



Her Last Escape (Rachel Gift #20)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: FBI Agent Rachel Gift, 33, unparalleled for her ability to enter the minds of serial killers, is a rising star in the Behavioral Crimes Unit—until a routine doctor visit reveals she has but a few months left to live.

Not wishing to burden others with her pain, Rachel decides, agonizing as it is, not to tell anyone—not even her boss, her partner, her husband, or her seven-year-old daughter. She wants to go down fighting, and to take as many serial killers with her as she can, but she can feel herself slipping.

While investigating the murders, a hospice worker recognizes the tired look in Rachel's eye. She can't hide her condition anymore and she knows it.

It is time to confess her truth—but not before she catches her last killer.

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The tires of Rachel's car squealed as she yanked it hard into the Goodrich Hospice parking lot.

A queasy feeling was riding waves in her stomach, and her hands were somehow both firm and trembling on the wheel.

The morning sun seemed to be shining down like a spotlight on the scene before her: five police cruisers, their light bars spinning silent red and blue patterns across the building's brick facade.

She also took notice of two unmarked sedans she recognized as local detective units.

And there, dominating the space near the entrance—a massive black van that she knew was a bomb squad sent in by the State Police.

They were all working together to evacuate the residents. Too slowly. God, it was happening too slowly. Of course, she supposed no one really trained hospice employees on what to expect or how to handle a situation like this.

Rachel's throat constricted as she watched two nurses wheeling a frail woman wrapped in blankets through the bitter December air.

The woman's head lolled to one side, oxygen tubes trailing from her nose, her thin white hair whipping in the wind. Oddly, there was a look of curious excitement in the woman's eyes; it was likely the most exciting thing to happen to her in years.

Behind her, another resident shuffled with a walker while an orderly and a cop

hovered nearby, ready to catch him if he fell.

More residents waited inside—she could see them through the glass doors, a cluster of wheelchairs and worried faces.

They were doing their best to remain organized and orderly—which Rachel knew was the right move—but everything seemed to be happening far too slowly.

The call from Anderson had come just twenty minutes ago, yanking her from a quiet morning at home.

She'd thrown on comfortable slacks and a cream-colored sweater, barely remembering to grab her coat and sidearm before racing out the door.

Her heart hadn't stopped pounding since.

Now, she slammed the car into the park behind a cruiser and burst out, her FBI credentials already in hand.

Her shoes crunched on salt-covered asphalt as a uniformed officer moved to intercept her, hand raised.

"Ma'am, you need to stay back—"

Rachel thrust her badge forward. "FBI, Special Agent Rachel Gift." Her voice cracked; she forced it steady. "I'm a volunteer here. What's the situation? I want to help." A gust of wind cut through her coat, but she barely felt it. Her skin was burning with adrenaline.

The officer—her nameplate read Lorenz—studied the credentials, then her expression shifted from stern to relieved.

"This way." She led Rachel toward the bomb squad van, where a burly man in tactical gear studied a tablet screen, his face illuminated by its glow.

"Commander, this is Agent Gift," Lorenz said.

"FBI and facility volunteer. Can you give her an update? "

The commander barely glanced up, his jaw set in rigid lines.

His tactical vest bore the name RICHARDS.

"Seven-sixteen AM, local precinct gets the bomb threat.

Seven-thirty-seven, K-9 unit confirms." He spoke in clipped, efficient bursts.

"The device is in the men's room, affixed to the inside of a toilet tank.

" He turned the tablet so Rachel could see the bodycam feed he was looking at. "My tech's on it now."

Rachel's breath caught as she studied the image.

The bomb was a nightmare of precision and malice—red and blue wires sprouting from what looked like C-4 modeling clay.

It was all wrapped around a digital timer that glowed an angry red.

The wires snaked through the tank's mechanism like parasitic vines, some disappearing into the porcelain itself. Her years of FBI training screamed that this wasn't professional work, but it was enough to get the job done.

To have created such a thing without blowing yourself up was more than enough knowledge to be dangerous.

The tech's gloved hands appeared at the edge of the frame, probing delicately at the wiring. Rachel could hear his controlled breathing through the feed.

"Can you remove it?" she asked. The question came out as a whisper.

Richards' mouth tightened. "Maybe. But one wrong move.

.." He shook his head. "The triggering mechanism is complex.

Multiple redundancies. Pressure switches in the tank, mercury switches on the device itself.

Motion sensors." His finger traced the screen.

"See these secondary wires? They're not connected to the detonator.

They're connected to timers. Cut the wrong one, the other timers activate.

Whoever built this wanted to make damn sure it went off one way or the other. "

Rachel's mind flashed to Cody Austin's face—that bland, unremarkable mask that hid a monster.

Was this his work? He was already connected to the hospice through his murder of Scarlett.

Was this doing? He'd already taken Scarlett from her, murdered her just when she'd beaten cancer and had a chance at life again.

Now this. The rage built in her chest, threatening to choke her.

Deep within her, she knew he was behind this.

A commotion near the entrance of the building snapped her attention back.

An elderly man had fallen while being evacuated.

Two nurses struggled to help him up while maintaining their grip on other residents.

One of the nurses—Rachel recognized her from the night shift crew—was crying silently as she worked.

"I'm going in to help," Rachel said, already moving.

"Agent Gift—" Richards started, his voice sharp with warning.

She was already running, flashing her credentials at the officers stationed by the door.

The lobby's Christmas decorations seemed to mock the chaos—a small tree tucked in the corner, its lights still twinkling, casting colored shadows on the walls.

Fake silver bells and turtledoves hung above the entrance, swaying slightly in the draft from the constantly opening doors.

The air smelled of antiseptic and fear, undercut by the lingering scent of morning coffee from the nurse's station.

"Where do you need me?" she called to a nurse who was crying while trying to organize the few wheelchairs that were left. The woman's nametag identified her as Helen, though her scrubs were so disheveled the tag was barely readable.

"Second floor," Helen choked out, wiping her eyes with a shaking hand. "We still have four residents who can't walk. The elevator—we're not sure if we should use it—"

"I'll take the stairs," Rachel said, squeezing the woman's shoulder as she passed. "Just keep everyone moving."

She took the stairs two at a time, her heart hammering against her ribs.

The stairwell echoed with distant shouting, the sound of wheels on linoleum, the controlled chaos of an evacuation moving too slowly.

On the second floor, she found a familiar face—Rose, one of her regular poker partners, sitting in her wheelchair while two nurses struggled with her IV stand.

Rose's usually immaculate silver hair was uncombed, her face pale with fear and exertion.

"I've got her," Rachel said, taking the handles. The older nurse's hands were shaking so badly she could barely let go. Her younger colleague looked shell-shocked, moving on autopilot. "How many more?"

"Two," the younger nurse said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Mrs. Chen and Mr. Garfield. From what I understand, the transport bus is almost here."

Rachel guided Rose's chair toward the stairs, where a team waited to help carry her down. Rose's paper-thin hand found Rachel's wrist. "Didn't expect to see you today, dear." Despite everything, there was still a hint of her usual wry humor in her voice.

"Couldn't let you get out of here so easily," Rachel tried to smile, but her face felt frozen. "You still owe me five dollars from the last time we played."

"Trying to collect from an old lady at a time like this?" Rose managed a weak laugh that turned into a cough. "Shameless."

They reached the stairwell where a large orderly and a much smaller, younger one was waiting. Rachel helped them secure Rose's wheelchair and made sure her IV was stable. "Can you guys get her down there?" she asked.

"It'll be the fourth one so far and there have been no accidents yet," said the larger one rather proudly. "Could you manage to get the IV stand while we work the chair down?"

"Absolutely."

It was impressive to see how the men managed to get the wheelchair (and Rose) down the stairs.

There wasn't much jostling, and for a moment, it seemed that Rose was actually enjoying the ride.

When she was back outside, there were a few more vehicles in the lot.

More than that, he saw a familiar face that she'd not expected on the scene.

Director Anderson was looking around the lot with a practiced eye, studying everything. His expression darkened when he saw her, that familiar look of concern mixed with exasperation. Before he could speak, she cut him off. "I'm only helping. I swear."

He nodded grimly. "I didn't call you so that you'd come out here, Gift."

"I know. But did you really expect anything less?"

Without waiting for his response, she turned back toward the entrance. A nurse hurried past, calling out, "Last two coming down! Bus is pulling up!"

Rachel reached for the door handle to head inside to help. Later, she would remember how cool the metal felt against her palm, how the morning sun caught the glass and turned it into a prism for just a moment.

