairline. He wasn't cut out for any hero business.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, Ken knew he couldn't just stand there with his thumb up his ass. If someone was in danger, if they needed help, he had to do something. He couldn't live with himself otherwise.

And then Ken was moving, his feet pounding against the grass as he ran towards the sound of the screams.

He crashed through the trees, branches whipping at his face and snagging on his clothes. Every worst-case scenario flashed through his mind in a sickening kaleidoscope - a mugging gone wrong, a sex crime, a homicidal maniac on a rampage. Ken burst into a small clearing and skidded to a halt, chest heaving, sweat stinging his eyes.

What he saw there stopped him dead in his tracks.

For a second, Ken thought he'd stumbled onto the set of some twisted arthouse flick. A statement on the human condition or some pretentious crap. He half-expected a greasy director in a beret to pop out from behind a tree and yell cut.

But this was no movie.

Because smack dab in the middle of the bandstand – the same spot where the brass band performed once a month – was a young blonde woman.

Only she was locked in some kind of medieval stocks.

Hands and head bolted in place. Her ankles lashed to the base of the contraption with frayed rope that bit into her flesh. She hung there like a ragdoll, torso slack, toes scraping the floor. The tips of her straggly blonde hair caressed the ground. Ken saw her chipped blue nail polish, flimsy floral dress, stockings that were fashionably ripped.

Ken's guts did a backflip, threatening to redecorate the grass with his morning coffee. He'd seen dead bodies before - you didn't grow up in the inner city without seeing a stiff or two. But this? This was something else. It was all real, right in the middle of Chautauqua Park, with the sun shining and the birds singing and the smell of fresh-cut grass in the air. Ken spotted another witness, hands clasped to her mouth, no doubt the source of the piercing scream that had drawn him here.

More gawkers poured into the clearing, drawn by the screams like flies to roadkill. They clustered around the bandstand, jaws flapping, eyes bugging out of their skulls.

Ken knew he needed to do something, call the cops. But his feet were rooted to the spot, his hands hanging useless at his sides. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe. All

he could do was stare at the carnage in front of him and try not to puke on his shoes.

What the hell had happened here?

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Ella strode from the living room to the kitchen and back again. Back and forth, like a caged animal, wearing away what was left of the hardwood floor. She needed a drink. Maybe some nicotine. Something to dull the edges of the hamster wheel that was her brain. It was spinning round and round, going nowhere fast.

Because she couldn't stop thinking about Martin Godfrey.

Mia's boy toy. The man who'd charmed his way into their lives with his crooked smile and his silver fox swagger.

But the pieces were falling into place now, and the picture they formed was ugly as sin.

Martin was no mere charmer. Much more than just a retired FBI agent and military vet.

He was Ella and Mia's uninvited angel of death.

Over the past month, four people close to Ella and Mia had been targeted by an unknown assailant. Logan Nash, shot between the eyes in his supposed safe house. Randall Carter, smug prick as he was, assassinated right outside his house. Trevor Garbett, Mia's scumbag ex, dumped on the side of the road like yesterday's trash with a bullet hole in his forehead.

And Ben. Poor, stupid Ben. Ella's own mistake, the guy she'd let get too close. He'd survived, but only just. And she'd seen his attacker, seen that face in the flesh. The same face she'd seen on grainy CCTV footage, standing over Carter's cooling

corpse.

And yesterday morning, Ella had paid a visit to Mia's house. There, sitting on her sofa like a king on his throne was Martin Godfrey, and in that moment, the grainy picture finally came into view.

It was like a bolt of lightning straight to her cerebral cortex. The disparate fragments of evidence, the nagging suspicions, all coalescing into one inescapable truth. Martin's profile, the subtle shift of his shoulders, the tilt of his chin - it all matched. The man on the CCTV, the figure in Ben's apartment room. It was him. It had always been him.

Ella's subconscious had known, even if her waking mind had been too blind to see it. The pieces had been there, waiting for her to put them together. She and Martin had exchanged a glance then, a look that spoke volumes without a single word. Ella's stare was wide and accusing, screaming the truth she'd uncovered.

Martin had returned the gesture. He knew that she knew.

Ella sank onto the couch, her head in her hands. It didn't make sense. Why would Martin do this? What was his angle? Some kind of twisted white knight complex, protecting the damsels in distress?

But that was stupid. Ella and Mia were no shrinking violets. They could handle themselves, had been doing it for years. They didn't need some trigger-happy old man watching their backs.

So what then? What was Martin's game? Ella's mind spun with possibilities, each one more far-fetched than the last. Was he some kind of serial killer groupie, getting off on taking out their enemies? A psycho who wanted to play hero? Maybe he craved the thrill of the hunt again, and this was his way of getting close to the action.

What if it was an effort to frame her and Mia? With Mia behind bars, Martin could be in line to inherit Mia's eight-bedroom palace she called a house.

Or was it something else entirely, something she couldn't even begin to wrap her head around?

Ella groaned, rubbing her temples. This was getting her nowhere. She needed to talk to someone, needed to get this off her chest before it ate her alive.

But who? Mia was out of the question. How could Ella look her best friend in the eye and tell her that her boyfriend was a murderer? That the man she'd let into her bed, into her heart, was a stone-cold killer?

It would destroy her. Destroy their friendship. And then where would Ella be? Alone, that's where. Alone with her suspicions and her guilt and her goddamn spinning hamster wheel of a brain.

She couldn't do that to Mia. Couldn't lay that burden on her shoulders. But she couldn't keep this to herself either. It was too big, too heavy. It would crush her.

Could she take it to the director? Possibly, but what would she tell him? That she suspected a former agent of being a serial murderer? It was a long shot, because other than a blurry shape on some CCTV footage, Ella's evidence for this accusation was sorely lacking. The director already thought she was crazy, so pointing fingers without proof wasn't going to get her anywhere.

Ella paced like a rat in a maze. She was in too deep now, no doubt about it. But what the hell was she supposed to do? She needed to talk this out, get some perspective before she lost her goddamn marbles. Mia was off the table, and spilling confidential FBI dirt to her roommate was a one-way ticket to unemployment.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, it hit her. Luca. The new guy at the Bureau, fresh meat with a pretty face. They'd crossed paths a few days back, made noises about grabbing a coffee sometime. Well, some time was now.

Getting out of her apartment would do her good. Maybe she wouldn't spill all of the details to Luca since she barely knew the man, but the primal act of being in the company of another might give her some perspective.

Ella snatched up her phone and fired off a text before she could talk herself out of it. Her thumb hovered over the send button, nerves jangling like alarm bells. But what did she have to lose? They'd briefly spoken yesterday about meeting up, but without a date and location locked in, plans had fizzled to intentions and then died a death.

She busied herself around the apartment, trying to burn off the restless energy and the reply-anxiety. The higher-ups had put her on mandatory RR after the case in Maine, but lounging around in her sweatpants wasn't doing her any favors. She needed to move, to do something, anything to keep the gears in her head from grinding themselves to dust.

Her phone buzzed, and Ella pounced on it like a starving dog on a pork chop. Luca's name flashed on the screen.

Free for a couple of hours. Shall we grab that drink?

Ella couldn't type fast enough. Yes, please. How about Nico's in 30 mins?

The seconds crawled by. Ella chewed on her lip and tasted blood.

Then, finally, a response. Deal. See you there.

Ella let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She glanced at the clock,

calculated how long it would take her to get presentable. She couldn't roll up to Nico's looking like something the cat dragged in.

She wasn't sure how to broach the subject on her mind, or whether it was a wise idea to do so at all. But one thing was for sure, she couldn't just sit on her hands and wait for the sky to fall. It was time to take action, to do something before this whole mess blew up in her face.

And she had to remind herself of another thing.

This wasn't a date. Definitely not.

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Ella flicked from the clock to the door and back again. She'd gotten to the coffee shop early, hoping to snag a few minutes of peace before Luca showed up. But now, with each passing second, her nerves were winding tighter than a watch spring.

Was it the Martin situation that had her on edge, or the thought of seeing Luca again? Ella wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

She scanned the room for the hundredth time, taking in the usual assortment of hipsters and hausfraus. She hadn't ordered herself anything, had to give her excuses to the eager waitress twice already. She didn't want Luca to think she was the selfish type. The least she could do is buy him a welcome-to-the-freakshow coffee.

Then the door chimed, and in walked a familiar face. Ella was suddenly reminded of the James Bond scene where Daniel Craig emerges from the water, dreamily wet.

Luca was wearing a brown leather jacket that looked like it had been poured onto his frame, the kind of thing that belonged on the cover of GQ. His hair was slicked back, not a strand out of place, and his jaw had just the right amount of stubble to make Ella's pulse kick up a notch.

Christ, she told herself, Mr. April in the flesh.

Luca sauntered up to the counter, flashing the barista a smile that probably made the lucky woman's ovaries explode. He ordered something, then turned and headed straight for Ella's table.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said as he gave her a gentle handshake. Ella thought about

leaning in and kissing his cheek, but that was probably a tad too far. 'Traffic was a nightmare.'

Ella waved it off, trying to play it cool. 'No worries. I appreciate you coming.'

Luca grinned, and Ella felt it like a shot of bourbon straight to the bloodstream. 'Are you kidding? I'm honored. I've heard all about the famous Agent Dark.'

Ella raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. 'I certainly hope not. My reputation can't take any more hits.'

Luca laughed, a rich, warm sound that made Ella's toes curl in her boots. 'All good things, I promise. So, I'm here to learn. Tell me everything,' he said.

"You first," Ella said. "That's the downside of being office-famous. Everyone knows you, but you don't know them."

Luca shrugged, that easy grin still playing around his lips. But before he could begin, the waitress arrived and sat down two coffees. Ella watched as he thanked her, noting the way the girl's cheeks flushed pink. Christ, the guy must have been fighting them off with a stick.

He pushed one over to Ella's side of the table. Ella eyeballed it, taking in the sweet aroma, the way the surface tension kept the white foam slightly north of the lip.

Vanilla latte, no doubt. He'd got it in one.

'Alright,' Ella said. 'How'd you guess?'

'I got lucky,' Luca said.

She shot him an eyebrow, then gauged his body language. Defensive, playful. Ella didn't buy it. She picked up her cup and put her nose to use. 'Come on. Vanilla latte, no sugar, cinnamon on the rim. You should play the lottery tonight.'

Luca shrugged, then gestured just below his eyeball. 'Well, I could tell you that the patch of rough skin under your eye means you're a caffeine freak. And I could tell you that discolored premolar hanging out of your gums means you've got a sweet tooth. I could tell you I played the odds. Probability versus possibility.'

Ella withheld a smirk. 'Oh really?'

'I could tell you that,' Luca said, then wiggled his ear. 'Or I could tell you I was queuing behind you in here a few days ago.'

She couldn't hold back the grin. 'Damn it. Great trick. You got me.'

Luca took a sip of whatever caffeine cocktail was in front of him. 'You never know who's listening.'

'I guess your profiling skills are on point.'

'That's how I ended up here,' Luca said. 'I was a criminal psyche in Massachusetts until last year. Up until a string of dead girls show up in my neck of the woods. I put together a profile, led the local yokels right to the killer's front door.'

Ella nearly choked on her latte. 'Wait, hold up. We heard about that case back at the office. That was you?'

Luca shrugged, like it was no big thing. But Ella wasn't buying the aw-shucks routine. She'd seen the file, heard the rumors. This guy had the gift people spent decades trying to master.

‘Is it true?’ she asked, pinning him with a look. ‘About your profile?’

Luca cocked his head, playing dumb. ‘Is what true?’

Ella leaned forward, her elbows on the table. ‘That it was so dead-on, you predicted what he’d be wearing when you caught him.’

A smile twitched at the corner of Luca’s mouth. He took another sip of coffee, drawing out the suspense. Then, finally, he gave a slow nod.

‘Blue shorts,’ he said. ‘Black socks. Had a lisp, facial scarring and worked as a chef.’

Ella let out a low whistle. ‘Christ on a bike. How the hell did you know?’

Luca shrugged, like it was nothing. But Ella could see the glint of pride in his eyes. ‘The vics all had fancy stuff in their stomach contents. Truffles, saffron, that kind of thing. Way too high-class for the shithole where our boy lived. And I knew that town well. It’s full of grifters. Ain’t no one hoarding saffron and not trying to make money off ‘em. That suggested he worked as a chef.’

Ella nodded, the pieces falling into place. ‘So you figured he was wining and dining them first. Cooking them a gourmet meal before he snuffed them out.’

‘Bingo. You know what they say. Fastest way to a woman’s heart is through her stomach.’

‘And the lisp? Scars?’

‘Projection and rejection. Tell me if I’m talking crap, but I find modern serial killers fall into one category or the other. I don’t buy into the whole organized versus disorganized debate. They either project their insecurities onto their victims, whether

that falls under the banner of revenge killings, mission-orientation or power-control dynamics. Or they're hedonistic or lust-motivated, which ultimately comes down to fear of rejection.'

'And which one was your unsub?'

'Both,' Luca said. 'He wined and dined his victims to elevate his status, get that dopamine high. , put him one rung above the objects of his affection. Then he killed them before they could reject him. He obliterated his victims' tongues and cheeks, because those were his deepest insecurities. Lisp, facial scarring.'

Ella sat back, taking it all in. It seemed Luca was much more than just a pretty face. He had the goods to back it up.

'And the black socks?'

Luca glanced around the coffee shop. 'Probability versus possibility.' He placed his foot on the chair and hiked up his trouser leg. 'I've never met a man that doesn't wear black socks.'

Ella let out a low chuckle, shaking her head. 'You're like a regular Houdini, you know that? All smoke and mirrors. But I gotta say, I'm impressed.'

Luca ducked his head, a humble grin playing at his lips. 'Hey, I'm just happy to be here. Never thought I'd make it to the big leagues.'

'Well, consider this your official welcome to the freak show,' Ella said, raising her coffee cup in a mock toast. 'Hope you're ready for long nights, cold coffee, and a return ticket to hell.'

Luca's grin turned rueful. 'Sounds like a ride. Hell, six months ago, I'd never even

held a gun. Now I'm here."

Ella cocked an eyebrow, sizing him up. 'I'll show you the ropes if you want. Shooting's easy with the right teacher.'

'Let's hope. The director's signing off my Glock 21 today. Meeting him in an hour for the fabled badge and gun handover.'

'Twenty-one? Nice piece.'

Luca bit his lip. 'Been a while since I heard that. But tell me about you. All I know about you is what I saw on that TV show about the Executioner case.'

Apparently a few months ago there'd been a low-budget retelling of Ella and Ripley's battle with a certain old nemesis on Lifetime or Real TV or something. Ella hadn't got round to watching it, and she had no doubt that most of the details would be sensationalized.

'Started out as a desk jockey down in Virginia, then I got lucky and landed a gig in Intelligence here at HQ. I did seven years, then Mia came along, fairy godmother that she is.'

"Ah, Ripley," Luca said. "Now, her I do know. Apparently, she's on the way out, right?"

She took a sip of her coffee, letting the bitter liquid scald her tongue. It was a familiar pain, a welcome one.

'Yup. Two months until she retires.'

'Why'd she single you out?' Luca asked.

‘She heard about my party trick. There was a perp in Iowa, killing women in their own homes. Unsub was breaking in, no signs of forced entry.’

‘Picked locks? Windows? Vents?’ Luca asked.

”Other entry points would be the first port of call, but I”d seen it before. There have been similar cases in Brazil and Japan. I told the investigators to check the keyholes for traces of nylon and viola, there it was. The perp was using guitar strings to manipulate the tumblers and unlock the doors. Then he”d do the same on the way out.”

Understanding dawned on Luca’s face. ‘Sheesh. Neat little trick. And that’s how they found him?’

”Bingo. Ripley was leading the case. She checked out a local music store, and that”s where she found the guy working behind the counter.”

Ella leaned back in her chair, sizing Luca up with a critical eye. He was good, no doubt about it. Had the chops to hang with the big dogs. She could definitely see herself spending some more time with this guy, but she couldn”t let herself get too close. Not while Ben’s absence was still fresh in her heart, and besides, she’d tried inter-offices romances before and it had ended up with a dead agent on her sofa.

She scrambled back to the present. Who was she to even consider such a thing, anyway? This was only the second time she’d met Luca in the flesh, and she doubted a guy with a jaw this chiseled would look at her twice. Chances are he was already spoken for, anyway.

No, she couldn”t make that mistake again. Especially not with Martin still out there, lurking in the shadows like a bad penny.

But damn if Luca didn't make it tempting. With his easy smile and his razor-sharp mind, he was like a breath of fresh air in the stale, stuffy halls of the Bureau.

'So, what do you make of this whole Carter thing?' Luca asked. 'Pretty wild, huh?'

Ella grimaced, bile rising in her throat. 'Awful stuff. Poor guy. He didn't deserve it.'

'Apparently, they're still no closer to finding out who did it. The guy that trained me – Byford – he's assigned to the case.'

Ella wanted to scream, wanted to spill everything to an unbiased ear. It was Martin Godfrey. I know it was. He's been picking off our enemies one by one, like some kind of murderous angel.

But she swallowed the words. Luca didn't need this burden. He hadn't even gotten his badge yet, so the last thing he needed was to be guilty of having working ears.

Then her phone buzzed. She went to pull it out but thought better of it. It was rude to check your messages in company.

Luca must have picked up on it. 'Please, get it,' he said. 'Might be important.'

'You sure?'

'Might be the big man. Lives could be at stake.'

Ella nodded her thanks, pulled out her phone and jabbed at the screen.

One new message.

From Mia.

Dark, call me. Please.

Ella's blood ran cold. Mia, the woman who thought manners were for weaklings and politicians. Nearly two years together and Ella couldn't remember the last time she'd said please.

'Can I just make a call real quick?' she asked.

'Go ahead.'

Ella slid back from the table and made her way out of the coffee shop. Her heart kicked into overdrive, palms suddenly glossy with sweat. The morning air slapped her in the face like a wet towel.

She made the call and Mia picked up on the second ring.

'Dark,' Mia said. 'Can you get to my place?'

The questions came in crushing waves. Had Mia figured out the truth too? Did she know Martin wasn't the charming middle-aged man he appeared to be?

'What's wrong?' Ella asked.

'It's Martin. He's missing.'

Ella's stomach dropped to her toes, knees weak, vision swirling like a kaleidoscope. She braced herself against the wall.

'What do you mean, missing?' she croaked.

'Gone,' Mia snapped. 'Vanished into thin air. No note, no nothing.'

Ella closed her eyes. This was it. The other shoe, dropping like a goddamn anvil.

Martin was on the move.

‘I’ll be there in thirty minutes,’ Ella said. ‘Don’t do anything stupid.’

She hung up before Mia could respond. She had to get to her, had to figure out their next move. Before Martin did something they couldn’t come back from.

But first, she had to deal with Luca. Sweet, clueless Luca. She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. Time to put on her game face, to be the badass FBI agent everyone thought she was.

Ella turned on her heel and marched back into the coffee shop, her jaw set and her eyes hard as flint. Luca looked up as she approached.

‘Duty calls?’ he asked.

Ella forced a smile. ‘You’ll get used to moments like these.’

‘Ha. Rain check on the shooting lesson, then.’ Luca rose from his seat. ‘I should get back. Thank you for the chat.’

‘And thank you for the coffee. I’m sure I’ll see you around the office,’ Ella said.

‘I certainly hope so.’

Ella didn’t prolong the pleasantries as much as she wanted to. She gave him her best smile, turned and made for the door.

Then she was gone, pushing through the door and out into the cruel, unforgiving

world. A world where the monsters wore human skin, and the heroes were just as broken as the rest of them.

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Ella screeched to a halt outside Mia's lakeside pad. The journey here had been a blur, thoughts pinging around her skull like wasps trying to escape a jar.

Had Martin vanished because he knew Ella was onto him? Was there any other explanation? Could he have fled to another state, assumed a new identity, ran before the vice of justice could squeeze him?

She barely had time to yank the keys from the ignition before Mia came tearing out the front door like her ass was on fire. Ella had seen Mia keep her cool in moments that would have spelled death for most people: pistols kissing her temples, hands wrapped around her neck. But here, Mia looked a picture of desperation.

'Ripley, you look like death warmed up,' Ella slammed the car door hard enough to rattle her teeth. 'Tell me everything.'

Mia latched onto her arm, nails biting through her jacket. 'Martin's gone.'

Ella placed a hand on each of Ripley's shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. 'Relax. Talk me through it.'

Mia was clearly in no mood to be comforted. She broke free of Ella's grip and began pacing. 'I woke up this morning and Martin wasn't here. Car's gone. Full Houdini.'

'Have you tried calling him?'

'Phone's dead. No signal.'

‘Maybe he’s just catching up with some buddies,’ she said, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. She didn’t want to go full accusatory just yet, because there was a chance Mia could come to the same conclusion with enough applied logic.

Mia shook her head so hard Ella thought it might fly off. ‘He’d tell me if he did. The guy has all his outings listed on the calendar. You can’t take the military out of the man. If this was some social thing, I’d know about it, and he sure as hell wouldn’t go with a dead phone.’

A creeping sense of oh shit crawled up Ella’s spine. No way was this a coincidence. Not with what she knew. Not with Martin catching wind that she was onto his little murder spree.

‘Fishing?’ Ella asked.

‘His rod’s still here. I checked.’

‘How long’s he been gone?’

‘Since at least six AM. I’ve checked everywhere, Dark. All of his usual haunts. He’s not here.’

‘He still has his own house, right?’ Ella asked. She already knew Martin wouldn’t go back to such an obvious sanctuary, but she had to tick these places off her mental checklist.

”Been there, tried it. A neighbor said she hasn’t seen Martin in weeks.”

Ella’s mind flashed to that charged moment in Mia’s living room. The silent conversation between her and Martin. The predatory glint in his eyes. Both had a secret, neither wanted to share.

Martin knew his game was up and now he was rabbiting.

White-hot rage surged through Ella's veins, fists clenched hard enough to crack walnuts. She should've moved on him sooner. Should've put the screws to him the second the pieces clicked. But she'd wussed out – for fear of what? Ripping her best friend's life to shreds? Was the alternative of Mia living with a secret serial killer a better option?

Mia's face crumpled, tears threatening to spill over. She looked up at Ella. 'What if our angel got him, Dark? What if Martin was the next one in line?'

Ella's heart clenched as a sour taste flooded her mouth. She wasn't sure which was worse. That Martin was a homicidal guardian angel or whether he was the victim of one. Either way, it was Ripley that would bear the resulting trauma.

'Hey,' Ella said, gripping Mia's shoulders tight. 'You're the most logical woman I know. So use logic.'

Mia took a shuddering breath. Ella could practically see her shoving down the panic, the fear, locking it away behind that tough-as-nails exterior.

Okay, you're right. Logic. Facts. We can do that.'

Ella squeezed her shoulders once more before letting go. 'Damn straight we can. Now, walk me through last night. When's the last time you saw Martin?'

Mia ran a hand through her hair, eyes distant. 'Around midnight, I think. When we went to bed. Everything seemed normal. Or at least...'

Ella cocked her head, zeroing in on that flicker of hesitation. 'You thought? Something happen? You two have a lover's spat?' She tried to keep it cool, because

deep down, there was a part of Ella that wanted to believe Martin was innocent. Maybe he'd been framed, or it was her paranoia running rampant. It wouldn't be the first time she'd convinced herself of something that wasn't true, even though she was all but convinced that Martin was their killer in angel's clothing.

Mia shook her head, but there was a tightness around her mouth that hadn't been there before. 'No, no fight. It's just....'

She trailed off, worrying at her lower lip. Ella waited, letting the silence stretch. Sometimes, you had to give a perp enough rope to hang themselves. With any luck, Mia could arrive at the same conclusion Ella had.

'He was going through some old files,' Mia said finally, words tumbling out in a rush. 'Right before we turned in. Said he was looking for something.'

Ella's pulse kicked up a notch, but she kept her face carefully neutral. 'Files? What kind of files?'

'I don't know. Old cases, probably. Martin's always elbow-deep in paperwork. I didn't think anything of it at the time.'

Ella hummed, mind whirring. What had Martin been looking for? Evidence of his extracurricular activities? Proof that Ella was closing in? Or something else entirely, some piece of the puzzle she hadn't even considered?

She pushed down the frustration bubbling in her gut. They were grasping at straws here, chasing shadows and maybes. They needed something solid, something real.

'Let's look through his files, then,' Ella said. 'There could be something in there.'

'I don't know where they are. I searched this place high and low.'

Ella's jaw tightened, molars grinding. 'What about his car? Have you tried tracing it?'

'Put a request in at HQ, but nothing so far. No pings on any traffic cameras.'

Ella's phone pinged. A second later, Mia's did the same. They both glanced down, matching frowns on their faces. Ella checked it.

William Edis wanted to see them.

'Director wants us in the office,' Ella said. 'Stat.'

Mia shook her head. 'No chance. I'm not setting foot out of D.C. until I find Martin. The director can wait.'

Ella's heart twisted at the pain in Mia's eyes, the desperation etched into every line of her face. This was tearing her up inside, eating her alive. And Ella was just standing there, watching it happen.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was coming. It was now or never. Not only was this eating Mia from the inside out, but Edis was no doubt about to unload another case on them. They could be gone for days, weeks. Ella couldn't let Mia torture herself while they were on the road.

Time to rip off the Band-Aid and face the messed-up truth.

'Mia...' she started, the words like broken glass in her throat. 'Have you considered... I mean, is it possible that Martin could be... responsible for all this?'

Mia's head snapped up, eyes blazing. 'What?'

Ella held up her hands, palms out. A placating gesture, like she was trying to soothe a snarling dog. ‘Just hear me out, okay? Think about it. All these people, anyone who wronged us, dropping like flies.’ She trailed off, letting the implication hang in the air like a noose. Mia stared at her, mouth agape, a vein throbbing in her temple.

‘You’re not seriously saying this, are you?’

Even as she said it, Ella could see the doubt creeping in, the awful realization dawning in her eyes. Because deep down, Mia had to know. Had to have considered the possibility, even if she’d shoved it down and locked it away. It could be ignorance, obliviousness, stubbornness. But a part of Ripley had to have considered the possibility.

‘He had access, Mia,’ Ella pressed, hating herself for every word. ‘He was the only person that knew about Nash, Carter, Ben, Trevor. Tell me if I’m telling lies.’

Mia turned away and overlooked the lake. ‘No. There’s no chance. Martin is...’

But her voice was wavering now, the conviction leaching out of it like blood from a wound. Ella could see the cracks forming, the foundation of Mia’s world crumbling beneath her feet.

And God, it killed her to do this. To be the one to shatter Mia’s illusions, to rip away the blinders and force her to see the ugly truth. But someone had to. Someone had to say the words to voice the horrible suspicion that had been gnawing at Ella’s gut since yesterday.

Even if it meant losing Mia forever. Even if it meant watching her best friend, her sister-in-arms, break into a million jagged pieces right before her eyes.

Ella reached out and grabbed Mia’s hand. ‘I’m sorry, Mia. I really am. But we have

to consider...’

Mia ripped her hand away, staggering back like Ella had slapped her. ‘We don’t have to consider shit,’ she snapped. ‘You’ve lost your mind.’

‘Have I? Because when I was here yesterday, I saw it.’

Mia spun and stared daggers at her possibly-former partner. ‘Saw what?’

”Martin. I saw it in his eyes. He knew I knew because he was the figure I saw in Ben’s apartment. He’s the guy on the CCTV footage from Carter’s murder. Hell, you can check it yourself.”

Mia strode closer, and if it was anyone but her partner in front of her, Ella could have sworn she was about to be punched. If it made Mia feel better, she could take all the shots she wanted.

‘And you got all that? From a glance?’

She had to make Mia see, had to drag her out of the dark pit of denial that threatened to swallow her. Ella knew that pit all too well.

‘Think about it, Ripley. Really think. Nobody else on this planet knew about our connections to Nash, Carter, Ben and Trevor.’

‘Oh please,’ Ripley practically screamed. ‘Nash was a known criminal. Everyone hated Carter. Trevor was a scumbag.’

Ella knew Ripley’s tone better than anyone. It was the same look she got when a perp tried to sweet talk her in the interrogation room, when a suspect thought they could pull a fast one.

‘And who knew about their connections to us? Me, you... and Martin. Nobody else.’

‘I’m not hearing this, Dark. You’re on my doorstep, telling me my partner is killing people? Why would he do that?’

Ella got it. God knows she did. The heart had a funny way of blinding you to the things you didn’t want to see, of making excuses and rationalizations for the inexcusable. She’d been there herself more times than she cared to admit.

But this was different. This was life and death, blood and bullets. They didn’t have the luxury of turning a blind eye, of pretending everything was sunshine and rainbows when the storm clouds were gathering on the horizon.

‘That’s what I’ve been asking myself. But please, we need to...’

‘If you ever mention this again, I swear I’ll-’ Mia raised a hand, tensed harder than a slab of granite. Ella clocked it, shut her eyes, prepared to endure the sting of her once-partner’s fleshy palm.

But it didn’t come.

Mia slammed her hand into her own side, turned away and stormed back towards the house like a soldier marching into battle. Her shoulders were rigid, her spine ramrod straight, every line of her body screaming get the hell out of here.

Ella watched her go. There was a hollow ache in her chest, where her heart used to be. Two years they’d been partners, two years of having each other’s backs through thick and thin. They’d faced down serial killers and psychopaths, had stared into the abyss and come out the other side battered but still by each other’s side.

And suddenly it felt like it was all crumbling away, like the foundation of their

friendship was built on quicksand and lies. Ella wanted to scream, to grab Mia by the shoulders and shake her until she saw sense, until she realized the danger they were in.

But she knew it was futile. Mia was too far gone, too deep in the trenches of love and loyalty to see the truth. She'd have to come to it on her own, have to face the ugly reality of Martin's betrayal in her own time.

Mia slammed her front door, leaving Ella alone outside. For a long moment, she just stood there, staring at the closed door like a lost puppy waiting for its owner to come back.

But she knew they wouldn't. Knew that Mia needed time, needed space to process the bombshell Ella had just dropped on her head. Pushing her now would drive the wedge between them deeper.

So Ella did the only thing she could. She turned on her heel and walked away, every step feeling like a mile, every breath like a knife to the lungs. She climbed into her car and started up the engine. She sat there a minute, fighting the urge to storm into Mia's house, grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she saw reason. But she wrestled the temptation into submission and shoved the thoughts into the same dark corner of her mind where she kept all the other ugly truths and painful realities of her job.

This wasn't about her. This was about Mia, about giving her the space and time she needed to come to terms with the fact that the man she loved, the man she'd given her heart to, was a monster in disguise.

Ella put the car in gear and pulled away. She didn't look back, didn't let herself dwell on the pain and heartbreak that lay behind her.

There would be time for that later, time to lick her wounds and nurse her broken heart. But right now, she had to get to work.

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Mia slammed the door so hard the hinges nearly blew clean off. The sound echoed through the house like a gunshot. Her blood was boiling hotter than Satan's sauna, and the pounding in her skull made the entire world feel like it was caving in.

Ella's words kept ringing in her ears. Accusing Martin - her Martin - of being some twisted guardian angel offing their enemies. It was so absurd Mia wanted to laugh until her lungs gave out. But all that came was a scream lodged in her throat, ready to tear the world a new one.

She stormed into the kitchen, snatched a whiskey bottle and took a long pull. How could Ella even suggest it? Sweet, charming Martin who made her feel alive again after the never-ending freak show that was life in the Bureau. He was a goddamn saint, not some deranged serial killer.

And what proof did Ella have? A glance? A hunch? Some half-baked theory pulled straight from her ass? She wanted to march right back outside, grab Ella by the shoulders and shake her so hard her perfect teeth rattled. But a tiny voice in the back of her head made her pause. The one that sounded annoyingly like the hard-nosed agent she was before Martin waltzed into her world and made everything feel shiny and new.

'You're an investigator, she told herself. Act like it.'

Mia growled and took another swig, welcoming the slow burn. Investigator. Right. Guess that meant doing the last thing she wanted - looking at this mess through the eyes of an impartial agent instead of a woman ready to castrate her best friend for talking smack.

Fine. She'd do the cop thing even if it made her want to hurl. She'd comb through the facts, wrack her brain for anything that might make Ella's wild theory more than the ravings of a lovesick fool. Mia slumped into a chair, massaging her temples. She started flipping through her memories like a deranged scrapbook. All the late night conversations with Martin, the pillow talk, the whispered secrets in the dark.

Christ, had she spilled her guts about Ella's drama? The whole debacle with Ben and how it sent her partner into a tailspin? Mia squeezed her eyes shut, trying to conjure Martin's honey-smooth voice.

'Heard things ended badly with Ella's boy toy. She doing okay?'

Mia's eyes snapped open. She had told him. Right after the big blowout that left Ella a zombie for weeks. In her defense, she'd been three bourbons deep and in desperate need of an ear. And Martin had been so sweet, so understanding.

No. No way. That proved nothing except her big mouth after too much whiskey. She dug deeper into the mess of memories, trying to unearth more clues in this pile of mental garbage.

Logan Nash. That guy's name was forever branded in her brain after what he did to Ella's old man. But had Mia ever told Martin about him? About the history there?

A vague recollection surfaced through the pounding in her skull. Some late night jabber session where the ghosts of their pasts came out to play. She'd spilled her guts about Nash while Martin held her close and whispered all the right things.

Goddammit. Strike two.

And Randall Carter. The smug son of a bitch who'd lucked into a role as FBI director and then treated her and Ella like something he scraped off his shoe. Mia would bet

her pension she'd run her mouth about him too during another bitch fest with her boyfriend - no, human security blanket.

But these scumbags had plenty of enemies, a line around the block itching to do them in. Just because Martin knew about the bad blood didn't make him a murderer. Christ, if she indicted people based on a couple conversations half the city would be behind bars.

Enter Trevor. Her ex-husband. Trevor had blackmailed Mia, tried to siphon fifty grand out of her bank account. Mia had refused, things had gotten ugly. Martin had been privy to every detail.

Mia stood so fast her chair toppled over. Investigator hat. Right. She had to look for facts, not cling to maybes that would send her world into a tailspin.

She needed those files Martin was digging for last night. Maybe they'd have some answers or at least a breadcrumb to follow out of this mess.

Without a second thought, Mia began tearing through the house like a woman possessed. She ransacked the kitchen, upending drawers and rifling through the stack of papers by the phone.

Nothing but bills and old grocery lists.

She moved on to the bedroom, tearing through the closet and peeking under the bed. Just a few lacy scraps she'd been saving for a rainy day and a thick layer of dust bunnies.

The office was next. Martin's sacred space where he'd spend hours poring over paperwork and doing whatever the hell retired feds did to keep busy. Mia always gave it a wide berth out of respect and a healthy dose of self-preservation. Nothing

killed the mood faster than wading through a sea of redacted files.

But desperate times and everything. She started with the desk, yanking open drawers and flipping through binders. Lots of blacked out pages and cryptic notes in Martin's chicken scratch. Nothing that screamed suspicious. She moved on to the filing cabinets lining the walls, combing through each one with rising desperation. More of the same - old cases, expense reports, a few newspaper clippings with either Mia's or Martin's name amongst the column inches. The only thing out of place was the empty space in the bottom drawer where files used to be. The ones Martin had been elbow-deep in last night.

'Damn it.' Mia slammed the drawer shut.

Martin had taken something. He'd never leave it like this. The man was military to the bone, never a hair out of place.

She collapsed into Martin's huge leather chair and stared at the ceiling. Her head felt ready to pop, and her gut churned like a blender set to pulverize. She was running on rage fumes and nowhere closer to unscrewing this situation.

Mia fumbled in her pocket for her phone and re-read Edis's text message.

He wanted her in the office immediately.

Her eyes caught the framed picture of her and Martin on the desk. Grinning like loons at some beach, she couldn't remember. He had his arms around her waist, and she looked happier than she had in years.

No. Mia wasn't going to work until she had answers.

Mia closed her eyes, sending up a silent prayer to a God she wasn't sure she believed

in but was ready to get chummy with if it unfucked her life.

‘Please, let this be some comedy of errors,’ she said.

Then she jabbed the call button before she lost her nerve.

It rang once. Twice.

‘Ripley?’ Edis’ familiar rumble filled her ear. ‘Are you on your way in?’

”No, I’m not. I have an emergency back home.”

‘An emergency? Mia, I’ve got a situation in Delaware and no agents to...’

‘Will,’ Mia interrupted. ‘You can threaten me with suspension or offer me a million dollars. I’m not going anywhere.’

A pause. ‘If you insist. Is everything okay?’

‘No, it’s not,’ Ripley said. ‘In fact, I need you to do something for me.’

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Ella felt like a damn zombie. Shambling through the FBI halls, head a jumbled mess of static and white noise. The fight with Mia played on repeat, like a greatest hits of accusations and denials that made her want to put her fist through a wall.

They never fought. Not like this. They'd waded through hell together, seen the worst humanity had to offer and come out the other side joined at the hip. But apparently all it took was one charming silver fox with a closet full of skeletons to rip them to shreds. She wished she could stay in D.C. and help Ripley uncurl this mess of a situation, but Mia was the most stubborn person she knew and then some. If Ella offered a helping hand, Mia would swat it away just like she'd considering swatting her face an hour ago.

Ella's feet carried her on autopilot, weaving through the sea of suits until she reached Edis' door. She half-expected to see Mia there, leaning against the wall with two steaming cups of coffee and a smirk that said let's do this.

But the space was empty. Nothing but a black hole where her partner should be.

Flying solo. The notion sucker punched Ella right in the chest. She couldn't remember the last time she'd walked into the boss's office without Mia by her side. She knocked on the door and a muffled come in filtered through the wood and frosted glass. She pushed inside before her nerves could get the best of her.

The boss man was parked behind his desk, blue suit straining against his linebacker frame. The fluorescent lights did him no favors, lumping every new wrinkle and gray hair front and center. Poor guy aged a decade a day, no doubt from playing nice with the stuffed shirts and blowhards higher up the food chain.

‘Sir.’ Ella tried for professional, burying the urge to word-vomit her drama all over his carpet. ‘You wanted to see me?’

Edis waved her into a seat. ‘Change in routine today, Miss Dark.’

Ella’s molars ground together hard enough to crack. The empty seat beside her where Ripley always parked her backside screamed louder than a banshee with a megaphone. No doubt Mia had given Edis an earful about their little spat and her wild theories. Probably threw in a few colorful suggestions about where Ella could shove her opinions too.

‘I believe so.’

Edis folded his hands on the desk, looking every inch the disappointed dad about to drop a hammer. ‘Agent Ripley has a personal issue to attend to.’

”Yes, she does,” Ella said.

‘Do you have any idea what it is?’ Edis asked. He switched from professional to curious citizen without blinking. ‘I hate to pry, but she sounded at her wits end on the phone.’

This wasn’t Ella’s place to elaborate, she decided. ‘Issues with her partner, I believe.’ That was enough.

‘She requested the police reports of her ex-husband’s death. And I believe she requested something from our tech team this morning. Other than that, I’m not clued up.’

‘The police reports? Can we even provide them?’

‘Local PD have jurisdiction, but we can pull rank if necessary. I did so.’

A surge of hope bubbled in Ella’s gut, but it was short-lived. Maybe Ripley was seeing sense. She might be investigating Trevor’s death as a rogue agent, trying to see if Martin could have been involved. But Ella knew Ripley’s stubbornness better than anyone, so there was equal chance she was investigating it just to disprove Martin’s involvement. And the end result would no doubt be shoved in Ella’s face.

‘Please keep checking on her,’ Ella said.

‘I will.’ Edis grunted, appeased for now. ‘But like it or not, there’s work to be done. A real nasty one just came across my desk and I need my A-team on it.’