Before she was able to open the door, the world exploded.

The blast hit like a giant's fist, lifting Rachel off her feet.

Time stretched like taffy as she flew backward, her body sailing in a whirl of shattered glass and pulverized brick.

The Christmas tree cartwheeled past her, ornaments scattering like deadly confetti.

Something slammed into her stomach—a chunk of debris—driving the air from her lungs. Then she hit the ground.

Pain bloomed across her back and head. Her ears rang with a high-pitched whine that drowned everything else.

Through blurring vision, she saw the entrance had collapsed, the Christmas decorations now twisted metal and burning plastic.

A nurse lay motionless in the doorway, half-buried in rubble, one arm stretched out as if reaching for help that would never come.

Black smoke billowed from a jagged hole torn in the building's side, and the acrid smell of explosives mixed with the more pungent smell of dust and shattered brick and concrete.

She tried to move, to call out, but her body wouldn't respond. Faces appeared and disappeared above her—Anderson, Officer Lorenz, others she couldn't quite focus on. Their mouths moved, but she couldn't hear what they were saying over the ringing in her ears.

The last thing Rachel saw before consciousness fled was a single silver bell, charred and bent, rolling across the parking lot like a child's discarded toy. It caught the morning sun one final time, flashing like a signal, before disappearing into the chaos of emergency vehicles and running feet.

Then darkness took her, and for a while, there was nothing at all.

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The bandage on Rachel's thigh had become more of an irritation than a necessity.

She peeled back the edge, examining the healing contusion beneath - a mottled purple landscape that served as a daily reminder of how close she'd come. Again. The wound throbbed as she investigated it in the ladies' room of the field office, but it had mostly healed.

Alternating between ice and heat and a good amount of rest had done the job, and now, nearly three weeks later, it was little more than a reminder of the explosion that had nearly taken her life.

She exited the restroom and headed back to her desk. When she sat down, her eyes instantly went back to the crime scene photos spread across her desk.

Four faces stared back at her from the manila folder.

Barry Easton, the bomb tech who had been trying to diffuse it.

Sharon Martinez, night nurse. Devon Cooper, maintenance supervisor.

Eleanor Webb was a terminal cancer patient who'd finally found peace in her last weeks, only to have it violently stripped away by a chunk of flying debris that struck her in the back of the head.

Rachel knew their faces better than her own Christmas tree this year - the one that had stood in her living room like an accusation while she'd tried to manufacture holiday cheer through gritted teeth.

All around her, the field office hummed with the usual January energy, agents shuffling between desks with coffee cups and case files, still sharing stories about the holidays even though they were now one week into the new year.

But Rachel barely noticed. Her focus remained locked on the explosion analysis report, though she'd memorized every detail weeks ago.

The bomb had been crude but effective. Some of the pros on the bomb squad had seemed perplexed that such a bomb had been able to cause so much destruction.

It had been professional enough to cause significant damage, amateur enough to leave no signature.

Her computer screen showed the caller ID log from that day, pinpointing the time of the call.

And the only listing they had was UNKNOWN.

The voice on the recording was digitally altered, clinical in its warning.

Forty-five minutes later, the hospice center's east wing had become a tangle of concrete, rendered brick, and steel.

"Still at it?"

Rachel looked up to find Novak leaning against her cubicle wall, his suit jacket draped over one arm.

"Someone has to be." She gestured at the files. "The surveillance team's been through two months of footage with nothing to show for it. No suspicious vehicles, no unfamiliar faces. Nothing."

“Nothing yet ,” he pointed out. “It’s been less than three weeks. You know how this stuff works.”

Yes, she did know how this stuff worked. Which was one of the reasons she’d not yet told Novak or Director Anderson about her suspicions about Cody Austin.

"No breakthroughs at all?" he asked, as if wishing he could have said something a bit more profound or hopeful the first time. After six months as partners, he was still trying to find his footing, trying to learn the ins and outs of his partner.

"None," she said. She couldn't tell him about her suspicions about Cody Austin. Couldn't risk having them dismissed or, worse, reported up the chain. And she certainly couldn't tell him that she had Cody Austin's current address.

She'd received it through the proper channels—a simple call to the prison that had released him.

Still, she felt that it was something to keep hidden... for now.

Rachel's jaw tightened. If only Novak knew. If only she could explain about Cody Austin, about his patterns, about the way he could blend into any environment like smoke. But she'd learned her lessons about obsession the hard way. She had the old mental scars from Alex and Alice to remind her.

“Anything I can do to help?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. Hell...I don’t feel like there’s much I can do at this point. Honestly, I’m waiting for Anderson to reprimand me for still looking into it. He made it pretty clear it wasn’t my case to look into.”

“Well, you know where I am if you change your mind.”

With that, he gave her a polite nod and headed back down the hallway.

She watched him go, recalling the touching moment he had called her home the day after Christmas just to check in on her.

Following the blast, Rachel had spent half a day in the hospital, undergoing concussion protocols and having her leg tended to.

She's also spent about an hour in her hospital room after Jack had already come to visit, crying her eyes out.

Crying for the deaths, crying for the destruction of the hospice center...

crying because she felt helpless to do anything about it.

Novak seemed to have sensed this and call on the 26th just to make sure the holidays hadn't steamrolled her.

And really, it had. Sitting there in her cubicle, the memory hit her like a physical blow - Christmas morning, trying to smile through the pain in her leg while Paige opened presents.

Thinking of the three lives lost in the explosion and all the times she had walked through those doors to spend time with the ailing and desperate.

"I need some air," she muttered, standing abruptly. Her thigh protested the movement, but she didn't care. All of a sudden, the field office felt too small. The walls were closing in on her.

She spoke to no one as she made her way out of the building, keeping her head low, her eyes to the floor.

Outside, the January wind cut through her coat as Rachel walked to her car.

She pulled out of the garage and began driving through the city, barely even registering traffic or the streets.

She felt as if she were on some automated line, being pulled by a magnet.

And then, fifteen minutes later, there she was...

parked in the hospice center parking lot.

The cleanup crews had done their job well - most of the debris was gone, and the damaged section was cordoned off with temporary fencing.

But she could still see the scars: the blackened walls, the shattered windows, the place where Eleanor Webb had been struck by flying debris.

Yellow tape blocked it all off, as well as two basic concrete barriers.

The yellow crime scene tape fluttered in the wind, creating a rhythm that matched the pounding in her head.

Rachel could at least rest easy in knowing that those who had survived—all but one which, she had to admit to herself, was a blessing when the totality of the event was considered—had been relocated to the secondary wing at Riverside Retirement Home.

Even Rachel had to admit to herself that it was a better environment than Goodrich Hospice, but it wasn't the same.

That sense of peace, of dignity in life's final chapter - the bomb had shattered more

than just walls.

Rachel's phone buzzed. A text from Director Anderson: Team meeting tomorrow, 9AM. Updates on surveillance review.

She knew what they'd say. Nothing suspicious. No leads. But Anderson didn't know about the address in her desk drawer—a thread she couldn't pull yet, but couldn't ignore either.

Her fingers traced the outline of her FBI badge, a reminder of everything she'd worked for, everything she'd nearly lost before.

She'd promised herself she wouldn't go down that path again.

The last time she'd let personal vengeance drive an investigation, it had cost her grandmother her life. And it had put Paige in grave danger.

But as she stood there, watching the wind whip debris across the parking lot, Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that somewhere Cody Austin was watching, too.

Waiting. Planning his next move while she stood here, bound by rules and procedures and the weight of past mistakes.

Or maybe he was just proud of what he had done, knowing that he was putting her through this sort of torment.

The sun was setting behind the damaged building, casting long shadows across the ground.

Rachel remembered other shadows - the Christmas tree's lights reflecting off her living room wall while she sat with ice on her thigh, pretending to enjoy the holiday

for Paige's sake.

The darkness that crept into her dreams, where the faces of Sharon, Devon, and Eleanor merged with older ghosts - her first husband Peter, Grandma Tate, Scarlett.

Her phone buzzed again. An addendum to the text about the meeting .

Work went on. It had to. Rachel took one last look at the hospice center, committing every detail to memory.

The twisted metal, the broken glass, the empty chairs visible through shattered windows.

Three lives ended here, and somewhere out there was a man who knew why.

She got back in her car, her thigh aching as she settled into the seat. The knowledge of Austin's address weighed on her like a stone. Not today, she told herself. Not yet. But soon, if the surveillance footage yielded nothing, if the evidence continued to dead-end...what choice would she have?

Rachel started the engine, letting its rumble drown out the whispers of temptation.

As she pulled away from the hospice center, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the rearview mirror.

The determination in her eyes reminded her of other times, other cases where she'd crossed lines to keep her loved ones safe and to bring killers to justice.

But this time would be different. This time she'd play it smart, play it by the book - right up until the moment the book failed her. Because if Cody Austin was behind this, if he was truly back to finish what he'd started, then following the rules might

not be enough to stop him.

The Christmas decorations were coming down across the city, twinkling lights giving way to the stark reality of January.

Rachel drove home through the gathering darkness, her mind already mapping out contingencies, backup plans, ways to work within the system while keeping one eye on that address she couldn't forget.

Rachel knew that justice sometimes needed a nudge. Sometimes the rules needed bending. But not today. Today she'd go home, take her pain medication, review the case file on the bombing for the fiftieth time, and pretend she wasn't counting the hours until tomorrow's surveillance update.

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Thomas Whitman looked down at the bathroom counter, a bit disturbed by how familiar it was becoming to him.

The granite surface gleamed under the recessed lighting, spotless.

The entire bathroom was spotless, actually, like the rest of Jill's house.

She kept a clean home, which was pretty much a stark contrast to how she behaved in the bedroom.

He chuckled to himself at this thought, checking his reflection in the mirror.

His greying black hair was slightly mussed but presentably so—exactly how it might look after a long day at the office.

The crisp white collar of his dress shirt showed no lipstick marks, and his blue silk tie hung perfectly straight.

To anyone else, he'd look like any other tech executive heading home after a typical Tuesday.

The endorphins still coursed through his system, making his movements fluid and easy.

He could still feel Jill's fingernails on his back, still taste the mint of her lip balm.

At forty-eight, he hadn't expected to feel this alive again.

Hadn't expected the rush that came with sneaking around, the thrill of forbidden pleasure that made him feel like a teenager breaking curfew.

Through the bathroom door, he heard Jill humming—some pop song he should probably know but didn't. The domestic sound of it twisted something in his gut. Guilt, maybe. Or perhaps just the recognition that this wasn't really his life to share.

He opened the door to find her making the bed, her movements quick and efficient.

She'd already changed into comfier clothes (after having peeled out of her work clothes half an hour ago).

Now, she was wearing a tee shirt and a pair of jogging shorts that were just tight enough to remind him how this whole ordeal started.

At forty-two, she moved with the confidence of someone who knew exactly who she was and what she wanted.

It was one of the first things he'd noticed about her six months ago.

"Hey there, stranger," she said, smoothing the duvet. "I was starting to think you'd climbed out the bathroom window."

"And miss saying goodbye? Never." He crossed the room and kissed her, meaning it to be quick but lingering when she pulled him closer. Her perfume—something light and expensive—filled his senses. "But I really do need to go."

"Same time next week?" Her fingers traced the length of his tie, a gesture that six months ago would have seemed practiced and calculated. Now he knew it was just Jill being Jill—tactile, present, unapologetically sensual.

"Wouldn't miss it." He caught her hand, squeezed it once. "Though I might need to get in more cardio. You wore me out tonight."

She laughed, the sound rich and genuine. "There's plenty more where that came from, old man." She picked up her shirt from where it had landed near the dresser. "Though I have to say, for someone who claims to be worn out, you certainly didn't show it."

The first time they'd met had been nothing like this—all business and bureaucracy in the sterile conference room at City Hall.

He'd been there representing his company's interests in upgrading the city's emergency broadcast system.

She'd been the deputy director of emergency services, full of pointed questions and skepticism about his proposal.

He'd found her intensity attractive even then, though he'd buried the thought.

It wasn't until their third meeting, when they'd ended up working late going over technical specifications, that something shifted.

She'd mentioned her recent divorce, casual and matter-of-fact.

He'd found himself talking about the growing distance in his own marriage—things he hadn't even admitted to himself.

They'd ended up in an unused conference room, and it had been the most erotically charged night of Thomas's life.

One coffee led to another, then a secret dinner, then this—a weekly get-together at Jill's house.

Thomas checked his phone as he made his way through the house.

7:34 PM. Perfect timing. Traffic would be light enough that his story about working late would hold up.

Ellie, his wife, would be finished with dinner, probably settled in with her iPad and that mystery series she'd been binging lately.

She barely looked up when he came home these days.

The guilt surfaced then, as it always did during these moments of transition.

Ellie deserved better. Twenty-three years of marriage, and this was how he repaid her loyalty.

But the guilt wasn't enough—not nearly enough to make him end things with Jill.

The truth was, he felt more alive in these stolen hours than he had in years.

He had his story straight: last-minute crisis with the Singapore team, endless Zoom calls, the usual alibi. It wasn't even really a lie. There had been issues with Singapore, just not today. The best lies, he'd learned, were built on foundations of truth.

The house was quiet as he made his way to the back door—his usual exit route, chosen because it opened onto an unlit side street rather than the well-lit main road.

Jill's neighborhood was upscale enough to feel safe but not so exclusive that his BMW stood out among the other luxury vehicles. Still, habits of discretion died hard.

His hand was on the doorknob when he heard Jill call from upstairs: "Drive safe!"

The warmth in her voice followed him out into the January night.

The cold hit him immediately, shocking after the warmth of the house.

His breath formed clouds in the frigid air as he fished his keys from his pocket.

He was thinking about dinner, how he really didn't deserve to have one waiting for him when he arrived home.

He wondered how much long this thing with Jill could last. Would they be able—

The impact came from behind, explosive and brutal.

Something hard crashed into the back of his head, sending him stumbling forward.

His keys clattered to the wooden surface of the back porch.

Before he could turn, before he could shout, before he could even process what was happening, a second blow caught him in the temple.

He went down hard, his cheek scraping against the rough concrete of the path.

Through the ringing in his ears, he heard footsteps—deliberate, unhurried.

A shadow fell across him. Thomas tried to roll over to see his attacker, to call for help.

But his body wouldn't respond, and the darkness was already closing in.

His last coherent thought wasn't of Ellie, or even of Jill. It was who would be able to fill his shoes on the Singapore job if anything happened to him.

Then the third blow fell, and Thomas Whitman thought nothing at all.

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The alarm chirped at six, but Rachel had already started coming awake.

Jack's side of the bed was empty, the sheets cool to the touch.

She lay there for a moment, listening to the quiet of the house, feeling the weight of another day settling over her.

Through the bedroom window, the sky was just beginning to lighten, a pale gray that promised another clear but cold Virginia morning.

Her morning routine had the comfort of muscle memory.

She started in the shower where she stood under the spray until the water ran hot enough to steam the mirror, letting it pound against her shoulders where tension always seemed to collect these days.

The wound to her thigh was nearly done healing and needed no special attention in the shower anymore.

Once out and dry, she chose her favorite gray pantsuits, paired with a cream blouse that softened her reflection in the mirror.

The familiar ritual of very brief makeup application followed—more to look professional than to enhance, though she took extra care covering the shadows under her eyes. Sleep hadn't come easily lately.

As she left her bedroom and passed Paige's room, she made sure to walk quietly.

There was another hour and fifteen minutes before she'd need to wake Paige for school.

Rachel moved on, her footsteps whisper-quiet on the carpeted hallway.

Sometimes these morning moments, tiptoeing past her daughter's room, reminded her sharply of those days during her illness—when every quiet morning felt like a gift she wasn't sure she'd get to keep.

The aroma of coffee drew her downstairs, accompanied by the soft rustle of papers and the quiet tap of fingers on a laptop keyboard.

Jack sat at the kitchen table, suit jacket draped over the back of his chair, scrolling through his phone with one hand while absently working on a half-eaten bagel with the other.

Morning light slanted through the bay window, catching the silver at his temples.

She remembered when those first gray hairs appeared during her treatment.

He'd earned every one of them, standing by her through it all.

"Another long day ahead?" she asked, reaching for her favorite mug—the one with the chip on the rim that she refused to throw away. Jack had tried to replace it twice, but she kept coming back to this one. Some imperfections felt like old friends.

"I hope not." He didn't look up from his phone. "That's why I'm up so damned early. Trying to get a head start."

Rachel cracked eggs into a pan, listening to them sizzle.

These morning moments were precious—increasingly rare snippets of normalcy in their chaotic lives.

Jack reading emails while she cooked, sharing space in comfortable silence.

The scratch of his chair against the floor as he shifted position.