Ella’s stomach sank to her shoes. A case. She knew it was coming, but now it was a reality. As if the universe hadn’t crapped on her enough recently, now she had to dive headfirst into another nightmare without Mia watching her six.

But what choice did she have? Throwing a tantrum wouldn’t change the facts. Mia was missing in action, off chasing ghosts and licking her wounds. And Ella still had a job to do, broken heart be damned.

‘What’re the details, sir?’ Ella hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. She’d flown solo a few times before, and it was always like walking a tightrope over a shark tank. One wrong move meant fish food.

A knock at the door made them both jump. Edis cleared his throat, smoothing a hand over what was left of his hair. ‘About that. You won’t be going in alone.’

Ella’s head whipped around just as the door swung open, revealing a face she knew all too well. Luca Hawkins. Same brown jacket, same hair that seemed a little too slick to be real. Still the walking cologne model she’d seen in the coffee shop a few

hours ago.

Ella's heart did a backflip at the sight of him. The guy was a walking, talking reminder of all the things she couldn't have. A normal life, a stable relationship, a partner who didn't accuse her boyfriend of murder over coffee.

Edis stood up, waving Luca inside like he was showing off a shiny new toy. 'I believe you've met Agent Hawkins. He's one of our agents in training, but his file speaks for itself.'

Ella wanted to laugh. Or cry. Or maybe just say screw it all and become a hermit in the woods. She reached out and took Luca's hand again. Luca flashed her a grin that could power a small city, clearly recognizing Ella's effort of showmanship. He returned the gesture regardless.

'Thank you, sir,' Luca said to the director. 'I'm looking forward to seeing Agent Dark in action.'

Ella's cheeks heated even as her stomach churned. Fantastic. Not only was she diving into a new case without Mia, but now she had to do it with a walking distraction by her side. A distraction with eyes that could make a nun consider breaking her vows.

'Careful what you wish for, Agent Hawkins.' She glanced at Luca, taking in the eager glint in his eye, the coiled energy in his frame. Poor guy had no idea what he was signing up for. Those good looks would be nothing but baggy eyelids and wrinkles before the year was out.

Edis cleared his throat like a backfiring engine. A not-so-subtle signal for them to put a pin in the pleasantries. He slid two folders across the desk like they were radioactive.

‘Dover, Delaware,’ he announced. ‘Two bodies in two days.’

Ella grabbed her folder, ignored the police reports and zeroed in on the crime scene shots. They always told a better story than any half-assed write-up. The first picture stopped her dead in her tracks.

‘Good God,’ she said.

Beside her, Luca’s file lay open on the same picture, face twisted into an easily-readable expression. ‘What the hell is going on here?’

‘You get used to it,’ Ella said.

Luca was back on the photos, skimming through them one by one. Ella did the same. The first victim was a young man, around mid-twenties, locked in a wooden contraption that bound his head and wrists. Ella couldn’t help but think of medieval torture devices.

Edis jumped in, ‘As you can see, our unsub’s got a thing for restraints.’

Ella studied a close-up shot of the Vic’s face. Strong jaw, Roman nose. Probably a looker before death froze him in a rictus of terror. Her heart sank to her stomach. Just a kid. She closed her eyes, muttered a silent prayer to a God she was sure had given up on her by now.

‘Pillory stocks,’ Luca said. ‘Like from the Middle Ages.’

‘Theatrical. Unnecessary. The unsub is trying to humiliate these people.’ Ella turned to the next set of photographs. This time, the victim was a woman, around the same age as the first.

‘Man and woman. Inconsistent victimology. This second set of stocks looks a little different from the first.’

Ella checked a photo showing a close-up of the apparatus. ‘First one is made of metal, second is wood.’

‘Amateur contraptions,’ Luca said.

Ella nodded, gears grinding away. ‘Our guy could be making these himself. And the victim disparity suggests it’s not about a physical type. Could be personal. Vics might represent someone specific to him.’

‘Surrogates. Guess these folks were in the wrong place at the wrong time.’

Ella thumbed to the close-ups of number two. Tilted her head, considering. No ligature marks around the wrists, despite their positioning. No bruising on the neck. Just the mottled, waxy pallor of the recently deceased.

‘Lack of restraint marks. Means they were dead before taking their places in the stocks.’

Luca hummed. ‘So the stocks are symbolic. Some kinda post-mortem ritual.’

‘And public. Gotta figure the perp wanted these poor guys found. Center stage in his own little theater of cruelty.’

Edis grunted. Meaty hand rubbing his forehead like he could smooth out the worry lines. ‘Newspapers are going to have a field day with this one, so keep the details on the down low. We’ve already got plenty of eyes on us after the mess with Carter, so the last thing we need is any more bad press. I need this case stamped out quickly.’

‘Yes sir,’ Ella said.

‘I’ll do my best, sir,’ echoed Luca.

‘Hawkins, I know I’m throwing you in at the deep end here, but Agent Dark will take good care of you.’

Luca shifted. His foot began tapping out a rapid-fire beat. Ella could practically smell the nerves wafting off him. She remembered the day Ripley had barreled into her life like a redheaded wrecking ball and took her through the swamps of Louisiana. Back then, Ella was probably wearing the same expression Luca was now. He was wearing it well, but Ella could see right through it.

‘I trust her to do so,’ Luca said. ‘Thank you for the opportunity, sir. I won’t let you down. Either of you.’

‘See that you don’t. Car for Dover will be in the lot in twenty. No point in flying when it’s only ninety minutes away.’

‘Roger that,’ Ella said. Any excuse to avoid the airport was fine by her. ‘I’ll keep you updated.’

Edis grunted. Dismissal and warning all in one. Ella turned on her heel and strode out with Luca behind her.

Now, the fun could begin.

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The car hummed down the highway, chewing up the miles to Dover. Ella sat in the back, nerves jangling like a pocket full of change. Luca was beside her, still the perfect G-man poster boy, even in the cramped space.

Ella wanted to hear his story, at least in more detail than he'd already shared, but she couldn't risk it. She didn't want to get too close, because everyone near her ended up in the ground or worse. She cut her eyes at Luca. He had his nose buried in the casefile, brow furrowed, pen tapping against his lip. The kid was desperate to prove himself. Desperate to show he had the chops. She couldn't curse this promising rookie with the affliction of her association.

"How are you feeling about this?" Ella asked. "Jumping into the deep end."

Luca glanced up, startled. Like he'd forgotten she was there. "Can't put it into words. Feels odd. Surreal. Like, I'm not really here. Does that make sense?"

Ella nodded. 'I know exactly what you mean. My first case with Ripley sent me to Louisiana, chasing a copycat that was mimicking Gein and Bundy and a bunch of other serial killers. I made a lot of mistakes.'

'Sounds like a lot of responsibility,' Luca said. He shifted in his seat, pen still tapping, nerves leaking out any way they could.

Ella remembered the Mimicker case like it was yesterday. She'd puked her guts out at every scene. But Ripley had been there. A steady hand on her back. A voice in her ear, telling her to breathe through it.

God, she missed that bitch already. Missed her like a severed limb.

‘What’s your take?’ Ella jerked her chin at the file. ‘What kind of sick puppy are we dealing with?’

Luca flipped to the crime scene photos. Studied them like they held the secrets of the universe. ‘Guy’s acting out a specific fantasy. Wants recognition for it. These scenes, they’re compensating for something. Righting a perceived wrong.’

Ella leaned back. Not bad for a rookie. She remembered Ripley grilling her the same way back in the day. Poking and prodding. Seeing what she was made of.

‘Perceived wrong,’ Ella echoed. ‘Elaborate.’

‘The stocks. The public displays.’ Luca waved a hand. ‘Unsub feels wronged. Humiliated. This is his way of getting even. Putting his vics through what he went through.’

Ella chewed on the comment. Luca was on the ball. Most serial killers were just overgrown kids throwing tantrums, raging at a world that didn’t give a damn.

‘Okay. Let’s play it out. What’s our boy’s damage? Try a profile.’

Luca blinked. Deer in the headlights. But he rallied quickly and flipped to a fresh page in his notebook. Before he began scribbling, he asked, “Are you testing me?”

‘If you want.’

‘Alright, go easy,’ Luca said. ‘Unsub is mid-twenties to mid-thirties. Menial job. Minimum wage. Feels looked down on. Disrespected. Loner. Lives alone.’

‘Why?’

‘If he lived with someone else, they’d pick up on his mental issues. No one had a chance to see this guy’s spiral, and now we’re witnessing the limit of it. And he’s a white male, goes without saying.’

Ella looked over at his notes.

‘Why is he a white male?’

‘Both victims are white. Even if there’s no sexual component – which there isn’t – serial killers are still more likely to hunt within their own racial groups.’

‘True. What else?’

‘History of mental illness. Rejection sensitive. Lacks emotional coping skills.’ Luca was in the zone now. Words flowing fast and furious. ‘I’m seeing a triggering event. Something that pushed him over the edge. Made him feel less than.’

‘Like?’

‘Girlfriend dumped him. Got passed over for a promotion. Kicked out of his LARP group.’

Ella snorted. ‘That’s a new one.’

‘Basement-dweller. Can’t get laid, can’t get paid, can’t get no respect. How am I doing so far?’

Ella fought the urge to slap his shoulder and tell him he was going to make a fine profiler. ‘Not bad, rookie, but I wouldn’t rule out a sexual component yet. We don’t

know if there are any signs of sexual assault, not to mention that these weird contraptions remind me of something.'

Luca shot her a raised eyebrow. 'BDSM restraints?'

Ella shrugged. 'Looks oddly familiar.'

'Familiar, huh?'

'Not like that.' The car hit a pothole. Jounced them in their seats. Ella grabbed the oh-shit handle and felt the plastic bite into her palm. Luca chuckled and went back to his notes. 'I mean, I saw it too. But these contraptions look like they're made from wood and metal. I don't want to sound like an expert in weird sex, but aren't bondage restraints made from leather?'

Truthfully, Ella had no idea. This was usually when she and Ripley would start riffing. Building theories. Bouncing ideas like a deranged game of mental ping-pong.

Luca was good. Better than good. But he wasn't Mia.

'I'd have to double-check,' Ella said. 'Victim number one. What do we know about him?'

Her new partner skimmed back a few pages in his folder. 'Archie Newman, twenty-six years old. Works as a bartender. Lives with his parents. No criminal record. Not a whole lot to go on.'

'And victim number two?'

Luca flipped a page. 'Georgia Bolton. Twenty-four. Waitress at a dive bar called The Rusty Nail. That's pretty much all we've got.'

A waitress, perhaps with dreams of something better. Story old as time. Until some twisted freak decided to make her the star of his own private snuff film.

Ella drummed her fingers on her thigh. "So we've got a bartender and a waitress. Both are in their mid-twenties. Both probably slinging drinks to the same crowd."

'Maybe they knew each other,' Luca suggested.

'Dover's a decent size, but it's possible. We need to check out their personal lives and see if anything overlaps.'

Luca scratched his pen against the paper. Ella watched him out of the corner of her eye. He was eager, endearingly eager. Like a puppy straining at the leash, ready to chase the first scent that crossed his path. She just hoped he had the stomach for it. Hunting monsters wasn't for the faint of heart. You had to be willing to burn the worst of humanity into your retinas and somehow live with it for the rest of your life.

Luca glanced up, caught her looking. His brow furrowed. 'Something on your mind?'

Ella shook her head. 'Just thinking. This unsub, he's bold. Dumping bodies in public like that. He wants to make a statement.'

'And what's that?'

'That he's in control. That he can do whatever he wants and no one can stop him.' Ella's lip curled. 'But he's wrong. We're gonna stop him. We're gonna nail his ass to the wall.'

Luca's eyes gleamed. 'Damn straight.'

The kid had fire. Ella had to give him that. But fire only got you so far in this line of

work. You needed ice in your veins, too. The kind of cold, calculated detachment that let you look at a mangled corpse and see evidence instead of a person.

She wondered if Luca had that. Or if he'd burn out fast and bright, just another casualty of the job.

Only one way to find out.

Luca peered out the window, his nose wrinkling. 'When we get there, where are we heading? The precinct?'

'Afraid not,' Ella said. 'We're going right into the heart of it.'

'Where's that?'

Ella tapped her case file. 'These things only give you half of the story. When you see the crime scene, things suddenly look a lot different. We're going to visit Georgia Bolton's death site. With any luck, it should still be warm.'

Luca nodded, soaking it up like a sponge. Kid was a quick study. Ella just hoped he was ready for the crash course.

She eyed the bulge under his jacket. 'You comfortable with that thing?'

Luca glanced down, patted his side. 'My gun? Yeah, I think so. I mean, I passed my qualifications, but how often do you have to... you know....?'

'Shoot someone?' Ella finished for him. She barked a laugh, short and sharp.

'Yeah.'

"In my whole time in the field, I've shot two people, which is more times than I'd like."

'Only two?'

'Never point your gun at something unless you intend to kill it, and I've only intended to kill once. The other time was damage control.'

Her hand drifted to her pocket and brushed against the hard edge of her phone. She thought of Mia, probably drowning her sorrows in a bottle of Jack, cursing Ella's name with every sip.

She should call her. Check in. Make sure she hadn't done anything stupid. But what would she say? Sorry for accusing your boyfriend of being a serial killer. My bad.

No. Mia needed time. Space. And Ella had a job to do. She couldn't let herself get distracted.

In the front of the car, the driver glanced in his central mirror and said, 'Twenty minutes 'til arrival.'

She straightened in her seat. Rolled her shoulders. Felt the familiar weight of her Glock nestled against her ribs.

Another day at the office awaited, another dance with the devil.

She just hoped they both made it out without too many scars. But she wasn't betting on it, because in this business, the house always won in the end.

Ella was damned. She knew that. Had known it for a long time. But maybe, just maybe, she could keep Luca from sharing her fate.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella rolled up on Chautauqua Park like a storm cloud, ready to rain hell. The place was swarming with uniforms, yellow tape flapping in the breeze like a flock of pissed off canaries. Looky-loos clustered at the perimeter, noses pressed to the proverbial glass, like vultures circling a fresh kill.

Luca was beside her, all lanky limbs and nervous energy. She could practically smell the fear sweat leaking from his every pore. Poor kid looked like he was about to hurl his lunch all over his shiny new wingtips.

‘You ready for this?’ Ella cocked a brow at him.

Luca nodded jerkily. ‘Yeah. Let’s do this.’

Brave words. But his face was fish-belly pale, and Ella could see his pulse hammering in the hollow of his throat. Like a rabbit cornered by a hungry wolf.

But hey, they all had to start somewhere. Ella thought back to that fateful day in Louisiana – the corpse of a woman strung up like a deer, missing her face and a few internal organs. Ella remembered the stench, the flies, the way her stomach had twisted itself into a gordian knot and threatened to evacuate her breakfast all over the evidence.

Those were the days.

She gave Luca what she hoped was an encouraging nod and headed for the tape. A baby-faced uniform stood guard, thumbs hooked in his utility belt like a Wild West sheriff. He eyed them warily as they drew near.

Ella flashed her creds. 'SA Dark and Hawkins. FBI. We're here to meet with whoever's in charge.'

The uniform's brows shot up to his hairline. He fumbled for his radio, muttering something about the feds gracing them with their presence. Ella resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Local yokels always got their tighty-whities in a twist when the out-of-towners came sniffing around.

A few crackly exchanges later another uniform appeared from the depths of the scene. Older. Harder. A face like a clenched fist, all scowl lines and pinched lips. He had the look of a man who'd seen too many stabbings and not enough shut-eye.

He thrust out a hand. 'Chief Dean Harland. Thanks for getting here so damn sharpish.' Ella returned his grip. Harland shook a little too hard.

'Early bird gets the unsub,' Ella said. 'You're in charge?'

'That I am.' Harland's eyes flicked to Luca and sized him up like a cut of meat at the butcher shop. 'No Ripley this time?'

'Afraid not. You know her?'

'They sent her last time we had a serial psycho running around. Must have been ten years ago.'

Of course, Harland knew her. Every chief in every town in this damn country seemed to know her. "Ripley's on a leave of absence. What's the status of the scene?"

Harland scratched at his stubbled jaw. 'Passerby called us just before seven this morning. The guy heard a scream, thought someone was being attacked. He followed the sound through those trees up ahead and found another rubbernecker. That was

who screamed.'

'Two people,' Ella said. 'You spoke to both of them?'

'Yup. Cleared. The guy was a feeble little thing, and the girl – the screamer – was barely eighteen.'

Luca chimed in. 'Not exactly serial killer material.'

'They touch anything?' Ella asked.

Harland shook his head. "Not a thing. The guy had the good sense to call it in right away. Been keeping the scene locked down tighter than a nun's knickers since, but you know what the public is like."

Ella knew all too well. In her line of work, death was the ultimate tourist attraction. 'What about our vic? Is she still there?'

'Coroner bagged her about an hour ago. But they left that medieval contraption in place. Figured you'd want to get up close and personal with it.'

'That we do,' Ella said. 'Lead the way.'

He led them past the sea of uniforms and gawking onlookers towards a small clearing ringed by towering oaks. The bandstand sat smack in the center, a round wooden platform with a conical roof. It might have been charming once, the kind of place where the town brass band tooted their horns on lazy summer afternoons.

But nothing was charming about it now. Not with that monstrosity squatting in the middle like a tumor.

‘Right in the middle of the bandstand,’ Harland said. ‘Never seen nothing like it in all my years.’

Ella strode towards the bandstand, Luca falling into step beside her. With each footfall, the knot in her gut pulled tighter, like a noose around her neck. The photos from the case file flashed through her mind in a hellish slideshow, but those black-and-white shots hadn’t done justice to the eeriness of the thing. Up close and personal, the thing was a behemoth - a hulking mass of rough-hewn wood, like something straight out of a medieval torture chamber.

‘Christ on a bike,’ Luca said. He took a few steps back.

Ella fished a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and tossed them to her new partner. ‘Rule number one. Don’t add any prints to the scene.’

Luca fumbled the catch, nearly dropping the glove in the dirt. Ella bit back a smirk.

‘Understood,’ he said.

They snapped on their gloves and got down to business, circling the stocks like sharks scenting blood. Ella ran a critical eye over every inch of the contraption, pressing a gentle finger to the apparatus, testing its rigidity. The thing was solid as a rock.

‘Good craftsmanship for something amateur.’ Luca must have read her mind.

The damn thing was clean as a preacher’s sheets, Ella thought. No bloodstains, no tangled hairs in the hole designed for her head. Even the ground around the base was undisturbed, like the stocks had just materialized out of thin air.

She crouched down, examining the base of the stocks. The top section, the part that

would have locked the victim's head and hands in place, lay on the ground a few feet away. Like it had been tossed aside in haste.

Ella straightened up, dusting off her hands. 'Chief. This bit here. Was it like this when you found her?'

Harland ambled over, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. 'We had to take that part off to get her out. The damn thing wasn't even locked in place. Just sort of slotted in.'

Luca asked, 'No padlocks? No screws?'

'Nope,' Harland said.

Ella's brow furrowed. 'So our vic was already cold by the time he trussed her up. He did the dirty work somewhere else, then transported them here for the big reveal.'

Harland spat into the dirt. 'Freak. Parading them around like some kinda trophy.'

Ella barely heard him. She was too busy chasing the thread, unraveling the skein of the unsub's twisted logic. 'He's staging them,' she murmured. 'Posing them just so, like mannequins in a department store window.'

'But how's he getting all this stuff here?' Luca asked. He gestured around. 'It's not like he can drive a car all the way up here. Nearest parking space is...'

'A hundred feet away,' Harland jumped in. 'I've been asking the same questions.'

'Piece by piece,' Ella said.

'That might explain this weird device, but how's someone get a body here without anyone seeing?'

Ella considered it and could only conjure up one likely answer. ‘Witnesses found this in the early hours, so chances are he snuck in here in the dead of night. Never explain with conjecture what can be explained with blind luck.’

Harland shifted uneasily. ‘So you think this guy snuck this device in, set it up, then went back and hauled a body here too?’

‘I don’t see any other way. He didn’t kill the victim here, so he had to transport her here. This park’s open twenty-four hours?’

‘Yup.’

‘Then it has to be that. We need any CCTV from the surrounding areas. Parking lot, roads leading into this place. Everything.’

‘Already on it,’ Harland said. ‘Forensics have been and gone, so we’ll have a report within a couple of hours.’

‘Excellent.’

Ella turned back to the skeleton of the stocks, her eyes tracing over every joint and plane. Imagining their victim splayed out in this thing, limbs askew, head lolling obscenely. A grotesque puppet, dancing to their killer’s tune.

But why here? Why this place, this particular slice of suburban hell? There had to be a reason. With theatrical displays like this, there was always a reason, always something that harkened back to a traumatic incident. Even if it all only made sense in the funhouse mirror of their own twisted psyche.

‘Alright,’ Ella said, stepping back from the bandstand. ‘Let’s think about this. Our boy goes to a lot of trouble to bring his victims here. Sets up this whole tableau,

makes a real production of it. Why?’

Luca shrugged helplessly. ‘To show off? To get attention?’

She looked out at the park, at the soccer moms and dog walkers already starting to drift back in now that the initial shock had worn off. Chautauqua Park. Where families came to frolic and old folks fed the pigeons. Norman Rockwell Americana, right down to the duck pond and the ice cream truck.

But scratch that wholesome surface, and what did you find? Strip away the veneer of picket fences and porch swings, and what dark things scuttled underneath?

Ella had to question whether or not it mattered. This could be Delaware rural France, or the seventh circle of hell. Everywhere had their secrets, hidden ugliness. And sometimes, that ugliness couldn’t be contained anymore. Sometimes, it came boiling up to the surface, seeping out through the cracks in the sidewalk like pus from a festering wound.

‘He hasn’t just built this thing in the middle of the trees,’ Luca continued. ‘It’s literally on a stage, where eyes are naturally drawn.’

‘Even when it’s empty,’ Ella said.

‘Probably stakes out his hunting grounds in advance. Knows the blind spots, the places where he can strike without drawing attention,’ Luca chimed in.

Ella nodded. The kid was catching on quickly. ‘He’s organized, meticulous. This whole scene, it’s literal theater to him. He’s sending a message, making a statement.’

‘By turning his victims into a sideshow attraction?’ Harland grunted, equal parts disgusted and baffled.

‘In his twisted little mind, yeah.’ Ella circled the stocks, taking in every angle, every splinter. ‘Chances are our guy sees himself as an artist, only instead of paint and canvas, he’s using bone and wood. Humiliation. Debasement. He’s stripping them of their humanity, their dignity. Putting them on display like animals in a zoo.’

She could almost hear the howls of the crowd, feel the rotten vegetables splattering against wood and skin. Public shaming, medieval style. Cruel and visceral, designed to break the spirit as much as the body.

Harland asked, ‘Couldn’t this freak just be obsessed with old torture devices or something? He’s done this twice in two days now.’

‘No. If that was the case, he’d mix things up. The stocks are crucial to his fantasy. This is a power trip,’ she continued, mind spinning out the theory. ‘He’s playing judge, jury and executioner.’

The chief just shook his head, the disgust eating him away. Ella couldn’t blame him. Staring into the heart of darkness day after day took its toll. They were all just different degrees of damned.

And if the killer’s two-bodies-in-two-days pattern was anything to go by, they’d need to act quickly before another body dropped into their laps.

Harland rocked back on his heels then checked his cell phone. ‘I’ll have my boys send over what we’ve got so far. Witness statements, CCTV footage, the whole nine. The coroner’s ready for you if you want me to drop you at the morgue.’

‘Please,’ Ella said. She glanced at Luca, who was still transfixed by the makeshift stocks. ‘Hawkins, burn that image into your mind because it’s the last we’ll see of it. Harland, can you get those stocks into evidence? The last thing we need is some journalist sneaking in here and snapping it.’

‘Roger that,’ Harland said as he got on his radio. Luca stepped back from the murder throne and shook off the discomfort.

‘Morgue?’ Luca asked.

‘Yup. Ready?’

He sucked in a deep breath through gritted teeth. ‘Uh. This is the part I’m dreading.’

Ella eyed Luca, taking in the green tinge to his skin and the faint sheen of sweat on his brow. ‘Not squeamish are you, Hawkins?’

Luca swallowed hard, Adam’s apple bobbing like a yo-yo. ”Uh, yeah. You could say that.”

”Luckily, I brought some sick bags.”

‘You think of everything, don’t you?’

She flashed back to her first time seeing a stiff, up close and personal, Ripley looming over her shoulder like a redheaded gargoyle. The minute the sheet came back, Ella’s knees had turned to jello. Ripley had just squeezed her cheeks and told her to suck it up.

And damn if Ripley hadn’t been right. You either learned to stomach the ugliness, or you washed out fast in this gig.

But looking at Luca now, all wide-eyed and wobbly-kneed, Ella couldn’t bring herself to go full drill sergeant just yet. He was still as green as a shamrock, so the last thing he needed was a boot to the groin on his first day.

‘First time’'s always the worst. It gets easier. Or at least, you get better at faking it.’ She jerked her head towards the car. ‘C’mon, let’s get this show on the road. The dead ain’t getting any deader.’

As they slid into the car, Ella shot a glance over her shoulder at the murder scene. The stocks still squatted there like a nightmare made real. She couldn’t shake the image of a limp torso locked in that thing, just waiting to be discovered by an oblivious passerby.

The unsub could justify it however he wanted. Dress it up in a pretty bow and call it righteousness or revenge or therapy. At the end of the day, he was still a rabid dog that needed putting down.

But for now, it was time to initiate her new partner. Baptism by blood and guts.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The Dover Medical Examiner's Office had all the charm of a Soviet gulag, and half the personality to boot. Puke-green walls, buzzing fluorescent lights that were one flicker away from triggering a seizure, and a pervasive stink of antiseptic trying and failing to mask the stench of dead meat. If despair had a smell, this was it.

Ella slouched in a molded plastic chair that had been designed by some sadist with a hard-on for scoliosis, staring at a sad little potted ficus that was the room's sole concession to any form of life. Next to her, Luca fidgeted like a kid on Ritalin, knee bouncing, fingers tapping out a nervous tattoo on his thigh.

Poor kid. Probably still had visions of CSI-style glitz and glamour dancing in his head. All neon-lit labs and sexy techs spouting snappy one-liners. Well, welcome to the real world, rook. Hope you brought your nose plugs and your big boy pants.

Ella reached out and tapped a hand on his knee. 'Easy there, Tiger. You're not on trial. Just relax.'

Luca shot her a rueful look, but at least he stopped bouncing. 'I am relaxed. Totally relaxed.'

'Never seen a body before?'

'Loads, just not a dead one.'

'They never took you to the body farm at Quantico?'

Luca huffed a laugh, then sobered. 'They don't use it anymore.'

Ella felt a pang of something suspiciously close to sympathy. She remembered her first time seeing a corpse up close and personal. The waxy skin, the sunken eyes, the way the jaw hung slack in an obscene parody of a smile. It had haunted her dreams for weeks after. But she'd learned to compartmentalize. To shove those images, those feelings, into a little box in the back of her mind and slam the lid tight. You had to look at a mangled piece of human wreckage and see a pile of slowly cooling meat, valuable only for the secrets it could reveal.

Ripley was a master at it. Could crack wise over an eviscerated torso while elbow-deep in viscera, and then go home and sleep like a baby. But Ella had never quite managed that level of detachment. A small, stubborn part of her still saw the person behind the corpse.

Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe that little flicker of empathy, of humanity, was all that kept her from turning into the very thing she hunted

Ella leaned back in the torture device that passed for a chair, wincing as her spine crackled like a glowstick.

'If it gets too much, there's no shame in tapping out.'

Luca shook his head, jaw setting in a way that was almost cute in its stubbornness. 'No way. I can handle it. It's part of the job, right?'

Ella had to give him props for that. In their line of work, grit was more valuable than gold. The ability to stare unflinchingly into the horrors that humans could visit upon one another and not go stark raving loony was a rare and precious thing. Maybe the kid had it. Maybe he didn't. Only one way to find out.

She was saved from having to respond by the lack of sensible shoes on linoleum. The receptionist, a reedy woman with a pinched face and the air of someone perpetually

sucking on a lemon, appeared in the doorway.

‘The coroner will see you now,’ she said, in a tone that implied they should be grateful for the honor.

Ella levered herself out of the chair. Luca sprang up beside her, probably running entirely on nervous energy. They followed the nurse down a long hallway that smelled of bleach. Ella breathed through her mouth, trying not to gag on the miasma of death and industrial-strength cleaners. No matter how many times she did this song and dance, she never quite got used to the stench.

At the end of the hall, a set of swinging doors loomed like the gates of Hades. The receptionist shouldered them open without ceremony, revealing a cavernous room lined with shining metal tables. Harsh white light blazed down from the ceiling, washing everything in a stark, pitiless glare.

‘Agents Dark and Hawkins?’ A reedy voice emerged from behind a surgical mask. The coroner, presumably. A small, rodentine man with beady eyes and a wispy comb-over. ‘I’m Dr. Patel. I’ll be your tour guide through this mortal coil today.’

Ella bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Gallows humor was par for the course down here in the land of the dead. You either learned to laugh at the absurdity of it all, or you ate your gun. Simple as that.

She glanced over at Luca, gauging his reaction. The kid was pale but composed, his gaze fixed on the two sheet-covered bodies with a kind of grim fascination. Good. Better a morbid curiosity than a sprint for the toilet bowl.

‘Thanks for seeing us, doc,’ Ella said.

‘You’re welcome. I just finished up on this morning’s arrival. Where do you want to

begin?’

‘Most recent victim first, please,’ Ella said.

Ella snapped on a pair of gloves. Beside her, Luca did the same, his movements stiff and overly precise. Nerves, no doubt. But he’d settle. They always did, once the initial shock wore off.

Dr. Patel cleared his throat. He lifted the sheet with a practiced flick of the wrist, revealing the horror show beneath.

Georgia Bolton’s torso appeared. Ella took a moment to pay silent tribute to the poor girl. She was pretty in a girl-next-door kind of way. Or she would have been, if not for the fact she was deader than disco and lying on a slab in the county morgue.

Ella’s gaze flicked to Luca, gauging his reaction. He stumbled back a step, then another, until his perfectly sculpted backside collided with a table.

Ella couldn’t blame him. It was one thing to see a body in crime scene photos, another to be up close and personal with the reality of death.

But to his credit, Luca didn’t bolt. He stood his ground, even as the color drained from his face, leaving him as pasty as the corpse in front of them.

Dr. Patel, seemingly oblivious to Luca’s distress, launched into his litany. ‘As you can see, external damage is minimal. A few superficial cuts and bruises, nothing that would have been fatal on its own. But I did find a significant contusion on the occipital region of the skull.’ He gestured to the back of his own head. ‘And some abrasions around the throat.’

Ella leaned in, studying the bruised and abraded flesh. ‘Strangulation,’ she said flatly.

‘That’s our COD?’

Patel nodded. ‘Most likely, yes. But here’s where it gets interesting.’ He pointed to Georgia’s neck with a gloved finger. ‘Do you see those marks? The bruising pattern?’

Ella squinted, nose wrinkling at the sickly-sweet stench of decay that wafted up from the body. Patel was right. The marks around Georgia’s throat weren’t the usual thumb-shaped impressions you’d expect to see in a strangulation case. Instead, it was a perfect ring that encircled the whole neck.

‘Ligature marks?’ Ella asked, though she already knew the answer.

Patel shook his head. ‘Nope. The abrasion is consistent with a garrote, but in such cases, I usually find fibers of rope or string. I found no such thing here.’

Ella straightened up. That was weird. Killers who strangled their victims almost always left telltale signs of how they’d done the deed. Thumb impressions on either side of the windpipe, a crisscross pattern from a ligature, fingernail gouges from the victim trying to claw their way free.

Luca, who seemed to have recovered somewhat from his initial bout of corpse-shock, sidled up next to her. ‘What about a garrote made of leather?’ he asked, voice only slightly strangled. ‘Could that account for the circular marks?’

Patel pursed his lips. ‘It’s possible. Whatever your perp used was thin. Most offenders who use ligatures go for something thicker, like a rope or a belt. Easier to grip, more leverage.’

Ella’s mind raced, trying to conjure up a scenario that fit the evidence. A garrote made of what, piano wire? Fishing line? It seemed unnecessarily fiddly for your average murdering psychopath. But then, when had serial killers ever done anything

the easy way?

She shook her head, shelving that particular puzzle piece for later. 'What about victim number one? Same COD?'

He moved to the second table, pulling back the sheet to reveal the wan, lifeless face of Archie Newman. Patel nodded gravely. 'Almost identical. Blunt force trauma to the occipital region, followed by strangulation with the same unusual bruising pattern.'

Ella stared down at Archie's slack features, trying to imagine the terror he must have felt in his final moments. The helplessness, the fear, the dawning realization that this was it. That he was going to die at the hands of a monster for no reason other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Ella was about to turn away from Archie's corpse, ready to file his death under the depressingly thick "senseless tragedy" tab in her mental Rolodex, when Dr. Patel cleared his throat.

'There is one more thing,' he said, in the tone of a man who knew he was about to drop a bombshell. 'The strangulation marks on Mr. Newman were more pronounced than on Ms. Bolton. And I found traces of PVC in the bruising.'

Ella's head snapped up, eyebrows climbing towards her hairline. 'PVC? Like, the plastic?'

Patel nodded, looking insufferably pleased with himself. 'The very same. It may be unrelated to the strangulation itself, but it's definitely present in the wounds.'

Ella frowned, leaning in to get a closer look. Patel was right. The bruising around Archie's throat was dark purple in places.

Her mind whirled like a well-oiled machine, trying to slot this new piece of information into the puzzle. PVC in the strangulation marks. What the hell did that mean? Did the unsub use some kind of plastic cord as a garrote? But why bother, when good old-fashioned rope or piano wire was deadlier?

She chewed on her lower lip, worrying at the chapped skin with her teeth. Beside her, Luca shifted from foot to foot, clearly buzzing with theories of his own.

‘Hawkins?’ she prodded.

‘Could just be a difference in strength,’ Luca mused. He still looked like he was one or two heaves away from losing the battle with his gag reflex. ‘Archie was our unsub’s first kill, so his adrenaline would be pumping harder on the first go-round.’

‘Good thought,’ Ella said. ‘Stands to reason the marks would be more pronounced on Archie. Unsub was probably still working out the kinks, figuring out how much pressure to apply, how long to hold it.’

‘He wanted to make sure his first kill was a success,’ Luca added.

‘What about time of death?’ she asked, turning back to Patel.

The coroner flipped through his notes. ‘Based on liver temp and rigor, I’d estimate both victims had been deceased approximately six to eight hours before they ended up on my table.’

Six hours. The gears in Ella’s head spun faster, greased by the thrill of the hunt. So, the killer was on a tight schedule. Snatch, kill, pose, dump, all in the span of a few short hours. Which meant he was organized, efficient, and driven by a compulsion that wouldn’t let him rest until his grisly work was done.

The worst kind of monster. The kind that didn't stop until someone made them.

Ella stripped off her gloves with a snap, tossing them into the trash with a flick of her wrist. 'Thanks for the breakdown, doc. We'll be in touch if we need anything else.'

Patel inclined his head, bushy eyebrows waggling in what might have been a parody of a bow. 'You're welcome. Toxicology reports will be over ASAP. Do try not to darken my doorway again too soon, hmm?'

'No promises.' She flashed him a razor-edged smile, then turned to Luca, who looked like he was mentally chewing on all of the unpleasant facts. 'We need to get to the precinct. Compare notes with the local badges. See if anybody's shaken any leads out of the trees yet.'

Luca nodded, clearly relieved for any excuse to exit stage left out of this place. "Yes, please."

Ella caught Dr. Patel's eye, who was watching them with a sort of detached, clinical fascination. Like they were some novel new species of colorful bug, he'd found skittering under a rock. She spun on her heel to stalk out of the morgue. She'd had about as much of the house of the dead as she could stomach for one day.

Luca fell into step beside her, his shiny shoes squeaking on the urine-colored linoleum. He was holding it together admirably well, considering it was his first journey into the mouth of hell.

Ella pushed through the swinging doors, out of the cold storage and into the slightly less frigid hallway.

'Great gag reflex,' Ella said.

But away from prying eyes, Luca leaned against the wall and began panting. 'Jesus wept. That was tough.'

'You'd never know.'

Luca caught his breath then wiped a layer of sweat off his forehead. 'I'm suddenly reminded of my own mortality.'

'Yeah, that'll happen.'

Her partner composed himself. 'Who wants to live forever?'

'True.'

'Right. Precinct.'

Something told her Luca Hawkins wasn't the washing-out type. He might puke his guts up later when the adrenaline wore off and the nightmares came calling. But he'd be back in the saddle come morning light, ready to do it all over again.

He had to be. Because the way this case was shaping up, Ella had a feeling she was going to need all the back-up she could get. Even if it came in the form of a green-around-the-gills rookie who still had that new car smell.

'Precinct. Let's go.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The Dover PD had all the ambiance of a meat locker and smelled about as fresh. Ella perched on the edge of a battered metal desk, trying to ignore the way the sharp edge dug into her backside. Across from her, Luca sat ramrod straight in a chair that looked like it had been shut out by an office supply store circa 1975. His eyes darted around the room, taking in the stained ceiling tiles and the sad little plant that was more brown than green. The place smelled like stale coffee, cheap disinfectant, and the slowly moldering dreams of a thousand burnt-out cops.

In other words, it felt just like home.

‘Welcome to the glamorous world of law enforcement,’ Ella drawled, waving a hand at the squalor around them. ‘Bet you’re regretting that career choice now, huh?’

Luca cracked a smile. ‘Not at all. This is exactly where I want to be.’

Ella snorted. ‘Well, you’re in luck. Looks like we’ll be getting real cozy with these upstanding officers of the law.’ She jerked her chin at the stack of files teetering on the desk between them. ‘Assuming they manage to dig up anything useful on our victims, that is.’

They’d put in the request as soon as they’d arrived - bank records, tax records, license plate hits, anything that might shed some light on who Archie Newman and Georgia Bolton were and why someone had decided to snuff them out like discount candles.

But in a city with this high of a crime rate, with cops working around the clock on an unlimited number of cases, she doubted they’d get so much as a parking ticket

violation before the day was out.

Still, they had to start somewhere. And right now, the sad, abbreviated lives of their two victims were the only lead they had.

‘While we wait for the records to come in, I’ll check for anything about our victims online. Ransack their social media accounts.’

‘Go ahead,’ Ella said as she turned to the stack of crime scene photos in front of her. ‘There’s gotta be a connection. Something that made these two stand out to our unsub. People don’t just wake up one morning and decide to start building torture sculptures in public parks.’

But even as she said it, she knew it wasn’t entirely true. Sometimes, that’s exactly what happened. Sometimes, people just broke, snapped like an overtightened guitar string, their psyche shredding itself on the jagged edges of an uncaring world.

It was the scariest thing about this job. The knowledge that the monsters weren’t always born. Sometimes, they were made. Forged in the crucible of a life that had dealt them one too many shit sandwiches. And once that switch got flipped, there was no going back.

Ella shook off the maudlin thoughts, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand.

Archie Newman. Twenty-six years old. A bartender at some trendy little microbrew joint downtown. Last seen clocking out after his shift, then...nothing. No witnesses, no security cam footage. Just a big, fat goose egg until his body turned up in an alleyway half a mile from his last known location.

She flipped through the scene photos, her stomach clenching at the sight of Archie’s slack, waxy face. He’d been a good-looking kid. Probably had all the sorority girls

lining up. Not that it mattered now. Death was the great equalizer, and Archie had been found in a narrow strip behind a strip club called the Boobie Trap, trussed up like a Christmas ham and displayed on a stack of wooden pallets like some kind of sick art installation.