The way he automatically smiled when she briefly looked in his direction, a dance they'd perfected over time.

Even the small irritations felt like comfort: his habit of leaving cabinet doors slightly open, the way he always set his coffee mug precisely on the edge of a coaster instead of centered on it.

She caught herself trying to memorize these details the way she had during her recovery. Old habits died hard. But she was healthy now. The quarterly scans proved it. She didn't need to hoard these moments like a squirrel storing nuts for winter anymore.

She settled across from him with her eggs, watching him work.

His forehead creased in concentration, tie slightly askew.

She thought about reaching over to straighten it, but something else pressed against her thoughts, demanding attention.

The same thoughts that had kept her awake last night, staring at the ceiling while Jack slept beside her.

"Jack." The word came out before she'd fully decided to speak.

He looked up, eyebrows raised. "Hmm?"

"I need to tell you something." She set her fork down, the metal clicking against porcelain. Something in the back of her mind screamed that this was a bad idea. But the words were already there, coming like a storm cloud, "About Cody Austin."

His expression shifted subtly—a tightening around the eyes, a slight compression of his lips. They'd been here before. Too many times, maybe, but she couldn't let it go. Not when she was so certain.

"I have his address," she continued, the words tumbling out now. "And I'm almost certain he's connected to the hospice bombing. More than almost certain—I feel it in my bones."

"Rachel—"

"Just hear me out." She leaned forward, hands flat on the table.

"Look at the timeline. I start volunteering and form this intense bond with Scarlett...

and then Scarlett beats cancer, finally gets to go home, and within weeks of Austin's release, she's murdered. Then, three weeks after that, a bomb goes off at the exact same hospice center where she was treated."

Jack set his phone down, giving her his full attention. His eyes held that mix of concern and skepticism she was growing to hate. "That's quite a leap."

"Is it?" Heat crept into her voice. "This is what he does, Jack. He's methodical. Patient. He picks targets that matter to people. He's trying to send a message."

"But what evidence—"

"Damn it, I just know." She sighed, hating the childish way it made her sound. "The timing..."

"The timing could be coincidental," Jack said gently, though he studied the dates on her phone. "You know how this works, Rachel. We can't build cases on intuition alone."

"This isn't just intuition." She pushed her plate aside, untouched eggs cooling.

"Austin spent ten years in prison because of me.

Ten years when he should have been in for life if we'd been able to prove everything he did.

He's smart enough to know a direct attack wouldn't work.

So he's doing what he does best—he's playing mind games.

First Scarlett, then the bombing. He's sending a message that nowhere is safe...that anything I am close to, he can take. It feels like..."

"Say it."

"It feels like Alex Lynch all over again."

"Exactly. You're letting that trauma work its way into your life all over again. You're just seeing things that aren't there."

She could hear the intensity rising in her own voice and knew she was starting to sound obsessed. But she couldn't stop. "Think about it, Jack. If it's not Austin...and if these two awful events aren't at all related, that's one hell of a coincidence."

Jack rubbed his temple, a gesture she recognized from countless late-night discussions. "Look, I understand why you're making these connections. The bombing happening at your hospice center—I get why that feels personal. But if you take this to Anderson without solid evidence—"

"He'll shut it down. I know." Frustration tightened her throat.

"But what if I'm right? What if we miss this and more people die?"

Austin was clever enough to avoid murder charges before.

Who's to say he isn't being just as careful now?

He had ten years in prison to plan this, Jack. Ten years to think about revenge."

"Rachel...four people were killed, including a member of the bomb squad. There's an enormous team on this. If it is Austin, they'll find out. And I'm sure Anderson will let you know."

The silence stretched between them, filled with unspoken words.

She opened her mouth to break the silence, but Rachel's phone buzzed.

The screen lit up with Anderson's name. Her stomach clenched.

For a wild moment, she wondered if he somehow knew what she'd been discussing.

But when she answered, his voice was casual, matter-of-fact.

"Gift, I have a case I'd like you and Novak to tackle."

“Of course. What do you have?” she asked.

"I need you two on a case near Charlottesville. Looks like it could be a serial in the making. Not sure yet."

"Sir, but what about the meeting about the bombing surveillance—"

“You can miss it. Besides, if we boil it all down, there are no new updates there. And before you go there, yes...I know that case is close to you. So when we do know something new, I’ll make sure you know.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, but the disappointment was thick in her voice.

"Besides," Anderson said. "I think it would do you good to focus on something else for a while."

The implication hung in the air: stop obsessing over the bombing. Stop looking for connections that might not exist. Rachel's free hand clenched into a fist under the table, nails biting into her palm.

"Yes, sir," she said, keeping her voice neutral. "I'll head out now."

She ended the call, meeting Jack's concerned gaze. "I have to go."

"I heard." He stood, gathering his things. The morning light caught his wedding ring as he reached for his jacket. "Want me to tell Paige—"

"Tell her I said have a good day, and I love her." The words felt inadequate, routine, but they were all she had time for now. "It's in Charlottesville, so if it goes beyond a day, I have no idea if I'll be coming back home or grabbing a hotel."

“We’ll be fine. Just stay in touch.” He got up and kissed her, drawing her in for a quick hug. “And be safe.”

“Aren’t I always?”

He sneered at her, but it broke apart in a small laugh.

They moved around each other in the kitchen's morning light, a dance that should have been familiar but now felt off-step.

As Rachel gathered her keys and badge, she felt the weight of everything unsaid pressing down on her.

Jack's skepticism. Anderson's dismissal.

Her own certainty, burning like an ember in her chest.

At the door, she paused. Part of her wanted to turn back, to make one last attempt at convincing Jack. But what would be the point? Without evidence, she was just spinning theories. And yet...

The morning air hit her face as she stepped outside, carrying a razor-like January chill.

She took a deep breath, trying to clear her head.

There was a case waiting in Charlottesville.

People who needed her focus, her expertise.

She couldn't let Austin—or her suspicions about him—distract her from that.

But as she slid behind the wheel, the heavy certainty of it hit her again...that somewhere out there, Cody Austin was watching, waiting, and planning his next move in a game only he fully understood.

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She was currently looking at the bloodied body of a man named Thomas Whitman.

His face was barely recognizable as human.

The medical examiner's preliminary report noted that the skull had been struck at least twelve times with what appeared to be a cylindrical metal object, likely a crowbar or length of pipe.

The right temporal and parietal bones had been reduced to fragments, some driven into the brain tissue.

His baby blue button-down shirt was saturated with blood, bits of bone, and gray matter.

His tie was looped in a weird U shape on the wooden floor of what the police report said was a back porch.

"Construction's backing up the merge ahead," Novak said from behind the wheel of their bureau SUV.

He was proving to be a careful driver, which Rachel reluctantly admitted she appreciated.

The morning traffic crawled along as cars tried to funnel into a single lane, exhaust hanging visible in the cold air.

She swiped to the next photo. "The beating continued well past the point of death,"

she read out loud. "The medical examiner estimates at least fifteen distinct impacts across the body, but the skull took the worst of it."

"Overkill," Novak said. "Rage killing?"

"Maybe." Rachel zoomed in on one of the wounds. "But look at the spacing and angles of the impacts. They're remarkably consistent. This wasn't just blind fury. The killer maintained control throughout the attack."

A semi-truck's air brakes hissed ahead of them as traffic ground to a halt again.

Novak drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, his default tell when he was working through something.

Rachel had started cataloging his habits the way she did with any new partner.

Knowledge meant prediction, prediction meant trust.

"What about the first victim?" he asked.

Rachel pulled up file labelled Foxworth, Diana. She was an attorney of great notoriety in the Charlottesville area. She'd been killed shortly after a work dinner...beaten to death just a few feet away from her BMW.

"Same weapon profile," Rachel said. "Though the attack seemed slightly less controlled. At least ten impacts, most to the head and upper torso. The killer may have been in a rush, though, as it was an open space. A parking lot."

"Christ." Novak shook his head. "And we're sure these are connected? Beyond the weapon and victim profiles?"

Rachel swiped through more photos, comparing the wound patterns. "Both victims were quite wealthy. Both were also attacked in locations that suggested the killer had studied their routines."

"Okay...Foxworth was found in a parking lot. What about the second vic?"

"It's a bit saucy, actually. He was discovered beaten to death by a woman he was having an affair with. By the mistress. And this happened just last night. Local PD have informed the wife."

"Jesus, that's a lot of bad news to get all at once," Novak said.

Traffic began moving again as they passed the construction zone.

The morning sun had burned away some of the chill, but frost still clung to shadowed patches of grass along the highway.

Rachel found herself grateful for the mundane normality of the traffic and weather.

It helped create distance from the brutality in the case files.

"You know," Novak said after a few minutes of silence, "I can't help wondering if the bureau would have still been called in for this if these murders happened in a different zip code. Two lower-income people beaten to death? Probably wouldn't make it past local PD."

Rachel glanced at him, surprised. It was the kind of observation Jack might have made back when they were partners. Grim, a little harsh...but undeniably true. "Probably not," she admitted. "Though the level of violence might have raised flags regardless."

"Maybe." He didn't sound convinced. "How're you holding up with all this, by the way? After everything at the hospice..."

"I'm fine." The response came automatically, perhaps too quickly. Rachel forced herself to soften it. "I appreciate the concern, but I need to focus on these victims right now. The hospice situation is being handled." And God, did it ever hurt to say that out loud.

Novak nodded, accepting the deflection. Another point in his favor – he knew when to back off. "So, Mrs. Whitman first? Even though the mistress was the last to see Whitman alive?"

"Yeah, I'd think so. The wife usually knows more than people expect, even about the affairs.

" Rachel closed the case files and pulled up directions to the Whitman residence.

"And if she didn't know, her reaction to learning about it might tell us something useful. I think she'd be more likely to be helpful if there's a link between the two victims."

The GPS indicated another forty minutes to Charlottesville.

Rachel used the time to review the rest of Whitman's file, trying to build a picture of his final days.

He'd been a rising star in the tech sector, recently landing a major defense contract for his company while also assisting the city of Charlottesville as well as the University of Virginia with a few cutting edge projects.

According to the files, the mistress—Jill Satterfield—was a junior executive with the

city council but also something of a stock broker,...

a classic corporate cliché that had ended in anything but a classic way.

The third photo in the crime scene sequence caught her attention.

Something about the blood spatter pattern seemed odd.

The directionality suggested the killer had changed position mid-attack, but maintained the same mechanical precision with the strikes.

It spoke of training, or at least significant planning.

"Most rage killers lose control as the attack continues," she said, thinking out loud. "The blows become erratic, excessive. But this..." She held up the tablet, showing Novak the pattern at the next red light. "This is almost methodical. Like the rage is being channeled, directed."

"Military background maybe?" Novak suggested. "Or law enforcement?"

"Possible. But killing Foxworth in a parking lot seems too risky for someone with that sort of training. The level of control definitely suggests someone with training in violence."

They passed a sign indicating Charlottesville was thirty miles ahead. The morning traffic had thinned somewhat, but there were still enough cars on the road to provide cover for anyone wanting to follow them.

"These are odd cases, you know?" Novak said.

"How so?"

“Well, you hope the victims are linked so it provides us with an automatic path to follow. But given how violent this guy seems to be, it makes you wonder what these two victims did to anger him so badly. It makes me think that we may uncover things about the victims that...I don't know...”

“That might make us almost have sympathy for the killer.”

Novak frowned and said, “You said it, not me.”

“Whatever the case, let's just hope we can find him before there's another victim.

There's always a next victim with this kind of killer," Rachel said.

"And yes, I think the violence will continue to evolve.

The question is whether it's evolving toward some specific goal, or just becoming more refined for its own sake. "

The sun had fully cleared the horizon now.

It was going to be one of those bright, cold days where everything seemed sharp-edged and clear.

Perfect weather for hunting killers, Rachel thought grimly.

She could feel her mind settling into the familiar patterns of a new case, compartmentalizing everything else – the hospice, Cody Austin, all of it – into boxes to be dealt with later.

The crime scene photos seemed to swim before her eyes: the devastating damage to Whitman's skull, the precise patterns of blood spatter on expensive clothing, the look

of surprise forever frozen on Diana Foxworth's battered face.

Two successful people, their lives ended with brutal efficiency by someone who felt they had a score to settle.

The GPS directed them into one of Charlottesville's older neighborhoods, where colonial-style homes sat back from the street behind mature trees.

The kind of neighborhood where people noticed strangers but were too polite to stare.

It was the perfect hunting ground for someone who knew how to blend in.

Someone patient enough to wait for exactly the right moment to strike again.

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The morning air held that peculiar crispness unique to wealthy neighborhoods—where even the oxygen seemed filtered and purified.

A few residents power-walked along the sidewalks in coordinated athleisure wear, their breath coming out in little clouds of vapor, completely unaware of the FBI vehicle cruising past their pristine properties.

Rachel noted security cameras mounted discreetly on every third or fourth house, their glass eyes tracking movement with digital precision.

"Check it out," Novak said as they pulled up to the Whitman residence. "Dead ringer for the McCallister place from Home Alone."

The sound of their car doors closing echoed across the manicured lawn with a finality that made Rachel wince.

She'd done this hundreds of times—approached homes where tragedy had struck—but something about this place made every movement feel magnified.

Their footsteps crunched on salt-scattered pavers as they approached the house.

The front door stood ajar, propped open by a bronze doorstop shaped like a sleeping cat.

Inside, a uniformed officer leaned against the wall, looking about as engaged as a museum guard on a Sunday afternoon.

A slight weariness in his eyes suggested he'd been there since the initial call.

He gave their badges a perfunctory glance and waved them through without a word, his gaze already drifting back to middle distance.

Rachel felt it the moment she crossed the threshold—that suffocating weight of fresh grief.

She'd walked into hundreds of homes just like this over her career, where death had made an unexpected visit hours before.

The air always felt different, heavier, like gravity itself had increased.

But this time, there was no wailing, no dramatic displays of mourning.

Just quiet sniffles and hushed voices drifting from deeper in the house.

The controlled grief of the wealthy, Rachel thought, where even devastation wore a designer label.

It was a slightly cruel thought, but it was there, and all the same.

The foyer opened into a hallway that could have been lifted from an architectural digest. Crown molding traced the ceiling like delicate lace, and vintage sconces cast warm pools of light every few feet.

The hardwood floors gleamed with a fresh coat of wax, unmarred by the usual scuffs and scratches that indicated actual life was lived here.

A crystal vase on a console table held fresh-cut hydrangeas—probably delivered weekly by some high-end florist. Everything was perfect, curated, artificial.

But something felt off. Rachel realized what it was as they passed a lonely end table—no family photos adorned the walls or surfaces, save for a single wedding portrait.

The happy couple—presumably Thomas and Ellie Whitman—smiled out from behind spotless glass, a moment frozen in time that now felt like a cruel joke.

Thomas Whitman stood tall and confident in his tuxedo, one hand resting possessively on his bride's waist. The photographer had caught him mid-laugh, his head turned slightly toward Ellie.

She gazed up at him with unguarded adoration, her white dress catching the light like fresh snow.

The absence of other photos nagged at Rachel.

No vacation snapshots, no casual moments caught on camera.

Just this one perfectly staged reminder of happier times.

She filed the detail away, letting it settle alongside the other observations accumulating in her mind.

She assumed this meant one (or both) of the Whitmans worked far too often and too hard to make time for vacations.

They followed the murmur of voices to an expansive dining room that opened onto what appeared to be a professional-grade kitchen.

The space was dominated by a massive mahogany table that could have seated at least a dozen, its surface reflecting the light from a chandelier that probably cost more

than Rachel's car.

Three women sat clustered around one end, their heads turning in unison as Rachel and Novak appeared in the doorway.

One of them clung to a mug of steaming coffee as if it were a life raft.

Two of the women could have been mirror images—same heart-shaped face, same amber-colored eyes, same graceful way of holding themselves.

Sisters, without question. The third woman was different in appearance but somehow matched their energy, as if years of friendship had gradually synchronized their movements.

They all turned their heads in the direction of their visitors at the same time.

"Sorry to interrupt," Rachel said, her voice seeming too loud in the hushed room. "I'm Special Agent Gift, and this is Special Agent Novak, with the FBI. We're looking for Ellie Whitman."

The younger of the pair, who were clearly sisters, raised her hand slightly.

"That's me." Her voice was steady, but her fingers trembled as they gripped her coffee mug.

A diamond tennis bracelet caught the light as her hand shook, the gems throwing tiny rainbows across the table's polished surface.

"Can... can they stay?" She gestured to her companions.

"Of course," Rachel said softly. She, perhaps more than anyone, recognized the need

for emotional anchors in moments like these.

"This is Ramona, my sister," Ellie said, "and Beth, my best friend since third grade.

" The women flanked Ellie like guardians, their bodies subtly angled toward her.