Ella's lip curled. This unsub had a flair for the dramatic, she'd give him that. Posing his victims like they were ready for their close-up, making sure they'd be found by some poor guy stumbling out of the club with a belly full of cheap booze.

'Our guy has some audacity,' Ella said. 'Victim number one in a public alleyway, victim number two in a busy park.'

Luca added, 'And he elevated them both. Georgia was on a bandstand. Archie was on a stack of pallets – for some reason.'

'Odd choice for sure, but he probably just wanted to maximize the shock. He staged them to incite terror in whoever found them – or us. Danny Rolling used to pose the bodies of his victims so that it traumatized whoever found them.'

'Hate that guy,' Luca said. 'Decapitated the head and hid it so the investigator had to search for it.'

'Real monster. Blueprint for the modern lust killer. Albert DeSalvo used to pose the bodies in a similar way. So did Rodney Alcala, Bruce McArthur, Edmund Kemper, Gary Ridgway, George Russell.'

Luca grinned in her direction. 'Is this your perfect memory talking?'

Ella returned Luca's grin with a wry twist of her lips. 'You heard about that?'

'Who hasn't?'

‘Ha. But yeah. Can’t forget a single grisly detail, even when I want to.’

Her partner spun on his chair and tapped his pen against his cheek. ‘Alright, I’m curious. How does it work? You just remember everything?’

”It’s ironic,” Ella said. ”I don’t actually know. A doctor once told me I just have a really long short-term memory. And by really long, I mean a lifetime, or until dementia sets in.”

Luca glanced out of the window then asked, ‘So, if you saw a license plate this morning, you could remember it forever?’

”If I committed it to my short-term memory bank, yeah. But it takes a few seconds to register. I’d love to be able to just take mental snaps of everything and recall them at will, but it’s not that simple. Does that make sense, or do I sound insane?”

‘The latter,’ Luca said. ‘How did you find out about it?’

Ella shrugged. ‘I thought it was normal until I was about eight. I remember my aunt took me to the store once to buy a record. Guns N Roses. On the way home, I read the booklet. You know, the little thing with all the lyrics in?’

‘Of course.’

‘When I played the record at home, I realized I knew the lyrics to every song even though I’d never heard them. My aunt thought I was pulling a prank or something.’

She could see the wheels spinning in Luca’s head, the implications of her little neurological quirk sinking in. The kid looked equal parts awed and horrified, like he couldn’t decide whether to be impressed or to offer his condolences.

‘Christ.’ Luca said at last. ‘You’re a walking encyclopedia. I bet you clean up at trivia nights.’

”I would if I knew anything worth knowing. Ask me about murder cases from the eighties, and I’ll talk for days. Don’t ask me the capital of Thailand.”

She reached for the second file, but before she could crack it open, the door to the bullpen swung open with a bang. Chief Harland stood in the doorway.

‘Saddle up,’ Harland barked. ‘Got something for you two.’

Ella was on her feet in an instant. ‘What is it, chief?’

Harland gestured to the hallway. ‘Follow me.’

Ella exchanged a glance with Luca, her heart kicking up a notch. She could feel it in her bones, thrumming through her veins like an electric current. It was a feeling she’d chased her whole life, from the first time she’d peeked through her fingers at a slasher flick on late-night cable. That morbid fascination, that sick compulsion to understand the darkness that lurked in the human heart.

And now, as she followed Harland out of the office, Luca hot on her heels, she could feel that familiar itch building beneath her skin.

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The house was too damn quiet. Mia Ripley sat at the kitchen table, a half-empty bottle of Jack and a pile of police reports her only company. She hated this. Hated the silence. Usually, Martin would be here, filling the space with his easy laughter and effortless charm.

But Martin was gone. Vanished into thin air like morning mist. And if Ella was right, if the crazy theory she'd spouted like gospel truth held any water, then Ripley had a lot of thinking to do.

No. Mia shook her head, jaw clenching hard enough to crack teeth. She couldn't think like that. Couldn't let herself go down that rabbit hole. Not without proof. Not without something concrete to back up Ella's wild accusations.

Even if a small, traitorous part of her whispered that it all made a sick sort of sense. That maybe, just maybe, her partner was onto something.

Mia snarled, slamming her fist on the table hard enough to rattle the bottle.

Goddammit. This was a mess. A dumpster fire of epic proportions, and she was standing in the middle of it with a can of gasoline in one hand and a Zippo in the other. Screw Ella and her holier-than-thou crap. She didn't know Martin like Mia did. Didn't know the man beneath the badge, the heart beneath the armor.

But then again, did Mia? How much did she really know about the man she'd shared her bed and her life with? The man who'd wormed his way past her defenses, made her feel things she'd thought long dead and buried?

A chime from her laptop snapped her out of her spiraling thoughts. She lunged for the device, nearly upending the bottle in her haste. The email she'd been waiting for blinked on the screen, taunting her with its promise of answers.

The police report for Trevor's death.

He'd turned up dead four days ago. Found on the roadside with a bullet hole in his skull. And only two days before Trevor woke up dead, he'd tried to extort Ripley out of fifty thousand dollars. Ripley didn't know what he needed the cash for, but Trevor had never met a casino he couldn't spend all night in.

Mia scrolled through the report, consuming every cold, clinical detail. Male victim, age fifty-four. Single gunshot wound to the head. Time of death estimated between ten PM and midnight. No signs of struggle, no defensive wounds. Just a neat little hole right between the eyes.

Mia's stomach turned. She'd seen a thousand reports just like this one, each detailing the grim specifics of someone's final moments. But this one hit differently. This one was personal.

No fingerprints left behind, no strands of hair, no clothes fibers. Everything was neat. Not the kind of sloppy, rage-fueled kill you'd expect from some criminal loan shark. This had all the makings of a professional execution, someone who had the stomach and the skills to put a bullet in a man's brain without blinking.

Her eyes scanned the dense blocks of text, picking out details like shrapnel from a blast. Ballistics matched a 9mm PMC Bronze one-fifteen grain – the same bullet used to put down both Carter and Logan Nash. The same caliber favored by most law enforcement, FBI included.

But that didn't mean anything. 9mms were a dime a dozen, the Toyota Camry of

handguns. Anyone over the age of twenty-one could get their hands on one within an hour in this country.

Mia felt bile rise in the back of her throat, hot and acrid. She swallowed it down, along with the scream that wanted to claw its way out of her chest.

She forced herself to keep reading, to sift through the medical jargon and autopsy reports for anything that might point to her boyfriend's involvement.

And there, buried in a sea of technical mumbo jumbo, she snagged on something.

A single line, almost lost amidst the endless litany of bodily fluids and exit wounds.

Traces of kerosene were discovered on the rear of the victim's skull. Mild, grade D-3699-19.

Kerosene? Gasoline?

Why would there be kerosene on Trevor's body? Had the killer tried to torch him after the fact, only to be interrupted? Was it a forensic countermeasure that hadn't gone as planned?

She turned to the crime scene photos. No signs of fire damage, no telltale scorch marks or soot stains. Just one dead scumbag with a hole in his head, dumped on the side of the road like yesterday's trash. The gunshot was clean, precise. Not the kind of kill you'd need to cover up with fire and gasoline.

So why the kerosene? What was she missing?

Unless, of course, the kerosene was never meant to be there.

Mia stared at the laptop screen until the words blurred into a smear of black and white, her brain doing its best impersonation of a rat in a maze, scurrying down one twisting path after another, always hitting a dead end.

Kerosene. The word stuck in her craw like a chicken bone. It was there, the answer, hovering just out of reach like a phantom itch she couldn't scratch.

She squeezed her eyes shut, digging her fingers into her temples like she could physically yank the memory out of the sludge of her mind. There was something, a fragment of a conversation, a throwaway line that had seemed like so much white noise at the time.

And then, like a sucker punch to the solar plexus, it hit her.

A lazy Sunday morning, limbs tangled in sweat-soaked sheets. Martin had said, 'Need to grab some kerosene from storage.'

She'd grunted something in response, too blissed out on post-coital brain chemicals to give half a damn. Martin was always elbow-deep in some project or other - tinkering with his ride, cleaning his fishing rods, gluing together those model planes he loved more than life itself.

So he needed some go-juice for his little grease monkey hobby. Big whoop. But now, with Trevor's autopsy report seared into her retinas like a cattle brand, that casual remark took on a whole new flavor of sinister.

But where was this storage? It certainly wasn't in Ripley's house. She'd made it clear when Martin was talking about gas for his lawnmower - no gasoline in the house, the shed or the garden. It was an explosion hazard, and with how many enemies Ripley had, it was an easy accelerant for her demise.

The possibilities rampaged through Mia's skull like a horde of crank-addled spider monkeys. Each one more batshit than the last, each one leading to a conclusion that made her want to gargle Drano and chase it with a chaser of buckshot.

But the facts were the facts. The traces of kerosene on Trevor's corpse. Martin's stockpile of the stuff, so casually mentioned you'd almost think he wanted her to know.

Mia choked out a laugh, the sound as jagged and bitter as broken glass. This couldn't be happening. Couldn't be real. Her Martin, a cold-blooded killer?

The idea was so absurd, it bordered on the obscene. Like a bad joke told by a worse comedian.

Time to dig deeper.

She didn't want to believe it, but something told her she was only just scratching the surface.

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The evidence locker was a concrete tomb, all gray walls and harsh fluorescent light. It smelled like dust and old secrets, the kind of place where the ghosts of a thousand unsolved crimes came to die.

And there, squatting in the middle of the room like twin altars to some forgotten god, were the stocks. The devices that had cradled Archie Newman and Georgia Bolton in their final moments.

Ella felt her guts clench at the sight of them. Even empty, even stripped of their grisly cargo, the damn things radiated a palpable aura of menace. Like they were just waiting for the next poor bastard to come along and fill the void.

Harland stood off to the side, his craggy face unreadable. 'Just got 'em moved here,' he grunted, jerking his chin at the macabre display. 'Thought you might want to take a gander. See if anything jumps out at you.'

Ella nodded, not trusting herself to speak past the lump in her throat. She'd seen a lot of disturbing sights in her time, a lot of twisted trophies and souvenirs. But there was something about these crude instruments of torture that set her teeth on edge.

'Good call, Chief,' she said at last. 'Never miss a chance to get up close and personal with a psycho's handiwork.'

She stepped forward. The first set of stocks, the ones that had held Archie Newman in his final embrace, were a twisted marvel of blackened metal and rust. The iron was thick and sturdy, the craftsmanship disturbingly elegant. Luca sidled up beside her, his face a shade of green usually reserved for moldy bread. He reached out a tentative

hand, fingers hovering over the pitted surface like he was afraid it might bite.

‘Damn, this thing is solid,’ he said. ‘Metal. Iron. Heavy gauge. Looks like it could have been forged in the fires of Mount Doom.’

Ella snorted. ‘Nerd. But you’re not wrong. Damn thing’s built like a tank. Definitely not some DIY job cobbled together in a basement.’

She traced the contours of the metal, feeling the nicks and scratches that spoke of age and use. This was no one-off, no spur-of-the-moment creation. Their unsub had put time and effort into this monstrosity, honing it to perfection like a demented craftsman.

‘So our unsub’s got a background in metalworking,’ she mused. ‘Or at least access to the tools and know-how. That narrows the field a bit.’

Luca nodded, still studying the stocks like they held the secrets of the universe. ‘Could be a welder, a machinist. Maybe even a blacksmith, if he’s got a taste for the old-school.’

Ella snorted. ‘A blacksmith? In this day and age? What, you think our guy’s some kind of Renaissance faire reject?’

Luca shrugged, unperturbed. ‘You never know. People are into all kinds of freaky stuff these days. Maybe he’s got a thing for ye olde torture devices.’

Ella shook her head, a grudging smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. The kid had a point. In a world where people got their rocks off by dressing up like furry animals and dry-humping each other, a blacksmithing serial killer wasn’t too far outside the realm of possibility.

Still, something about it didn't sit right. The level of skill, the attention to detail. This wasn't some hobby gone wrong. This was the work of someone who knew their stuff, who had the tools and the talent to turn their sick fantasies into cold reality.

She moved on to the second set of stocks, the ones that had played host to Georgia Bolton's final performance. This one had been made of wood, and even under the fluorescent lights of the evidence room, Ella couldn't see any gaps in the creator's craftsmanship. It was as solid as the first, but she struggled to reconcile the two disparate images. Why the switch from metal to wood? Was it a choice born of necessity, of expediency? Had the unsub simply used what was at hand, grabbing whatever materials he could find in his mad rush to bring his twisted vision to life?

'Metal for the male victim, wood for the female victim,' Ella said.

Luca cocked his head, considering. 'Maybe he ran out of scrap iron and had to improvise?'

Ella thought about it but had to disagree. "No chance. This took planning, premeditation. Our unsub wouldn't have started his murder spree without making sure he had all his ducks in a row first."

Luca shrugged, his face scrunched in thought. 'Could be a lot of things. Availability, convenience.'

'You said it yourself, these metal stocks are professional grade. The kind of thing you'd need specialized tools and skills to make. If he had access to that kind of setup, he'd have access to more materials. Enough to make a matching set, at least.'

'So, what then? You think it's intentional? Some kind of message, or...'

Frustration buzzed under Ella's skin. None of this made a lick of sense. The

mismatched stocks, the demented stagecraft of the crime scenes. It was like trying to piece together a jigsaw puzzle blindfolded and shit-faced drunk.

She was about to say as much when Luca let out a low whistle, eyes narrowing to laser-focused slits. ‘Hey, check this out.’

He was crouched down by the metal stocks, gloved finger tracing over a spot near the wrist hole. Ella sidled up next to him, squinting at the offending blemish. At first glance, it looked like just another scratch in the pitted surface. But when she angled her head and let the light catch it just right, it looked like a signature.

‘Is that what I think it is?’

‘A signature? Initials? Or a symbol, maybe. A circle with some kind of squiggle inside.’

Ella leaned in until her nose was almost touching the metal. Luca was right. There, etched into the iron like a cattle brand, was a rough circle. And inside, a series of jagged strokes that might have been letters might have been the ravings of a lunatic.

‘The hell?’ Ella muttered. ‘Our unsub leaving a calling card?’

Ella’s gears spun, the hamster wheel in her skull hitting lightspeed. A signature spoke volumes: arrogance, ownership, a fat middle finger to the cops. If that’s what it was, then it was bold, ballsy as all hell. Most killers tried to hide their involvement, bury any trace of themselves at the scene, but this guy was stamping his name on his handiwork like a demented artist signing a canvas.

But she had to concede that it could be something simpler. A maker’s mark, a logo of whatever twisted metal shop welded this house of horrors.

”Bag it and tag it,” she said abruptly, jerking her chin at the stocks. ”I want high-res photos of that mark, from every angle. And see if we can get a print of it or at least a clearer image. If this joker”s leaving us love notes, I wanna know what they say.”

Luca nodded, already fishing out his phone to snap a quick pic. ‘On it. Who should I send it to?’

‘The lab back at HQ. See if they can work their magic.’

She was just opening her mouth to bounce a few more theories off Luca when Harland”s gravelly voice cut through the musty air like a chainsaw.

‘Hate to interrupt your little CSI moment, but we got company.’ He wiggled his cell phone at them. ‘Just got a message saying the Archie’s parents just rolled up. Asking a lot of questions, demanding a lot of answers.’

Ella glanced up, eyebrow cocked. ‘You informed them already, right?’

‘Yeah. This morning.’

‘How much info did you give them?’

‘Not much. The basics. Nothing about the contraption.’

She prayed that the specifics of the murders hadn’t reached the family. If they had, no wonder they were asking questions.

‘Alright. I’ll go and talk to them.’ Ella cut a glance at Luca, taking in the sudden pallor of his cheeks.

‘Me too?’ he asked.

Looking into the eyes of the bereaved, the shattered. Seeing the moment when their world crumbled to ash, when the last shred of hope was ripped away and replaced with a yawning, endless grief. It was a special kind of hell reserved for the unlucky few who chose to walk the path of justice. And Ella had been down that road more times than she cared to count, had borne witness to more tears and screams and hearts breaking than any one person should ever have to.

But this time was different. Because this time, she had a rookie in tow. A bright-eyed, bushy-tailed kid who still thought he could make a difference, still believed in the fairy tale of good triumphing over evil. If he had even a shred of human decency in him, this was the part of the job that ripped it out by the roots and stomped it into a bloody smear.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You too.’

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Ella led Luca into a cramped box that passed for an interview room. In the center, hunched over a wobbly table, sat the Archie Newman's parents.

The place had all the ambiance of a prison visitation area, which was fitting, seeing as how she was about to serve the Newmans a life sentence of misery.

Ella took a moment to study the couple, to take in the lines of devastation etched into their faces. The mother, a small, bird-boned woman with a halo of gray curls, looked like a strong breeze might shatter her into a million pieces. The father, a hulking bear of a man with a salt-and-pepper buzz cut, had the shellshocked look of a soldier who'd just seen his buddy step on a landmine. Grief hung off them like a cheap suit, mixed with a hearty dose of pissed-off.

Ella slid into a chair across from them, Luca following her lead. She laced her fingers on the table, met their gazes head-on.

'Mr. and Mrs. Newman, I'm Agent Dark. This is Agent Hawkins. First off, I want to say how sorry I am for your loss. I know those words don't mean much right now, but...'

'You're right. They don't,' Mr. Newman cut her off, voice rough as a gravel road. 'What I want to know is what happened to my boy. We heard... rumors.'

Ella's guts clenched. Rumors spread faster than crabs in this game. Someone probably overheard some cop chatter, blabbed to his buddies, and now it was all over town. The Newman's catch wind and of course their minds go to the worst place.

‘I understand your frustration,’ Ella said, picking her words like she was defusing a bomb. ‘The investigation is still ongoing, but I can assure you...’

‘We heard Archie was strung up,’ Archie’s mother blurted, voice hitching on her boy’s name. ‘Stuck in some kind of - of torture thing. Is that true?’

Ella’s tongue felt like lead. How the hell was she supposed to soft-pedal this?

But before she could open her mouth, Luca piped up. ‘Mrs. Newman, we won’t lie to you. Archie was found in a device called a pillory. It’s a type of medieval restraint.’

Ella shot him a look that could curdle milk. The hell was he doing, giving them the uncut version? But Luca barreled on, those baby blues big and earnest.

‘I know that’s hard to hear. Believe me, if I could shield you from this, I would. But you deserve the truth.’

The mother let out a low keen, like a gut-shot deer. Pops pulled her to his chest, his own eyes suspiciously bright.

‘Why?’ the dad croaked. ‘Why would someone do that to our boy?’

And there it was. The million-dollar question. The one that kept Ella up at night, chasing answers she knew she’d never find at the bottom of a bottle.

She leaned forward, held the father’s gaze. ‘I don’t know. But I can promise you that we’ll find out.’

Mr. Newman regarded her. Measuring her up, seeing if she was just another empty suit spewing platitudes.

Finally, he gave a slow nod. 'I'm holding you to that.'

Ella returned it, solemn as a blood oath. Now it was time to peel back the layers of Archie Newman's life, see what made him tick. And what made him a target?

'Can you tell me about Archie? What was he like?'

Mrs. Newman dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue. 'He was a good kid. A little rough around the edges, but heart of gold, you know?'

Mr. Newman grunted in agreement. 'He had his moments, like anyone. But he was everything we ever wanted.'

'What did he do for a living? What were his hobbies, his interests?'

Mr. Newman cleared his throat. 'He was a bartender. Worked at that new place downtown, the Boathouse.'

Ella already knew this. She just wanted to assess the parents' capacity for truth-telling.

'Did he like his job? Get along with his coworkers?'

Mrs. Newman nodded, a wobbly little gesture. 'Oh yes, he loved it. Said it was like getting paid to party.' A ghost of a smile flickered across her face, there and gone again. 'He always was a people person.'

People person. Ella mentally underlined it. It fit with the image she was building in her head - a young, outgoing guy, well-liked by most. The kind of person who made friends easily, navigated the choppy waters of human interaction with a grin and a wink.

But it also meant he probably let his guard down, trusted too easily. An open book, all his soft spots right there for any passing psycho to see.

‘What about outside of work?’ She asked. ‘What did Archie like to do for fun?’

‘He was always tinkering with something,’ Mr. Newman said. ‘Bikes, mostly. He had this old Harley he was fixing up, spent hours in the garage just fiddling with the damn thing.’

Luca stepped in. ‘Did Archie have a girlfriend? Or boyfriend? No judgments here.’

A shadow passed over Mr. Newman’s face, there and gone again. ‘No,’ he said shortly. ‘Archie, he was so focused on working, making money for a house deposit. Said he didn’t have time for any distractions.’

Ella’s spidey senses tingled. No romantic partner. It wasn’t unheard of, especially for a young, good-looking guy on the rise. But in her experience, even the most ambitious man had an itch to scratch. The fact that Archie had no one sharing his bed stood out like a red flag on a golf course.

She made a mental note to do a deep dive into Archie’s love life, or lack thereof. It could be nothing, just a quirk of personality or circumstance. Or it could be a sign of something else.

‘What about friends?’ Ella pressed. ‘Did Archie have a tight crew, people he hung out with regularly?’

Mrs. Newman hesitated, her fingers worrying at the damp tissue. ‘He had a few close friends, sure. Went out with them a few times a month, maybe.’

‘Where to?’

‘Usual places, I guess. Bars, comedy clubs, theater sometimes.’

Ella benched the info and leaned forward, elbows on the scarred table. Time to poke the hornet’s nest, see what stung.

‘In my experience, Mrs. Newman, sometimes even good people have enemies. Someone who might be nursing a grudge, or feeling slighted.’ She kept her tone gentle but insistent. ‘Can you think of anyone who might’ve had a problem with Archie? Maybe something from his past, something he mentioned in passing?’

Mr. Newman shifted, his jaw working like he was chewing on a tough piece of gristle. ‘The boy could be... opinionated, at times. Had a mouth on him... admittedly.’

Ella’s ears pricked. Now she was getting somewhere. ‘Opinionated how?’

The father huffed, something between a sigh and a growl. ‘Archie, he didn’t suffer fools. If someone was being an ass, he’d call ’em on it. Didn’t matter who they were.’

Mrs. Newman’s hands fluttered like wounded birds, plucking at her tissue, her sleeve, her husband’s arm. ‘He got himself into a few scrapes over it. Nothing serious, but... words were exchanged. You know how young guys can be.’

Ella knew it well. She’d seen it a thousand times, young bucks butting heads, measuring dicks. Most of the time it was nothing, just posturing and bravado. But sometimes, when you mixed in a few drinks and a few bruised egos, things got physical.

‘These scrapes,’ Ella probed, ‘they ever go beyond words? Any pushing and shoving, maybe some thrown punches?’

‘No, no, nothing like that, as far as I know.’ Mrs. Newman looked almost offended at the suggestion. ‘Archie wasn’t a violent man. He just... he was just so passionate, you know?’

Ella had to concede that passionate was sometimes a synonym for being an asshole.

‘And there’s nothing wrong with that,’ Luca chimed in. ‘Archie sounds like he was a man of principle.’

Ella shot her partner a sidelong glance. Easy there, Oprah. The last thing they needed was the Newmans clamming up because they thought their precious boy was being painted as some kind of hooligan.

But to her surprise, Mrs. Newman actually cracked a smile. A tiny, wobbly thing, but a smile nonetheless. ‘Thank you. He was. Admirable, I mean. The best son a mother could ask for.’

And then, just like that, the waterworks started up again. Mrs. Newman crumpled like a house of cards, great shuddering sobs wracking her narrow frame. Mr. Newman gathered her into his arms, making soothing noises that didn’t quite cover his own hitching breaths.

Ella sat back, giving them a moment. She’d seen this scene play out more times than she could count - the raw, ragged edges of grief, the yawning chasm of loss. It never got easier, watching someone try to wrap their head around the unimaginable.

She exchanged a glance with Luca. Time to wrap this up, that look said. They’d gotten what they needed, pried all they could out of the Newmans without crossing the line into cruelty.

Ella cleared her throat softly. ‘Thank you for your time, Mr. and Mrs. Newman. I

know this isn't easy, but everything you've told us - it'll help. I promise you that.'

'You'll find them, won't you?' Mrs. Newman asked as she raised her head from her husband's shoulder. 'The monster who did this to our Archie?'

Ella opened her mouth, the stock-standard we're doing everything we can poised on the tip of her tongue. But before she could get the words out, Luca leaned forward.

'Yes,' he said simply. 'We'll find them. Whoever did this, wherever they're hiding... we won't stop until they're brought to justice. You have my word on that.'

He might have been so green he was practically photosynthesizing, but his heart was in the right place. Even if his mouth was writing checks, his ass couldn't cash. Ella couldn't get too annoyed because she used to do the same when Ripley was by her side. Ripley sprouted facts, Ella gave them hope. Both had their place in the life-and-death world of law enforcement.

Ella said, 'We'll be in touch. If you think of anything else, anything at all... you call me. Day or night.'

She pressed her card into Mrs. Newman's limp hand, holding the other woman's gaze for a long moment. Then she turned and strode out of the room, Luca scrambling to follow in her wake. She didn't look back. She couldn't. If she did, she might just crack herself, might just let the jagged shards of her own battered heart slice right through her poker face.

And she couldn't afford that. Not now. Not when there was work to be done and a killer to catch.

In the hallway, Luca fell into step beside her. He was practically vibrating with nervous energy, his mouth already open to speak. Ella cut him off at the pass.

‘Don’t,’ she said.

Luca’s jaw rose back to normal. ‘Don’t what?’

‘Don’t apologize. It’s fine. I used to do it too.’

Luca’s face was a study in contrition, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. ‘I know, I know,’ he said, holding up his hands in surrender. ‘I shouldn’t have told them about the stocks. Or made promises we might not be able to keep.’

Ella sighed then pinched the bridge of her nose. The kid was a walking, talking heart-on-his-sleeve. In this line of work, that was both a blessing and a curse.

‘Hope can keep you going when everything else has gone down the can. But it can also cut you to the bone when it’s ripped away.’

She’d seen it too many times. Families clinging to every scrap of false comfort, every empty platitude, only to have their world shattered all over again when the truth came out. When the killer walked, or the case went cold.

‘I just wanted to give them something. Anything. I know how it feels. I know how easy it is to blame the cops.’

Ella’s heart clenched. Goddamn bleeding heart. But she couldn’t fault him for it, not really. Not when she’d been in his shoes, spouting the same rose-tinted naivety.

‘I get it. It’s just the more you give them, the more they lose. Plus, Edis told us to keep everything on the down low. We’re the ones that gotta explain to him how the press know the details.’

‘Sheesh,’ Luca said. ‘So what now? Back to the drawing board?’

‘Not quite. I want to know more about Georgia Bolton, see if anything overlaps with Archie.’

”She”s got a sister, according to her records. Lives a couple of miles away.”

‘Then that’s where we’re headed.’

‘Wait. I don’t know if she knows her sister is dead.’

Georgia Bolton”s family. Another set of lives to shatter, another hole to rip in the fabric of someone’s world. And Ella was the one who had to look them in the eye and tell them their loved one was never coming home.

‘Then get ready for lesson number two,’ Ella said.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella squinted against the glare of the sun as she pulled up to Georgia Bolton's digs. The place was a postage stamp, more shed than house, with peeling paint and a sagging porch that looked one strong breeze away from collapse. But being so close to the city, the place probably demanded seven figures regardless.

She killed the engine and glanced over at Luca, who was fidgeting like a virgin at a strip club.

'You ready for this?'

'Barely,' Luca said.

Ella grunted. 'First time's always the worst. Just remember, there's no right way to tell someone their loved one's not coming home. No magic words that'll make it hurt less.'

'A mercy killing.'

She popped the door and climbed out into the midday heat that slapped her like a scorned lover. Luca joined her and they trudged up the cracked concrete driveway, dodging weeds sprouting through the gaps. Ella's gut churned like a washing machine on spin cycle. This part never got easier, no matter how many times she did it, but there was something about having Luca beside her that she felt might make it easier to digest. A spoonful of sugar.

'Like you're slaughtering a boar. You ever been hunting?' Ella asked.

‘I grew up on a farm. Dig the knife in, yank it out, tell yourself the animal died quickly.’

‘Just like that.’

They reached the porch, floorboards groaning under their feet like arthritic joints. Ella raised her fist to knock, but before she could make contact, the door swung open. A woman stood there, bird bones and sharp angles, eyes red-rimmed and puffy. Same dirty blonde hair as her sister, same sharp cheekbones. But where Georgia had been all smiles in her photos, this gal looked like she’d been through the wringer and hung out to dry.

‘Marcy Bolton?’ Ella asked. A second later, she found herself staring at the woman’s palm.

‘Don’t say it,’ the woman said. ‘Don’t tell me she’s gone.’

Ella swallowed the lump in her throat, her tongue suddenly as dry as a desert bone. She’d rehearsed this moment a hundred times in her head on the drive over, practiced the words until they tasted like sandpaper. But now, face-to-face with Marcy’s raw, naked grief, every platitude felt like a slap in the face.

She cleared her throat, tried to inject some semblance of authority into her voice. ‘Ms. Bolton, I’m Agent Dark, and this is Agent Hawkins. May we come in?’

‘Just say it. I need to hear it.’

‘We’re sorry, Marcy, but Georgia was found dead early this morning.’ Luca did the honors. Bless his heart.

Marcy made a sound, somewhere between a sob and a scream, her whole body

folding in on itself like a house of cards. Ella fought the urge to reach out, to offer some scrap of comfort. But she knew from experience that there was no comfort to be had, not in the face of a loss like this.

She waited, letting the silence stretch, giving Marcy a moment to collect the shattered pieces of herself. The least she could do was let her purge the poison in a tidal wave of snot and salt water. When the woman finally looked up, her eyes were like two bruises in her pale skin.

‘How?’

Ella hesitated, weighing the truth against the need for tact. But one look at Marcy’s desperate gaze and she knew she couldn’t sugarcoat this. The woman deserved the truth, no matter how ugly.

‘She was found in Chautauqua Park,’ Ella said gently. ‘Murdered.’

‘I knew it,’ Marcy croaked. ‘That goddamn loudmouth, always running her yap, pissing off the wrong people. I told her. Told her to keep her head down, mind her own business. But she just...’ She broke off, choking on her own words. Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks, cutting tracks through the grime and mascara.

Ella shot Luca a sideways glance, eyebrows climbing towards her hairline. This wasn’t the reaction she’d been banking on. Most folks went through the stages like clockwork - denial, anger, bargaining, the whole shebang. But had skipped right to the bitter end, like she’d had the ‘I told you so’ locked and loaded for years.

‘Mind if we take this inside?’ Ella jerked her chin towards the gaping doorway. ‘With your help, we might be able to find who hurt your sister.’

Marcy sniffled, swiping at her nose with the back of her hand. ‘Yeah, sure. Come on

in. Not like I got anything better to do now that my sister's gone and gotten herself killed.'

She spun on her heel and stalked into the house, leaving Ella and Luca to trail after her like a couple of lost puppies. The place was a dump, a hoarder's wet dream. Piles of junk teetered in every corner, threatening to avalanche at the slightest breeze. Marcy collapsed onto a threadbare armchair while Ella perched on the edge of the couch. Luca opted to stand.

'Can you tell us about Georgia? Life, routine, friends. That kind of thing.'

Marcy shielded her face with her forearm while a few sobs leaked out. Any second now, the reality of losing her sister would set in, and her anger would turn to distress. Ella hoped it would, at least, because she'd never seen a bereaved family member jump right to victim-blaming before. Every day was a school day in law enforcement.

'I need the details first. What happened to my sister?'

Ella leaned forward, elbows on her knees. She'd been dreading this part, the moment where she had to lay it all out in gory technicolor.

'She was strangled, most likely last night. A passerby found her this morning.'

'That's it?'

'Whoever killed her also staged her.'

Marcy looked at Ella like she was speaking a dead language. 'Staged? What the fuck are you talking about?'

'Posed,' Luca interjected. 'The perp placed Georgia in medieval stocks.'

Marcy's glossy eyes took on new dimensions. 'Stocks? The things that hold you in place?'

'Yes,' Luca said. 'We're sorry to be the ones to tell you this. If it's any consolation-,'

'Why?' Marcy cut him off, then fresh tears began spilling. Ella's heart gave a little lurch. There it is, she thought. The grief. The disbelief. Right on schedule.

She cleared her throat, tried to steer the conversation back on track. 'That's what we're here to find out, Marcy. But we need your help to do it. We need to know everything you can tell us about your sister.'

Marcy swiped at her eyes, smearing black streaks across her knuckles. 'I don't know how much help I can be. Georgia and I...we weren't exactly close.'

Ella nodded, unsurprised. 'Siblings can be like that. But you grew up together, lived together. You must have some insight into who she was, what made her tick.'

Marcy huffed out a breath. 'Georgia was...Georgia. Stubborn as a mule and twice as mean. She never met a fight she didn't pick, never met a bridge she didn't burn.'

Luca shifted from foot to foot, clearly itching to jump in. But Ella shot him a warning look. Let her talk, that look said. Let it all come pouring out.

'She was always mouthing off, always sticking her nose in where it didn't belong. I lost count of how many times I had to bail her out of jail, or talk some pissed off boyfriend out of breaking down our door.'

Ella mentally cataloged it all. There was a little thrill there, because Georgia Bolton and Archie Newman seemed to be two sides of the same coin.

‘Boyfriends? Did Georgia date a lot?’ Ella asked.

Marcy snorted. ‘Date? No. More like nail and bail. Girl had a thing for bad boys, the kind with rap sheets longer than my arm. She’d shack up with ’em for a few weeks, then it was on to the next one.’

Ella took it in. It opened up a whole new avenue of investigation. Jilted lovers, jealous exes. It was like the scumbag lottery.

‘Any names you can remember? Anyone who might have had a particularly nasty breakup with her?’

Marcy chewed on her lower lip. ‘There was this one guy a few months back. Ricky something or other. Real mean son of a bitch. He laid hands on Georgia more than once. Put her in the hospital, even.’

Ella’s head snapped up. ‘The hospital? You file a police report?’

Marcy just looked at her, a sad, knowing smile playing around her mouth. ‘What do you think? Georgia wouldn’t even admit he did it. Kept saying she fell down the stairs, walked into a door. The usual bullshit.’

The same old song and dance, Ella thought. ‘Alright, we’ll look into it. Anyone else spring to mind? A friend, maybe? Someone she talked to regularly?’

‘Friend? Ha. Georgia didn’t have friends. She had losers she partied with, got high with. People she wanted to impress.’

Luca stepped up. ‘We know she worked at the Rusty Nail bar. Was she career-driven at all?’

‘Career-driven? Georgia? Hell no. That girl couldn’t hold down a job to save her life. Always calling out, showing up late, half in the bag. She was a bartender, for Christ’s sake, not a lawyer.’

Ella felt a little twist in her gut. So much for the similarities between Georgia and Archie. Seemed like the only thing they had in common was their untimely end and a talent for pissing folks off.

‘But she had an active social life, right?’ Luca asked.

Marcy snorted, rolling her eyes so hard Ella thought they might pop right out of her skull. ‘Oh yeah, she was a regular social butterfly. If by social you mean getting blasted at every dive bar and comedy club in town.’

Ella thought it all through. The pieces of Georgia Bolton’s trainwreck of a life began falling into place like a jigsaw puzzle from hell. It sounded like she was a wild card, a loose cannon. The kind of gal who’d hitch a ride on the back of the devil’s Harley if he promised her a good time.

‘Anything else we should know about her?’ Ella asked. ‘Any skeletons in the closet, secrets she was keeping?’

Marcy just stared at her, eyes flat and empty as a snake’s. ‘Georgia didn’t have skeletons. She had a whole graveyard. But I couldn’t tell you what was buried there. Girl played her cards close to the chest, even with me.’

Ella nodded, unsurprised. Folks like Georgia, they built walls higher than the Berlin Wall. Kept everyone at arm’s length, never let anyone see past the rough-and-tumble exterior. Until it was too late.

‘Any idea where Georgia might’ve been last night? After her shift at the Rusty Nail?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine. Could’ve been anywhere. Alleyways, back seats of cars, shooting up under a bridge. Girl was a ghost when she wanted to be.’

Ella’s teeth sank into her lower lip. Truthfully, she’d expected a lot more from Georgia’s sister.

‘Did she ever mention an Archie?’ Luca asked. ‘An Archie Newman?’

Marcy’s brow furrowed, the lines etched deep as canyons. ‘Archie? No, doesn’t ring any bells. Why? He has something to do with this?’

Luca shook his head, face carefully blank. ‘Just following up on a lead.’

Marcy’s face twisted like she’d just bit into a lemon. Her fist slammed into the ratty couch cushion, sending up a puff of dust. ‘I told her to stop running her mouth. To reel it in before someone did something to her. Now look. It’s all just...’ Marcy grabbed her hair with both hands and sank face-first into the cushions. The sobs came in a sudden wave.

Ella just sat there, letting the woman ride out the wave of grief and rage. She’d seen this song and dance a thousand times before. The anger, the regret, the woulda-coulda-shouldas. It was all part of the process, the messy, ugly business of picking up the pieces after someone got snuffed out.

But Luca seemingly couldn’t sit on his hands while this woman spiraled into despair. He crossed the room in two long strides and crouched down next to Marcy and lay a hand on her shoulder.

‘Hey, hey. Look at me, Marcy. This isn’t on you, alright? You didn’t do this. Some psycho out there did. And we’re gonna find him, make him pay for what he did to Georgia.’

Marcy raised her head. ‘You promise? You promise me you’ll get the bastard?’

‘We won’t stop until we’ve got him in cuffs or in the ground. You have my word on that.’

Ella had to hand it to the kid. He sure knew how to lay on the charm thick like honey. And damn if it didn’t work like a snake oil salesman’s miracle cure. Amazing what a pretty face could do for a grieving woman’s frazzled nerves.

But they couldn’t sit here all day, holding hands and making promises they might not be able to keep. They had a killer to catch, a case to crack wide open. And the longer they lingered, the colder the trail would get.

Ella pushed to her feet. ‘Alright, Marcy. I think we’ve taken up enough of your time. You got a number we can reach you at, in case we have any more questions?’

Marcy blinked like she was coming out of a trance. She rattled off a string of digits. Ella committed them to memory and gestured for Luca to come along.

‘We’ll be in touch. And remember, anything comes to mind, anything at all, you call us. Day or night. Got it?’

Marcy nodded. Luca gave her shoulder one last squeeze and made his way to the door. Ella paused on the threshold, one hand on the knob. She turned back to look at Marcy, huddled on the couch like a broken doll. ‘I’m sorry for your loss. Truly. And I promise you, we’ll get the son of a bitch who did this. One way or another.’

It was a vow she’d made a hundred times before, and as always, she meant it. Georgia Bolton might have been a loudmouth Karen, but everyone deserved justice. The victims were out there somewhere, crying out for justice from beyond the grave. And come hell or high water, Ella would get it for them. Even if she had to shake this

whole rotten city down to its foundations to do it.

‘Well, that was a whole lot of nothing,’ Luca said once they were outside. ‘Where to now?’

‘You sure about that? We have a connection.’

Luca leaned against the car hood. ‘What? What connection?’

‘Archie and Georgia were both abrasive types, so we just need to find out who they pissed off.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

As he sat hunched over his computer like a parody of a real person, a sudden profound awareness took hold. The world, this twisted funhouse mirror of a reality, had become so absurd, so utterly ludicrous, that all attempts at art, at humor, had been rendered pointless.

No fiction could capture the absurdity of the modern age. No jokes could dull the pain, and there was no point in even trying anymore, because humans were the jokes and life was the punchline.

He had to laugh. If he didn't laugh, he'd go insane. But the real gag, the ultimate knee-slapper, was that he'd been nothing more than a bit player in a cosmic comedy of errors. A footnote in the grand farce that was the universe.

The sounds of life, of laughter, seeped through the walls. Giggles, guffaws, shrieks that might as well have been serrated blades designed to saw at his last few threads of sanity. Time had long since lost all meaning in this dank, musty space - seconds, minutes, hours bleeding together like the viscous ichor of a festering wound. Was it day or night beyond these moldering walls? He could no longer tell, nor did it matter.

They were talking about him, he was sure of it. Mocking him. Laughing at him. Just like they always did. So he lurched to his feet and crossed to the window. He twitched the curtain aside with a shaking hand, peering out at the sun-drenched sidewalk. It was daytime, apparently, and outside a group of kids were playing hopscotch, high-pitched giggles like knives in his ears. For a moment, he imagined storming out there, grabbing them by their scrawny necks and squeezing until they went quiet.

But no. Not yet. There was work to be done. Holy work. Righteous work.

He let the curtain fall back into place, shutting out the light and the noise and the sickening normalcy of it all. Returned to his desk, his sanctuary. The only place where he felt truly in control.

On the screen, the video waited for him. He stabbed a key, pausing the video for a single, frozen moment. Leaned in until his nose nearly touched the screen, bloodshot eyes devouring every pixel, every infinitesimal detail. The two before, they had fallen so sweetly. Their choked sobs, the spluttering and gargling before death took hold. Hell, the gentlemen he'd killed had even relieved himself in his final moments.

Okay, maybe he was wrong. Maybe life was still funny sometimes.

He scratched at his arm, nails digging into the pale, pockmarked flesh. Flakes of dry skin fell like snow, littering the desk, the keyboard. He needed to focus, needed to concentrate. The video, that was what mattered. The key to his masterpiece.

Frame by frame, second by second, he scrutinized the images. Or did he? Maybe he was just staring at a blank screen. It wouldn't be the first time he'd admired a piece of abstract art or shimmering lake, only to find that he was actually gawking at the tiles on his bathroom floor.

It hadn't always been like this. Once upon a time, the sun rose in the east and set in the west, just like his old geography teacher had taught him. There was a time when women would look him in the eye without sniggering. Used to be he could show his face in public and not get side-eyed by half the population. Life had been normal, until one night everything had changed for the worst. The night the laughter had died, choked off by a tightness in his chest and a roaring in his ears.

He had fled then, wandered the streets for what might have been days. He lost

himself in a fugue state, and when he finally found his way back to his apartment, he found he inhabited a different world. One where artistry, laughter and entertainment took a back seat to humiliation and cruelty. He had foolishly believed that society had left the Victorian freakshow in a bygone era, but it had simply evolved and adapted. Instead of gawking at unfortunate souls in dingy tents and seedy back alleys, the masses could point and laugh and jeer from the comfort of their own homes.

Now all people wanted was to capture another's shame, another's downfall and showcase it to the world. The court of public opinion had become a colosseum, where hapless souls were thrown to the lions and torn to shreds for the sheer amusement of it. Big mouths had replaced big brains, and the loudest, most obnoxious voices drowned out all others.

Memories kaleidoscoped through his fevered brain, but he benched them and focused on the task at hand.

He turned back to the screen, to the image of the next unwitting character in his story of retribution. In this theater of the grotesque, there could be no rehearsals, no second takes. Every performance was opening night and closing night all in one - a one-time-only engagement, never to be repeated.

But first, the preparations. The stage must be set, the props gathered, the players positioned just so.

However, there was a problem. He'd used two pillory stocks, and if the police had half a brain on them, they'd have made the connection by now.

So, he needed to make a change. He needed some new material.

Either way, his audience would be laughing before the night was out. They'd heckle, scream and beg, but in the end, the joke would be on them.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Mia raked through the files like a starving dog tearing into a T-bone. She'd been at this for three, four, five hours. She wasn't sure. Time had a funny way of slipping through the cracks when your world was crashing down around your ears.

Every scrap of paper, every cryptic scribble from Martin's pen - she'd pored over them all, searching for some clue to the storage spot. The place he supposedly stashed that damn kerosene. The same one found on Trevor's corpse. If she could find Martin's storage place, she might just find Martin.

But the files she'd seen Martin elbow-deep in just last night? Vanished into the ether like a puff of smoke. Along with any crumb of evidence that might prove Ella's crackpot theory right - or bang it tight into a coffin.

Ripley shoved back from the desk hard enough to send the chair skidding. It screeched across the hardwood like a cat getting its tail stomped, but she barely heard it over the drumbeat pounding in her skull. She lurched to her feet, paced the floor like a caged tiger.

What's the play, Mia? The little voice in her head piped up. Burning daylight chasing fairy tales when there're real monsters running wild out there?

Ripley shook her head like she could rattle the doubts loose. But they clung like ticks, burrowing deeper with every step.

She couldn't shake it - this bone-deep hunch that the storage spot was the key. The linchpin holding this whole mess together. If she could just get eyes on it, just see for herself what skeletons Martin was hiding in his closet, then maybe she could unravel

this mess.

And then what? The voice needled. Say you do find some musty old shed packed with gas cans and guilty secrets. What's that prove? That Ella's on the money about your man being a guardian angel with a body count?

There were two ways this could go. Either Ella's hunch was right, and Ripley had been living alongside a secret monster for the past few months, or this was all a big misunderstanding.

'Shut up,' Ripley snarled. She slammed her palm against the doorframe and relished the pain. She couldn't just stay here, devouring Martin's belongings like a jilted lover. She had to get out into the open, inspect every bar, every corner, every fishing hotspot. Martin was out there somewhere, and as a woman who'd spent her life finding people who didn't want to be found, how hard could it be to track the man she shared a bed with?

Keys. She needed her keys. And her Glock.

Mia strode down the stairs into the kitchen, grabbed her equipment and made for the door. She burst out into the unusual sucker-punch heat and unlocked her car. She yanked the door open, threw herself behind the wheel and fired up the engine.

No destination, no plan. Just an animal need to move, to put distance between herself and the doubts nipping at her heels. She'd rattle every cage in this town if she had to. Chase down every lead, every whisper. Throw herself against the walls of Martin's secrets until something cracked.

Storage lots. Abandoned factories. Some backwoods cabin where the screams wouldn't carry. Wherever he'd burrowed, she'd dig him out. Drag the truth into the light, kicking and screaming if need be.

And then what?

The question hit her like a freight train. For the first time, Ripley let herself really picture it. Imagine the look on Martin's face if she actually found him. Dug up his hidey-hole and shone a light on all the dark, twisted things he'd kept buried.

Betrayal. Shame. Maybe even relief, in a sick way. Like lancing a boil, letting all the poison out.

Christ, was this really what it had come to? Ripping her own life apart, chasing shadows and gut feelings like a dog after its own tail? When had the lines gotten so blurred?

Suddenly, the shrill of her cell phone made Ripley jump halfway out of her skin. She fumbled for it one-handed.

The display flashed. Jacobs, from the tech pit. Maybe with an update on the plate she'd asked him to track. The one belonging to Martin's car.

'Ripley,' she bit out.

'Hey, it's Jacobs.' The kid's voice was a notch too high, tight with excitement or nerves. Maybe both. 'That license plate you wanted eyes on? We got a hit.'

Ripley's blood fizzed in her veins. 'Where?'

'Empty lot, ass-end of town. Tucked behind some condemned warehouses.' A crinkling sound, like he was consulting a map. '3400 block of Oakwood.'

She could picture it - weed-choked, scattered with broken glass and junkie trash. The kind of place you went to dump a body or cook up a batch of meth. Anonymous.

Isolated.

‘Jacobs, I could kiss you. Tell Edis I”m-’

‘There”s something else,’ the tech cut in. He swallowed audibly, like the words were sticking in his craw. ‘The car... it”s on fire. Caller reported an explosion, then flames a couple minutes ago.’

Cold flooded Ripley”s gut. The bottom dropped out of her stomach like she”d crested the peak of a rollercoaster.

‘Say again?’

‘It”s on fire. Fire department are on the scene right now.’

Ripley let the phone fall from her numb fingers. The road ahead blurred, hot and hazy.

So this was it. The moment of truth. The universe calling her bluff, shoving her chips to the center of the table.

She mashed the gas, tires shrieking, chewing up asphalt. The car leaped forward like a horse stung by a whip.

Oakwood. 3400 block. Towards the flames and whatever waited on the other side.

Ripley just prayed she was ready for it. Ready to face whatever hard, ugly truths rose out of those ashes.

Because one way or the other - there”d be no more running from this.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella shook the numbness out of her bones. The precinct's chairs were built for perps, not posterity. Hard plastic and splintery wood, a chiropractor's wet dream. In front of her, the victims' records were spread out like a buffet. Bank statements, phone records, social media records. Everything they could dig up without the assistance of a black-hat hacker.

Beside her, Luca was doing his best impression of a statue - chiseled jaw, furrowed brow, the whole tall-dark-and-pensive schtick. She had to concede that this rookie was alright, even if his peach fuzz made her feel like a cradle robber.

He jabbed a finger at the stack of papers, breaking her out of her daze. "Both of our victims had a real talent for pissing people off. We know that much."

Ella grunted. He wasn't wrong. Archie Newman and Georgia Bolton - poster kids for winning friends and alienating people, according to their records. Loudmouths with more enemies than a corrupt politician, given how many passive-aggressive posts they'd plastered on social media.

'Could be something there,' Ella said. 'Coincidences are fairy tales in this line of work.'

Luca nodded, all earnest eagerness. The kid was like a puppy begging for a treat. "Where do we start? Matching up known associates, cross-referencing social circles?"

Ella reached for Georgia's file. Girl's life was spread across a half-dozen social media platforms; a digital tapestry of bad decisions and worse taste in men.

‘Bolton’s online footprint is a minefield. Let’s start there, see if any of her virtual pals overlap with Newman’s.’

They dug in, sorting through a labyrinth of likes, shares, and subtweets. The minutes swept by, the bullpen’s buzzing fluorescents marking time like some kinda sadistic sundial. But even as her eyes strained and her brain went static, Ella’s thoughts kept circling back to Ripley. Her partner, her yin to her yang. Off chasing ghosts and gut feelings, probably drowning in a bottle all the while.

Ella’s fingers itched for her cell. One call, just to check in. Make sure Ripley hadn’t swallowed her Glock or done something equally stupid in the name of love.

But she shut that down quick. Ripley had made it crystal she didn’t want Ella’s nose in her business. Not when it came to Martin and his possible extracurriculars.

Luca’s voice yanked her back to the here and now. ‘I’m not seeing any mutual friends here. Bolton and Newman might as well have been living on different planets.’

Ella pinched the bridge of her nose. ‘Their financials telling a different story?’

‘Nada. She was all dive bars and nightclubs on the few occasions she did leave the house. He was more Pbr and video games. Opposite ends of the spectrum.’

This was getting them nowhere fast. She shoved back from the table and said, ‘Let’s look at this from another angle. Maybe it’s not about their social circle, but their daily routines. Where they worked, where they played.’

Luca flipped through a sheaf of papers. ‘Bolton was slinging drinks at a joint called The Rusty Nail. Newman was pulling pints at The Boathouse Brewery.’

‘Both service industry, both dealing with drunks and bachelorette parties.’ Ella started pacing, the gears in her head grinding. ‘What about extracurriculars? Either of them have any regular haunts? Places they frequented outside of work hours?’

More shuffling, pages rustling. Luca huffed. ‘Not seeing any crossover. Bolton was all about the party scene, anywhere with a pulse and a two-for-one special. Newman’s credit card shows a lot of activity at sports bars and a pizza place that he frequented with alarming regularity.’

Ella stopped mid-stride, something pinging in her brain. ‘Wait. Pizza place?’

‘Yeah. Bella Napoli Pizzeria. Sounds like a nice place.’

A memory tickled the back of Ella’s mind. Ella dove back into the Bolton file, scanning the pages like a hawk searching for prey. She flipped through Georgia’s social media history, a blur of drunken selfies and scathing posts about ex-lovers and former friends.

And there, buried in the deluge of digital vitriol, she found it.

A post from three months ago, Georgia ranting about some ‘punk-ass pizza jockey’ who’d kicked her out of his pizza shop.

And she’d tagged the page for Bella Napoli Pizzeria in the post.

”Hawkins, check this,” Ella said. She pushed the file over to him. ”Apparently, our girl Georgia got the boot for being a belligerent drunk.”

Luca’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Same place where Newman was burning his cash. He practically had a standing order at that place.’

Ella could picture it – Georgia swaggering in, all fishnet and attitude, tossing slurs and insults like confetti. Things escalating, tempers flaring. Maybe a full-blown tantrum at table six.

‘Maybe they got into it with a server or bouncer. Pissed off the wrong person. Maybe even got someone fired?’

It was thin, but it was something. More than they’d had five minutes ago.

Luca leaned back in his chair, a slow grin spreading across his pretty-boy mug. ‘Bella Napoli. That’s Italian, you know. Just like yours truly.’

She pushed to her feet, snatching her jacket off the back of the chair. ‘What gave it away? The ‘Napoli’ or the Italian flag on the logo?’

‘Just saying.’ Luca shot out of his chair and shrugged into his jacket in record time. The kid’s enthusiasm was a welcome shot of adrenaline in the arm.

‘You’re Italian?’ Ella asked.

‘No, I’m as American as a bald eagle,’ Luca said as he scooped up his things. ‘My dad’s middle name was Luke, and his favorite sport was lucha libre. He just combined the two.’

‘Smart. Just don’t tell anyone.’

‘My lips are sealed. Now, let’s pay a visit to my people.’

Ella mentally ran through the possibilities. If Georgia and Archie had gotten into it with an employee at Bella Napoli, it could be the break they needed. A disgruntled server, a pissed-off pizza slinger. The kind of everyday slight that could fester into

something deadly in the right kind of broken brain.

She thought of their unsub, out there somewhere, stewing in his own twisted juices. Building his next torture throne, picking his next vic. The familiar urgency thrummed through her, the need to hunt, to chase, to catch.

Time to rattle some cages, kick down some doors, maybe grab a slice of Italy's finest import. It was a long shot, but in this game, you played the hand you were dealt, and you played it to the bloody end.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The Bella Napoli Pizzeria squatted on the corner like a zit on prom night. Faded bricks, peeling paint. A veritable carbuncle on the ass-end of the city.

Ella killed the engine and eyeballed the place through the windshield. 'This is it?'

'Looks like it,' Luca said. 'Never judge a book, etcetera.'

'True enough. Ready?'

Luca double-checked his sidearm and unlocked the car door, one foot outside. Ella scrutinized the exterior of the shop again, and she was about to crack wise about the health department's lax standards when Luca leaned back in.

'You know, some of these places aren't pizzerias at all.'

Ella cocked an eyebrow. 'Come again?'

'They're fronts.'

'For what?'

'You know...' Luca said. 'The Family.'

'Is that so?'

'I saw it on Law and Order.'

Ella snorted as she got out of the car and met Luca on the other side. "If this place is laundering money, then that's the least of our concerns. Let's see if anyone inside remembers our vics."

She led the way, pushed through the door. The tinny chime of the bell was drowned out by the wheezing rattle of an ancient AC unit. The odor of congealed grease invaded her nostrils and suddenly reminded her the last time she ate anything was in a different state. If this place was a money laundering operation, they were working for it.

A bored-looking kid slouched behind the counter, idly hunched over his cell phone. Two customers huddled in a booth, lost in a murky haze of vape smoke that smelled suspiciously like marijuana. Ella let it slide.

'Excuse me, we're looking for the manager of this place,' she said. She slid her badge across the counter. 'FBI.'

The kid blinked slowly, mouth opening and closing like a guppy gulping for air. 'FBI? Uh, yeah. Sure. Lemme just...' He scurried off towards the back, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste.

'Smooth,' Luca said.

Before Ella could fire off a suitable retort, the kid returned with a man in tow. The guy was a mountain of flesh stuffed into a sweat-stained wifebeater. A doughy face set in a permanent scowl.

'Carmin Ross,' he grunted, meaty arms crossed over his barrel chest. 'I own this joint. What's your damage?'

Ella flashed her badge again, gratified to see a flicker of unease in Carmin's piggy

little eyes. ‘Agents Dark and Hawkins, FBI. Is there somewhere we can talk?’

Carmine’s scowl deepened, transforming his face into something resembling a bulldog chewing on a wasp. ‘Grab a table,’ he said. Despite the command, he led the way to a corner booth, far enough away that the other patrons couldn’t eavesdrop. Ella and Luca slid into the cracked vinyl of the booth as the ancient table wobbled between them like a drunk on a bender. Carmine loomed over them and took a seat opposite.

‘What’s this about?’ Carmine snarled.

‘We’re investigating an ongoing case. Victims were regulars at this place according to their records. Georgia Bolton and Archie Newman. Ring any bells?’

Carmine’s scowl deepened, creasing his face like an origami frog left out in the rain. ‘Bolton and Newman? Nah, never heard of ’em.’

Luca whipped out his phone, thumbed through a couple of screens, then slid it across the table. ‘Maybe these mugs will jog your memory.’

Carmine squinted at the images, eyes narrowed to piggy slits. Slowly, recognition dawned on his doughy face like something rising to the surface of a backed-up toilet.

‘Oh, yeah. Them. The guy was a regular, and the chick came in a few times too. Couple of pezzo di merdas, if I’m honest. Every time they were in here, they brought attention.’

Ella studied Carmine, watching the anger simmer just beneath the surface of his greasy skin. The guy was built like a side of beef, with hams for fists and a neck thick as a tree trunk. Probably strong enough to snap a man’s spine if the mood struck him. But then again, wasn’t that the stereotype? The hot-tempered Italian, ready to blow

his top at the drop of a ravioli?

‘Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Carmine, but your regulars? They’re cooling their heels in the morgue as we speak.’

Carmine’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, genuine shock registering on his doughy mug. ‘Wait, what? Those two mooks from the news? The ones they found strung up in Chautauqua Park and behind the strip club? That was them?’

Ella had to fight back the crushing weight in her gut. The news had already reached the masses. Edis was going to give her an earful tomorrow morning.

Luca nodded. ‘Bingo.’

Carmine slumped back in his seat as the pleather creaked under his bulk. He ran a meaty paw over his face and blew out a long, slow breath.

‘Cavolo. I mean, I ain’t exactly surprised. Those two, they were always lookin’ for trouble. Always sloshed. I had to bounce them out of here a few times.’

Luca asked, ‘You or your staff ever get physical with them?’

Carmine’s eyes bugged out of his head like a pair of runny eggs. ”What? Nah, nothin” like that. I ain’t never laid a finger on them, and neither did my crew. I run a respectable joint here.”

Ella’s gaze drifted to the counter, where the zit-faced kid and a couple of other grease-stained goons were milling about. She studied each face in turn, looking for a tell, a twitch, anything that might ping her radar.

The kid was out, too scrawny and pock-marked to fit the profile. Ditto for the old guy

flipping pies in the back, his hands shaking like a junkie in withdrawal.

But the third guy was younger, mid-twenties maybe, with a wiry build and a shaved head gleaming under the harsh kitchen lights. The way he moved, the coiled energy in his stance. Something about him made Ella's cop senses tingle.

She filed him away for later, a mental snapshot to run through the database. See if their mystery man had any priors, any history of violence.

'What about a vendetta?' she asked, turning back to Carmine. 'Word is, Bolton took some potshots at this place on social media. Posted a real nasty review, called you out by name. Maybe someone on your payroll took offense and decided to teach her a lesson?'

Carmine barked out a laugh. 'Are you kiddin' me? You think we care what some drunken skank says about us on the internet? We're doin' business like never before, lady.'

Ella's jaw clenched. This guy's lack of remorse was getting under her skin, but she couldn't exactly collar him for being a callous prick. She needed evidence, a smoking gun. Something to tie him or his goons to the murders.

'Where were you the past two nights?' Luca chimed in. 'Say, between the hours of midnight and four AM?'

Carmine spread his hands. 'Same place I always am, detective. Right here, slingin' pies and keepin' the peace. Me and my whole crew, we were on the clock 'til the wee hours. Got the timecards to prove it. CCTV footage too.'

Frustration simmered in Ella's gut, but she doused it with a hefty dose of saliva. 'We'll need to see it.'

Carmine held up a meaty paw. ‘Hold your horses. Lemme grab the proof.’

He heaved himself out of the booth, the vinyl sighing in relief, and lumbered towards the back.

‘What do you think?’ Luca asked.

She made sure no one could hear. ‘I think he’s living up to the stereotype. But I don’t think he’s involved,’ she admitted.

A minute later, Carmine returned, a fistful of timecards clutched in his hamhock of a hand. ‘There ya go, detective. Read ’em and weep.’

Ella snatched up the cards and scanned the rows of names and numbers.

Each line was another nail in the coffin of her hunch.

Three PM to three AM. Every single employee had punched in and out at the same time, just like Carmine said. A regular Kumbaya circle-jerk of punctuality.

According to the autopsy reports, both victims had been killed around midnight – around six hours before they were discovered. At their times of death, Carmine and his workers had been elbow-deep in pizza bases.

Which meant they were all off the hook.

‘We’ll still need the CCTV footage,’ she said as she tossed the cards back on the table. ‘Visual confirmation you were all present and accounted for.’

Carmines smirk could’ve greased a fleet of frying pans. ‘Sure thing, sweetheart. You got a card? I’ll have my boy Gino email it over.’

Ella dug in her pocket and flicked her card across the table like a ninja star. ‘Make it snappy. And if I catch one whiff of editing, I’ll be back with a warrant and a pack of rabid dogs.’

‘Trust me,’ Carmine said. ‘You guys want a Bella Napoli special? It’s on the house.’

Ella asked, ‘Is that a bribe?’

‘If you want.’

She slid out of the booth, her appetite well and truly murdered. ‘I’ll pass. Hawkins?’

‘I’m good, but thanks for your time.’

‘We’ll be in touch,’ Ella finished and made for the door. Luca fell into step beside her as they strode outside. The cold seeped into her bloodstream, but she barely felt it over the frustration simmering in her veins.

A dead end. A lead crumbling to ash. It was like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall.

They climbed into the car. Ella shot Luca a glance as she cranked the engine. His pretty boy face was a study in disappointment.

‘Don’t sweat it,’ she said. ‘Sometimes it’s one step forward, two steps back, sometimes in a bed of thumbtacks.’

Luca huffed and jabbed his fist into his stomach. ”It just hurts right here. Thought we had something. Thought we could head back to the families and give them some good news.”

Ella’s heart did a little shimmy in her chest. The kid had empathy, miles of it. In this

line of work, that was both a blessing and a curse.

‘It’s early days,’ she said, surprised at the conviction in her own voice. ‘We’ll dig into Newman and Bolton’s lives ’til our fingers bleed. Someone’s gotta know something.’

Luca nodded, but there was some hesitation in those dangerously blue eyes of his. ‘About that. I was wondering if you could take the reins on it. Something that’s been rattlin’ round my brain pan. There’s another angle I’m thinking of taking.’

Ella cocked an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. ‘Care to share with the class, Hawkins?’

But Luca just shook his head. Lips zipped tight. ‘Not yet. Just want to make sure I’m not putting stock in a whole load of nothing.’

Ella studied him for a long moment, trying to suss out what cogs were turning behind those pretty peepers. But the kid had a surprisingly good poker face.

Her mind spun like a roulette wheel as flashes of the past bled through the din of the present. All the times, Ella had done the same thing to Ripley, revealing things little by little as they slotted into the overall jigsaw piece. It had driven Ripley nuts, probably, but Ripley had always given her the benefit of the doubt. Never mothered her, never forced her to spill what was on her mind.

And now, watching Luca’s jaw work, seeing the gears turning, Ella felt a pang of something bittersweet. Understanding, maybe. Or just the ache of familiarity, of history repeating itself in the passenger seat.

‘Alright, Columbo, keep your ideas under wraps for now,’ she said as she guided the car into the flow of traffic.

Luca flashed her a grin, quick and bright as a muzzle flare. ‘Just trying to take the initiative, partner.’

The initiative. As much as Ella loved Ripley with that black pit she called a heart, she couldn’t remember the last time Ripley had taken the initiative. Ripley was content to watch and guide and shout instructions, so Ella struggled to contain the flutter of warmth in her chest. The sense that maybe, just maybe, the universe had thrown her a bone here. A partner who could keep up, who had the chops and the moxie to run with the big dogs.

Careful, Dark, a little voice whispered in the back of her head. Remember what happened the last time you let someone get too close.

But Ella shoved that voice back into its box, slammed the lid and tossed away the key.

There was work to be done. Right now, she had a precinct to get to, a boss to update, and a ton of legwork to do.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella squinted at the case files until the words blurred together like smudged ink on a doctor's notepad. She'd been at this for hours, combing through every scrap of intel on Georgia Bolton and Archie Newman, trying to find the thread that would unravel this whole bloody mess.

But so far, nada.

Aside from their shared love of getting tanked up and visiting Bella Napoli Pizzeria, these two had about as much in common as a priest and a porn star. Different crowds, different haunts. It was like trying to mix oil and water and praying for a Molotov cocktail.

Ella leaned back in her chair. She scrubbed a hand over her face, feeling the grit of exhaustion sanding her corneas. Christ, when was the last time she'd gotten a decent night's sleep? Four hours here, a catnap there. Life seemed to be a never-ending barrage of cities, cases and serial killers. Her eyeballs felt like overripe grapes, ready to burst at the seams.

The numbers in the corner of her laptop swam in and out of focus. Nine PM. Witching hour for the workaholics and masochists.

Knock it off, Dark, she scolded herself. No rest for the wicked, remember? You can sleep when you're dead.

But even as she rallied, even as she reached for another file, her aunt's voice echoed in her head like a ghostly nag.

You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, and you'll get better grades with a rested mind.

The old broad had a point. Loath as Ella was to admit it, burning the midnight oil wasn't doing her any favors. Her brain felt like scrambled eggs on Quaaludes, synapses misfiring like dud sparklers.

She needed to recharge the old batteries. Get some shut-eye and let the subconscious work its magic. Maybe then the dots would magically connect and she could make sense of this senseless case.

Ella was just about to heave herself out of the chair, muscles creaking like rusted hinges, when the door burst open like a gunshot.

She whipped around, instincts alert despite being in the sanctuary of the precinct. But it was just Luca at the door, and his pretty-boy face was flushed and his eyes were bright with the unholy glee of a man who'd just struck gold.

'Ella!' he crowed, brandishing a sheaf of papers like a holy relic. 'I've got it! The signature!'

Ella blinked, her sleep-deprived brain struggling to catch up. 'Context, Hawkins. What signature? What are you on about?'

Luca practically vibrated with excitement as he crossed the room in two long strides. He slapped the papers down on Ella's desk, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

'Remember that mark we found on the inside of the stocks? The circle with the weird squiggles?'

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘That’s where you’ve been? The library?’

Luca’s grin widened as he nodded. ‘Oh yes. See, I figured whoever made these stocks had to be old-school, you know? A blacksmith, a metalworker, someone who still uses their hands instead of a 3D printer.’

Ella leaned back in her chair, intrigued despite the fatigue fogging her brain. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, those types, they tend to advertise the old-fashioned way too. Classified ads, flyers, that sort of thing. So I hit up the library, spent the last four hours going blind on microfiche.’ He slapped a newspaper clipping on the desk and jabbed his finger at a grainy image. ‘And bingo. Look familiar?’

Ella squinted at the ad, the words ”Aleister Morgan”s Medieval Museum” leaping out at her in bold, Gothic script. And there, tucked away in the corner like an afterthought, was a familiar sight.

‘The signature,’ she breathed. ‘The same damn squiggle from the stocks.’

Luca nodded, triumph oozing from every pore. ‘Looks like this guy Aleister Morgan - is more than just a curator. He”s a craftsman too, specializing in ”authentic recreations of medieval torture devices.” Charming, right?’

Ella shook her head, a grudging respect blooming in her chest. The kid had done good, damn good. She”d been ready to write this whole thing off as a dead end, but Luca had followed the thread, unraveled the clues like a seasoned pro.

‘Aleister Morgan”s Medieval Museum,’ she said. ‘What the hell is it?’

Luca frowned at the newspaper clipping. ‘Not much to go on here. Just a few ads, a name, and an address that”s probably older than dirt.’

Ella snatched up her laptop and started tapping away, fingers flying over the keys like a concert pianist on a bender. ‘Let’s see what the wonder of the world wide web has to offer.’

But the internet proved to be a fickle mistress. No website, no social media presence, not even a damn Yelp review for Aleister Morgan’s Medieval Museum. The place was a phantom in the digital age.

Ella was about to toss the laptop aside in frustration when a tiny blurb caught her eye. She clicked, zoomed, her eyes narrowing to slits.

BUSINESS STATUS: INACTIVE.

‘Well. Looks like our buddy Aleister did have a business at one point.’ She dug in a little deeper. ‘But it went down the pan two years ago. Filed for bankruptcy by the looks of it.’

Luca leaned in, his breath tickling her ear. ‘Bankruptcy, huh? That’s one hell of a motive for murder.’

Tale as old as time. Guy loses everything, blames the world, decides to take his pound of flesh outta anyone unlucky enough to cross his path.’

Luca huffed out a laugh, but there was no humor in it. ‘Guess we better pay Mr. Morgan a visit then.’

‘Even if he’s not our guy, the stocks used definitely came from him.’ Ella was already on her feet, snatching up her keys and her piece. She punched the address into her phone, a frown creasing her brow. ‘Huh. That’s weird.’

Luca glanced over. ”What? He lives in a cave or something?”

‘Nope, just a normal house. Quite big and pretty secluded, but doesn’t exactly scream medieval museum.’“

‘Perfect place for a serial killer to manifest.’

Ella had a lead, a name, a face to put to the horrors she’d seen. And in this business, you didn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, even if its teeth were rotten and its breath reeked of death.

‘Alright, Hawkins, this could be it. You ready?’

Luca checked his sidearm and cracked his knuckles. ‘Those words are music to my ears. It’s the first time I’ve heard them, but still.’

‘But still,’ Ella echoed. ‘Let’s go meet the guy that built these stocks.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Asphalt gave way to gravel as Ella drove further into the outskirts of Dover. The houses thinned out, replaced by scraggly trees and overgrown lots, the detritus of civilization receding in the rearview.

‘Jesus, we’ve got ourselves a hermit,’ Luca said.

‘Ed Gein. Unabomber. Herb Baumeister. Serial killers and isolation go together like shoes and socks.’

The GPS chirped, dragging Ella out of her historical reflection. They were close, less than a mile out from their destination. She felt that familiar tingle, and it had nothing to do with the bad suspension and everything to do with the hunter’s instinct flaring to life in her gut.

Something was waiting for her at the end of this road. She knew it.

‘Up here,’ Luca said. ‘This dirt path.’

‘Time to go off road.’ Ella dropped into second, mounted the path and began scaling the hill. It was a rickety climb, nothing but a sheer drop into the brambles on either side. At the top, she rounded a bend, and there it was.

Aleister Morgan’s house. Rising out of the gloom like a malevolent tumor.

‘Talk about a Leatherface house,’ Luca said.

Ella cranked the handbrake and killed the headlights. ‘If this was a museum, no

wonder it went under.'

It was a behemoth of a thing: crumbling bricks, sagging gables, the kind of place that had been plucked from the reel of a gothic horror film. Darkened windows gaped like empty eye sockets. An overgrown yard bordered the place in a tangle of weeds and brambles that reached out like a witch's fingers.

'What's the plan? All guns blazing?'

There was a correct answer to this question, so it was a chance to put the rookie to the test, see if he could read the room. 'What do you think, Hawkins?' Ella asked.

'If he's our unsub, then surely we'll want him cooperative as quickly as possible. Clear the corners, get him on the ground right away. Put the fear on him.'

Ella pulled out her Glock and checked her ammunition levels. All on point. 'Look around you. What do you see out here?'

Luca indulged the request and glanced out of the window. 'A whole load of nothing. Nature. Trees. Why?'

'Look up in those trees. Those clusters of branches. A farm boy like you should recognize that.'

Luca squinted. 'Uh. A bear's nest?'

'Yup. If there are bears around here, there are people with guns to take down said bears. And besides, name me a hermit who didn't have a gun stash.' She popped the door and stepped out. 'Just be smart.'

Luca joined her, one hand resting on his pistol like it was his only friend in this

world. They crept towards the house, every step carefully placed to avoid snapping a twig and announcing their presence like a brass band at a funeral. The dilapidated porch groaned like a dying whale as they eased their way up the steps. A stencil declaring Aleister Morgan's Medieval Museum was etched above the door.

Ella knocked, waited, then caressed her Glock for reassurance. Alone, she'd have no fear, but having Luca by her side prompted a more secure approach. Only last year, she'd been partnered with another rookie, and rushing into an unsecured location had proved fatal for the one-time cohort. The poor girl's face still haunted her nightly, and Ella would be damned if she'd make the same mistake again.

No answer at the door. Luca knocked this time.

Thirty seconds passed.

No response.

Luca went to hammer again, but Ella held up a fist, freezing Luca in his tracks. She cocked her head, listening hard. There, beneath the chirping crickets and hooting owls, was the metallic groan of rusted hinges.

'Hawkins, you hear that?'

Luca pressed his ear to the door. 'No?'

'Not in there.' She jerked her chin around the side of the house. 'Round the back.'

Ella took the lead and peered around the wall, then slowly followed the route down the side of the apparent museum. The surrounding yard was a nightmare of ankle-twisting roots and grasping brambles, a canopy of gnarled branches blotting out the sickly moonlight.

And there, at the far end, a gate. Ancient, its lopsided maw gaping like a hanged man's broken neck.

An invitation? A trap?

Only one way to find out.

Ella's pulse spiked. Luca was stuck to her side as she shouldered through the gate, the old hinges screeching like a banshee. She entered into a garden-turned-obstacle-course; gnarled roots, overgrown shrubs, spiky grass snatching at her ankles. Something told her this was a pistol-first invasion.

Suddenly, Luca nudged her. 'Ella, there,' he whispered.

Ella followed his line of sight. There, at the back entrance to Aleister Morgan's house was a silhouette. Tall and scrawny, with a riot of mad scientist hair visible from the dim light coming from inside the home.

The figure stayed still as a statue, like he was carved out of the shadows themselves.

Was this him?

'You're late,' a voice knifed through the gloom, sharp enough to draw blood.

Late, Ella repeated to herself. Was this guy expecting someone else? Some tweeker looking to score? Or was this a regular thing, freaks and geeks showing up at all hours to perv on Aleister's little chamber of horrors?

Ella inched closer, breathing heavily to slow her pulse rate. Before she could announce herself, the figure turned, slow as molasses in January.

Irritation rolled off him in waves as he squinted at the two new arrivals.

‘I said, you’re-’ The words died on his tongue as recognition sucker-punched him. His eyes flared wide, mouth hanging open like a gutted fish.

‘Aleister Morgan?’ Ella said. ‘That you?’

Aleister looked like he’d just seen a ghost. Or a cop. He stood frozen, brain visibly short-circuiting behind those beady eyes.

Ella took a moment to drink him in, to really look at the man who might be behind the Dover murders. He was a scrawny son of a bitch, all sharp angles and jutting bones. Lanky in a way that suggested more drugs than meals.

But there was a wiry strength to him too. She could see it in the way he held himself, in the twitch of his fingers and the dart of his eyes. This was a man who knew violence, who maybe even got off on it. Aleister Morgan might look like a strong breeze would knock him over, but there was something in his eyes, something cold and dead and hungry. The kinda look that said he’d do anything, hurt anyone, just to feel something.

She’d seen it before, in the empty stares of a dozen different killers. The ones who killed for fun, for sport, just to prove they could.

Ella took a step forward, but quick as a snake, Aleister spun on his heel and bolted into his house. He crashed through the back door, leaving curses and a slammed door in his wake.

‘Freeze!’ Ella screamed, but Aleister was gone. She barreled into the house, pistol in one hand and flashlight in the other. Luca moved in sync with her, equally armed. Ella swept her flashlight across the living room, illuminating a sagging couch, a TV

that looked like it had been stuck on static since the Cold War. Empty beer cans and overflowing ashtrays littered every surface. Perhaps the detritus of a life circling the drain.

‘FBI,’ Ella shouted. ‘Come out.’

But there was no response. Just the creak of rotting floorboards.

Luca disappeared up ahead and Ella followed. Into a kitchen, Ella found a sink piled high with crusty dishes and a fridge that smelled like something had died in it, but no signs of life. Ella moved into a hallway with rows of doors either side, booted the first one open and shined her light in.

It illuminated a splattered hellscape someone might generously call a bathroom. Cracked tiles, a broken porcelain throne, a mildewed shower curtain clinging to a rusted rod like a moldy shroud. She swept the light around, half-expecting Aleister to come scuttling out like a cockroach. But the only occupants were an army of yellow bottles standing to attention.

On to the next contender. Ella shouldered through, ready for anything. A downstairs bedroom. A mattress squatting on the floor, surrounded by mountains of crusty laundry and an archaeological dig’s worth of beer cans. Posters peeled off the walls like sunburnt skin; naked women and concert posters. The typical interior design of a degenerate bachelor pad.

‘Ella!’ Luca’s voice knifed through the house. ‘In here, now!’

Ella sprinted towards her partner’s voice. She burst into the next room and skidded to a halt, blood turning to ice water in her veins.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Ella said.

Their flashlights brought the contents of the room into view piece by piece.

Stocks, racks, iron maidens – masterfully crafted, given the sickening sheen on the wood and metalwork. They lined the walls, crouched in the corners, a forest of nightmares waiting to snare the unwary.

Ella swallowed hard. There was no time to gawp at what might be devices designed to showcase corpses. Beside, Luca stood frozen, but Ella caught his nostrils flaring. He cocked his head like a dog catching a scent.

‘You smell that?’ Luca asked.

She inhaled and caught a note of something. The kind of smell she associated with back alleys and seedy dens. It was sweet, acrid, with a zing that made her eyes water.

‘Meth,’ she bit out.

Junkie and a serial killer, a match made in a cop’s worst nightmare. It explained the squalor, the stench. Guy was too busy chasing the white dragon to worry about little things like hygiene and decor.

Luca spun to face her, his pretty-boy mug set in hard lines. ‘We gotta split up. Guy could be hiding anywhere.’

‘No chance. Not letting you outta my sight.’

‘C”mon, trust me. This place is huge. We stick together, Aleister could slip right by.’

Ella chewed her lip, copper flooding her tongue. Luca had a point. Much as it chapped her ass to admit, going solo would double their odds of catching this freak.

‘Fine,’ she ground out. ‘But keep your finger on the trigger and try not to kill him.’

‘Roger.’

Then he was gone, pounding up the stairs in a clatter of boots and bravado. Ella swallowed past the sudden tightness in her throat. He better not do anything stupid, or she’d resurrect him just to slap him herself.

She pushed the worry down, locked it up tight. No time for sentimentality. She began prowling the rest of the downstairs area, senses cranked to eleven. More empty spaces, more junk. She jabbed her flashlight into corners dark and deep enough to hide an army.

Nothing. Just dust and cobwebs and the rancid reek of a life gone sideways.

She snarled under her breath. Where was this guy? She hadn’t heard any doors opening or closing. Hadn’t heard anyone ascend the stairs until Luca did. Her instincts told her that Aleister Morgan was on this floor. Either that or he’d managed to get outside.

Ella paused in the hallway, closing her eyes as she strained her ears past the thud of her own heartbeat. Listening for the creak of floorboards, the rasp of breath, anything that might give the bastard away.

But there was only the groans and sighs of the house settling and the faint skitter of unseen vermin in the walls. She was about to punch a hole through the drywall in sheer frustration, but then something appeared in her periphery.