Rachel recognized the protective formation—they'd probably been up all night, holding Ellie while she cried, making sure she ate something, fielding phone calls from well-meaning relatives.

Their designer clothes were slightly rumpled, suggesting they'd slept in them if they'd slept at all.

"Please, sit," Ellie said, indicating the chairs across from them. The coffee cups before them were full but cold, untouched. A half-eaten croissant sat on a bone china plate, torn into tiny pieces but barely consumed.

Novak cleared his throat. "We've reviewed the police reports, but we may need to go over some things again. So I apologize if it seems like a lot of this is just a repeat..."

A flash of something—anger, pain, or both—crossed Ellie's face. Her perfectly manicured nails dug into her palm. "What kinds of things?" she asked. "The fact that someone killed Thomas, or that he was cheating on me?"

"Maybe both," Novak replied evenly, his tone professional but not unkind.

Rachel leaned forward slightly. "The reports indicate you weren't aware of the affair until last night."

"That's right." The laugh that came out of Ellie's mouth was bitter, hollow, like wind through dead leaves.

"Nothing like finding out your husband was unfaithful the same moment you learn he's dead.

" Ramona placed a hand over her sister's, their fingers interlacing with practiced ease.

Rachel noticed their matching rings—probably childhood gifts from parents who had encouraged their close bond.

"The woman's name is Jill Satterfield," Rachel said, watching carefully for any sign of recognition. "Does that name mean anything to you?"

Ellie shook her head, a strand of honey-blond hair falling across her face.

"Never heard it before the police showed up at 10:45 last night.

" Her voice cracked on the time as if the moment was permanently etched in her memory.

Beth reached over and rubbed small circles on Ellie's back, a gesture so natural it spoke of decades of shared comfort.

"Were you surprised?" Novak asked. "About the affair?"

"Not really." Ellie's fingers tightened around her sister's.

"He'd been... distant for months. I told myself it was work stress.

He was always going crazy with his work.

Sometimes fifteen hours days, seven days a week.

That was much easier to believe that..." She trailed off, her free hand moving to twist her wedding ring—a large diamond that caught the light like a tiny sword.

Rachel watched the subtle interplay between the three women.

Every time Ellie's voice wavered, one or both of them would touch her—a hand on her shoulder, a gentle bump of knees under the table.

They moved like a single organism, connected by years of shared secrets and unwavering support.

Rachel could almost see the invisible threads that bound them together, strengthened by countless sleepovers, wedding preparations, and late-night phone calls.

"Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Thomas?" Rachel asked gently, noting how Beth's hand tightened on Ellie's shoulder at the question.

That same conflicted expression crossed Ellie's face—grief wrestling with rage.

"Take your pick. Thomas had no shortage of enemies.

" Her voice grew harder, taking on an edge that seemed to surprise even her.

"Mostly because of work. He did as he pleased without asking permission.

He got to where he was in his career by stepping over a lot of others. "

"Any specific names come to mind?"

"No... not right now." Ellie's grip on her anger slipped, and her bottom lip began to quiver.

Rachel recognized the reaction—sometimes anger was easier than facing the crushing reality of loss.

It gave you something to hold onto when everything else was spinning out of control.

Anger didn't leave you feeling quite so helpless, quite so alone.

Tears began rolling down Ellie's cheeks, cutting trails through her expensive makeup.

She brushed them away almost angrily, but they kept coming.

Ramona and Beth moved closer, forming a protective circle around their wounded friend.

Rachel noticed how they seemed to communicate without words, each knowing exactly what the other would do before they did it.

"I think that's enough for now," Ramona said quietly but firmly, her voice carrying the same cultured accent as her sister. "Maybe you could come back after Ellie's had some time to... to process everything?"

Rachel nodded and stood, recognizing when a door was being firmly but politely closed. "Of course. Thank you for your time." She handed Ellie her card, noting how the younger woman's hand shook as she took it. "Please call if you think of anything else."

As they walked back to their car, Rachel could feel the heaviness of the situation inside the house peeling off of her like a snakeskin.

Houses like that—perfect houses with their perfect lawns and empty pools—they were supposed to be fortresses against tragedy.

But death didn't care about property values or security systems. It slipped in any way, leaving behind nothing but coffee gone cold and sisters holding hands across polished mahogany tables.

The winter sun had risen higher, making the neighborhood look even more like a movie set. A woman walking a pure-bred golden retriever crossed to the other side of the street as they approached their vehicle, her designer sneakers silent on the spotless sidewalk.

"We should look into Diana Foxworth next," Rachel said as they pulled away from the curb, watching the Whitman house recede in the side mirror. "See if we can establish any connection before we talk to Jill Satterfield."

Novak nodded, but Rachel barely registered his response.

Her mind was still in that dining room, watching three women bound by blood and history face the unthinkable together.

It was a reminder of why she did this job—not just to catch killers, but to give answers to the people left behind in death's wake.

People like Ellie Whitman, who would never look at her wedding photo the same way again.

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The tree-lined streets of Charlottesville's University district were winter-stripped and looked almost like natural gates.

Rachel watched them pass by in rows as Novak guided the car past weathered brick buildings where generations of students had pursued their dreams, their windows reflecting the shockingly bright light of the late morning sunshine.

The neighborhood was a stark contrast to the manicured subdivisions they'd visited earlier – here, massive oaks and maples formed natural archways over the street like gnarled arms.

Students wandered the sidewalks in small groups, their backpacks laden with laptops and textbooks, their conversations creating a distant murmur that seemed to belong to another world entirely.

A world where death was still an abstract concept, something to be discussed in philosophy classes rather than investigated in real time.

The police files indicated that Diana Foxworth had not been married and had listed her parents as the next of kin.

Her father, Steven Foxworth, was a professor at the university, specializing in British Literature.

He apparently lived quite close to the campus, which was why they were currently navigating around it.

"Different world over here," Novak said, glancing at a group of students crossing the street with backpacks and coffee cups. He'd been quiet for most of the drive, focused on getting through the city.

Rachel checked the GPS as Novak navigated the car around a delivery truck double-parked outside a small bookstore.

"Should be the next left." Her mind drifted briefly to her own college days, before the FBI, before the cancer, before everything changed.

The memory felt like it belonged to someone else now.

She could remember all three of her different roommates and how none of them had ever really clicked.

She remembered the parties and the late-night study sessions, her discovery of different kinds of music and enjoying a live show whenever she got the chance. God, had it really been that long ago?

The street they turned onto was quieter, lined with faculty housing that had watched the university grow around it over decades.

These weren't the ostentatious homes of newly minted tech millionaires or corporate executives.

These were the residences of scholars and researchers, people who measured wealth in knowledge as much as dollars.

The Foxworth residence sat back from the street, a two-story colonial with black shutters and a small but meticulously maintained garden to the side. While not as imposing as the Whitman estate, it carried the quiet dignity of old money – the kind

that valued education over ostentation.

They made their way up the brick walkway, past flowerbeds that were just as stark and as cold as everything else. They briefly made her think of Scarlett—of the flowers she'd planted in her backyard and would now never see bloom.

On the porch, Novak's knock echoed against the solid wood door. After a few moments, it opened to reveal a man Rachel assumed to be Steven Foxworth. Rachel felt Novak tense slightly beside her – they'd both seen this kind of grief before, but it never got easier to witness.

The man before them bore the unmistakable weight of loss.

His white beard was neatly trimmed, but dark circles haunted his eyes, which were bloodshot from what Rachel suspected were countless sleepless hours.

He wore a brown cardigan that hung loose on his frame, as if he'd lost weight recently.

His shoulders slumped forward slightly, like his body was ready to welcome sleep whenever he decided it was finally time.

A coffee stain marked the sleeve of his cardigan, the kind of detail that suggested someone who had stopped noticing such things.

"Professor Foxworth?" Rachel asked, though she already knew. "I'm Special Agent Rachel Gift, and this is Special Agent Novak. We're with the FBI, investigating your daughter's death."

Something flickered across his face – pain, resignation, or perhaps both. His hand tightened on the doorframe for a moment, as if seeking support. "Yes, of course.

Please, come in." His British accent was subtle, worn smooth by decades in Virginia, but still detectable in certain words.

He led them through a foyer decorated with framed photographs – Diana's graduation, family vacations, random scenic shots – into a den that managed to be both scholarly and welcoming.

A flat-screen TV hung above a brick fireplace, but it was the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf along the back wall that dominated the room.

Leather-bound classics shared space with well-worn paperbacks, their spines forming a literary tapestry.

Rachel noticed several volumes of Shakespeare prominently displayed, their bindings well-worn from years of use.

The room smelled of old books and coffee, with an underlying hint of something else – the staleness that comes when grief disrupts normal routines when windows stay closed too long, and daily habits fall away. A half-empty cup of coffee sat on the side table, the liquid long since gone cold.

Rachel and Novak settled into a pair of worn leather armchairs while Steven lowered himself onto the matching sofa.

His movements were careful and deliberate, as if he was operating on autopilot.

Above them, footsteps creaked across the ceiling, followed by the sound of drawers opening and closing.

Each sound seemed to hit Steven like a physical blow.

Steven glanced upward, his expression tightening.

"My wife, Becka. She's been..." He paused, swallowing hard.

His hands fidgeted with the edge of his cardigan, a professor's hands more used to holding books than bearing this kind of burden.

"She's been cleaning Diana's old room. Has been for the past day or so.

I don't think she's... I don't think she's accepted it yet.

But when she does..." His voice cracked slightly. "God, it's going to level her."

Rachel leaned forward slightly, choosing her words carefully. "We understand this is difficult, Mr. Foxworth. We'll try to keep this brief." She'd conducted countless interviews like this over the years, but each one required its own approach, its own careful navigation of raw grief.

Novak leaned forward, with his phone in his hand; Rachel saw that he had the initial police reports pulled up. "Sir," Novak said, "the police report indicates that Diana was attacked after leaving dinner at a downtown restaurant. Do you know who she was meeting by any chance?"

Steven shook his head, running a hand through his beard.

The gesture seemed automatic, a scholar's habit of contemplation transformed into a mourner's nervous tic.

"A business dinner, that's all I know. We spoke to her four days ago.

.." His eyes grew distant, no doubt replaying that last conversation.

"Rebecca – Becka – she was teasing her about being single, hoping maybe it was a date.

They always bickered about how Diana always preferred to remain single.

" A ghost of a smile touched his lips before fading, like sun breaking briefly through storm clouds. "But Diana said no, just business."

"Can you tell us about her work?" Rachel asked, watching his face carefully for any hint of something held back, something unspoken.

"She was an attorney. A good one. Knew what she wanted since she was fifteen – used to argue circles around me even then.

" Pride mingled with pain in his voice. "But the details of her practice?

No, I'm afraid not. She loved it, though.

That much I know." His fingers drummed absently on the armrest, a nervous energy that seemed to build with each passing moment.

A muffled sob drifted down from upstairs, followed by more shuffling.

Steven's face crumpled slightly as he looked toward the ceiling.

The shadows under his eyes seemed to deepen, the grief etching new lines around his mouth.

In that moment, he looked older than his years, as if Diana's death had aged him a decade in days.

"Excuse me," he said, pushing himself up from the sofa with visible effort. "I should check on her." There was something deeply painful in watching this clearly educated, articulate man reduced to such simple, inadequate phrases.

Rachel stood quickly. "Of course. We'll see ourselves out. Thank you for your time." She gestured to Novak, who pocketed his phone and got to his feet.

They made their way back through the foyer as Steven's footsteps climbed the stairs behind them.

Rachel caught one last glimpse of a family photo – Diana in her law school graduation robes, beaming between her proud parents – before closing the door behind them.

The contrast between that moment of triumph and the current reality felt like a physical ache.

The walk back to the car felt longer than it had to come in. An icy breeze stirred the leaves, carrying with it the distant sounds of campus life not too far away – a world that continued turning while inside that house, time stood still.

Neither agent spoke until they were back in the vehicle. Rachel could feel the frustration rolling off Novak in waves, matching her own growing sense of unease about the case. The heater blasted out warmth, but Rachel still felt a chill.

"Well, we didn't really get much of that, did we?" Novak said finally, frustration evident in his voice.

"No, we didn't."

"You think it's time to speak with Jill Satterfield?"

Rachel thought it was a good idea. Not only had she found Thomas's body, but he had been killed at her house.

Besides...maybe she had a husband or boyfriend that had known about the affair and had gotten jealous.

She had no idea how Diana Foxworth played into any of it, but it might at least be somewhere to start.

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“Yeah, I think it might be.” She pulled out her phone and pulled up Jill Satterfield's number from the case file. The call went straight to voicemail after four rings, each one seeming to mock their lack of progress.

“No answer.”

“Maybe she’s being questioned by local PD,” Novak suggested. “We could check with them.”

"Worth a shot," Rachel said, though her tone suggested she didn't expect anything. She then pulled up the contact number of the policeman who had taken down the primary information from the discovery of Thomas’s body. When she called it, he answered on the third ring.

“This is Sergeant Rose,” a deep-voiced man said.

"Sergeant, this is Rachel Gift, with the FBI. We're looking into the death of Thomas Whitman, and I'm trying to get in touch with Jill Satterfield...but she's not answering her phone. We were wondering if maybe she was being questioned or held for any reason with the local PD."

“Oh, well...I’ve not been involved with the later developments on this, but I do know that as of about four hours ago, Mrs. Satterfield is in the hospital. She attempted suicide very early this morning.”

“Oh...I had no idea. Is she stable?”

"Not sure. From what I gather, she did the slit-wrists-in-the-bathtub thing and was discovered by a friend. She made it to the hospital in time, but beyond that, that's all I know."

"Well, thanks, Sergeant."

Rachel ended the call and said, "Well, we won't be speaking with Jill Satterfield for a while." She then gave him the update she'd just received from Sergeant Rose. She saw her own surprise and disappointment mirrored in Novak's expression.

"Okay, so where to next?"

"Let's try the coroner's office," she said. "Maybe there's more to the attacks than we're seeing. Maybe we can find something that will help us positively ID the exact weapon the killer has used."

"Sounds like a plan," Novak said.

As they pulled away from the curb, Rachel glanced in the rearview mirror.

The Foxworth house grew smaller behind them, its windows now glowing amber in the dying light.

Somewhere inside, a mother was going through her murdered daughter's childhood belongings, trying to hold onto whatever pieces of her she could still touch.

Rachel felt the familiar weight of responsibility settle more heavily on her shoulders.

They needed to find something soon – before another family was torn apart, before another parent had to clean out another bedroom too soon.

SEVEN

He guided the Mercedes along the curved entrance of Wells Luxury Motors, past the ornate water feature that marked the dealership's main entrance.

The fountain's cascading waters caught the midday sun, creating a sophisticated ambiance that perfectly matched Peter Wells' carefully cultivated image.

Everything about the place screamed success, from the immaculate landscaping to the strategic placement of their most impressive vehicles.

But really, he thought Wells choosing a fountain for the entrance to a car dealership was a little much.

The showroom stretched across the front of the property like a wall of glass, reflecting the afternoon sky.

Inside, a Porsche Taycan gleamed under perfectly positioned LED spotlights, its pearlescent white finish making it look almost ethereal even from outside.

The price tag adhered to the window would make most people wince, but Wells' clientele didn't blink at seven-figure prices.

He continued his circuit of the lot, noting how Wells had arranged his inventory like art pieces in a gallery.

The Tesla Model S Plaid commanded its own special area near the front, flanked by two Mercedes EQS sedans.

Behind them, a row of Lucid Airs caught the sunlight, their chrome details winking like jewelry.

Traditional luxury hadn't been forgotten – a Bentley Continental GT and an Aston Martin DB11 occupied places of honor near the showroom entrance, a reminder that Wells understood both the future and the pleasures of the past.

The employee parking area lay discreet and hidden behind the service center, a deliberate choice that spoke volumes about Wells' business acumen.

Everything about the layout was designed to focus attention on the products, to make customers feel like they were entering a realm of exclusive opportunity rather than just another car lot.

It was like the difference between a bouncy house at a country fair and stepping foot in Disney World.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel as he spotted Wells emerging from a side door, engaged in animated conversation with a younger man – likely his sales manager, based on the tailored suit and confident bearing.

Wells moved with the easy authority of someone who had built an empire from the ground up.

Five other dealerships across Virginia, with the D.C.

location being the crown jewel. The man had worked his way up from selling used cars in his twenties to becoming one of the most successful automotive retailers on the East Coast.

All that success. All that careful planning. And yet Wells had no idea that his time was running out.

The thought sent a familiar tremor through his hands. The clock was ticking – not just

for Wells, but for him, too. But he could not focus on that. There was work to be done. And if he did his work correctly and in a timely manner, maybe the end may not come for him after all.