A door. Barely visible in the gloom, tucked under the stairs like an afterthought. Ella crept closer, pulse kicking up a notch as the stink of chemicals grew stronger. Meth fumes, seeping through the cracks like toxic smoke.

She tried the handle. Locked, of course, but locks were merely a suggestion.

Ella took a step back and unleashed hell on that flimsy piece of plywood. The sole of her boot slammed into it like a battering ram, once, twice, three times. The frame shattered, the door flew open and suddenly Ella was staring down a set of narrow stairs descending into pitch blackness.

A basement.

Perhaps Aleister's own little corner of tweaker hell.

Ella's lips peeled back from her teeth in a skull's grin. Bingo.

She started down, gun leading the way. Her flashlight burned through the inky depths as the risers creaked under her weight. As she descended, the stench of harsh chemicals became overwhelming, and it mingled with the cloying rot of festering garbage for good measure.

But Ella pushed on, the thrill of the hunt thrumming through her veins and drowning out all else. Aleister was down here, she'd bet her badge on it. Probably thought he was safe in his dank little rat hole.

Ella hit the icy concrete at the bottom. She swept her light in a wide arc, shadows skittering up the crumbling brick walls. The beam flashed over a rusted workbench cluttered with pipes and bottles, a propane tank hulking in the corner like a bloated metal toad.

Aleister's meth kitchen. His personal portal to chemical Wonderland.

'FBI,' Ella announced again. 'It's over, Aleister.'

Ella picked her way deeper into the room, waiting and praying for a response. She found overturned furniture, piles of scrap metal and plastic tubing. Two more pieces of medieval equipment; a wooden chair covered in spikes and straps, a metal cage suspended in the air. The place was a regular medieval-meets-meth-house conception.

But no Aleister. Just the remnants of his disastrous attempts to cook crank.

Ella swore under her breath. Had she jumped the gun? Let him slip right through her fingers?

She was halfway to the stairs, ready to double back and canvass the whole damn property inch by inch, when a sound made her freeze.

A footstep. The scuff of a shoe on concrete, directly behind her.

Ella whirled, finger tightening on the trigger. But before she could get a bead on the threat, something slammed into her from the side in a blur of flailing limbs.

She hit the ground hard, flashlight flying as the air whooshed out of her lungs. A knee dug into her back, bony hands scrabbling for her gun. Aleister. He'd pulled a guerrilla ambush, lying in wait like a snake in the grass. His hands clamped around her throat, squeezing, crushing, cutting off her air.

Ella bucked, thrashed, but he had an iron grip, a crackhead's grip. Spots danced across Ella's vision as the pressure built in her skull. She reached up to claw at his face, but Aleister dodged and tightened his grip around her neck.

But suddenly, the overhead light blazed to life. Black turned to yellow and Aleister's weight was ripped away as someone tore him off her like a scab off a wound.

She rolled to her side, coughing and wheezing as blessed air rushed back into her

lungs. Luca and Aleister were joined as one, careening across the room, with Luca driving Aleister back with the inexorable force of a freight train. Aleister stumbled, flailed, tried to find purchase on the filthy floor but Luca was relentless. With a roar that rattled the teeth in Ella's head, Luca hurled Aleister towards a nightmarish collection of medieval horrors. Spikes and blades and things that existed only to bring pain.

Time seemed to slow as Ella watched Aleister fly. He pinwheeled his arms, desperately trying to stop his momentum, but it was too late, too much.

Ella cringed in anticipation, bracing for the sickening crunch of flesh meeting metal. And then it came as Aleister slammed into a chair straight out of the Spanish Inquisition's wet dreams.

Rusted spikes pierced his back, drew blood and howls in equal measure. But the crazy bastard didn't stay down. He jolted to his feet like a human pincushion high on pain and insanity.

He staggered forward, mouth open in a wordless snarl. But Luca was ready for him. He snatched up a metal rod – the kind of thing that would be right at home in this house of horrors – and swung.

Not at the face, but in a perfect arc right between Aleister's legs.

Metal on meat.

Even Ella had to clench her own nethers in sympathetic agony.

And suddenly, Aleister was screaming a different tune.

He crumpled, hands clutching his pulverized package. A hit like that, Ella wouldn't

be surprised if his balls were powder.

She staggered to her feet, one hand massaging her bruised throat. She stared at Luca, at the steel in his eyes, the set of his jaw. In that moment, he was more than a pretty face rookie. He might very well have been her savior.

Luca tossed the rod aside with a clatter, his chest heaving as the adrenaline drained away.

He jerked his chin at Aleister, still writhing on the floor like a worm on a hotplate. His hands were glued to his groin.

‘The capital of Thailand,’ Luca said. He turned back to Ella.

Ella pulled out her cuffs and threw them to her partner. ‘What?’

Luca suppressed a grin, pointed to the fallen suspect and said, ‘Bangkok.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Mia Ripley's gut clenched like a fist as she screeched to a halt at the ass-end of Oakwood. The 3400 block, a wasteland of weeds, broken bottles, and shattered dreams. The kind of place even the rats had the good sense to abandon.

And there, squatting like a mortally wounded beast amidst the urban decay, was Martin's pride and joy. His baby, his Excalibur, his magnum opus on four wheels.

And it was smoking like an ancient furnace.

The fire crew had the blaze mostly licked, but smoke still twisted into the sky like a python on the make. The acrid stench sucker-punched Ripley right in the sinuses while the heat-blasted her face like Satan's sauna.

She swallowed hard past the lump in her throat, a lump that tasted suspiciously like her heart trying to climb out of her mouth. What the hell was Martin's car doing here, abandoned and burning like a funeral pyre in this godforsaken corner of urban hell? Her mind spun dizzying scenarios – kidnapping, carjacking, a simple malfunction turned inferno. But in her marrow, she knew this was no accident, no coincidence. This had all the hallmarks of a deliberate act; a statement written in fire and ash.

Ripley stumbled out of her car on legs that barely seemed capable of holding her weight. The ground felt unsteady beneath her boots, the world tilting on its axis as she tried to process this display of vehicular carnage. She zeroed in on a uniform, some baby-faced beat cop standing around with his thumb up his ass.

'Hey,' she barked. 'Agent Ripley with the FBI. What happened here?'

The cop blinked at her, looking about as bright as a sack of wet mice. He glanced from her shield to her face and back again, the hamster wheel in his head practically smoking.

‘Fed?’

‘Yeah.’

‘This is just a car fire.’

Ripley’s smile felt like a razor blade on her face. ‘It’s personal, not professional. I know the owner of this car.’

That got the gears turning behind the cop’s bovine eyes. He looked from her to the smoldering wreck of Martin’s beloved ride and back again. ‘My condolences,’ he said.

‘Save your Hallmark moment,’ Ripley snapped. ‘Just give me the facts.’

Baby-face shrugged, hooking his thumbs in his utility belt like a cut-rate John Wayne. ‘Not much to tell, really. Looks like a pretty standard torch job. Fire department says it was doused in kerosene, lit up like the Fourth. No one inside, far as we can tell, but we haven’t had a chance to really poke around yet.’

Kerosene, Ripley thought. ‘Mind if I take a peek?’ She jerked her chin towards the car, already moving past the yellow tape before the cop could respond. ‘Seeing as I’m here and all.’

The uniform scrambled to keep up, puffing like a two-pack-a-day asthmatic. ‘Hey, you can’t just... I mean, this is still an active crime scene, you can’t go contaminatin’ evidence.’

Ripley spun on her heel, fixing him with a glare that could un-erupt a volcano. ‘You got about a fifty percent chance of me figuring out what happened here, and that’s fifty percent more than you had before I arrived.’

She could practically see the kid’s testicles shrivel. He held up his hands in a placating gesture, taking a smart step back. ‘Alright, alright. No need to get hostile. You can take a look, just let me witness it. There could be explosives in there.’

‘I’ll take my chances.’

She’d walk through the fires of hell in gasoline panties if it meant getting to the bottom of this mess. A little soot and sweat was a small price to pay for answers.

She stalked over to the car, every step feeling like her feet were encased in cement. Up close, the damage was even worse. The once cherry-red paint job bubbled and blistered, tires melted into unrecognizable lumps of rubber, windows blown out to leave gaping, jagged holes like empty eye sockets. And the stench, Christ. Like a chemical spill in a crematorium.

Ripley steeled herself and reached through the shattered passenger side window. The door handle was still hot enough to sear her fingertips, but she gritted her teeth against the pain and wrenched it open with a tortured creak of hinges.

The interior was a nightmarish ruin, like she’d just stepped into Satan’s rumpus room. The upholstery was nothing but scorched springs and melted foam, the dashboard warped and sagging like a Dali painting. Every surface was coated in a thick layer of greasy soot, clinging to her skin and clothes as she levered herself into the back seat. Shards of glass and jagged metal bit into her ass and thighs through her jeans, but Ripley barely registered the discomfort. She was a woman possessed, tearing through the burnt-out wreckage as though the Shroud of Turin might be in here. Flinging aside charred hunks of god-knows-what, heedless of the way they

crumbled to ashen smears on her hands and clothes. Ripping, clawing, searching for anything, any tiny scrap that might point her in the direction of Martin.

Her gaze snagged on the underside of the front seats, on the small gap between the charred upholstery and the car's floor. Something about that narrow crevice, that tiny slice of shadow amidst the fiery devastation, set her senses tingling.

With desperate, clawing fingers, Ripley ripped and tore at the scorched fabric until it hung in blackened tatters. She thrust her hands into that cramped space, heedless of the jagged metal and searing heat that bit into her flesh. Groping blindly, frantically, until her questing fingertips brushed against something solid. Something that crinkled beneath her touch like ancient parchment.

She seized hold of it and wrenched it free from its sooty cocoon. Then she tumbled out of the vehicle, coughing and spitting black phlegm. She staggered around to the rear of the car on legs that wobbled like a newborn foal's, adrenaline and panic buzzing through her veins in equal measure.

A thick bundle of files.

The edges were curled and blackened, the manila folders stained with soot and God knows what else, but still blessedly, miraculously intact.

With shaking hands, Mia reached into the cubby and lifted out the precious cargo. She cradled the files to her chest like a mother would a babe, staring down at them with a mix of trepidation and wild, desperate hope. Her ticket to the truth, scorched and tattered but still legible.

The same ones.

The godforsaken files that Martin had been poring over like a man possessed the

night before he vanished into the ether. The same ones that had been conspicuously absent from his office when Mia had torn it apart in the wake of his disappearance. She'd ransacked every drawer, upended every pile of junk and detritus, combed through every scrap of his life that he'd left behind in search of those innocuous little folders. Coming up empty again and again until she was half-convinced, she'd hallucinated the whole thing.

But no. They'd been real. As solid and damning as the charred bundles clutched white-knuckled in her hands. Why had Martin taken these particular files with him on his little midnight ride into oblivion? Why had he hidden them in his trunk and tried to torch them? These files were supposed to be embers right now, but it was only because of Jacobs at HQ that they weren't. If not for keeping track of Martin's license plate, Martin's secrets would be a pile of ashes.

What unforgivable skeletons had her lover been keeping in his closet for God knows how long?

And did she really want to know?

This was it. The edge of the map, the point of no return. The moment when the comforting lies and blissful ignorance she'd wrapped around herself like a security blanket finally crumbled away.

Mia Ripley was many things – a ball-buster, a raging bitch with an acid tongue and the itchiest trigger finger in the business.

But a coward had never been one of them.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The night was alive with laughter, except each cackle was a rusted blade across the raw nerves of his mind. He watched from the shadows, a wraith cloaked in darkness, as the object of his fixation stood amongst a gaggle of drunken sycophants. They swayed and guffawed outside the neon-washed facade of some trendy watering hole, lost in a haze of booze and forced joviality.

What could possibly be so funny? What scintillating witticism, what earth-shattering bon mot could warrant such a response? Nothing is that funny, not to mention that these cretins wouldn't know humor if it bit them on the ass and called them Sally.

Their laughter was empty, meaningless, a pathetic attempt to fill the yawning void in their souls with cheap liquor and cheaper company.

But he knew the truth. Laughter was a weapon. A way to mock and diminish, to grind the downtrodden ever deeper into the muck. He had felt its sting too many times, endured the slings and arrows of a world that refused to give him a place.

But no more. Now, it was his turn to wield the blade, to carve the smiles from their faces and leave them choking on their own mirth. They thought him broken, beaten, just another failure consigned to the dustbin of obscurity. But how wrong they were. He had been reborn in the crucible of his pain, forged anew into something harder, sharper, a scalpel honed to slice through the cancerous flesh of a society too sick to save.

His target drained his glass and set it aside, clapping one of his cronies on the shoulder as he made his goodbyes. The man began weaving down the sidewalk, straying from the flock and into the waiting jaws of the wolf. He shambled past dark

shopfronts and shuttered windows, blissfully oblivious to the predator dogging his steps.

And so he slid behind the wheel of his battered sedan. The engine sputtered to life like a consumptive cough, and he eased out into the street. He kept his headlights dimmed, trailing his quarry at a discreet distance. The hunt was on now, the dance of death had begun anew. His pulse quickened, a heady cocktail of anticipation and loathing thrumming through his veins.

Block after block slid by, the city's squalor blurring into a smear of jaundiced light and rotten brick. His prey stumbled on, lost in a drunken haze, all too easy to tail. His fingers tightened and breath grew faster as he imagined those chapped lips stretched wide in a rictus of terror, those glassy eyes bulging as he choked the life out of him.

This was the part he savored. The warm-up. The delicious buildup before the main event. He hadn't anticipated he'd enjoy this part so much, but he'd become addicted the moment he had Archie's limp corpse at his disposal. It wasn't just the kill itself, though that was certainly the crescendo. No, it was the buildup, the slow, inexorable march towards inevitability.

With Archie, it had been almost too easy. The fool had practically gift-wrapped himself, strutting out of that bar with his chest puffed out and his dick swinging, so sure of his own invincibility. He'd never seen the blow coming, never had a chance to wipe that smug grin off his face before he'd crushed the guy's windpipe and sent him spiraling into oblivion.

And he'd known, in that moment, as he knelt there in the viscera and the void, that completion of this vast mission was easily attainable. This was his true calling. Not begging for scraps of approval from the masses. At last, he'd finally found something pure. Perhaps the only pure form of art left on earth.

Georgia had been even sweeter. He'd played with her, a cat toying with a doomed mouse, drawing out each exquisite moment until she was a mewling wreck. Only then had he delivered the coup de grace, a mercy and a condemnation all in one.

And now, this poor sap. He'd shadowed his mark for days, learning his habits, his haunts, the patterns and pathways of his vapid little life.

And so he shadowed him now. The man turned, wandering off the main drag and into the narrow throat of an alley. Perfect. The fly bumbling ever closer to the spider's silken strands. He hit the gas, rocketing around the block to head off his target. He slewed to a stop at the mouth of the alleyway.

It was time.

He grabbed his weapon and donned his mask – a new addition to his arsenal. It was half theatrical, half efficiency. Tonight was his only opportunity to get up close and personal with target number three, so he had to risk killing him at an hour when people might still be walking the streets. It was a risk, but for this kill, for this glorious piece de resistance, he was willing to chance exposure. To dance on the razor's edge between triumph and ruin, all for the sake of his art.

The transformation from man to character was complete, and so he slipped from the car, becoming a shadow amongst shadows. The alley yawned before him; a narrow, trash-strewn gullet leading straight into the bowels of the city. And there, at the far end, stumbling ever closer with each sloppy, drunken step, was his quarry.

He melted into the darkness, pressing himself against the rough brick of the alley wall. His heartbeat was a wardrum in his ears and he'd attuned every sense to perfection, aware of the slightest shift in the urban cacophony that surrounded.

He could hear the distant wail of sirens, the barking of dogs, the bass thump of music

spilling from some late-night dive. But closer, louder, growing ever more distinct with each passing second, was the sound of footsteps. He held himself perfectly still. Eyes never left the mouth of the alley, never wavered from that narrow strip of sidewalk where his victim would soon pass. He scanned the street beyond, searching for any sign of movement, any hint of a passerby or a night owl who might spoil his perfect moment.

But the avenue was deserted. The city slept. It wasn't the witching hour, but it was good enough.

The footsteps grew louder, closer, until they became all-consuming. His fingers flexed, curling into claws, aching to close around the soft, unsuspecting throat of his target. Just a few more steps, a few more seconds, and it would be time. Time to pounce, to claim his prize and begin the glorious work of the night.

He could see the man now, a shambling silhouette backlit by the sallow glow of the street lamps. Could smell the reek of booze and sweat and cheap cologne that wafted from him like a miasma. So close he could almost taste the copper tang of blood on his tongue.

The man took another step, then another, crossing some invisible threshold, passing the point of no return.

And he struck, finding the man's throat with unerring precision. Cord wrapped around flesh, tightening, crushing, cutting off air and sound and hope. The man bucked, thrashed, his flailing limbs battering uselessly against his attacker's iron embrace. But it was futile, a fly caught in the web, a lamb bleating its last before the wolf's fangs found its throat.

They crashed to the ground together, predator and prey, locked in a fatal tango as old as time itself. The man's struggles grew weaker, more desperate, eyes bulging in

their sockets as life drained from his body. He rode him down, straddling his chest, bearing down with all his weight and strength until he felt the final, shuddering spasm, the last futile gargle of breath.

And then it was done.

The first part is complete.

This was what he was made for, what he had been born to do. Not to amuse, but to destroy. The world demanded a punchline, and tonight, they'd get it.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella stood in the precinct hallway beside Luca, both eyeballing the creep behind the one-way glass. Aleister Morgan, trussed up in chains, twitching like a bug under a magnifying glass. She'd seen some real prizes in her day, but this joker took the cake. Greasy hair hanging in his eyes, skin like a slab of spoiled cheese. A real looker.

Chief Harland sidled up beside her, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. 'So how'd you bag this freak, anyway?'

Ella smirked. 'Aleister might've wanted kids one day, but Hawkins here disagreed.'

Luca ducked his head, but there was no hiding the grin tugging at his pretty boy mouth. Harland's bushy brows shot up to his nonexistent hairline. 'The hell you talkin' about?'

But Ella waved him off. A little inside joke never hurt anyone. Luca shuffled his feet, hands shoved deep in his pockets. 'Still think this is our guy?' he asked.

Ella rolled her shoulders, vertebrae popping. It was impossible to say at this point. On paper, Aleister was a shoo-in. The basement chock-full of torture porn props, the meth lab straight out of

a tweaker's wet dream.

'Could be,' Ella mused. 'Between the kinky decor and the Breaking Bad routine, he's not exactly squeaky clean.'

'Plus he went straight for your neck,' Luca added. 'Same way he killed the victims.'

Harland grunted. ‘Sounds open and shut to me. We got means, motive, and a helluva opportunity, seeing as he’s already made our vic’s snuff props. Lock this creep up and call it a day, as far as I’m concerned.’

But Ella couldn’t quite shake the niggling feeling in her gut. That little voice whispering in the back of her head, telling her to look closer, dig deeper. She narrowed her eyes at Aleister, studying the expressionless mask that passed as a face. A real cool customer, this one. Too cool. Like he was putting on a show, waiting for the curtain to drop on the big reveal.

And that’s when it hit her. The ghost of Ripley’s voice, echoing in her skull like a bad hangover. You’re seeing what you want to see, Dark, it scolded. Gotta peel back the crap and stare reality right in its ugly mug.

Damn that woman and her albeit-hallucinatory wisdom. But as much as Ella hated to admit it, Ripley had a point. She couldn’t just check the boxes and call it a day. Not when they still had a body count to rack up if they screwed the pooch on this.

She turned to Luca, sizing him up out of the corner of her eye. The kid looked jittery as hell, bouncing on the balls of his feet like a kid who needed to pee but couldn’t peel himself away from the park. She couldn’t really blame him. Interrogations always turned your guts to ice, especially when it was your first time.

‘Alright, Hawkins.’ Ella jerked her chin at the door. ‘We’re gonna go in there and squeeze this guy ‘til he pops. You ready?’

Luca blanched, the blood draining from his pretty mug faster than booze from a wino’s bottle. ‘Me? I was thinking I’d just observe. Get a feel for it.’

Ella snorted. Like hell, that would happen. ‘No chance. You’re up to bat on this one. Aleister’s seen you in action. Felt it, too, judging by the way he was cradling his

balls. He'll smell the fear on you, try to make you his prison bitch. You gotta establish dominance. And nothing says bad cop like reminding a guy you rang his bell."

Harland grunted his agreement, craggy face split by a grin as ugly and wide as a pothole. "Girl's got a point, son. Ain't no better way to get a perp singin' than flipping the script."

Luca swallowed audibly. He looked from Ella to Harland and back again, resignation settling over his face like a shroud. Alright, you win. Let's do this."

Damn straight. Ella cuffed him on the shoulder, just enough oomph to smart a little. Better to give him something else to focus on than the churning in his own guts. She strode over to the interrogation room door and pushed it open. Playtime was over. Now, it was time to see what dear old Aleister was really made of.

The wiry-haired suspect was hunched over the single metal table bolted to the floor, hands manacled in front of him, leg irons clinking with every twitch. His head snapped up at their entrance, scrutinizing the new arrivals, probably looking for the crack in the armor he could slip a blade between.

She sauntered over to the table, pulling out the chair with a screech of metal on concrete. Popped herself down, crossed her legs and waited. She let him stew a minute. Aleister stared at her, unblinking. A cobra just waiting for the mongoose to blink. Luca hovered behind her, radiating enough nervous energy to light up the Vegas strip. She let him squirm for a ten-count before jerking her chin at the empty seat.

Luca sat down ramrod straight and planted his hands on the table. His knuckles were

as white as Aleister's pasty face, but Ella gave him points for putting up a strong front.

Ella leaned forward, elbows on the table, fingers laced like she was settling in for a friendly little tête-à-tête. Let her eyes rake over Aleister from greasy head to jittery toe, taking in every twitch, every flinch.

'Mr. Morgan, you know why you're here.'

Aleister twitched like someone goosed him with a cattle prod. He leaned forward, chains rattling, drowning Ella in a tsunami of stale breath. 'I'm not saying anything without a lawyer.'

The lawyer response. Classic.

'That's cute,' Ella said, 'but cast your mind back an hour and you'll remember we found a meth lab in your basement. There isn't a lawyer on the planet that can talk a judge around that one.'

Aleister's eyes bugged out of his head so far Ella thought they might pop clean out. His gaze swung wildly between them, color high in his cheeks.

'But that's not why we're here,' Ella continued. 'Truth be told, we couldn't care less about your side hustle. We're more interested in those medieval stocks you have stashed away.'

'My stocks? They were for my museum.'

'Okay, let's start at the beginning,' Ella said. 'Your museum. What was the deal with it?'

‘I was a craftsman once upon a time,’ Aleister said proudly. ‘I liked medieval props, so I made my own. I thought I could get some money out of it, so I opened my house up to the public.’

Ella followed. ‘And?’

‘Nobody cared. So I rented some real medieval props. Cost me a fortune. But nobody cared about those either. Tumbleweeds on opening day.’

‘Right, so your business went to hell. How did you go from medieval devices to cooking methamphetamines?’

Aleister hung his head, greasy locks curtaining his face. ‘You don’t understand. I was drowning in debt. Collectors calling day and night, threatening to break my legs, take my kidneys. I didn’t have a choice. I need money.’

‘There’s always a choice,’ Ella said flatly. ‘And it looks like you made the wrong one. Because now, your little arts and crafts project has got you linked to two homicides.’

‘Homicides?’ Aleister asked. ‘What homicides?’

‘Maybe you ought to tell us,’ Luca said.

Aleister looked between his two accusers, deer in the headlights. ‘What are you talking about? I don’t know about any homicides.’

‘Hawkins, show him,’ Ella said.

Her partner obliged. He pulled out his phone, scrolled to a photo and placed the phone down on the table.

‘This is Georgia Bolton. Local girl, found strung up in wooden stocks this morning.’

Aleister’s eyes went wide as saucers as he stared at the picture. His mouth worked like a fish on a hook, opening and closing but no sound coming out.

Luca moved to the next photograph. ‘And this is Archie Newman. Not only had he been strangled to death, but he was found in a set of metal stocks – stocks with your signature on them.’

At last, a sound escaped Aleister’s lips. ‘This is... my stocks?’

‘Yes,’ Ella said. She tapped Luca’s screen. ‘Tell us. Did you make these?’

Aleister nodded.

‘You recognize them,’ said Ella. It wasn’t a question.

Aleister nodded jerkily, his gaze still glued to the screen. ‘Y-yeah. I made both of those. But I swear, I never used them on anyone. I’m not a killer, I’m just a craftsman! I didn’t know about any murders.’

Ella leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. She’d seen plenty of perps try to play the shocked and appalled card, but something about Aleister’s reaction rang true. The guy looked like he’d just seen a ghost, and not the Casper kind.

Luca scoffed. ‘Why should we believe you? Two people are found in your stocks. Strangled, the same way you attacked my partner here. And you run when the feds show up on your doorstep?’

‘I thought you arresting me for cooking crystal,’ Aleister cried. ‘I’m telling you, I didn’t kill anyone.’

‘Seems real convenient,’ Luca began, but then Ella held up a hand, silencing her partner. Aleister was sweating bullets and he looked about two seconds away from passing out or puking his guts up all over the interrogation room floor. This wasn’t the reaction of a guilty man. This was sheer, pant-wetting terror. A mission-oriented offender like this wouldn’t shy away from his handiwork when presented with the truth. He would embrace it.

Ella leaned forward, elbows on the table. ‘Alright, Aleister. Let’s say I believe you. You didn’t kill anyone. But those are your stocks, your handiwork. So how did they end up at our crime scenes?’

Aleister licked his lips, his eyes darting around the room like a cornered animal.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

Ella kept a watch on Aleister’s microsignals. The purse of his lips, his quick-draw knees, the subconscious gazes to the top-left of his vision. All dead giveaways of a liar.

‘Looks to me like you’re holding something back,’ Ella said. She rose to her feet and leaned across the table. ‘We’ve already got you on cooking methamphetamine, so we can hold you here for as long as we like. But, you know...’

Aleister bit his lip and asked, ‘I know?’

‘If you give us the whole truth, maybe I can get you out of a prison sentence.’

Aleister’s eyes expanded to the size of casino chips. Dangling the carrot of potential freedom in the face of a looming jail sentence never failed to get suspects to open up.

”Okay, goddamnit. I’ll tell you what I know. But I want it on record I’m

cooperating.'

The sudden awareness of police procedure came as a shock. Maybe this guy was sharper than Ella thought.

'Done. This is all being recorded. Whenever you're ready.'

Aleister slumped forward, chains rattling, head hanging low. His shoulders were shaking but Ella couldn't tell if it was from relief, fear or barely-contained rage. Maybe all three.

'About three months ago, I had two... commissions.'

'Commissions? For what?' asked Luca.

'Stocks.' Aleister tapped Luca's phone screen. 'These exact stocks.'

Ella's pulse rate tripled in speed. 'What did this person ask for?'

"Stocks, pillory. One made of steel, another of wood. The person was very precise with their instructions regarding the measurements."

"And who was this commissioner?"

"I...I don't know his name. It was all done through anonymous emails, proxies, that whole deal. Dude was cagey as hell."

Ella thought Aleister had some serious gall, calling someone else cagey. 'No name? No address? Nothing?'

'Nothing,' Aleister repeated.

"Alright," Luca jumped in, "So Mr. X contacts you out of the blue, asks for these custom torture pieces. What then?"

"I made 'em to his exact specifications. Serious craftsmanship, y'know? Takes time, skill. He paid up front, full cost, plus a little extra for my discretion."

'And how'd you meet? How'd you exchange the goods?'

"We met up in the park. After dark. He inspected my work, I collected the cash. Simple as that.'

'So, you saw this man in the flesh? You saw his face?'

Aleister shrunk in on himself like a turtle trying to retreat into its shell. 'Not quite. Y'see... he had this mask on.'

'A mask?' The comment set Ella's nerves on edge. 'What kind of mask?'

Aleister waved a chain-rattling hand in front of his face. 'Plain white, but the mouth was frowning. That's all I remember.'

She shot a glance at Luca, who seemed to recoil at the comment. Maybe it was the imagery. Maybe the guy just had an overactive imagination.

'What about hair? Clothes? Tattoos? Height? Weight?' she asked.

'Hair was completely scalped. Skinhead. No tattoos that I could see. Normal height, on the smaller side. Not skinny, but wide. Clothes were... I don't know. How often do you pay attention to someone's clothes?'

Frustration began to rear its head. 'Usually when that guy is wearing a mask and

asking you to build him ancient torture devices.'

Aleister placed his palms on the table. 'I'm sorry. I don't remember.'

Ella and Luca shared a glance. They had the stocks linked to Aleister, but something still wasn't sitting right. Call it a cop's instinct, call it woman's intuition. But Ella couldn't shake the feeling that Aleister was just the tip of a very ugly iceberg.

'Alright, Aleister. You've given us the who and the how. But I want to know about the why. What was this commissioner's endgame? He must have mentioned a reason for needing these props.'

Aleister squirmed in his seat. He was sweating now, greasy rivulets running down his pasty face. 'I don't know, I swear! Dude never said anything about why he wanted the pieces. I didn't ask questions, just took the money and ran.'

Luca's lip curled. 'C'mon, man. You really expect us to buy that? You're telling me this whackjob commissioned custom torture devices from you, and not once did you think to ask what he wanted them for? What he was planning?'

'Hell no!' Aleister yelped, eyes wide and rolling like a spooked horse. 'In my line of work, you learn real quick not to poke your nose where it don't belong. Guys like that, with the masks and the cloak-and-dagger routine? You don't ask questions. You just do what you're told and count your blessings you walked away with all your bits still attached.'

Ella sat back, chewing on the inside of her cheek. Much as she hated to admit it, Aleister had a point. Sickos with a murder hard-on weren't exactly known for their sparkling conversation skills. Chances were, this commissioner – if he existed at all – was just using Aleister as a means to an end.

But that didn't mean they were at a dead end. Not by a long shot.

'Alright, Walter White, let's say we buy your whole mysterious client schtick. You still got those emails he sent?'

Aleister couldn't nod quick enough. Y-yeah. They're on my computer. I can show you.'

"We'll need to see all of your communication and the bills he gave you if you still have them."

'I got the emails, but not the money.'

No surprise there, Ella thought. 'Two stocks. That's what he ordered, right? Just the pair?'

'That's right,' Aleister said, the cuffs rattling as he spread his hands. 'One metal, one wood.'

Small mercies, Ella mused. If this sick sonovabitch was working with such a limited toolkit, chances were the body count would stay in the single digits. Cold comfort to the families of Archie Newman and Georgia Bolton, but better than the alternative.

She drummed her fingers on the table, gaze boring into Aleister like a laser cutting steel. 'Where were you the past two nights between 11 PM and 3 AM? And before you start hemming and hawing, remember what happened the last time you tried to sell me a line of bullcrap.'

'Wednesday night I was at the cinema. Caught the midnight showing of some film. I still have the stub.'

‘And last night?’

‘At home, streaming something on TV until I passed out on the couch.’

Ella said, ”Well, you better remember exactly what it was. We can check your streaming logs.”

‘Okay,’ Aleister said.

Ella pushed to her feet. ‘Sit tight, Aleister. We’re gonna check those alibis, see if they hold water. In the meantime, I suggest you get real familiar with the idea of being here a while.’

She jerked her head at Luca and strode towards the door, not bothering to look back as it banged shut behind them.

Then came the familiar itch that said the pieces were there, just waiting for her to slot them into place. The picture was taking shape, the outline of her unsub starting to emerge from the shadows.

But they weren’t there yet. They needed more. More evidence, more intel, more ammunition to take this psycho down before he added any more names to his list.

Ella cracked her neck, rolled her shoulders. Time to get to work. Sleep was for the weak and the dead, and she was neither. She had a promise to keep, to the victims, to their families.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Mia Ripley sat in her car, the engine ticking as it cooled, the acrid stench of burnt paper and scorched upholstery still thick in her nostrils. On her lap lay the remnants of Martin's life, a handful of half-charred files snatched from the smoldering ruin of his beloved ride.

The uniform at the scene had been happy to let Mia take them, eager to wash his hands of the whole sordid affair. 'All yours, Agent Ripley,' he'd said, eyes skittering away from her face like cockroaches from a lit match.

Problem. That's what Martin had become. A problem to be solved, a puzzle to be pieced together from the ashes of his existence.

Ripley's fingers shook as she flipped through the pages, because she didn't expect this.

The documents in her hands were Martin Godfrey's entire life in paper form.

Vehicle registration forms, tax returns, mortgage statements. A paper trail of a life lived, now reduced to so much kindling.

But why? Why torch it all, erase every trace of himself like a ghost slipping its chains? Was he running from something? Someone? Trying to disappear without a trace, leave nothing behind but smoke and questions?

The thoughts chased each other round and round Ripley's skull like rabid dogs, but no matter how hard she chewed on it, she couldn't make it make sense. Couldn't reconcile the man she'd loved, the man she'd shared her bed and her heart with, with

this stranger who'd set his own life ablaze and vanished into the night.

And amongst these seemingly ordinary documents, one stood out from the pack.

Her fingers closed on a file at the top of the stack, the edges curled and blackened but the contents still legible. A lease agreement, dated six months prior. Martin's signature scrawled across the bottom like a dead man's last words.

This contract confirms that Martin Godfrey agrees to rent storage unit #247 at Dover Self Storage, located at 1456 Industrial Park Road, for the purpose of personal storage. The unit measures 10x10 and will be leased on a month-to-month basis at a rate of \$85 per month.

Ripley's heart kicked against her ribs. A storage unit. Rented under Martin's name, squirreled away on the outskirts of town. The perfect place to stash his secrets, hide his sins away from prying eyes.

Kerosene. He'd said he needed kerosene, offhand and casual as a comment on the weather. For his lawnmower, his model airplanes. All those little projects that ate up his time and kept him out of her hair.

This was where he kept it. Kerosene that was also found on her ex-husband's corpse. Perhaps Trevor had died in that same place.

This was it. The bread crumb, the thread to follow into the labyrinth. If Martin was hiding anything, playing any twisted games, the answers would be in that storage shed.

She had to go. Had to see, even if it killed her. Even if it shattered her heart into a million jagged pieces and left her bleeding out on the floor.

Ripley threw the address into the GPS.

1456 Industrial Park Road.

One mile away.

Close enough to walk to after ditching your car and setting fire to it in this empty lot.

She could be there in ninety seconds.

Ninety seconds between her and the truth.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Back in her office, Ella could feel Harland's and Luca's eyes boring into her back, expectant, waiting for some kinda revelation to come flying out of her mouth like a flock of doves from a hack magician's sleeve.

She spun on her heel, pinning them both with a hard stare. 'What? I got something on my face?'

Harland huffed, arms crossed over his barrel chest. 'Yeah, the look of a woman who's just bought a steaming pile of garbage. You really buyin' this "mystery client" routine?'

Ella shrugged, leaning back against the desk. 'Honestly, yeah. Aleister's story tracks. He's a small-time grifter, not some criminal mastermind. Guy couldn't plan his way out of a wet paper bag, let alone orchestrate two clean murders.'

'Just 'cause this mook can string two sentences together doesn't mean he's innocent. Coulda been playing you, feedin' you a line to save his own sorry hide.'

But Luca stepped forward, shaking his head. 'No, I'm with Ella on this one. Aleister's reactions were genuine. The shock, the confusion, the fear? You can't fake that, not unless you're gunning for an Oscar.' He ticked off the points on his fingers, building steam. 'Look at the facts. Aleister's got no connection to the victims, no motive beyond his Frankenstein fetish. He's a junkie, not a killer. And Aleister is dripping in potential DNA evidence. That crazy hair, meth chemicals. That guy left me smelling a pharmacy just sitting near him.'

Ella couldn't hold back her grin. The kid had good instincts, she'd give him that.

Couple more years on the job and he'd be running circles around the rest of these flatfoots.

Harland threw up his hands, disgust etched into every craggy line of his mug. 'Alright, alright. You've made your point. So if de Sade ain't our guy, that means this sicko's still out there, probably scouting his next victim as we speak.'

A lead weight settled in Ella's gut. Harland was right. Every minute they wasted jawing was another minute their unsub had to hunt, to plan, to salivate over whatever twisted fantasy was brewing in that diseased head of his.

She pushed off the desk, already reaching for her jacket. 'Chief, we need boots on the ground. Every dive bar, club, and watering hole in the city. Both our vics were snatched after last call. Can you get your guys to keep an eye on places that have secluded areas nearby? Alleyways, empty lots, that kind of thing?'

Harland grunted. 'I might have a few guys free. Leave it with me.'

The chief was already barking orders down the crackle of his walkie before the door swung shut behind him, leaving Ella and Luca alone in the sudden quiet. He looked wrung out, like a dishrag that had been put through the wringer one too many times. The adrenaline crash, she reckoned. That post-interrogation slump that hit like a sack of wet cement when the action died down and your body remembered it was running on fumes and a prayer.

'You alright there, Hawkins?'

Luca huffed out a laugh. "Yeah, yeah. I'm good. It's just...intense, I guess. Being in the room, watching a guy unravel like that. I wasn't expecting it to hit me so hard. What about you?"

Ella softened, just a touch. She remembered her first time in the box. It was like jumping out of a plane with no chute, no net, no guarantee that you'd walk out in one piece.

'It gets easier,' she said. 'Never easy, but easier. You did good in there. Kept your cool, asked the right questions. Couldn't have done it without you.'

And damn if she didn't mean it. Luca had held his own, been the good cop to her bad, the honey to her vinegar. They made a good team, loathe as she was to admit it. For some reason, it felt like a betrayal to Ripley.

'What do you say we call it a night?' she continued. 'Come at it fresh in the morning.'

But Luca shook his head, squaring his shoulders like he was psyching himself up for another round. 'I've still got some gas in the tank if you have.'

'Always,' Ella said.

'Then let's keep going.' But Ella could see something else in his eyes, something haunted and far away. Like he was seeing ghosts in every corner. Maybe he was just telling her what she wanted to hear. 'Don't persevere just because I'm an insomniac. If you want to head to bed, that's fine by me.'

Ella didn't catch the double-meaning until she'd spat the words out. However, they seemed to go right over Luca's head.

'Thank you. It's just...' he started, then trailed off, gaze darting away from hers. 'It's nothing. Forget it.'

Like hell, she would. Ella leaned in, ducking her head to catch his eye. "Spit it out,

Hawkins. If something's wrong, speak up, or you'll end up like me."

Luca's shoulders hunched up around his ears. 'It's ancient history. Don't worry about it.'

'That's what war criminals say.'

'True.'

'So spit it. We're partners, your history is my history. And I know that look on your face. I've seen it in the mirror often enough.'

Luca flinched like she'd slapped him, eyes darting away, fingers twitching towards the pistol in his holster. Rookie tell. Reaching for the weapon when the cracks started to show, like it could ward off all the evil in the world.

'It was a long time ago,' he said. 'I was just a kid. Seventeen, dumb as a box of hair.'

Ella waited, letting the silence stretch. She knew this dance, this stumbling two-step of confession and absolution. You couldn't rush it, couldn't yank the story out by the roots. Had to let it unfurl in its own sweet time.

'Me and my girlfriend, we went camping.' Luca's eyes unfocused, seeing something far away and long ago. 'Up in the Berkshires, this sweet little spot by a lake. Thought it'd be romantic, y'know? Just the two of us, a tent, a whole lotta starry sky.'

Ella hummed, encouraging. She could picture it. Young love, sticky sweet and summer bright. Probably thought they'd live forever, the way kids do.

'Everything was great. Stupid me even thought about proposing,' Luca laughed. 'But I woke up in the middle of the night and Kate was gone.'

‘Gone?’

‘Yeah. It was about four AM. I figured she’d just gone to take a leak or something. But she never came back, so I got out of the tent and went looking for her. And...’

And here it was. The ghost, the specter, looming up out of the dark. Ella braced herself.

‘You found her,’ she said.

‘I found her. By the lakeshore.’ Luca’s voice cracked and splintered. ‘Laying there in the sand, hair was soaking wet, staring up at the sky with big old empty eyes.’

Ella’s heart twisted in her chest. Christ. Seventeen years old and finding your sweetheart dead by the lake. The kind of thing that broke you and shattered your heart into an irreparable mess.

‘What happened to her?’

‘That’s where it gets weird, because I looked up and there was... someone watching me. Across the lake. Just standing there in the trees. Wearing a mask. White, plain, big black holes for eyes.’

The bottom dropped out of Ella’s stomach. Her mouth suddenly went as dry as a bone. The pieces arranged themselves like a magical jigsaw, and the picture they formed made her heart sink like an anchor.

‘That’s why you went pale as a ghost when Aleister mentioned a mask,’ she said.

Luca’s laugh was dry. ‘Guess I’m not as slick as I thought.’

‘Who was it?’

‘I’ve got no clue who it was. Just some phantom in the trees, still as a statue. To this day, it was never solved.’

The kid’s voice was steady as a surgeon’s hand but Ella could see the cracks in his pretty-boy veneer. She looked at Luca, really looked, past the cover model mug and the lady-killer smile, and for the first time she saw the person. The scared seventeen-year-old boy who’d had his heart ripped out and shoved down his gullet on some godforsaken camping trip a lifetime ago.

Ella cleared her throat. ‘What happened to Kate? How’d she...?’ She trailed off, not sure how to finish that sentence without twisting the knife.

‘Autopsy said she drowned. Tox report was clean, so they slapped a suicide label on it and called it a day. Case closed.’

‘Drowned?’

‘She had bruises,’ Luca cut in. ‘On her skull, the back of her head. Like someone had blitzed her one good before dumping her in the lake.’

‘And let me guess. You kicked up a fuss, tried to get someone to take a closer look.’

Luca barked out a laugh. ‘Yeah, but I was seventeen. Nobody took me seriously. More hormones than sense.’

An all-too-familiar ache twisted in Ella’s chest. The impotent rage of a victim shoved to the sidelines, forced to watch as the system chewed up their loved one and spat out the bones. She’d seen it too many times, heard the same story sung in a thousand different keys.

‘They swept it under the rug,’ she said softly. It wasn’t a question.

‘Swept it, vacuumed it, steamrolled it flat as a pancake.’ Luca swiped a hand over his mouth. ‘Left me with nothing but a “what if” and a gaping hole where my heart used to be.’

Ella swallowed past the sudden tightness in her throat. Reached out ’til her fingers brushed Luca’s, tentative as a sparrow’s wing. Watched him flinch at the contact then melt into it, shoulders sagging like someone had snipped his strings.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said and meant it. ‘For picking at old scabs.’

‘Don’t be. I’m glad I told you. Feels good to finally let it out. Like I’ve lanced a boil and leaked it all over your head.’

Ella laughed. ‘There are worse fluids.’

‘I bet.’

And just like that, the spell was broken. They were back to their regularly scheduled programming, but something had shifted between them, something small and subtle but no less seismic.

‘It gets easier,’ she said, injecting every ounce of conviction she had into the words.

‘That was thirteen years ago,’ Luca said. ‘But forget that. We’ve got work to do.’

Ella looked at him again, and for the first time she didn’t see a rookie or a colleague or a roadblock. She saw an ally. A friend, maybe, if they both lived long enough to claim the title.

‘Yes, we do.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Officer Burt Macklin cruised the streets in his black-and-white, the radio squawking like a scalded parrot with the usual Friday night chatter. Domestic disputes, drunken brawls, the odd fender bender from some lead foot with more horsepower than brain cells.

Just another night in paradise.

Macklin sighed and scrubbed a hand over his five o'clock shadow. He'd been riding this beat since he was a rookie, fresh outta the academy with a shiny badge and a head full of heroic notions. Now, five years and a few dozen shades of cynicism later, the only thing shiny was his cue ball dome, and his notions had gone from heroic to hemlock.

Still, it coulda been worse. At least he wasn't walking the Tenderloin like those poor schmucks in Vice. He'd take babysitting a bunch of booze hounds over wading through used needles and human misery any day of the week.

Especially since the Chief had put the word out - keep your eyes peeled for anything hinky, anything that might point to Dover's newest whackadoo playing pin-the-tail-on-the-corpse. The things he did for a measly government paycheck and a shitty pension.

But hey, it gave him something to do besides run speed traps and scrape drunks off the sidewalk. So he'd play along, do his due diligence, keep his peepers peeled for any sign of psycho-boy out there.

Macklin cruised past O'Malley's, taking in the usual gaggle of stumble-bums and

working girls loitering near the entrance. Half of them looked like they'd just stumbled off a boxcar, while the others could've passed for halfway respectable if not for the dead eyes and track marks.

Nothing promising there. Macklin made a mental note to have a word with O'Malley about his clientele, maybe see about getting some of those lost souls into a program or something. Assuming they didn't pickle themselves to death first.

Next in line was The Chuckle Hut, a so-called gentlemen's club that hadn't seen anything gentle since the Reagan administration. Last he checked, they had a two-for-one special on lap dances and penicillin shots. Macklin gave the parking lot a once-over, taking in the rust-bucket beaters and mid-life crisis mobiles. Nada on the serial killer front, but he spotted a familiar face stumbling out the door - one Ronnie Dobbs, a semi-regular guest of the county lockup.

Looked like Ronnie was riding the white horse again. Macklin sighed, weighed the merits of hauling the scrawny bastard in to sleep it off versus letting him wander off to go piss in some poor sap's azaleas. Without much more thought, he figured the flora could take one for the team. Ronnie was a pain in the ass, but he wasn't a killer. At least, not the kind Macklin was on the lookout for.

He peeled away from the curb, leaving Ronnie to his own devices and the tender mercies of whatever shrubbery he chose to defile.

And so it went, up and down the strip. Bar after bar, dive after dive. Macklin's eyes started to glaze over, his brain going soft as a two-day-old donut from the sheer monotony of it all. He was half-tempted to tug his piece and start playing quick-draw with his reflection in the windshield, if only to keep from nodding off at the wheel.

But just as he was about to call it quits and head back to the barn to go cuddle his faithful hound and his faithful bottle of Beam, something caught his eye.

Two people, silhouetted against the sallow glow of the street lamps. Nothing too outta the ordinary there, except for the fact that that one of them was parked in a wheelchair and the guy was pushing them along like he had someplace to be.

Now, Macklin was no expert on the social habits of the invalid set, but something about the whole setup just didn't compute. Who the hell went for a stroll down Skid Row in the middle of the night with Grandma or Granddad in tow? It was like seeing a vegan at a steakhouse - technically possible, but highly friggin' unlikely.

He slowed to a crawl, trying to get a better look without spooking 'em. But they must've had a sixth sense for prying eyes, 'cause they hooked a sharp left and disappeared into an alley quick as grease through a goose.

The hell?

Macklin's cop brain started firing on all cylinders. Could be nothing, just some Good Samaritan helping out a little old lady in need. But in this neighborhood, good deeds were about as rare as hen's teeth.

He eased past, eyes straining to penetrate the murk of the alleyway. Caught a flash of movement, there and gone again, swallowed up by the dark. The wink of light on metal.

Macklin knew this alley, knew where it led. Straight to Snickersville Square, home of the famous Chuckles Memorial Fountain. Damn thing was not only an eyesore but a reminder that Dover's biggest celebrity was some old-timey comedian who'd died on stage. These days, it was more likely to be full of used needles and human waste than anything resembling humor.

Nobody went there unless they had a reason.

It was an isolated landmark.

Aw, hell.

Something told him to get in there.

Macklin was moving before his brain could catch up, throwing the cruiser into park and bailing out like his ass was on fire. He slipped into the alleyway, one hand on the butt of his gun, the other fishing the flashlight off his belt. The beam cut through the dark, bouncing off dumpsters and fire escapes, empty bottles and condom wrappers.

Macklin forced himself to breathe, to take it slow and steady. Last thing he wanted was to go barreling in all Rambo-like and wind up giving the crazy a hostage. Or worse, a shield.

So he crept, one foot in front of the other, every sense cranked up to eleven. The stink of piss and decay hung thick in the air, undercut by something else.

He rounded the corner onto Snickersville Square, and that's when he saw it.

His heart plunged into his stomach like a lead weight into quicksand.

The fountain, dry as a bone and choked with dead leaves.

And there, in the center, handcuffed to the crumbling stone spires of the fountain like a slab of meat on a hook, was a body.

A man's body, dressed in threads that mighta been respectable if they weren't stained with piss, puke, and other fluids Macklin didn't wanna think too hard about. The stiff's wrists were shackled to the ornate curves of the fountain's upper basin, arms wrenched behind him at an angle that made Macklin's shoulders ache just looking at

it.

Macklin's gorge rose, his dinner of coffee and stale donuts making a break for freedom. He clamped his jaw shut, breathing hard through his nose.

A soft scuff behind him, the crunch of dead leaves under a careless foot. Macklin whirled, hand flying to his holster. And found himself staring into the face of a nightmare.

White mask, smooth as a cue ball, black holes for eyes. And the mouth - Christ, the mouth. Curved in a grotesque frown, like some kinda twisted parody of a sad clown.

It was him. The one they were all looking for, the freak with a hard-on for stocks and strangulation. And he was just standing there, bold as brass, not twenty feet away.

Time dilated, seconds stretching like taffy. Macklin's gun cleared leather, his voice ripping out of him in a hoarse bellow. 'Police! Freeze!'

The figure bolted like a deer on opening day, vaulting over the fountain's edge and hauling ass across the square. Macklin gave chase, blood roaring in his ears, the acrid stench of the vices voided bowels fading behind him as he ran.

'Stop! Police!' he hollered, the words ripped away by the wind of his passage. But the figure didn't stop, didn't even slow. Just ducked and wove through the shadows like a ghost in a funhouse, always just out of reach.

Macklin pounded after him, lungs burning, thighs screaming. He was a donut-eatin' desk jockey, not some track star, but he'd be damned if he'd let this freak get away. Not when he was so close he could smell the crazy on him.

They careened down narrow alleys, vaulted trash cans and dumpsters, the killer

always just a hairsbreadth ahead. Macklin's vision tunneled, the world narrowing to that bone-white mask bobbing and weaving in the dark.

The freak was fast, but Macklin was fueled by righteous fury and too much caffeine. He closed the gap, fingers stretched to snag the bastard's flapping coattails. Almost, almost.

Then the alley opened up and the mask was gone, swallowed by the shadows between the buildings like it'd never been.

Macklin stumbled to a halt, chest heaving, frantic gaze raking the gloom.

Nothing. Not a goddamn thing.

He was alone, nothing but the sound of his own labored breathing and the far-off blare of traffic for company.

A four-letter word erupted out of him in a raw bellow, all his impotent rage and sickened frustration poured into one sour syllable

With a shaking hand, Macklin fumbled for his radio. Keyed it with a thumb that felt like a sledgehammer.

'Dispatch, this is Unit 42. I need backup at Snickersville Square, now. And get me a bus while you're at it. We got another one.'

Backup usually took five minutes. Might as well be five years, for all the good it would do. The damage was done. Macklin had blown it. If the cosmos had any mercy left, maybe he could crawl into a bottle and pray the whole thing was just some cheap-whiskey nightmare.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella's head nodded, eyelids fluttering as she teetered on the knife's edge between waking and dreams. Files and photos blurred together, names and faces melting like crayons left out in the sun. She could feel herself slipping, the squawk of the bullpen fading to muted underwater gurgles.

Just five minutes...

The thought swam up from her subconscious, sweet and seductive as a siren's song. What was the harm? Couple winks, clear out the cobwebs, come back swinging. The temptation wrapped its sticky fingers round her brain and dragged her under, down into the depths of REM and regret.

Ripley's face floated by, hard eyes in a soft face. Tough as a coil of razor wire wrapped in silk. Ripley. Where was she right now? Had she finally come around, or was she still trying to delay the inevitable? The thoughts bubbled by, drifting away in a stream of worry.

Ben drifted past her mind's eye next, sunny smile and surgeon's hands. Golden boy wonder, always reaching, always just out of grasp. He shimmered like a mirage, bright and blurry round the edges. He was out there right now, California dreaming, ocean gleaming.

Brrring.

Ella jolted awake with a snort. Her mouth suddenly tasted like vinegar. Hey, bleary eyes swept the office.

‘You gonna get that?’ Luca asked from across the table, brows hoisted to his hairline. Kid looked fresh as a daisy. Curse his perfect pores.

Brrring.

Phone. Right.

Ella snatched the receiver like it might scuttle away. ‘This is Agent Dark,’ she said.

”Another one.” Harland’s voice came through. His voice was as raw as a back alley brawl.

Ella’s heart leapt then plunged like a bungee jumper with a frayed cord. ‘Another one? Where?’

Luca caught the comment and stood to attention.

‘Snickersville Square. My guy saw the freak in action.’

‘Saw him in action?’

Ella hoped, prayed that there was more to Harland’s comment than that. Please say you have him in chains.

‘Yeah,’ Harland said, ‘but he got away.’

Of course he did. Because the universe was a twisted old biddy with a sick sense of humor.

‘Dammit.’ The word slipped out, heartfelt as a prayer.

‘224 Allenstown. Chuckles Fountain.’

Ella wasn’t sure she heard him right. ‘The what?’

‘Just GPS it and get here now.’

‘On it.’ Ella hung up the phone and grabbed her jacket. Luca cocked his head, question mark stamped on his mug.

‘What’s going on?’

She’d been wrong. This killer wasn’t stopping at two.

‘Unsub struck again. We need to get there now.’

Ella screeched into the regular cop carpet that was Snickersville Square and slammed the brakes next to a cruiser with its PD blues still swirling.

‘Guess this is the place.’ Luca had his door swung open before the car lurched to a standstill. Ella was right behind him as they jogged into the neon-soaked nightmare.

A few stray onlookers buzzed round the edges, pressing against the yellow tape. Necks craned, cellphones snapping for social media likes and shares. Anything for clout in this sick, sad world. Ella shouldered past them, face hard as the badge in her pocket. No time for looky-loos when there was a job to do.

She slipped under the tape with Luca close behind, and a grim scene of death and stone made itself known.

And smack dab in the middle, chained to the Chuckles Memorial Fountain like Christ on the cross, was a body. A man's body, all dressed up for a night on the wrong side of the tracks.

Ella's soul withered at the sight. Another one. Another poor sap who'd drawn the short straw when the killer came calling. She stalked closer as every detail seared itself into her eyeballs. Hands cuffed to the fountain's upper spires. Slumped head, limp torso, knees on the elevated base of the fountain.

Close, so goddamn close and still too late.

'Good God,' Luca said. 'This is our guy? Where are the stocks?'

Ella didn't have an answer. Across the way, she spotted Harland jawing with a uniform, both of them looking like they'd rather be drinking poison. She angled in their direction.

'Chief,' she called. 'Talk to me.'

Harland swiveled to face her, craggy mug set in stone. 'Freakshow. Grade-A goat rodeo. But at least we got a witness this time.' He jerked his thumb at the uniform. 'Meet Officer Macklin. He's the one who stumbled on this mess and got an eyeful of our sicko in action.'

'You saw the perp?' Ella asked. She sized him up. The guy was shook, no doubt about it.

'I saw something,' Macklin said.

'Walk me through it, officer.'

Macklin swallowed hard. 'I was on patrol, keeping an eye out like the Chief said. Anyway, I spotted this guy pushin' someone in a wheelchair. Struck me as strange, y'know? Wrong place, wrong time.'

Wheelchair, Ella thought. That's how he's transporting the victims.

'Go on.'

'So I followed, saw them duck down this alley. By the time I caught up...' Macklin trailed off, falling victim to a full-body shudder.

'Take your time,' Ella said, not unkindly. Pushing too hard now would only jam the guy up worse.

After a beat, Macklin forged on. 'I found the vic, chained up. And the perp.'

'You see his face?'

'No, ma'am. He had a mask on.'

Behind her, Ella heard Luca's sharp intake of breath. Felt him go stiff as a board at the M-word. She reached back, brushed her fingers against his wrist. He caught them for a second, a silent thank you. Then it was back to business.

'What kind of mask?'

'White. Plain, but with like, a frowning mouth. Black eye holes.'

Ella chewed the inside of her cheek, pieces clicking together in the jigsaw of her brain. Same get-up Aleister's client had been sporting. The freak with the stock fetish.

She traded a loaded glance with Luca, a whole conversation in the quirk of a brow. If Aleister was on the level about his mystery commissioner, then they were back to square zilch on leads. Aleister Morgan had been telling the truth, and given this body had shown up while he was under interrogation, that meant he was innocent.

Macklin was still yapping in a stream of self-flagellation. 'I chased him, I swear. But the bastard was greased lightning. Disappeared.'

Harland jumped in, 'I've got guys scouting the area. Every direction. The wheelchair he used is behind the fountain right now. The guy didn't have a chance to take it with him.'

Ella looked over, clocked it. A cheap black chair parked in the shadows. 'Nobody touch it until forensics get here. If we wanna bag this guy's prints, that chair is our best option.'

'Roger,' Harland said. 'Techs should be here in ten.'

Ella turned back to Macklin. 'Good job here.'

"Yeah, right," he said.

'Seriously. You got eyes on him. That's the closest we've come so far. Keep your head up.'

It was cold comfort, flimsier than a streetwalker's alibi. But it was all she had to offer.

'Appreciated.'

'You get his height, weight, identifiable marks?'

‘He was on the small side. Maybe twenty pounds overweight. Hair was buzzed. No tats or anything that I saw.’

‘Got it. Chief, keep the bloodhounds at bay? Me and Hawkins need to take a closer look.’

”Yeah, yeah.” Harland’s eyes cut to the rubbernecks, still gawping at the police line. ”You do your thing, I’ll handle the peanut gallery.

She nudged Luca and strode back into the lion’s den of flashing bulbs and fetid stone. He fell into step as the monstrosity amongst this admittedly-crude sculpture came into full view.

Up close and personal with this modern art monstrosity masquerading as murder, the wrongness of it smacked Ella right between the peepers. With the other stiffs it was the stocks, the mocking ye-olde punishment vibe the unsub got his rocks off to.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ Luca asked. ‘Did we interrupt his staging?’

Luca was right. This was off-script. Lazy. Like he’d been caught with his pants down and had to improvise.

No stocks, just a pair of bargain-basement handcuffs chaining the vic to the fountain like an afterthought. The intention was the same, but the presentation lacked the loving attention to detail of the previous kills. The sick artistry that made Ella’s gorge rise and her trigger finger itch.

She knelt down, peering at the victim’s wrists cuffed awkwardly above his head. He was hanging limply, knees brushing the ground, like a waiting sacrifice for some otherworldly demon.

Luca crouched beside her and squinted at the vic's neck. 'Abrasions to the neck. Same M.O. as the others.'

'Ambushed, strangled, then rigged up like a scarecrow,' Ella finished. She tilted her head, considering. Something wasn't sitting right in her craw. 'But why no stocks this time? What's with the switch to cuffs and chains?'

'Maybe...' Luca ventured, 'Maybe the stocks aren't what's important. Not for this one, anyway.'

Ella shot him a look. 'Explain.'

Luca shrugged, sheepish. 'Dunno, exactly. But we know our unsub had this all planned in advance. He brought those two stocks months ago. He doesn't do impulsive.'

'So there's something else about this place that's important to him.'

'Maybe, but what?' Luca asked. 'Chuckles Fountain. Did we ever stop to consider that the locations might be significant? Park, alleyway, now a fountain.'

Knock her over with a feather, because Luca might be onto something. 'Hold that thought,' she said and looked back to the gaggle of uniformed officer. 'Macklin, get over here.'

The officer sauntered over. 'Everything okay?'

'This fountain,' Ella asked, 'what is it?'

Macklin nodded at the sculpture. 'It's a memorial for a guy named Chuckles. Some local celebrity, before my time.'

‘Who was he?’

‘A comic. Poor man’s Charlie Chaplin. Quite a tragic story, apparently.’

Luca asked, ‘How so?’

‘I’m no Dover historian but legend goes that he was doing a show one night, but the audience started booing him, heckling him, because he was putting on a poor show. Turns out the guy was sick, and he ended up having a heart attack onstage.’

Ella processed the story, filed the details away. ‘Poor Chuckles.’

‘Poor Chuckles, alright.’ Macklin gestured at the fountain. ‘And all he got for his efforts was this dumpy piece of shit.’

”Thanks, Macklin,” Ella said, then went back to the display. She shelved the information for later, then pulled a pair of latex gloves from her pocket.

Luca said, ‘Nothing scarier than when a girl puts the gloves on.’

‘Need to go diving,’ she said.

‘Where?’

Ella edged closer and gently searched the victim’s pockets. The usual detritus of a life cut short – keys, loose change, receipts for coffee and pie. And a wallet, worn buttery-soft with age and use.

‘Unsub didn’t have time to clean the vic out like he did with the others. Everything’s still here. Phone, keys, wallet.’

‘Phone contents could be vital,’ Luca said.

Ella flipped open the wallet, zeroing in on the driver’s license tucked behind a scratched window of plastic. ‘Harry Shepherd,’ she read out, committing the name to memory.

‘Harry Shepherd,’ Luca repeated.

Ella kept digging, sorting through punch cards and scraps of paper in search of something, anything to break the holding pattern they’d been stuck in since this whole circus kicked off.

Her fingers caught on something stiff, a rectangle of cardstock shoved into a backfold. She tugged it free, flipped it over. And promptly felt her eyebrows shoot up to outer space.

‘Uh...’

Luca leaned in, all barely-leashed curiosity. ‘What you got?’

Wordlessly, Ella held up the card. Black as a bible and twice as likely to give Luca an aneurysm, with Lord Leatherworth, Dominant Extraordinaire embossed in blood-red foil.

Luca blanched. ‘Is that...?’

‘Professional male dom? Looks like.’ The corner of Ella’s mouth ticked up. ‘Looks like Harry here was into the scene.’

‘Combined with the cuffs here,’ Luca gestured. ‘I mean, it paints a picture.’

Ella nodded. It sure did. A big, lurid, full-color centerfold of a picture, the kind to make a vice cop blush. But the question was: did that picture include a white-masked psychopath with a thing for stocks and strangulation?

Only one way to find out.

‘Let’s see if Harry here left us any other breadcrumbs.’ She jerked her chin at Luca. ‘Help me get his pants off.’

‘Come again?’

Ella fought the urge to laugh at Luca’s bug-eyed incredulity. Right, the guy probably never had to strip a corpse. Much less in public, with half the Dover PD snapping pics for the scrapbook.

She relented with a wry grin. ‘Not the full monty. Just need to check for any marks, anything that might confirm our findings.’

Luca cleared his throat as a dull flush crawled up his neck. ‘Uh. Right. That’s... yeah, okay. Are we allowed to do that?’

‘Generally frowned upon,’ Ella said as she reached for the vic’s belt.

Luca choked, a strangled sound somewhere between a laugh and a whimper. But he knelt down gamely enough, helping Ella ease Harry’s rumpled slacks down over his hips. She wrangled his underwear out of the way, professional as a preacher’s daughter, then flicked over the milk-white skin, the vulnerable backs of thighs. She frowned when she noticed the stripes of fading pink cross-hatching Harry’s firm backside.

Bingo.

‘Well heck,’ Luca muttered. ‘Looks like Harry here was quite the submissive.’

‘Agreed.’

‘These marks are fresh, too. Harry has been spanked pretty damn recently. Probably today.’

Ella gave him a look. ‘Thought you weren’t an expert in weird sex,’ she smirked.

Luca blushed a little. Bless him. ‘Maybe I lied.’

She flicked another glance at the business card in her hand at that pretentious red scrawl. Decision crystallized with every beat of her strung-out heart. It could be a coincidence, of course, but in her experience, coincidences were just patterns with bad timing.

‘Let’s get Harry’s pants back up. The guys out there are looking at us like we’re grave robbers.’

With as much grace as possible, Ella and Luca redressed Harry Shepherd. She mentally apologized for the indignity, then followed up with a promise to find justice for this poor gentleman.

‘Time to go and visit a professional dom,’ Ella said.

‘What, now?’ Luca asked. ‘It’s nearly midnight.’

‘That’s the beauty of late night calls. People are always home.’

The game was afoot. At last. The thrill of the hunt sang in Ella’s blood, razor-edged and bittersweet as the first sip of rotgut after a long dry spell.

And she had to admit, she had a good feeling about this.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

He glanced down at the mask dangling from his fingers and locked eyes with the black holes that bore into him like judgmental pits.

The frown was slipping, sagging at the edges where his sweaty mug had stretched the material. Turning the expression from comically morose to downright pathetic.

You blew it, the mask said to him. Threw it all away, like you screw up everything. Weak, pathetic, can't even get through a set without bombing.

'Go to hell,' he snarled back. 'Just a minor setback. I've still got the closer, the coup de grace.'

The mask just stared. Anger pulsed in his temples, thick and curdled and tasting of bile. With a strangled roar, he tore the thing to shreds. Felt the tacky plastic stretch and give, digging into his fingers until it finally cracked.

Panting, he flung the pieces to the grimy concrete. Stomped on them for good measure, grinding the tattered remnants into the muck under his heel. There. Gone, erased, removed from the act like a rotten tomato lobbed by some heckler in the cheap seats. The thought curled his lip, old hurts prickling under his skin like hot needles.

He'd been so close, so goddamn close to finishing his masterpiece. To take his sweet time with this squid before the big sendoff. Really make the bastard squeal, make him pay.

But the damn pigs just had to show up and stick their snouts where they didn't

belong. Interrupt his work, his art. And now he was running, lungs burning, rabbit-hearting through the urine-filled backstreets of this hopeless city. Filth under his boots, fear clogging his nostrils.

The whole scene - the grand guignol, the magnum opus, his fucking raison d'être - left behind like so much set dressing. Abandoned in his mad scramble to ditch the cops and save his own sorry skin.

And the wheelchair. The damn wheelchair. All part and parcel of the performance, and now it was police property.

It was all coming apart, unraveling like a cheap sweater. All his planning, all his prep, all the hours spent honing his material, rehearsing the moves front of the mirror until everything flowed like poisoned honey, all primed for punchlines that'd bring the house down.

Wasted. All wasted.

Well, he hoped they enjoyed the show. Hoped they got a real kick out of ruining a man's life's work, his goddamn magnum opus. No appreciation for the craft. For the blood, sweat and tears he poured into his routine. Now, the timing was screwed. The rhythm was off, the flow interrupted. He'd lost the beat, the groove, that zesty je ne sais quoi that separated the hacks from the headliners.

He had to get it back. Had to dip back into the old toolbag and pull out one last zinger, one final bit to bring it all home and leave them howling. Or screaming.

Same difference, in the end.

They'd all been so quick to judge, so eager to cut him down. The whole stinking world lined up to take their shots, take their pounds of flesh. Well, he was taking his

own back now, and the currency was suffering. The sweet music of screams and sobs, the crunch of bones and the glorious snick of life leaving the body.

Payback. Revenge. For every slight, every snub, every cruel word and mocking gaze seared into his memory like a brand on a steer's hairy ass.

It wasn't enough. Would never be enough, not until the whole world choked on its own sick laughter. On the jagged shards of its own smug superiority. But it was a start, a mere down payment on the reckoning to come. The grand balancing of the scales that'd leave him the last clown standing in a world of corpsified straight men.

And he'd get there. Oh yes, he'd get there. Just one more to go - the main event, the big kahuna. The headliner he'd been saving for the finale, the glittering jewel in his carnage crown.

But first he had to book. Scram, vamoose, skedaddle stage left while the getting was good. The pigs would be swarming the scene by now, combing for clues and getting their grubby mitts all over his genius. Mucking up the delicate timing, trampling the nuances until they were flatter than a critic's punchlines.

His car was nearby. Far enough away from the scene that the pigs wouldn't connect it to the grand display at the fountain. He needed to get there, get back home and plan for tomorrow's performance.

So he ran. Scuttled like a roach through the dark cracks of the city, the parts that never saw sun and stank of hopelessness and human effluvia. Twitchy, glancing over his shoulder every third step, half-expecting to hear the baying of hounds and the wail of sirens on his heels.

But there was nothing. Just the jaundiced gloom. Piss-stained walls and the smell of rotten fruit between his ears. Dover's rancid underbelly, the seedy substrate where

he'd cultivated his glorious fungi of vengeance.

He laughed to himself. Fungi. Classic bit.

He'd have to write some of this down later, mine it for material. The harrowing escape, the thrilling pursuit. Stretch it out, punch it up, turn it into a bit that'd make them wet their pants even as their guts froze in the chest.

But that was for later. For the next town, the next stage. When he'd finished his encore and could finally take his bow, bask in the bravos and the thunderous silence that was sweeter than any applause.

He slipped down a narrow passage, more crevice than alley, brick walls pressing close on either side. It was tight, claustrophobic. A place to hunch shoulders and walk sideways, praying your coat don't snag on some jagged outcrop or spent needle. He scurried along, rat-quick, sharp little breaths puffing in the fetid dark. Just a little further, a little deeper into the dank bowels of the city and he could reach the safety of his vehicle.

He stumbled to a halt, chest heaving, sweat stinging his eyes and turning his world to a smeary Vaseline lens. Propped himself up against the clammy wall and felt the damp brick leaching the heat from his skin like some kind of backward vampire. He needed a minute. Just a minute to get himself together, to tamp down the twitchy roil in his guts that felt like a stomachful of wasps.

The last one. It all hinged on the last one, the final piece in his glorious puzzle of payback.

And he already knew where to find the schmuck. Knew his haunts, his habits, the sad little ruts and routines that made up his pointless, puttering existence. Had cased him for weeks, swallowed his own tongue 'til it was thick with the sour taste of

surveillance.

The sad sack would never see him coming. He'd go down easy, like a sack of turds in an elevator.

A quick in and out, then exeunt stage left, with a spring in his step and a song in his shriveled little heart.

This son of a bitch had it coming real bad. He'd earned it in snubs and slights and arrows that stuck in the skin and festered like thorns dipped in anthrax. Every cutdown, every smirk, every cruel chuckle seared into his memory like a red-hot brand.

Well, he was doling out the punchlines now. The setups and sendoffs, bloody and final as the tomb. No more the jester, capering for peanut shells and guffaws. Now he was the straight man, and all the world his bumbling, stumbling foil.

Infamy. Not fame, never fame - that whore had spurned him, turned up her powdered nose and laughed in his face. But infamy, oh yes. The dark renown, the black-edged notoriety that clung like a miasma and seeped into the cracks in the pavement.

The last laugh. The ultimate joke. And he'd be there to see it, to toast it with rotgut and grave dirt, spit and semen and the salt of his own mad, crowing laughter.

It was so close he could taste the grease paint and smell the sawdust. Just one more. One more, and he'd be immortal.

Laughing. Always laughing, even as the world gagged and retched and clutched its splitting sides. He'd bring the house down, alright, and he'd stand in the center of it all, bowing to the twitching corpses and the shell-shocked survivors.

And then, at last, blessed silence.

Because a good showman knew when to make an exit. Knew when to step offstage, while the crowd was still writhing and wheezing and crying out for more. Always leave 'em wanting, even if what they wanted was for him to choke on his own blood and die screaming.

So he straightened. Pushed off the clammy alley wall and sucked in a deep breath of that thick, fetid air. Let it fuel him, nourish him. The stink and the rot, the decay and despair. It was all so deliciously funny when you really stopped to savor it.

But now it was time to move. To find his vehicle, stalk his prey, close in for the kill. And when the time was right, when the stage was set and the players all in place, then at last, it would be time for the gag to end all gags.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The club squatted at the ass-end of a grimy side street. Ella cocked a brow at the faded sign hanging askew above the entrance. Pandora's Toybox. Cute. Probably thought it was real clever, a wink and a nudge to all the dark and dirty delights waiting inside.

'Looks like this is the place,' Luca said from the passenger seat.

Ella's instinct had been wrong, because despite the late hour, Lord Leatherworth wasn't at home. According to Luca's quick-fingered research, he was doing a BDSM show at Pandora's Toybox at one AM tonight. God only knew what a BDSM show entailed.

'Charming place,' she drawled. She fished into her pocket for a pack of non-existent cigarettes. Anything to take the edge off, to dull the sense of wrong itching under her skin. Luca grunted, his pretty face pinched tight.

'Could this Leatherworth guy really be our unsub?'

Ella was in two minds. There was every chance their perp had a connection to the BDSM scene, but would such an unsub be so brazen as to employ the tools of their hobby for homicidal recreation?

'One way to find out,' Ella said.

Luca's lips thinned, but he didn't argue. Just squared those broad shoulders like a soldier marching into battle and fell into step beside her as they exited the car and approached the club. The door loomed before them in a pockmarked sheet of metal

with a slit of a window cut at eye level.

A grate slid open with a rusty shriek, and a pair of piggish eyes peered out at them.

‘Password,’ a voice grunted. Gruff as gravel in a blender.

Ella flashed her badge like a get-out-of-jail-free card. ‘FBI. We’re looking for a gentleman named Lord Leatherworth.’ Ella felt a prize fool just speaking the name. He sounded like a villain from some Penny Dreadful.

A pregnant pause followed. ‘Why?’

‘None of your business. Is he inside or not?’

The grate snapped shut and the door swung open on groaning hinges, revealing a slab of beef stuffed into a wifebeater standing in the dingy foyer.

‘Hell if I know, but go ahead,’ the bouncer said. He stepped aside, and Ella breezed past him into the club proper. Or improper, as it were. The joint was a symphony of sights and sounds designed to make good girls gasp and bad boys reach for their wallets. Strobing purples and reds, writhing bodies packed ass to elbow, music throbbing like a tell-tale heart.

And the outfits, Christ on a cracker. Leather and latex, PVC and spandex, all squeaking and straining over bits God never intended to see the light of day. Made Ella uncomfortably aware of her own get-up, with its black-rimmed glasses and split ends in dire need of pruning. Luca sidled up beside her, nursing his own flavors of discomfort, but at least the kid looked the part; clean-cut good looks and a jawline for slicing cucumber. Ella couldn’t help but think of Beauty and the Beast.

Luca leaned into her ear and yelled, ‘We look stupid.’

Just as Luca's comment registered, a stick-thin young man in a neon bodysuit brushed past her, caressing her knees with what Ella concluded was a horse tail hanging off his backside.

'You reckon?'

'Yeah. If our guy is doing a show, he's probably getting ready somewhere in the back.'

'Let's go,' she shouted over the music. 'Scope out the talent.'

Luca just nodded, too green to gag. They wove through the throng, Ella's elbows as sharp as her tongue, carving a path to the stage at the back of the room. Some industrial monstrosity of metal and chains, draped in enough black vinyl to upholster a fleet of hearses.

But what really caught the eye was the curtained-off area just behind it, a slice of shadow hinting at hidden rooms and furtive comings and goings. Ella jerked her chin at it, raised brows asking a question. Luca shrugged, the universal sign for hell if I know, and together they slunk through the crowd, two currents in a river of sin.

Ella flashed her badge as they approach the curtain. The security guard took a closer look, mouthed something to his comrade and then asked, 'FBI?'

'Looking for one Lord Leatherworth,' Ella shouted. The name still felt dumb to say.

'Leatherworth?' the guard asked. He looked back at his partner, who nodded and gestured behind the curtain. The guard waved them through.

Ella gave her thanks and slipped past the curtain into the humid hush of the backstage area. Cramped and crowded, smelling like sweat and a few substances that under

other circumstances she might care about. In here, the glances fell by the wayside. To unwitting and uncaring performers, they probably just looked like venue staff.

‘Leatherworth,’ Ella called out. In a place like this, she guessed subtly wasn’t a necessity. ‘Anyone seen him?’

A few curious glances, a whispered word here and there. Then a wisp of a woman, sixty if she was a day and dressed like a Power Ranger, jerked her thumb further down the hall.

‘Try the greenroom, sweetheart. Probably polishing his pistol, if you know what I mean.’

Ella didn’t know and didn’t want to. Just grunted her thanks and forged on, Luca sticking close. At the end of the corridor, a single room loomed. Ella pushed inside, and immediately concluded that greenroom was a generous term for the closet she found herself in, barely big enough to swing a cat.

But there, crammed between a ratty couch and a lit-up mirror, was the man of the hour.

And Lord Almighty, was he ever a man. Six-six if he was an inch, biceps like boulders and abs you could bounce a quarter off. Oiled to the gills, skin gleaming like glass. Probably spent more time on his up-do than Ella had in the past fiscal year.

‘Lord Leatherworth?’ she asked, just to be sure. The beefcake beamed, teeth so white they probably glowed in the dark.

‘The one and only,’ he purred. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m Agent Dark, this is Agent Hawkins. We’re with the Feds, and we need to ask

you some questions.'

That brought him up short, smirk faltering on his fantasy-art face. "Questions? About what? Listen, sweetie, if this is about that little misunderstanding with the fire inspector...'

'It's not,' Ella cut in. 'We're looking into something serious.'

Leatherworth turned away from the mirror and eyeballed his interrogators like two pieces of meat. He gave Ella the once over, but he lingered on Luca for what others might deem an uncomfortable amount of time.

'I've got something serious you can look into,' Leatherworth smiled at the rookie.

'Quit the innuendo,' Luca snapped, 'or I'll put something else in your endo. Harry Shepherd. The name ring any bells?'

Leatherworth held his hands up in surrender. 'Relax, princess. I'm just yanking your chain.'

Poor choice of words, Ella thought as she sized him up. Leatherworth was a hulk, no doubt about it. Judging by those chemically enhanced biceps, he certainly had the strength to choke the life out of three people and haul their bodies into pillory stocks.

But as she considered it, she remembered that both Aleister Morgan and Officer Macklin had said the perp was on the smaller side, maybe a tad overweight and with buzzed hair. Leatherworth here was the polar opposite.

Ella's eye twitched. On paper, this oiled-up dom wasn't her unsub. Disappointment crept in, but she kept herself in the game. If this not-so-gentleman knew the victim, he might still have something useful to share.

‘So, you know Harry?’ she asked.

‘Maybe,’ Leatherworth said. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘It’s important, Mr. Leatherworth. Like, life and death important.’

The beefcake just crossed his arms. ‘Sorry doll, no can do. Loose lips sink ships.’

Luca surged forward, that pretty mug set hard as a slab of granite. ‘Yeah? Well how’s this for loose lips - your buddy Harry just turned up deader than disco about an hour ago.’

Bullseye.

Leatherworth reeled like Luca had socked him right in the abdomen. All the color drained out of his face faster than a flushed toilet, leaving him pasty as a corpse in a meat locker.

‘Harry’s...dead?’

Ella just nodded, watching those oil-slicked muscles seem to shrink in on themselves. Suddenly, the guy seemed a lot smaller.

But with the truth out there, Ella saw the raw, ugly anguish of loss on Leatherworth’s expression. It sucked the air out of his lungs, and at the moment, it confirmed that this domination-Casanova wasn’t the psycho she was looking for. The unsub was a squirrely little goblin, not the Incredible Hulk’s roided-up cousin.

But Leatherworth wasn’t off the hook yet. Not by a long shot. He had secrets locked up in that thick skull, and Ella planned on rattling them loose.

‘So,’ she said, casual as a Sunday stroll. ‘You and Harry.’

‘Harry’s a... client.’

Ella noted the tense. In the wake of an unexpected death, it took a while for the conscious mind to catch up.

‘But he trusted you. Told you things.’

Luca cleared his throat. ‘So you and Harry never...?’

A bark of laughter, more reflex than humor. ‘Please, honey. I’m a dom, not a prostitute. Contrary to popular belief, we can keep it in our pants.’ His gaze raked over Luca, a flash of heat that sent a whole different kind of color rising in the rookie’s cheeks.

‘You saw him recently?’

‘This afternoon, like I do every Friday.’

Ella asked, ‘Anything you can tell us about Harry, anything at all, might help us figure out who might want to hurt him?’

The grief was back, etching lines in that chiseled face that hadn’t been there before. ‘He was a sweetheart. A real gentle soul, y’know? Most the jerks I deal with, it’s all macho posturing, who’s got the biggest hog. But Harry... he just wanted to feel safe. Cared for.’

Ella considered this, held it up to the light of what she knew about the other victims. The loudmouths, the abrasive types who caused ruckuses in pizza shops. Neither Archie nor Georgia wee gentle souls, not until you scraped down to the soft and

squishy bits.

‘Did Harry ever talk to you about his life, his problems?’ she asked, grasping for threads.

Leatherworth said, ‘Not really. He was a closed book. Showed up, took his licks, tipped well and toddled off. The only time I ever saw him let his hair down was this one night, he came in half in the bag...’

Ella perked up. ‘Drunk? How’d he act?’

‘A complete one-eighty. Loud, rude, shooting his mouth off to anyone who’d listen. I had to take him aside, sober him up a bit before we could play.’

Well, well. Ella caught Luca’s gaze and held it. Another piece of the puzzle snapping into place. Booze the great equalizer, the skeleton key to the deepest, darkest parts of the psyche.

Leatherworth continued, ‘How’d you connect Harry to me, anyway?’

‘He had your business card in his wallet.’

‘And you think I might have killed him? Why would I do that?’

Ella shot for raw honesty. ‘We don’t think you killed him, but Harry’s death isn’t the only homicide in the past week. There’ve been others, and we believe our perp might have a connection to your... scene.’

‘Is this the... stocks thing?’ Leatherworth asked. ‘I heard rumors. Some girl in the park.’

‘It’s connected.’

Leatherworth pursed his lips and looked up to the ceiling. ‘And you found Harry in stocks too?’

‘Not quite. No torture devices on Harry, but he was restrained.’

Luca stepped up, ‘Mr. Leatherworth, did Harry...’

‘Please, call me Paul,’ the dom chimed in. ‘And before you ask, no. Harry’s tastes were simple. No restraints. Just an over-the-knee thrashing once a week.’

”Not a sniff of torture devices or handcuffs?”

‘Lovelies, you’ve both mentioned torture devices, but you know that stocks are far from that, right?’

Ella paused. Wheels turning. ‘How do you mean?’

Paul regarded Luca from head to toe. Somehow, the man found space to perv in the middle of an interrogation. ‘You ever been in stocks? It’s just a little pressure around the wrists and neck. Not exactly torment.’

Ella could safely say she’d never been in stocks in her life. ‘So, what are they?’

Paul shrugged his oil-slicked shoulders. ‘Humiliation, mostly. I mean, think about it. What’s more degrading than being trussed up like a pig, unable to move while the world gawks and laughs?’ A pause, wheels turning behind those bedroom eyes. ‘It’s about shame, sugarplum. Stripping someone down to their basest bits and putting it all on display.’

Ella rocked back on her heels, pieces clicking together like tumblers in a lock. The vics, the loudmouths and tough-talkers. All choked out and strung up, their darkest vulnerabilities laid bare for all to see.

It wasn't about the pain. It wasn't about the kill. It was about the spectacle, the sick theater of it all. Making a mockery of all their bluster and bravado, their pretensions of power.

Luca asked, 'That's how they're used in an SM context?'

'That's how they're used in every context. They're for bad boys and girls. Nothing torturous about them.'

Ella's mind whirled like a busted clock. She looked over at her partner. Similar gears were spinning behind those pretty blues and flushed cheeks.

Time to get out of here. Leatherworth wasn't her man. He didn't fit the physical profile, and despite his brawn, the man clearly had brains too. He wasn't stupid enough to embark on a homicidal adventure, least of all with clients who likely had paper trails to him.

'Paul, thank you for your time. You've been a real help.'

The big man nodded, still looking a bit shell-shocked. 'I'm sorry I couldn't be more help.' He reached out and put a weary hand on Ella's shoulder. 'Please find this guy. Harry was sweet as sugar. I know this scene might look bizarre to the outside, but we're harmless.'

'Count on it,' she said.

'Take care, both of you,' finished Leatherworth.

Ella exited the greenroom with Luca in tow. They stepped beyond the curtain, out into the club and made their way through the masses.

They were out into the night, where the only eyes on them were the stars.

Ella sucked in a lungful, let it out slow. Watched her breath fog and dissipate.

‘What’s the plan?’ Luca asked.

Images flashed through Ella’s brain in fiendish kaleidoscope - the victims, alive, running those fool mouths. Words weapons, fists without fingers. Then dead, trussed up and displayed. Weaknesses bared, soft bits spiked for all to scoff at.

But if what Leatherworth said was true, then Harry Shepherd was an anomaly.

‘All of our victims pissed our unsub off. That means there’s a connection. Somewhere. He wouldn’t opt for humiliation if there wasn’t a personal reason for it.’

‘Then that’s what we need to find,’ Luca finished.

‘Come on, back to the office. We’re going to unravel this – even if it takes all night.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Mia Ripley stared at the storage complex through the windshield.

1456 Industrial Park Road. The location of Martin's storage unit, at least according to the files he'd tried to torch.

This was it. The moment of truth. The crossroads where the fog of delusion lifted and the cold, hard reality came crashing in. Part of her wanted to run, to peel out of this place and never look back. Pretend she'd never seen those files, never smelled the smoke from Martin's burning life.

But she couldn't. The doubts had burrowed deep, and now they gnawed at her guts like starving rats. She had to know. Had to see with her own eyes the truth of the man she'd given her heart to.

Even if it destroyed her.

Mia regarded the rows of uniform units and drew breath after breath. She held the steering wheel tight. Stalling. She was delaying the inevitable, and she damn well knew it. Like a fool, a coward.

Get it together, woman, a voice hissed in her head. You've faced down the worst America has to offer, and you're scared to walk into a storage unit?

No. God no. She was the scourge of scumbags, and what was another scumbag to the pile? Even if that scumbag was someone she'd foolishly shared a bed with. No man, no matter how deep under her skin, was gonna make her tuck tail and run.

She wrenched the key from the ignition and relished the pain of the metal biting into her palm. She used it to center herself, to uncoil the diamond-hard knot of rage that had seen her through a thousand worst storms.

Nothing was going to hold her back from facing the truth in all its ugly glory.

Ripley hauled herself out of the car and strode towards unit number eleven. It was a plain white garage door, nothing she hadn't seen before. The padlock hanging off the clasp leered at her like a one-eyed whore.

For a moment, she just stood there. Staring at that hunk of rust and spite like it held the secrets to the universe. It was time to rip off the Band-Aid and let the poison drain.

Ripley fished her keyring out of her pocket and navigated to the slim piece of metal nestled between her car and front door keys. The little nugget had been a gift from Ella once upon a time. Ella, the lock and key expert, the woman that could best a padlock or deadbolt or mortice lock without blinking. If Ella was by her side, they'd have breached this door an hour ago and left no sign of any intrusion. If Ripley's memory was on point, Ella told her to only use this device when it was shit-hits-the-fan-o'clock.

Well, the hour was nigh. The bells were tolling, and the piper was coming to collect his due.

As she inserted the piece of metal into the padlock, Ripley couldn't help but think of the rookie and hope she was surviving somewhere out there. She worked the pick in a circular motion, hardly the deft touch of a safecracker. A twist, a click, and the shackle popped free.

The door yawned open on squealing hinges, a gaping maw hungry for her hopes, her

dreams, the tattered remnants of her happily ever after.

Last chance to walk away, that small, craven voice whimpered. To go back to the lie, to the pretty fiction you've wrapped around yourself like a security blanket.

But Ripley had never been one for soft landings and easy comforts. She was a creature of hard edges and brutal truths, of festering wounds lanced and cauterized. She didn't flinch from ugliness - she grabbed it by the throat and made it look her in the eye.

She stepped over the threshold and let the darkness swallow her. The door swung shut at her back with a clang like a dungeon gate.

For a long moment, she just stood there. Breathing in the musty air, the cloying tang of secrets left to molder. Letting her eyes adjust to the murk, picking out shapes in the gloom.

First, she saw the barrel. Squat and black, dominating the small space with its chemical musk. A sweet-sick bite of kerosene that coated her tongue, seared her sinuses and watered her eyes.

There must have been gallons of the stuff in there, Ripley reasoned. Enough accelerant to turn a body into a grease-spot. To erase a man so thoroughly, even dental records would be hard-pressed to identify the crispy critter left behind.

Just like Martin had tried to do to himself. Dousing his life in gasoline and striking a match, leaving nothing behind but scorched earth and questions without answers. Burning his bridges, salting the earth so nothing could grow in his wake.

Opposite the barrel – a wooden chair. Straight-backed and sturdy. At its base was a red stain, a rust-brown smear soaked deep into the concrete.

Ripley's gorge rose, her gut twisting like a fist around a knife.

She didn't know what this was, so she stood there, paralyzed, afraid to take a step in any direction. She breathed deep, letting the sting of kerosene scour her nasal passages raw.

What now? What did you do when the world tilted on its axis, when the foundations of your reality crumbled like so much sodden drywall? When you feared the man you loved was a monster in a human suit?

There was no protocol for this. No training manual, no procedural handbook for navigating the bombed-out ruins of your own psyche. She wanted to scream. To rage, to tear at her hair and rend her clothes. To give voice to the black, seething thing clawing at her insides, ripping her apart from the inside out.

Had she missed the signs? The red flags, the warning klaxons blaring in the night? Had she been so blinded by her own desperate need, her aching loneliness, that she'd ignored the snake in her bed?

Or had he just been that good? The consummate chameleon, the silver-tongued serpent. Spinning his lies, his half-truths and obfuscations, weaving a web so silky-sweet she'd gladly stepped into it.

Grim laughter bubbled up her throat. Some detective she was. Some profiler, some hunter of monsters. She'd welcomed one into her heart and let him sip from her veins. Now, she was paying the price for her own stupidity.

Ripley's thoughts cut out at the harsh trill of her cell phone. The ringtone reserved for Ella. Fumbling it out of her pocket, she stared at the screen, at her friend's name flashing insistently.

Ella. Ella, who'd tried to warn her. Who'd seen through Martin's mask, who'd begged Ripley to open her eyes. Ella, who must be worried sick. Who'd moved heaven and earth to find her, to bring her back from the brink of...what? Madness? Oblivion? The kind of heartbreak there was no coming back from?

Ripley's thumb hovered over the button. The urge to answer, to unburden herself, was overwhelming. She needed Ella like she needed air right now, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't face the concern or the pity in her friend's voice. And beneath it all was a flicker of shame, wounded pride and the tattered shreds of her ego bristling at the thought of admitting that Ella had been right. That Ripley had been a fool, a patsy, just another mark for a con man to fleece.

No. She had to do this alone. Had to face her demons on her own terms, in her own time. She owed Ella that much - a clean kill, a monster put down and a mess mopped up before her partner ever had to glimpse the carnage.

The phone fell silent. She slipped it back into her pocket.

And so, Ripley did the only thing she could.

Ripley crossed to the barrel in a daze, one foot in front of the other like a dead woman walking. She levered herself on top of it, sat down, and wouldn't move until all of this was over.

And she waited.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The dream hit Ella like a fist between the eyes. Ripley's face swam in her vision, eyes wide, mouth open in a silent scream. And behind her, Martin, smile on his face, barrel of his gun pressed to Ripley's temple.

No, Ella tried to shout. Tried to move, to lunge, to do something, anything. But she was frozen, paralyzed, stuck in the molasses of her own subconscious. Helpless as she watched that silver-haired devil pull the trigger. Watched Ripley's head snap back, a spray of crimson and gray matter painting the wall behind her.

Ella jolted awake with a gasp. For a second, she didn't know where she was. The dream clung like cobwebs, but then the world came into focus – the dingy office, the tower of paperwork, the rumble of bodies in the main area beyond the glass partitions. She was hunched at her desk, spine and neck screaming bloody murder.

Christ, she felt about a hundred years old. Like Methuselah's little sister; creaky joints and crow's feet and a tiredness that a catnap in the office couldn't touch. She scrubbed a hand over her face and felt leathery skin. She needed a shower and enough caffeine to kickstart a Clydesdale.

She snatched up her cell, squinted blearily at the screen. No missed calls. No new messages, no voicemails from a certain redhead that may or may not be in the throes of despair right now.

Ella had called her last night, after their adventure in that SM club. Hoping against hope that Ripley would pick up, that she'd let Ella explain. Maybe with Ripley's blunt insight, they could put their heads together and untangle this snarled mess of a case.

But Ripley had let it go to voicemail.

Ella's fingers itched to dial again. To keep calling until Ripley answered, until Ella could hear her voice, brusque and bullheaded as ever. But she knew it was useless. Ella had to admit that it stung. They were partners, dammit. Ride or die, two against the world. But now Ripley had disappeared to Parts Unknown in a quixotic quest for answers that could very well lead to her demise.

She wanted to hammer the table in frustration, perhaps break her knuckles to give her something to dilute the pain in her gut. But really, what would that solve? She could break apart later, perhaps fall apart in the privacy of her own shower.

Now she had to work. Had to put one foot in front of the other until she reached the finish line or fell off the edge of the map.

She was just about to gather up her scattered files and begin from scratch when the door swung open. Luca rushed in, riding a caffeine high judging by the spring in his step. He planted a cup on her desk, blacker than a vampire's heart and smelled like heaven.

'For the lady,' he said, and fixed her with a grin that Ella definitely did not find charming at this time of morning. 'Breakfast of champions.'

Ella groused, but she grabbed the cup anyway. Couldn't afford to be picky about her caffeine delivery system at this point. "You're a lifesaver."

'I got you black coffee this time. They don't do lattes here.'

'Probably for the best. Don't tell me you've been up all night.'

'I caught about four hours, then I went hunting.'

Ella caught his eye. 'Hunting?'

He whipped out a plastic baggie dangling from his fingers like a magician doing a nickel-and-dime trick.

'You were my first sleepover with a woman in ages, and when I woke up, I still had my clothes on. So I figured I'd do something useful.'

Ella leaned forward, squinting. Inside the bag were shards of something white. Jagged, like broken china. It took her caffeine-starved synapses a second to put it together.

Then it clicked.

'Holy hell,' she breathed. 'Is that what I think it is?'

Luca winked, the cheeky son of a bitch. 'One psycho mask, smashed to bits. Found it in an alley not far from the fountain.'

Ella gaped at him, at the baggie, her heart doing a wild tarantella. This was huge. Physical evidence, ripped right off the killer's face. The CSI techs might be able to pull trace, DNA. At the very least, it proved Macklin's story. Proved that the freak was out there, scrambling to cover his tracks.

And Luca had found it. This rookie, this Quantico wonder boy, had cracked the case wide open while Ella had been snoozing at her desk like a damn damsel in distress. A hot flush of shame scorched through her veins, searing as a branding iron. What the hell was wrong with her? She was supposed to be the driven one, the hungry one, the one who never stopped moving. And here she was, catching Z's while the new kid ran circles around her.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. He'd pulled a miracle out of his backside while she'd been drooling on her case files, but Ella wasn't one to argue with results.

'You beautiful man,' she said fervently, forcing the words past the lump of wounded pride in her throat. 'I could kiss you.'

Luca preened. 'Maybe later. Had to do something to occupy myself while you were sawing logs. Figured an early morning stroll through the crime scene couldn't hurt.'

They had to get the mask to forensics stat. Every second they wasted was another second for the trail to go cold, for the killer to rabbit. Ella was just about to voice this thought when Chief Harland came barreling into the bullpen. His mug was beet red, eyes wild.

'Dark!' he barked. 'Hawkins! Evidence room, now. Something you gotta see.'

Ella shot to her feet, suddenly wide awake. Luca grabbed the mask in his fist. They shared a charge glance then sped out into the corridor.

'What is it, Chief?' Ella asked, already moving. 'What'd you find?'

But Harland just shook his head, already turning on his heel.

'No time. Just move your asses.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella's heart rate reached dangerous levels as she burst into the evidence locker with Luca hot on her heels. The room was a claustrophobe's nightmare: cinderblock walls and metal shelves crammed with the detritus of a thousand broken lives.

And there, squatting in the middle, was the wheelchair. The same damn chair their unsub had used to cart Harry Shepherd's corpse to his final resting place

Ella circled it like a shark tasting blood. This thing was the key, the loose thread that could unravel this whole mess. But only if it gave up the goods, spilled its secrets like a stool pigeon under the hot lights.

'What's the word, Chief?' she asked, trying to keep the hungry tremble out of her voice. 'Tell me the lab jockeys found something juicy on this hunk of junk. A partial print, a hair fiber, anything.'

Harland just shook his head, jerked his thumb at a nearby table. 'Nothing on the chair. But take a gander at what was tucked in the seat pocket.'

Ella wheeled around, zeroed in on the plastic baggie laying there like an accusation. Inside was a length of wire, black and sleek and coiled like a snake ready to strike. She snatched it up, squinting through the plastic.

Some kind of cable. Nylon coating stretched tight over copper guts, the end a spiky mess of frayed fibers. Like it'd been ripped from its other half, an electronic umbilical snapped too soon.

A spasm shot through Ella's guts as the penny dropped. The vic's neck wounds. The

doc babbling about PVC and pressure. This was it. This was the garrote, the murder weapon. This unassuming little length of wire had choked the life out of two – no, three – people. Bitten into their flesh like a starving dog on a bone.

‘Son of a bitch,’ she breathed.

Luca sidled up beside her. ‘What? What is it?’

Ella’s gaze never left the cable. She tilted it, watching the light play off the ravaged end. ‘Our murder weapon. Has to be. The freak used this to garrote them. Archie, Georgia, Harry. All of them.’

Her partner snapped his fingers. ‘The coroner said there were nylon tracings around the victims’ necks. This must be what our killer used to strangle them. An electrical cord.’

She held it up to the light, squinting at the smudged letters printed along its length. ‘What the hell is a Midas Pro?’

‘A Midas Pro?’ Luca asked. ‘That’s a microphone cable. The high-end stuff.’

Ella shot him a look, something stirring in her mind, something hazy but visible. ‘A microphone cable?’

‘Yeah. Singer in my old band swore by them.’

The world tilted, lurched. Ella felt like she’d just stepped off a cliff, plunging headlong into the abyss of epiphany. The clues whirled through her brain in a maelstrom of disparate data points. The mask. The pillory stocks. The strangulation. The microphone cable.

It all slotted together like the tumblers in Satan's lock.

She lunged for the evidence table, scrabbling for the bag with the shattered mask. Ripped it open with trembling hands, latex snapping as she jammed on a pair of gloves.

'Ella? The hell are you doing?' Luca sounded miles away, tinny and distant.

She ignored him, already spreading the shards out on the tabletop. Sorting them, arranging them, trying to make order from chaos. It was a jigsaw from hell, all jagged edges and mocking frowns. A curve here, a jutting shard there. The ghost of a frown, a slit for a mocking mouth.

She felt possessed, consumed. A madwoman on a mission, the need to know burning through her like a fever. The mask fought her, pieces slipping and sliding under her frantic fingers. But slowly, surely, it took shape. A face swam into focus, cracked and crazed as a funhouse mirror.

There. It wasn't perfect, wasn't complete. But it was enough. Enough to see the shape of it, the specter rising from the fragments like Lazarus shambling free of his tomb.

Ella straightened up. Took a step back, a strange calm settling over her. The calm of absolute, undeniable certainty.

'Guys,' she said, quiet as the grave and twice as deadly. 'I think our unsub is a comedian.'

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella's marker squeaked across the whiteboard like nails on a chalkboard as she laid it all out for Luca and Harland.

This was it. The home stretch.

The whiteboard was a ballad of lines, underscored words and half-cocked theories. She stepped back, surveying her handiwork with a critical eye. To an outsider, it might look like chaos, like the ravings of a madwoman. But to Ella, it was a roadmap to the twisted mind of their unsub.

Harland leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed. He looked a picture of defeat, but Ella could see the glimmer of interest in his eyes. Luca, on the other hand, was perched on the edge of his seat like an eager student.

'Explain,' Harland said.

'First things first - our vic's COD.' She tapped the board, the words "MICROPHONE CORD" underlined thrice in bold red strokes. 'Strangled, garroted, however you wanna slice it. But the weapon of choice? That's key.'

Harland grunted. 'Could be anything. Singer, theater geek, American Idol washout.'

Ella shook her head, impatient. She jabbed a finger at the crime scene photos tacked up in a gruesome row.

'There's more to this than a fancy noose. Look at how he posed them. Archie on those pallets, Georgia on the bandstand, Harry on that fountain. You see a pattern

there?’

‘Not really,’ Harland said.

‘Our unsub wasn’t just posing bodies. He was staging them. Quite literally staging them. They were all elevated, like they were on a stage.’

Harland shifted a little. She could see the gears grinding in his head, the stubborn blue-collar pragmatism warring with the unavoidable truth. But he wasn’t quite ready to cry uncle. Not yet.

‘Putting on a show, huh?’ he asked. ‘You sure you’re not grasping at straws here?’

Ella had to grin. He sounded just like Ripley.

‘No, there’s a lot more. When me and Hawkins talked to the vics’ families, both mentioned something that we completely overlooked.’ The details clawed back at her, as fresh as a papercut. She turned back to the board, tapped another set of underlined words. ”COMEDY CLUBS,” they screamed in lurid green.

‘Mrs. Newman said Archie frequented bars, comedy clubs, and the theater sometimes. Georgia’s sister said that Georgia got blasted at every dive bar and comedy club in town. Same song, different key. See?’

Harland shook his head, incredulous. ‘So, what? Our unsub”s hitting the open mic circuit?’

Ella ignored the comment and steamrolled ahead with the momentum of a freight train. ‘And then there’s this.’ She underlined the word ‘TRAGEDY MASK.’

‘What about it?’ Harland asked.

‘Comedy and tragedy. Two sides of the same coin. The theater masks. The universal symbol of the human condition.’

‘Right, but if he was a comedian, wouldn’t he use a comedy mask?’

”No. Something happened to our unsub that set him on his path. He’s gone from comedy to tragedy, and this is the result. Laughing turned to screaming, somehow. Something flipped the script on this guy.”

Harland stood up and walked over to the crime scene photos. He zoned in on a glossy picture of Harry Shepherd hanging from the memorial fountain.

‘Chuckles,’ Harland said. ‘Last night’s vic was hanging from a memorial to a comedian.’

‘Bingo,’ Ella said. ‘That’s why the lack of stocks. Because the location was the punchline.’

Harland harrumphed, bushy brows colliding like mating caterpillars. ‘Alright, let’s say you’re on the right track. What do the stocks have to do with this? Archie and Georgia were both locked up in stocks. Why?’

Ella blew out a breath, dragging a hand through her hair. The eternal question, the niggling little itch that had dogged her since they’d stepped foot in this city.

‘That’s the million dollar query, Chief. The one piece that doesn’t quite...’

‘Laughing stock,’ Luca broke in.

Ella’s head snapped around so fast she damn near got whiplash. Until now, the rookie had been deathly silent.

‘Come again?’ she said.

Luca met her gaze, steady as a surgeon’s hands.

‘Laughing stock,’ he said again. ‘He’s being literal. Transposed his pain into tangible imagery that he thinks will help overcome his trauma.’

Ella’s jaw hit the floor like a sack of cement. Dammit. The kid had done it again, put the pieces together while she was still fumbling in the dark. A hot flush of envy seared through her guts, green and ugly as a five-day-old bruise. How the hell did he do it?

‘Laughing stocks,’ she repeated.

Luca rose out of his chair. ‘Stocks are used for humiliation, right? Display the victims, let the public take their shots. Our unsub’s doing the same. He’s trying to be funny. It’s a visual gag.’

Ella could have kissed him. Again.

‘Holy crap, Hawkins. Good catch.’

But even as she said it, even as she pasted on a smile and played nice, that jealous little voice in the back of her head wouldn’t shut up. Wouldn’t stop whispering that she was obsolete and this fresh-faced rookie was everything she was but better.

But before she dwell too deeply on it, Harland jumped in. ‘Hold the phone. Laughing stock?’

The agents turned to him. ‘It mean something?’ Ella asked.

‘There’s a club in town by that name. Laughingstock. Small place. Kinda seedy. Pretty much anyone can take a crack at stand-up over there. Cheap booze though.’

Ella felt her heart kick against her teeth. ‘There’s a club around here called Laughingstock?’

‘Sure is,’ Harland said.

Ella’s mind whirled like a slot machine hitting jackpot. A wannabe comedian turned tragic clown. Ella could see it unspooling in her mind’s eye like a snuff film on repeat. The unsub, a twitchy, maladjusted misfit. Stepping into those hot lights, that humid crush of a crowd. Desperation leaking from his pores, neediness cranked to eleven.

She spun to her computer, seized by a sudden urgency. Her fingers clattered over the keys in a machine gun ratatat. She searched the club name, the location, then scoured through the results in a frenzy; searching, ferreting, digging for that needle in a haystack that would blow this thing wide open.

And then...there it was. A thumbnail, grainy and dark but there.

But what caught her attention was the title.

Brutal Heckling DESTROYS Bad Comedian!!

‘Holy mother,’ Ella breathed.

Harland and Luca crowded around the laptop.

‘Whoa,’ Luca said. ‘Heckling destroys comedian?’

She clicked it, breath caught like a rabbit in a snare.

The video buffered, pixelated. A dimly lit stage swam into view, a lone figure hunched over the mic stand like a vulture on a carcass. The crowd was a faceless mass; an amorphous blob of drunken jeers and jostling shadows.

The heckling was already in full swing, but the comedian's voice crackled just above the jeering. I just finished reading *The Divine Comedy*. Waste of time. I didn't laugh once.

The boos rose like a wave, like a tsunami of casual cruelty cresting to crash against the stage. The figure - a man, pasty and soft in the cruel spotlight - seemed to crumple, folding in on himself like a house of cards.

It quickly crescendoed, bottles and glasses arcing through the air to shatter at his feet. And still he stood there, rigid and shaking, a quivering Jell-O mold of humiliation.

'Christ almighty,' Luca said.

Ella was laser-focused. On the video, it looked like the majority of the heckling came from a group of people near the camera. Some of the crowd remained sitting, clearly uncomfortable at the interruption.

Watching it seared Ella's retinas, scorched her gray matter. It was like a peek through the gates of hell, all the unsub's rage and humiliation and shattered dreams distilled down into one hundred and eighty seconds of digital bile.

And then the camera panned to a face in the crowd. A face beside the cameraman.

A single, sneering visage.

Luca leaned over her shoulder, so close she could feel the heat of him through her shirt. Could smell the clean musk of his aftershave, the lingering bite of department-issue coffee.

‘That’s... Archie Newman,’ Luca said.

Light into dark. Comedy into tragedy. And it all started right there, in one seedy little club on one shitty little night.

The beginning of the end. The origin story of a monster made, not born. All laid out in one hundred and eighty grainy seconds. Humiliation. Annihilation. The kind of total ego death you didn’t come back from. Not without some scars and a serious axe to grind.

‘This is it,’ Ella said. ‘This comedian is our killer.’

‘Look, his name’s in the comments section. Sebastian Doyle,’ said Luca. ‘Christ, this video’s got three million views. No wonder it sent him on a killing spree.’

‘Sebastian Doyle,’ repeated Ella. ‘Choked on his own flop sweat and fell to pieces in the spotlight. His shot at validation, at connection, blew up in his face. And it broke him. Snapped something vital and sent him spiraling straight into his own personal hell.’

Silence in the wake of her words. Harland and Luca staring like she’d just grown a second head. Or maybe like they were really seeing her for the first time - the jagged edges, the hairline fractures. The parts of her that understood the unsub, that could slip into his skin and feel the warp of that freakshow he called a mind.

But there wasn’t time to plumb those pitch-black depths. They were on the scent now, the unsub’s scent hot in their noses. And they had to move, strike while the trail

was fresh.

‘I’ll get his address,’ Harland called and rushed out of the room.

‘We got him,’ Luca said. ‘God dammit, we got him.’

Ella pushed to her feet, already reaching for her pistol, checking the chamber. Ready to roll, to turn this city upside down until their unsub fell out like a rotten tooth. She rolled her neck, cracked a few joints, let old aches fade to background noise.

She was alive and crackling like a live wire with the thrill of the hunt. The quarry was in sight, the game afoot.

And damned if she’d let this ghoul slip through her fingers.

Harland scurried back in. ‘335 Reedswood Grove,’ he said.

‘Good work, Chief,’ Ella said. ‘That’s where we’re headed.’

‘You need backup?’

‘No. I need you to stay here.’ Ella pointed to her laptop. ‘Get your tech guys to identify any potential victims. Any hecklers, any raised voices. They’re all possible targets. Identify them and keep them safe.’

The chief nodded in understanding. ‘Alright. You two stay safe.’

Game on. Showtime. The big finish, and Ella was ready for her turn in the center ring. Step right up and come one, come all to the greatest show on earth.

‘Let’s do this, Hawkins.’

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Midafternoon sun stabbed through the car windows as Ella screeched up to Sebastian Doyle's house. The place was a shoebox, squat and faded, hunkered down between carbon copy neighbors. Just another cookie cutter dump in this nowhere burg.

As soon as she killed the engine, Luca was out and moving before she could blink, the spring-loaded pretty boy jonesing for action. Ella hauled herself after him, ignoring the creak in her joints, the twinge in her back. Too little rest, too many unhealed injuries.

They hit the porch together, Luca pounding on the door like it owed him money. Three strikes, sharp and loud as gunshots in the drowsy afternoon hush. They waited, listened. Not a damn thing. No shuffle of feet, no startled curses. Just a big fat goose egg.

Ella's molars ground together, frustration bubbling in her guts like a shook-up soda can. No way was she letting this twisted son of a bitch slip through her fingers. Not when they were so close she could practically smell the sociopathy leaking out of the walls.

Ella pounded on the door, three short, sharp raps. 'Sebastian Doyle, FBI. Open up.'

Silence. Nothing but the distant yap of a dog and the creak of a screen door two houses down. Ella scowled, fist rising to knock again.

Then the shades twitched.

Just a flutter, there and gone. But it was enough. Ella's hand dropped to her holster,

fingers curling round cool steel. Beside her, Luca tensed, a quivering arrow ready to fly.

‘Doyle, we just want to talk,’ she called.

More silence. Another shiver of the shades, a glimpse of movement in the gloom beyond. Then, quick as a magic trick – nothing. Stillness settled like a shroud.

‘God damn,’ she spat. Then she was moving, prowling around the side of the house like a hungry alley cat. Looking for a way in, an angle to play. Luca scrambled after her, protest hot on his heels.

‘Whoa, hey! Are you sure about this? Feels a little off-book for’

‘Can it.’ Ella shot him a look that could curdle milk. ‘If the director kicks up a fuss, just blame me. I’m not letting this freak ghost us, not when we’re breathing down his damn neck.’

She hugged the side of the house, slinking through knee-high grass gone to seed. Dandelions clawed at her ankles, ragweed dusting her trousers. Ahead, a small window winked at her from beneath a rusted-out AC unit.

The glass was filthy, caked with the grime of years. But it was open a crack, just enough for clever fingers to pry it wider. Ella jimmied the sash, grunting as the warped wood resisted. But she was a determined cuss, and splinters were a small price for entry.

The window shrieked like a stepped-on cat as she forced it up. She clambered through, ass-first and graceless. Tumbled to a linoleum floor that hadn’t seen a mop in years.

The kitchen was a ruin. Peeling Formica and nicotine-stained walls, empty bottles and crusted dishes teetering in the sink. Ella held her breath, picking through the detritus towards the door. She palmed the knob, swung the door wide for Luca and his highfalutin protocol. Bless him for wanting to do things by the book, she thought, but sometimes you had to break the rules to get ahead.

The place was a mausoleum. Peeling wallpaper, faded photos. Threadbare carpets gone bald with age. Ella ghosted through the hall and into a living room that smelled like mothballs and Bengay.

And there, in the corner – a figure.

Huddled and still, slumped in a wheelchair like a forgotten coat on a rack.

Ella's heart kicked, adrenaline dumping into her bloodstream like a hit of bad speed. Her piece was in her hand without thought, muzzle trained on that silent shape.

'Sebastian Doyle?' Ella shouted. 'Hands where I can see them.'

A beat. Two. Then a rusty creak as the wheelchair swiveled, as a face emerged.

Not Sebastian. Not by a long shot, unless he'd aged fifty years since his disastrous comedy set at the Laughingstock club a few months ago.

An old woman, white hair and rheumy eyes, skin sagging off her bones like cold oatmeal. For a second, Ella thought she'd just stumbled on a corpse propped up like some sick conversation piece.

Then the granny opened her yap and started screaming bloody murder.

'Out!' she howled, claw-hands plucking at the ragged afghan on her lap. 'Out, out,

get out! I'll call the police!'

Luca's hands up in surrender. Ella fumbled for her badge, held it up like a shield against granny's sonic assault. 'Lady, we are the police. We're looking for,'

But the broad was too far gone. Lights on, nobody home. She just kept hollering, voice like rusted hinges swinging in a cyclone.

'Police? Liars! Seb warned me about you! Oh yes he did!'

It all clicked together like a cocked .45. The wheelchair. The one their sick puppy had used to cart his victims around, tuck them into those freak show stocks. Borrowed from this old woman, whoever she was.

'Seb?' Luca asked. 'You mean Sebastian?'

The old biddy pursed her lips, gums smacking wetly. 'My boy. Wouldn't hurt anybody, not like you!'

Ella held up placating hands, took a careful step forward. 'Easy there, Mrs. Doyle. We just need to have a word with Sebastian. Is he here?'

That got her attention. Granny's milky eyes narrowed, lips curled back over her pink gums. 'No, he ain't! Now get out before I-'

Luca stepped up, hands out in a soothing sort of way. Like he was gentling a startled mare. He had a set of peepers on him that could charm the habit of a nun, this kid. Ella could practically hear the wheels turning under that high-dollar haircut.

'Ma'am, please. It's really important we find Seb. He could be in a whole mess of trouble.'

‘Trouble? No, no, not my boy. Not Sebby. He’s a good kid. Always has been.’

Luca flashed a grin, cheeks dimpling. He stepped closer, every inch the gentleman caller came to pay his respects. He pulled out his phone, scrolled until he found the headshot that had been blasted to every badge in a fifty mile radius. He held it up to granny, gentle as a pediatric nurse.

‘This him? This Sebastian?’

The woman squinted. ‘Yes. That’s my boy. But he’s not here. He’s-,’

She clamped her lips shut so fast her dentures clacked.

‘He’s what? Where’d he go, ma’am? Please.’

Granny’s eyes darted around the room like a pair of cracked-out pinballs. Ella could practically see the dementia jellying between her ears, memories slipping and sliding around without a handhold.

‘He’s out,’ the old woman cried.

Luca crouched down at her level and said, ‘My partner and I, we’re just trying to sort out a sticky situation. I’m sure a clever lady like you can understand that.’

The old bird near swooned, apple-doll cheeks gone ruddy. ‘Okay. Though I don’t know what help an old thing like me could be.’

‘More than you know,’ Luca assured her. ‘Now, about your son. We’d love to talk to him. Do you know where we might find him?’

The old woman’s face crumpled, tears springing up to swim in cloudy eyes. ‘Oh, it’s

awful! Just awful!’

Luca took her hand and asked, ‘What’s awful, ma’am? Please tell us what you know.’

‘They were so cruel,’ Mrs. Doyle warbled. ‘Awful people!’

‘Which people?’

‘They ruined him,’ she hissed. ‘Those people, that crowd. Laughed my poor boy offstage. Broke him.’

Ella’s gut clenched. So Sebastian had spilled his guts to Mommy Dearest. Poured out all his blackest bile. But did his mother know just how far his son had taken it?

Luca, bless his handsome mug, kept his cool. ‘And these people, ma’am - you know they’ve passed on?’

Ella held her breath, watched confusion cloud those milky eyes. ‘Passed on? You mean...dead? No, no. Seb, he was just gonna talk to them. Sort it all out.’

‘Ma’am, all of those people at your son’s comedy show – the ones shouting at him – are all dead. And we believe Sebastian might be the one responsible.’

The wail that slipped out of granny’s withered lips was damn near inhuman. She started rocking back and forth, keening like a banshee with a busted 8-track.

Ella’s heart twisted in her chest. This old bird was a victim, too. A mother’s love, blind and fierce, warped into something tragic by her son’s sickness. She stepped forward, crouching down beside Luca, her voice soft as she’d ever managed.

‘Mrs. Doyle, I know this is a lot to take in. And I can’t imagine how much you’re

hurting right now. But we need your help.'

Luca jumped up, put both hands on her shoulders and kept her still. 'Mrs. Doyle, I know this is hard, but we need to find Sebastian immediately. If you can help us, we can put an end to all of this.'

The old woman took her sweet time. Wails turned to inaudible murmurs and after a good long stare at Luca's chiseled feature, she said, 'Seb is out.'

'Where?'

'Gone to meet the last one.'

'Last one?'

'The main one. The one who started it. The last one.'

The last one.

Frustration bubbled up like a volcano, and Ella was just about to go full rabid dog when her cell buzzed in her pocket like a cattle prod to the backside. She snatched it up, clocked the name.

Harland.

'Chief, what is it?' she answered as she scuttled out of the room, leaving Luca to mind the mother.

'Christ, woman, you tryin' to deafen me? You find him yet or what?'

'Negative,' she bit out. 'But we're in his house. With his mom.'

‘His mom?’

‘Don’t ask. What about a next target?’

‘That’s the problem,’ Harland said. ‘My tech guy here IDed three of Laughingstock Larry’s targets from that video. Newman, Bolton, Shepherd. But there ain’t enough pixels in the world to put names to any other mugs in that crowd.’

Ella pinched the bridge of her nose, willed the throbbing in her temples to kindly go to hell.

‘Shit. Doyle’s mom said something about him going after the main one, the last one. There’s no one else in the video? No one at all?’

‘Not that we can see. The main three culprits are the three victims so far. There’s a few other voices, but they’re out of shot.’

Ella closed her eyes, counted to ten. Then again backward, then one more time in Sanskrit.

‘So what are you saying, Chief? That we’re chasing our tails?’

‘I don’t know. What else can we do?’

Ella’s heart dropped into her boots. Three victims, three links in this psycho’s daisy chain. But no fourth. Was this it? Was his mission over, and he’d disappeared into the sunset?

The gears in her skull spun, smoked. All the details, all the testimony. Granny Dearest spitting bile about Seb’s tormentors, the crowd that cracked him open like a bottle rocket on the Fourth of July.

What if Sebastian was targeting someone not on the video?

No. It couldn't be that, because this video was surely his only reference point for his hecklers. He could have recognized faces in the crowd during his performance, but that seemed a long shot. And besides, it was Archie, Georgia and Harry that made him a viral sensation for the wrong reasons.

Then it hit her. A bolt from the blue.

Ella pulled the phone away from her ear, stared at it like it might start oozing pus.

Maybe they were looking at this backward. Maybe it wasn't about what was in the video, but what was behind it.

Phone back against her ear, she said, 'The cameraman.'

'Christ, of course,' Harland said.

'There's one face we didn't account for. The prick filming it all. Uploading it for the world to gawk at. He's the key. Sebastian's grand finale!'

'Shit on a shingle,' Harland spat. Then a clatter, the squawk of tin-can orders hollered at light speed. 'You're sure? That's the connection?'

'Who else could it be?' Ella asked.

She could damn near hear the steam shooting out Harland's ears. But credit to the old goat, he came through in the clutch.

'Brandon Mulroney. He's the uploader according to the something-data,' he barked, after a tense filled eternity. '5284 Briarcliff Road.'

‘We’ll be there immediately,’ Ella said.

‘No. Briarcliff Road’s only a mile from here. I’ll get a car there in a blink.’

‘Roger. Meet you there.’

Ella clicked off without another word. She was already moving, already running.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

‘Almost there,’ Luca chirped, ever the navigator. ‘Two blocks up, hang a left.’

Ella grunted, slinging gravel as she cut the corner too close. No time for niceties, for coloring inside the lines. Not when every second wasted was another chance for Doyle to claim his next victim.

She sucked the sour air through gritted teeth and played every hunch, every half-assed instinct that had gotten her this far. Pictured the clues clicking into place like a Rubik’s Cube from hell – masks and mics, gags and guffaws all twisting, aligning until the truth stared her dead in the face.

And the truth was, their killer had one last name on his list. One final act, a gut-busting encore to bring the whole house down. And Brandon Mulroney would be his stage, his straight man, his giggling corpse.

‘Up here,’ Luca said.

Briarcliff was a shithole, even by Dover standards. Cracked pavement, busted chain link fencing bristling like rotten teeth. A junkyard of broken dreams, coughed up and spat out by the same mean streets that had made Sebastian Doyle the man he was today. Ella cranked the wheel, brought the unmarked to a shuddering stop at the curb. 5284 squatted halfway down the block, and Luca was out of the door before the engine had time to die. Ella jumped out and caught up with him. The blood was roaring so loudly in her ears that she almost missed Harland’s buzz-cut mug popping out the front door.

‘Whoa, where’s the fire?’ He held up a ham hock of a hand, brows beetling together.

‘Thought you two were gonna come through the wall.’

Ella shouldered past him, already scanning the living room for blood spatters and body parts. But the place was quiet as a church on Saturday night, just some golf rerun droning on the tube and the tick of a grandfather clock.

And there, perched on the sofa like he was waiting for high tea, was who she assumed was Brandon Mulroney.

He blinked up at them, pale and a little baffled. Ella gave him a quick once-over. The kid was no hottie, that was for sure. Doughy and soft; the profile of a man who’d never met workout he couldn’t skip. Hairline making a desperate retreat from a shiny fivehead, jowls working overtime to swallow a weak chin.

This was the guy who’d captured Doyle’s breakdown on film? This was the guy that birthed a serial killer for his own amusement? This book had no idea how close he’d come to getting snuffed. How tight the noose of his own digital dickery had gotten around his flabby neck.

Jesus wept, she thought. It would be funny if it wasn’t so tragic.

‘Brandon Mulroney?’ Ella didn’t waste time on a how-do. ‘Special Agent Dark, FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Hawkins. You know why we’re here?’

The confusion melted from Mulroney’s face like a Dali clock, replaced by something resigned and faintly constipated. ‘Yeah, the cops filled me in. Some psycho’s taking out hecklers and I’m next on the list, right?’

Ella opened her mouth, ready to read him the riot act. Fill his ear with all the gory details of what happened to snitches and stitches in Sebastian Doyle’s brave new world. But Harland cut her off at the pass.

‘Brandon here’s been briefed,’ he said. ‘No sign of our boy Doyle. Looks like we mighta jumped the gun on this one, Dark.’

The words hit Ella like a sock full of pennies to the gut. No Doyle. No smoking gun, no trail of blood and teeth leading to a funnyman-turned-psycho killer. Just another dead.

She shook it off, zeroed back in on Brandon. The guy was squirming like he had a hamster shoved somewhere intimate. Nervous. Hiding something.

‘Walk me through it again,’ she said. ‘You were at the Laughingstock that night. Caught Sebastian Doyle’s meltdown on candid camera. Spill.’

Brandon licked his lips, eyes darting to Harland like he was looking for a lifeline. But the chief just crossed his arms, face straight as a Nevada highway.

Mulroney shifted, fingers lacing over the beginnings of a beer gut. ‘Not much to tell. I wasn’t even heckling, just...y”know. Filming. Documenting.’

Ella’s ears pricked. ‘Documenting?’

‘Yeah, for like...proof. Evidence.’ Mulroney shrugged his soft shoulders, picked at a hole in his sweatpants. ‘I felt bad for the guy, y”know? Doyle. He was dying up there, getting ripped to shreds. I thought maybe if I got it on tape...’

‘You could what? Get some clout on the Internet? Get some precious likes?’

‘No!’ Brandon spat. ‘Nothing like that. Those guys were disturbing the show. I wanted to get them kicked out, banned from the club, something like that.’

Ella wasn’t buying it. ‘That’s a pretty little story, Brandon, but if you were so keen to

play hero, why upload it for the world to see? Why Make Seb Doyle the poster boy for public humiliation and turn him into a serial killer?’

Mulroney went still. Possum in the pan lights still, barely breathing still. ‘I...I didn’t...I mean, I was going to, but...’

‘But what?’ Ella pressed, sensing blood in the water and closing fast.

Brandon paled so fast Ella thought he might faint. A skim of sweat popped out on his upper lip. ‘I couldn’t...’

‘Can it.’ Ella took a step forward, boiling over. Getting right up in Brandon’s grille until she could see the spineless yellow of his eyes. ‘You got something to confess, better make it quick. Because I guarantee you, there’s a killer out there who isn’t going to ask twice.’

Mulroney’s eyes flicked to Luca, to Harland looming in the doorway. Looking for an out, a friendly face in a sea of badges.

And then he crumbled like a sandcastle at high tide. Ella almost felt sorry for the bastard. Almost.

‘Alright, Jesus,’ Mulroney cracked, the words bursting out of him like pus from a zit. ‘I didn’t have a choice, okay? Vanzetti made me do it!’

Luca blinked. ‘Who the hell is Vanzetti?’

‘Freddy Vanzetti,’ Mulroney half-sobbed. ‘The owner of The Laughingstock. He paid me to post the video, said it’d be killer publicity for the club.’

Ella felt her guts turn to ice, a slow frost creeping through her veins. ‘Paid you.’

‘Two grand, cash on the barrel.’ Mulroney looked up at her through wispy lashes, pleading. ‘I needed the money, alright? Medical bills, they don’t pay for themselves!’

Ella’s head was pounding, rage and disgust a two-headed viper sinking fangs in her frontal lobe. Greed and cruelty, the oldest dance partnership in the book. Chew a man up and spit him out, then sell tickets to the aftermath. She wanted to laugh or scream or punch her own head until the world made sense again. This mook, this soft-handed little worm had sold Doyle out. Cashed in on his humiliation for a measly two grand.

And now people were dead because of it. Good, bad, didn’t matter - they were all just punchlines now. Christ, no wonder Doyle had snapped. No wonder he’d started painting the town red one laugh at a time. Ella almost couldn’t blame him.

But there was no time for sympathy, for understanding. No time to plumb the depths of a broken man’s shattered psyche. Not when there was still one name left in his little black book.

‘Did Doyle know?’ She asked, voice cold enough to leave hoarfrost in its wake. ‘That you got paid to ruin his life?’

Brandon’s chin wobbled, tears starting to leak. Pathetic.

‘Doyle emailed me,’ he said, snot bubbling. ‘Begged me to take the video down. But I couldn’t. Freddy would have cut me off. Blackballed me from every other club in town. Said he’d sue me if I told anyone about our deal.’

Ella saw red. Blood in her eyes, pounding in her ears. For a second, she wanted nothing more than to crack Brandon’s empty skull open and see if there was anything rattling around besides echoes and IOUs.

But she reined it in. Barely. The job came first. Finding Freddy Vanzetti the club

owner and beating Doyle to the last square on this messed-up bingo board.

‘It’s a hard life,’ she said. ‘And this Freddy Vanzetti. He was there the night it happened?’

”He”s there every night. Every day, too. He was the one who boosted my video out there. Put it on all the social sites, all the video sites. He made sure millions saw it.”

The man behind the curtain. The one who”d set the stage, called the cues. The one who”d made a laughingstock of a wannabe’s dreams, and then had the gall, the sheer unmitigated audacity to profit from it.

Another star of this freakshow. Another villain, cackling and capering in the wings.

And Doyle was headed right for him. A guided missile, locked and loaded with enough psychotic rage to level city blocks. He”d save Vanzetti for last, the pièce de résistance of his bloody revenge fantasy.

So now Ella had to save his life.

She whirled away, already fishing out her cell. Ready to put an APB on every cop, crud, and camgirl from here to the state line. Smoke this Freddy fucker out, get him in protective before he wound up the big finish at Doyle”s stand-up special.

But Luca caught her elbow, his grip gentle as a shrink”s question. Ella snapped around to snarl at him, but the look in his eyes stopped her dead.

‘We already know where Doyle”s headed,’ he said softly. ‘Where he”s been headed this whole damn time. We know where this ends.’

And Ella saw it. The dots connecting, lightning streaking across a black sky. The

endgame Sebastian had planned before the first body hit the ground.

‘The Laughingstock club,’ Ella said as she eyed her partner, this rookie who’d seen too much too soon. Who still had hope and heart and a hunger for justice that matched her own.

And she knew, in that moment, that she’d happily go down, all guns blazing and middle fingers raised alongside him. He might not have been Ripley, but damn if he didn’t make a good argument for being her replacement.

She turned to Harland, jerked her head at Mulroney still quaking on the couch. ‘Hold down the fort here, Chief. Babysit the cameraman, make sure he doesn’t accidentally make any more murderers.’

Harland grunted, already moving to block the door with his bulk. ‘You got it. Where are you going?’

‘We’re going to find Doyle and show him some real laughs.’

And with that, she was moving. Out the door, down the walk, Luca hot on her heels like a hound scenting blood.

Doyle had had his fill of the spotlight, basked in the crimson glow of revenge served raw and wriggling. Now it was time for the hook, the long drag offstage and into a cold cement cell.

No more encores. No more death rattles in the dark. Ella was ending this freakshow tonight.

She was going to have the last laugh if it killed her.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

The Laughingstock's front door mocked them, a bolted-up slab of dented metal. Ella yanked on it anyway, just to feel the rattle of futility up her arm and into the sockets of her shoulders. Beside her, Luca scanned the lot, the street, the overflowing dumpster and tagged-up back alley.

'We sure about this?' Luca asked. 'Doyle's killed all of his victims at the witching hour. It's not even happy hour yet.'

'Jumping the gun's the only way to keep from eating a bullet, Hawkins,' she said. 'He knows where onto him. We've got his wheelchair and his murder weapon. Even someone as deluded as him knows it's only a matter of time before we figure him out. He knows it's nut-cutting time.'

'So what, he just throws the serial killer rulebook out of the window?'

'Guys like this go out with a blaze of glory or swinging from a bedsheet in a cell. No in between. If he wants his mic drop moment, he has to do it now. He can't do it when the club is full.'

Luca jerked his chin at a rusted-out Chrysler squatting in the corner. 'That's Vanzetti's car. I checked his licence plate on the way here.'

'Looks like someone's home,' Ella said as she tugged the door handle again. Then she stepped back and raked the rest of the building for another way in.

And there, running up the side of the building like a jagged metal smile - a fire escape, ladder hanging a few feet off the ground like an engraved invitation. The

city”’s half-assed attempt at thwarting junkies and frisky teens alike.

‘There,’ she said.

She was moving before the thought had even fully formed, boots pounding against pavement as she closed the distance. A jump, a scramble, and she was hauling herself up the ladder hand over fist. Luca followed close behind, with his coiled grace and coltish limbs. They clattered up the steps, ancient iron shuddering beneath their combined weight. The landing at the top was little more than a rusted grate, a tetanus shot waiting to happen.

Ella tried the fire escape. It rattled, but didn’t open.

She glanced at Luca, jerked her head in a silent command. On three.

He nodded, jaw tight, hands flexing at his sides. A heartbeat passed, two, the space between seconds stretching like taffy.

Then they both took a running start and crashed into the door shoulder-first. The shabby red door burst inward, and Ella hit the ground on her knees. Luca, the monkey-like little prince, landed in a graceful crouch. Unbelievable. He made it look like she’d been asleep for the past two years.

Pistols drawn, they moved as one, sweeping doorways and shadowed corners. Ella straightened slow, keeping her piece level and ready. She jerked her chin at the open doorway gaping to their left, the rectangle of deeper darkness that hinted at a hallway beyond.

Luca nodded, fell into step beside her as they moved into the belly of the beast.

The corridor was narrow, walls pressing close on either side. Peeling plaster and

nicotine stains, the ghosts of a thousand amateur sets echoing in the silence. They cleared the rooms as they went, quick and quiet as sharks through bloody water.

Empty offices, storage closets packed with moth-eaten velvet and moldering props. A green room that looked more like a holding cell, complete with sagging couch and shattered mirror. Ella tried not to think about how many poor saps had sat there over the years, psyching themselves up for one more night in the spotlight, one more chance to chase that ever-elusive laugh.

Ella shook off the maudlin thoughts, forced herself back to the here and now. They were close, she could feel it in her bones. Close to the central nervous system, the heart of this hive of humiliation and despair.

And then, drifting from somewhere up ahead – a sound. A thump, a muffled curse. The unmistakable music of human misery, of violence in the offing.

Ella froze, head cocked, every sense straining. Beside her, Luca went still as stone, barely breathing.

There. Again, louder this time. A crash, a clatter. The dull thud of flesh meeting flesh, of bone crunching against bone.

She was moving before she knew it, eating up the distance in long, loping strides. Heart hammering, blood singing in her ears like a murderer's lullaby. Luca hot on her heels. The hallway opened up ahead, spilling out into a cavernous space. Dim shapes loomed out of the shadows - the hulking bulk of an ancient sound system, the tattered drapes of a stage long past its prime.

And there, caught in the watery spill of an emergency exit light, was hell itself.

Two figures grappled in the center of the stage, locked in a brutal pas de deux.

Doyle. It was Doyle, had to be. The madman, the monster, the architect of all this misery.

And his final victim, slack and glassy-eyed in his grip – Freddy Vanzetti. Club owner, creep, cheap profiteer of human suffering.

Ella raised her Glock, the barrel rock-steady even as her blood sang with the sick thrill of it. Beside her, Luca mirrored the motion.

‘Freeze, you son of a bitch!’ Ella roared, voice booming over the scuffling, the gagging, the heavy thump of her own pulse. ‘Let him go. Hands where I can see ’em!’

For a split second, the world hung suspended. Doyle, Vanzetti, twin gargoyles grappling in the ghost light. Then Doyle moved, quick as a cobra strike.

He flung Vanzetti to the ground, one hand splayed across his chest to pin him like a collected butterfly. The other dove behind his back, came up with what Ella recognized as a snubnose thirty-eight. Light glinted obscenely off the barrel as he jammed it against Vanzetti’s sweat-slick temple.

‘Nobody move!’ Doyle cried. Ella could see his finger itching on the trigger. A hair’s breadth from oblivion. ‘Either of you move and I kill this man right here.’

Ella felt her lip curl. ‘Put down the piece, Doyle. You’re outgunned and out of time.’

Doyle’s eyes darted between them, beady and black as a shark’s. He dug the pistol into Vanzetti’s skin. ‘I’m the one writing this punchline. I’m the one who decides how it ends.’

‘Sounds to me like you already reached the big finale,’ she said, mouth quirking

without humor. ‘Got a little something extra in your act tonight, huh? Why the gun?’

Doyle bared his teeth like a wild dog choking on its own chain. ‘Someone stole my cable.’

‘You didn’t have a spare?’ Ella took a step forward, Glock ready to unload on Doyle’s shoulder.

Doyle’s chuckle was a rusty saw dragging over bone. ‘This guy is too good for shooting. He needs to suffer, but if I have to... he’s paying for what he took from me.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Everything.’

Ella edged closer for a better shot. Judging by the Vanzetti’s world-weary daze, she didn’t have much time to make the save. Vanzetti needed medical assistance if he wanted any chance of staying alive longer than a few minutes. Once unconsciousness set in, there was no chance he wasn’t waking up without brain damage – if he woke up at all. Ella subtly glanced back at her partner. Luca was edging in the opposite direction. She trusted him to read the room.

‘What’s everything?’ she asked. Keep him talking until you can get a clean shot.

‘Fame, glory, everything.’ Doyle pushed the gun barrel harder into Vanzetti’s temple. The poor club owner was so out of it his head just lolled. ‘All because this asshole wanted attention for this stupid club.’

‘You want to blame someone for your failure? Look in the goddamn mirror.’

Doyle's face twisted, ugly and animal. 'You what?'

'You pissed your pants onstage and never got over it. Big deal.'

'I'm going to kill Freddy, you understand?' Doyle yelled. 'I don't care if you kill me. I'll still be in the papers tomorrow.'

Doyle was too far gone, too deep in his own madness for any kind of negotiation. He was going to burn the house down with everyone in it for one last shot at the big time.

Time for the hard sell.

'Okay, Seb, you've made your point. Got the whole world watching.' Ella lowered her gun a fraction. 'Let Vanzetti go. He's not the one you want, not really. It's us. It's always been us.'

Confusion warred with rage on the comic's wasted face. 'What?'

Ella took another step towards the stage, arms spread. 'We're the final boss. The big bad wolf to your little pig. You want to make this right? You want real closure?' She thumped her chest with the barrel of her gun. 'Take your shot. Pull the trigger and watch me bleed. See if that fills up the hole where your soul should be.'

'Ella, what the hell-' Luca hissed. But she waved him off, never breaking eye contact with Doyle. The comic was trembling now, sweat running in rivers down his sallow cheeks. Want and hatred, fear and desperate starvation, chasing each other like dogs in his beady eyes.

'You want me to shoot a cop?' he rasped. 'That's my big break?'

'No, nimrod. I want you to give up like the bitch you are. But we both know that

ain't happening.' Ella's voice dropped to a purr, the kind reserved for death row inmates and rich men's daughters. 'So take your free shot. Paint me red for your adoring fans. Then we'll see who has the stones to keep this comedy of errors rolling.'

She had him. Could see the indecision, the shattered crystal of his psyche fragmenting further with every passing second. The gun wavered against Vanzetti's head, the club owner himself now on the verge of passing out.

It was almost a relief when Doyle moved. A quick jerk, a spasmodic twitch.

Then Vanzetti was tumbling to the stage like a sack of rotten fruit.

'Luca, the vic!' Ella roared even as Doyle brought his piece to bear. The rookie didn't hesitate, just broke for Vanzetti in a flying tackle that sent them both skidding into the orchestra pit.

Ella gave them a half-second glance, just long enough to see Luca's fingers seeking a pulse in Vanzetti's fleshy throat.

Then she was moving as Doyle raced for the wings. Ella plunged into the gloom of the backstage area, into the twisting guts of the Laughingstock itself.

A maze, a labyrinth. A dank, dismal warren of narrow halls and blind corners, of shadow and stale air and the stink of grease paint and despair. Ella navigated it at a dead run, gun up and ready, senses straining for any hint of Doyle in the dark.

Crap. She'd lost him. Let him slip through her fingers like smoke, like a greased fucking pig on roller skates. Some hotshot detective she was, couldn't even keep tabs on one sad-sack psycho in a building the size of a postage stamp.

She slowed, forced herself to breathe. To think, to focus, past the red haze of anger and adrenaline clouding her vision. Doyle was here, somewhere. Lurking in the shadows, biding his time. Waiting for his moment to strike, to make his final move in this sicko chess game he'd been playing with all their lives.

Ella just had to be ready. Had to anticipate, had to outthink the bastard. Get inside his head, suss out his next steps before he even took them.

C'mon, Dark. Think like a psycho, move like a madman. You've been doing it long enough, should be second nature by now.

She crept forward, one foot in front of the other. Picking her way through the gloom, gun up and ready, every sense straining. Ella swung around a corner, quick and quiet as a ghost. Another empty hallway stretched before her, pocked with doorways and choked with shadow. She moved down it slowly, methodically, clearing each room as she went. Closets, cupboards, a janitor's sink packed with moldering mops and the sour reek of ancient pine-sol.

But no Doyle. No trace, no trail. Nothing but dust and cobwebs and the faint, forlorn honk of Vanzetti's wheezing breaths echoing from the stage.

Ella swore under her breath. She was running out of time, out of options. Out of patience for this twisted game of hide-and-go-screw-yourself.

Where are you, you maniac?

As if in answer, a noise shattered the sepulchral silence. A clatter, a crash, the unmistakable sound of something heavy toppling to the floor.

Ella whirled, gun snapping up. It had come from behind her, from one of the rooms she'd already cleared. A closet, a storage space, some black hole of junk and detritus

she'd written off in her haste to find Doyle. He was close, so close she could practically smell the flop sweat and desperation leaking from his pores.

Ella turned on her heel, stalked back the way she'd come. Past doors hanging drunkenly from rusted hinges, past piles of moldering props and moth-eaten costumes. Back to the closet she'd dismissed, the junk room she'd written off as just another dead end.

A breath. Two. The space between heartbeats stretching like a noose, like a garrote about to snap taut.

Then, in one fluid motion, she kicked the door wide and charged through, leading with her gun and a wordless battle cry ripping from her lungs.

The closet was a pit, a black hole of junk and jumble. Broken chairs, shattered spotlights, an avalanche of musty fabric that might've once been curtains or backdrops.

And there, lurking in the darkest corner like a spider in its web – a figure.

Doyle.

Ella's vision tunneled, world narrowing to the man in front of her. She brought her gun to bear, finger tightening on the trigger, a hair's breadth from squeezing off a shot that would splatter his diseased brains across the cracked plaster.

But before she could end it, before she could paint the walls with the bastard's gray matter and call it a day – Doyle moved.

Quick as a snake, fast as a fever dream, he lashed out. One long arm whipping around, something glinting in his grip. A metal pipe, a crowbar, Ella couldn't tell. All

she knew was that it was arcing towards her face, whistling through the air like a baseball bat hungry for a hit.

She threw herself back, spine screaming as she contorted to avoid the blow. But she was a fraction too slow, a microsecond too late. The pipe clipped her wrist, sent her gun flying from her numb fingers. It clattered away into the shadows, swallowed by the gloom as Ella stumbled backward.

And that's when it hit her, a realization as stark and brutal as a slug to the gut. Doyle wasn't reaching for his gun. I wasn't even trying to bring it to bear. He wanted this up close and personal, wanted to feel the life drain out of her with his own two hands. Or maybe the piece was just for show. A prop, a bit of misdirection to add to the drama of his final act. Empty as his soul, as bereft of ammo as he was of humanity.

And then Doyle was on her in a fit of flailing limbs and animal fury. He crashed into her like a speeding train and sent them both tumbling to the cluttered floor in a tangle of thrashing bodies.

They rolled, grappled, a grotesque parody of lovers caught in the throes of passion. Ella raked her nails down Doyle's face, felt skin tear and blood well beneath her clawing fingers. Doyle howled, drove a fist into her ribs. Ella's breath left her in a whoosh, stars exploding behind her eyes. But she clung on, wrapped herself around the bastard like a python hell-bent on crushing its prey. They slammed into a broken couch, sent springs and stuffing flying like the aftermath of a teddy bear massacre.

She dug her knee into his groin, grinned viciously as he shrieked and convulsed. Doyle channeled all of his wiry strength and surged against her, caught her in the temple with an elbow, a lucky shot that sent starbursts cascading through her vision.

Ella reeled, grip slackening for a fraction of a second. But it was enough. Enough for Doyle to buck her off, to send her tumbling ass over teakettle into a drift of moldy

curtains.

By the time she righted herself, spitting dust and worse from her mouth, he had already scrambled to his feet. Was lurching towards the door, a deranged glint in his bloodshot eyes.

Ella launched herself at his retreating back, caught him around the knees in a diving tackle that would've done her old high school football coach proud. They hit the ground hard, Doyle's chin cracking against the scarred floor with a sound like a gunshot. But still he struggled, still he fought, clawing and squirming beneath her like a worm on a hook.

Doyle bucked, jack-knifed, caught her in the breadbasket with a lucky heel. Ella doubled over, gagging, and in that moment of weakness he slithered from her grasp, uncoiling like a snake from under a rock.

Then he was up, stumbling, staggering for the door. Out of the closet and into the hallway, the flickering fluorescents painting his hollow face in ghoulish shades and shadows.

Ella heaved herself to her feet, blood dripping into her eyes from a gash on her brow. The world swam, tilted, but she gritted her teeth and pushed through, giving chase with single-minded determination. Ella's lungs burned, her whole body one giant bruise. But she couldn't stop, wouldn't stop. Not until she had Doyle either in chains or on a slab.

They spilled onto the stage, grappling and heaving. Ella caught a glimpse of Luca hunched over Vanzetti's limp form, blood on his hands and a desperate, animal light in those eyes. Then Doyle's fist caught her in the mouth and the world tunneled down to blood and rage and the driving need to end this goddamn sideshow once and for all.

She slammed her forehead into his nose, felt cartilage crunch and splinter like dry kindling. Doyle howled like a branded calf, staggered back with blood pouring down his chin.

Ella pressed her advantage, dove low and caught him around the waist. Heaved with all her strength, every ounce of her not-inconsiderable fury.

Doyle's feet left the ground, eyes going wide as dinner plates. For a single, crystalline moment he hung suspended in a slo-mo snapshot of surprise and dawning dread.

Then he crashed down, the back of his head cracking against the mic stand in a burst of feedback and sparks. Hit the stage like a sack of wet cement.

Ella breathed a sigh of relief.

She knew a total knockout when she saw one.

Ella stood over him, chest heaving, blood dripping from her ravaged knuckles. Stared down at his slack, stupid face, the confusion and fear swimming in his pain-glazed eyes.

'Wha...' Doyle slurred, tongue thick and clumsy behind shattered teeth.

'Justice.' Ella spat a glob of blood-tinged saliva. 'That's all folks.'

'I wouldn't...' Doyle heaved himself up onto his elbows, coughing wetly. 'I still got... still got one more gag in me, one more bit...'

Then Luca materialized out of the gloom, pistol trained dead center on Doyle's forehead.

‘Sebastian Doyle. Don’t move an inch,’ he commanded.

Ella collapsed against Luca, steadied herself on his shoulder. Then she dropped to one knee beside Doyle’s crumpled form, shook out her cuffs and slapped them on his wrists.

Luca’s aim remained steady. Ella looked over to the other side of the stage and saw Freddy Vanzetti sitting upright, clutching his stomach, breathing like a wounded animal.

Alive.

That was enough.

Ella found her cell, signaled their location to the chief. Two minutes and this place would be swarming with cops, medics and forensics.

Luca adjusted his aim and said, ‘If you move, you die on this stage.’

‘Wouldn’t be the first time,’ Ella laughed.

Game over.

Punchline delivered.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Ella perched on the edge of the Laughingstock's stage, legs dangling over the orchestra pit like she was waiting for the matinee to start. The club was a hive of activity now - uniforms tramping through, techs tagging and bagging, EMTs hauling out the single casualty on a rattling gurney.

It was a dance she knew well, the post-case shuffle. Usually she'd be chomping at the bit to get gone, to ditch the circus and find a dark hole to lick her wounds in peace. But today, with Luca warm and solid beside her, the itch under her skin had dulled to a low thrum.

'Hell of a show,' Luca said, kicking his heels against the scuffed wood. 'Dinner and a near-death experience. You sure know how to treat a guy.'

Ella bit the inside of her cheek, tasted blood and the phantom burn of cheap whiskey. 'Stick with me. I'll take you on all the best bad rides.'

'A bad ride? Sounds like a promise.'

There was a heat in Luca's voice that sent a shiver down Ella's spine. But before she could examine that little nugget too closely, Harland lumbered over like a block of government-issued concrete.

'You two look like microwaved shit,' he grunted by way of greeting. 'But damn if you didn't do the job and then some.'

Ella smirked, ignoring the twinge in her split cheek. 'Careful, chief. That almost sounded like a compliment.'

‘Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while.’ But there was a grudging respect in the old battle-ax’s beady eyes. ‘Vanzetti’s stable. Probably’ll be sipping drinking through a straw for a while, but he’ll live to sleaze another day.’

‘And Doyle?’ Luca asked.

‘Bellevue’s finest rubber room,’ Harland said with a nod. ‘He’s drooling Thorazine and screaming about spotlights and hecklers. But given everything we’ve got on him, it’ll be a slam-dunk life sentence. If this was ten years ago, he’d be getting the injection.’

‘Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy,’ Ella drawled.

Luca asked, ‘Can we have someone take care of his mom? Poor woman is going to need therapy and then some after this.’

‘Got officers at her place already. Doyle was her caregiver, according to one of my guys. We’re going to move her to a home.’

‘Thank you, chief,’ Ella said. She stuck out a hand, met Harland’s crushing grip without flinching. ‘For everything. The hard work. If you hadn’t have found that murder weapon, we might still be chasing our tails.’

Harland harrumphed, but there was a flicker of something almost like affection in his stony face. ‘You did the rest. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to call me. Both of you.’

Ella and Luca nodded their gratitude, and then Harland was gone, barking orders at a knot of gawking uniforms. Ella watched him go, something unfamiliar swelling behind her ribs. Appreciation, maybe. Or just the post-case crash, making her soft.

‘He grows on you,’ Ella said.

‘Like a fungus.’

Ella huffed a laugh, a real one this time. It felt rusty, unused. When was the last time she’d laughed and meant it? Probably around forty-eight hours ago when Luca had swanned into her life, all shiny loafers and shinier hair.

She cut her eyes at him, trying for casual and missing by a mile. ‘So. On a scale from “watching paint dry” to “seasick on a rollercoaster”, how’d we do? Think you can hang in the big leagues?’

Luca shrugged. ‘You tell me. I’m just the rookie. You’re Miss Dark.’

His voice dipped low on her name, a purr she felt in her molars. And oh, that was a mistake. Because suddenly all Ella could think about was him - his mouth, his hands, the solid heat of him pressed against her back as she lined up a shot.

‘Jury’s still out,’ she managed, tongue darting out to wet her lips. ‘But you didn’t completely shit the bed, so. Points for that.’

Slowly, carefully, like he was gentling a wild thing, Luca reached out. Settled one warm palm high on her thigh, fingers flexing just shy of indecent. Ella’s heart turned over in her chest, a sweet, bright ache blooming behind her ribs. This was dangerous, this warmth, this softness kindling in her battered bones. She’d been down this road before, let herself get close, get attached. And it had only ever ended in blood and tears and shattered pieces that couldn’t be put back together again.

But looking at Luca now, at the openness in his face, the gentle strength in his grip...she couldn’t bring herself to care. Couldn’t muster the energy to rebuild the walls, to shove him away and retreat behind her armor of cynicism and self-loathing.

This was a bad idea. Nuclear, even. Ella knew it down to her bones, in the same place she knew bourbon before breakfast and always going for the kill shot.

But she was so tired. Tired of the armor, the distance, the cloak of cynicism, she wrapped around herself like a shroud. And Luca was right there, a balm and a bandage and a bad decision begging to be made.

She wanted to be touched. Wanted to be held, to be seen. Wanted to let herself fall, just for a moment, and trust that someone would be there to catch her.

So when he leaned in, slow and telegraphing his intent like a skywriter spelling it out in big, puffy letters...Ella let him.

Let him cup her jaw in his big, warm hand, let him tilt her face up to meet his. Let him brush his lips against hers, soft and sweet as a first kiss behind the high school bleachers.

She no longer cared how bad of a decision this might be. Not when Luca's mouth was on hers, not when he tasted like adrenaline and cinnamon gum and something uniquely him. Not when kissing him felt like coming home, like finding a part of herself she hadn't known was missing.

It felt different. Different from Ben and every other pair of lips she'd tasted in her life. Ben had never really understood her, never got why she did what she did. But Luca seemed to get it. Get her. In a way, no one else had. With him, she didn't feel like a freak or a liability.

Her nerve endings sang, her blood fizzing in her veins like cheap champagne. She sank into the kiss, let herself get lost in the gentle pressure of Luca's lips, the rasp of his stubble against her skin.

Eventually, they broke apart, foreheads touching as they shared air in the charged silence. Luca huffed a laugh, one hand coming up to cup Ella's jaw with a tenderness that made her eyes sting.

'Wow,' Ella said. 'That was...'

'A terrible idea,' Luca finished.

"The worst," Ella agreed, a grin splitting her face. The smart call would be to tap out now, to shove this back in its box and throw away the key. Nip the bud of intimacy before it could take root in the salted earth of her heart.

But something stopped her. Maybe it was the keenness of the lonely wind in her ears, mourning for connection. Maybe it was the phantom warmth of Luca's lips on hers, the promise of shelter, however brief. Or maybe she was just finally ready to land - to put down roots, however gnarled, in something other than death and brutality.

'Maybe we need to practice a little more,' he said.

Ella laughed, the sound rusty but real. She leaned back, putting some much-needed distance between them before she did something really stupid, like jump the guy's bones right there on the Laughingstock's sticky stage.

'Good idea.'

She climbed to her feet, grabbed Luca's hand and pulled him up. This time, she didn't let go. She intertwined her fingers into his and led him down from the stage, out into the weak sunlight.

She knew it was temporary. Knew the abyss always called its children home in the end. But here, now, with Luca's pulse beating hummingbird-quick against her own, it

was enough.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:08 am

Mia Ripley didn't know how long she'd been sitting on this damn kerosene barrel. Time slipped by in an excruciating crawl, seconds into minutes into hours, marked only by the slow march of shadows across oil-stained concrete and the occasional skitter of unseen vermin in the walls.

She'd picked the lock on this freakshow storage unit in the wee hours, high on heartbreak and sleep deprivation. Traded the cold comfort of her car for the dank confines of this corrugated metal box, all on a wild hunch and a masochistic need to know. To ferret out the truth, no matter how buck-toothed and ugly it might be.

But with each hour that ticked by with no sign of Martin, doubt crept in like damp rot. Maybe she'd jumped the gun, like always. Stuck her nose where it didn't belong and ripped the scab off something better left to fester.

It was enough to make a saner woman cut and run. To pack it in, wash her hands of this whole sordid mess and never look back. But Mia had never been accused of being particularly sane. Or smart, when it came to matters of the heart. No, she was a glutton for punishment, a masochist of the highest order. She'd see this through to the bitter end, even if it killed her.

So she waited. Leaning against the cold metal wall, eyes gritty and head pounding. Sleep crept up on her in fits and starts, teasing her with oblivion only to dance away again. For years she'd been telling anyone who'd listen that she was getting too old for this crap. All-nighters and stakeouts, running on fumes and nerves frayed raw as dollar store carpets. Time was, she could go days without sleep - just her, her instincts, and a stomach loaded with bad coffee.

But that was then. A lifetime ago, when the job was all she had, the only thing tethering her to the world. Before she'd gone soft, let herself hope for something more than a tin star and a ticket to oblivion.

Before Martin.

Mia pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes until starbursts painted the backs of her lids. Sucked in a slow lungful of kerosene and dust, mildew and misery so thick she could almost chew the air.

She should go. Cut her losses, chalk this up to another lesson carved in scar tissue, and walk away while she still could. There was no coming back from this, no matter what her traitor heart wanted to believe.

Then, in a flash of gut-punch clarity, a soft scuff outside the unit. Rubber soles on oil-slick pavement.

Mia went statue-still, not daring to breathe. Her fingertips tingled, curling instinctively around the absence of her service Glock, still nestled uselessly in the glove box, left behind in a moment of weakness or perhaps level-headedness. A desperate attempt to keep this from turning into a bloodbath. Because she knew, deep in her bones, that if she had it on her now, things could very well go sideways. So she'd played it safe. Left the gun behind, traded cold steel for colder logic. Tried to convince herself that she could handle this with her head.

But for a reason only her subconscious knew, she was starting to regret that decision.

She waited for the jangle of keys, the snick of the lock disengaging. The creak of hinges as the door swung open to reveal her fate, her future, her whole damn world teetering on the edge of a knife.

But nothing happened. The door stayed closed, the silence stretching like a noose.

And Mia knew with an excruciating certainty that settled in her guts like lead, that Martin was out there.

She felt it like an itch between her shoulder blades. A sixth sense honed by a hundred hunts, a thousand close calls in the jaws of a beast.

And worse yet, Martin – the stranger on the other side of the door – knew she was in here. Knew she was waiting, wanting.

They were trapped in a standoff. Two serpents coiled in their den, waiting to see who would strike first. Who would break, who would shatter the illusion of civility, of love, that they’d built between them like a house of cards.

Ripley broke first. She always did, in the end.

‘Martin,’ she said. ‘Get in here. Please.’

The word felt jagged in her throat. Ripley couldn’t remember the last time she’d said please, the last time she’d asked instead of demanded.

But with him, she was always baring her belly. A dog crawling for scraps, so starved for connection, she’d debase herself just to feel the heat of his hand.

Ripley held her breath, counting the seconds, the heartbeats. Waiting for the world to end, for her life to crumble to ash and dust.

And then, with a groan of protesting metal, the door inched open. Martin’s silhouette filled the gap, backlit by the sallow light of the moon.

Mia’s heart seized in her chest. Because there he was. Martin. A black cut-out, featureless. But she’d know him anywhere – the angle of his jaw, the slope of his shoulders. The hands she’d kissed, the arms she’d twined herself in like climbing

ivy. Her north star, her fixed point in a mad world. He stood there with shadows in his eyes and secrets on his tongue, regarding her like she was a stranger.

He didn't move. Didn't cross the threshold, didn't come to her like he had a thousand times before. Just stood there guarding the gates of her own personal hell.

'Was it you?' The words clawed their way out of Ripley's throat. 'Nash, Carter, Trevor. Was it you?'

The silence stretched. Ripley could hear her own heart pounding, could feel the rush of blood in her ears like a distant ocean. And then, so soft she almost missed it.

'No.'

Just that. Flat, cold. Definitive as a bullet to the brainpan.

And God help her, but some tiny, treacherous part of her wanted to believe it. To wrap herself in the worn comfort of that word, let it lull her back into the cozy fantasy of the past few months. The illusion of peace, of partnership, of a callused palm cupped around her jaded heart.

But Ripley was a hound to the bone.

She slid off the barrel, legs gone to jelly. Stumbled a step closer, fighting the urge to recoil, to retreat. The urge to lunge at him, to bury her face in the crook of his neck and just breathe him in.

She couldn't trust her eyes, not now. Couldn't let herself fall into old patterns, old weaknesses. So she looked down instead, zeroed in on his hands. His thumbs.

The one infallible tell, the one chink in any liar's armor. You could school your face, your eyes, modulate your voice into a perfect mask. But the body had its own

language, its own raw and brutal truth.

And with one glance – even in the wake of such a brief comment, even as the denial fell from his lips like poison – Mia knew that it was a lie.

‘I have to go,’ he said. Monotone, a dial tone droning. A stranger wearing her lover’s skin.

And just like that, he was backing away. Fading into the dark like he’d never been, a ghost, a revenant slipping its chains.

Ripley’s arm shot out on pure animal instinct. To catch him, to claw him back, to do something more than stand here shaking as the world tilted.

But her feet were rooted, her limbs calcified.

And so, in that moment of weakness, of soul-crushing doubt...Mia let him go.

Ripley sagged back against the wall, knees giving out in a rush. She slid to the floor. The world swam before her eyes, blurred with tears she couldn’t shed, wouldn’t let fall.

An engine fired up somewhere outside. Revs followed, and a car sped off into the night.

Some things were worth burning for, Mia thought, because some stories could only ever end in flames.