He watched Wells and his employee climb into a Range Rover, probably heading to one of the upscale restaurants that lined the commercial district for their lunch break.

His finger tapped against the steering wheel, counting out seconds.

The urge to follow them was almost overwhelming.

It would be so easy to walk into the same restaurant and catch Wells in the restroom...

or to simply follow them and shadow Wells back to his office and. ..

No. He forced the thought away. Patience had gotten him this far.

And he felt he'd already used up most of his luck on getting away with Diana Foxworth's murder.

He'd been so close to a public space—so close he could hear the laughter of people exiting the restaurant Diana had come out of.

But he'd planned that for weeks, learned her schedule, found the perfect moment. Rushing now would be stupid. Reckless.

Instead, he turned his attention back to studying the dealership's layout.

The service entrance at the rear of the building looked promising – less traffic, fewer cameras.

Wells often stayed late, especially on inventory days.

The cleaning crew left at seven, but Wells would sometimes work until nine or ten, going over the books in his private office.

He made another loop around the property, noting the positions of security cameras, the blind spots created by the rows of luxury vehicles.

A Rolls-Royce Spectre caught his eye – Wells' latest addition to his electric lineup.

He knew that the price tag dangling in the window read just shy of \$500,000.

Even though he had no intention of ever buying a vehicle from Wells, he'd done his homework.

On Wells. On the dealership and the cars, he pandered.

He felt very strongly that people like Wells – people who measured everything in dollars and cents – they couldn't be trusted with humanity's future. They'd sell spots to anyone who could afford it, diluting the quality of the survivor pool.

He couldn't let that happen. The man sold cars for a living, for God's sake. He hadn't contributed anything meaningful to society, hadn't advanced human knowledge or capability. He'd just moved money around and convinced people to spend more than they should on depreciating assets.

No, Wells had to go. Just like Whitman and Foxworth. Thomas Whitman with his shallow tech innovations, and Foxworth with her manipulation of the legal system. The future needed to be preserved for people who could actually improve it, not just profit from it.

He completed another circuit of the lot, this time paying special attention to the loading dock where they took delivery of new vehicles.

The security camera there had a blind spot – he'd noticed it during his third pass.

More importantly, it was the kind of place where a strange car wouldn't draw immediate attention.

Delivery drivers came and went at all hours, especially for the high-end vehicles that required special handling.

Time was running out, yes, but he couldn't afford mistakes.

Not when he was so close. He'd wait, watch Wells' patterns for a few more hours. Maybe days...though he wasn't sure he had that much time.

Wells was a creature of habit – they all were, in their own ways.

The perfect opportunity would present itself, just as it had with the others.

He pulled out of the lot, taking one last look at the dealership in his rearview mirror. The fountain sparkled in the sunlight, water flowing endlessly in its circular pattern. Soon enough, Wells' time would run out too. It was just a matter of patience and planning.

As he merged into traffic, his mind drifted to how the city temperatures of January had everything outside looking crisp.

It made him feel cold despite the heater keeping him comfortable.

He could almost feel the cold seeping into his bones, trying to claim him as its own.

He smiled, wondering if he might be able to feel that subtle little chill when the time finally came to take Peter Wells out of the world.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

The county coroner's office smelled like industrial cleaner—a smell that Rachel had always thought smelled eerily like the busier hallways of a hospital.

Rachel had walked through these doors countless times over her career, but the weight never lifted.

Each visit represented a failure—proof that they hadn't been quick enough, smart enough, or lucky enough to prevent another death. Sure, they'd only gotten into Charlottesville after both deaths had already occurred, but it was a difficult feeling to shake.

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead as a receptionist buzzed them through at the lobby counter. Rachel's footsteps echoed against the tile floor, mixing with the softer tread of Agent Novak beside her.

The smell hit her harder today than usual—that precise mixture of bleach and formaldehyde that seemed to seep into your clothes, your hair, your skin.

Maybe it was because she'd spent so much time in hospitals during her cancer treatment, learning to read the subtle differences between the smell of healing and the smell of death.

Or maybe it was because of Scarlett, whose murder still felt like an open wound in Rachel's chest.

It made her wonder if something deep inside of her had more or less flipped a switch after the bombing of the hospice center. Had she been more in tune with death since

then and simply not realized it? Did she have a proverbial grey cloud hanging over her head now?

"I hate these visits," Rachel muttered, more to herself than to Novak. "Every time we end up here, it means we've exhausted our other options. Like we're admitting defeat and asking the dead to give us the answers we couldn't find on our own."

"That seems...grim," Novak said.

"Well..." she said, gesturing all around them in a somewhat comical way.

She thought of all the times she'd stood in examination rooms, staring down at bodies that used to be people, trying to piece together their final moments.

It was different now, after her own dance with mortality.

She no longer saw just evidence when she looked at a body—she saw all the moments that person would never have, all the breaths they'd never take, all the sunrises they'd never see.

Novak remained silent. Rachel appreciated that about him—he knew when words weren't necessary. Jack would have tried to comfort her, would have sensed her dark mood and attempted to lighten it. But sometimes the darkness needed to be acknowledged, needed to be walked through rather than around.

Their footsteps slowed as they approached Examination Room C. Rachel noticed the slight hesitation in Novak's stride—he was still new enough to this that each morgue visit carried its own weight of dread. She felt for him.

The woman who greeted them wasn't what Rachel expected.

Dr. Katherine Colet stood just shy of six feet tall, her dark hair pulled back in a severe knot that emphasized her sharp cheekbones and angular jaw.

She was striking in the way a well-crafted blade was striking—beautiful but purposeful, designed for precision rather than aesthetics.

Her green surgical scrubs did nothing to diminish her presence.

"Agents." Dr. Colet's voice carried the same precise quality as her appearance.

Her words came out crisp and measured, like she was constantly aware of the weight each one carried.

"I assume you're here about the Whitman and Foxworth cases.

" Her eyes, a pale gray that reminded Rachel of surgical steel, moved between them with clinical assessment.

"That's right," Novak said. "Are you the ME in charge?"

"Yes. Although, we've not yet been able to run a full autopsy on Mr. Whitman...though the cause is very apparent."

The examination table dominated the center of the room.

A white sheet draped over what was unmistakably a human form, dark spots of blood having seeped through in places.

Rachel had seen hundreds of bodies in her career, but something about the random pattern of those spots made her throat tighten.

They looked almost like a Rorschach test—what do you see in these bloodstains?

Death, her mind proclaimed. You see death.

"I should warn you," Dr. Colet said, one latex-gloved hand resting near the edge of the sheet, "the head trauma is.

.. extensive. I can answer your questions without the visual aid if you prefer.

" There was no judgment in her tone, no implication that declining would somehow make them less professional.

Rachel had worked with enough medical examiners to know this wasn't always the case—some seemed to take pleasure in shocking law enforcement with the gruesome reality of their work.

Rachel exchanged a quick glance with Novak. Without actually speaking, they came to an agreement. "You can keep the body covered," Rachel said.

"We really just need to know for sure if these murders are connected," Novak added. "Anything definitive you can give us."

Dr. Colet's expression shifted subtly, like a focusing lens.

"Mr. Whitman's body is being prepared in the adjacent room, but I've examined both victims thoroughly.

The murder weapon is almost certainly the same in both cases.

" She moved to a computer terminal, pulling up several photographs.

The images were clinical, detached—the kind of photos that reduced a person to evidence, a life to a series of measurements and observations.

"Initially, I thought we were looking at a baseball bat," she continued, "but the impact patterns tell a different story.

" She gestured to close-up shots of what Rachel assumed was a severely crushed skull.

"The concentrated nature of the trauma suggests something narrower.

A pipe, most likely—thicker than a golf club but with a smaller diameter than a baseball bat.

Probably steel or similarly weighted metal, given the depth of the cranial depression.
"

Dr. Colet zoomed in on one particular image, her movements precise and economical.

"See these striations along the edge of the impact site?

They're consistent with industrial pipe threading.

The killer either didn't bother to smooth out the edges or, more likely, chose this weapon specifically because the threading would cause additional damage. "

Rachel studied the images, forcing herself to look past the horror and see the evidence. Honestly, the pictures were almost as bad as the real thing. The doctor's clinical detachment helped—it was easier to think of this as a puzzle to be solved rather than a person who had been brutally murdered.

"The blood spatter patterns are also telling," Dr. Colet continued, her voice taking on a lecturer's tone.

"The first blow in both cases was delivered while the victims were standing.

You can see the gravitational drops here and here.

" She pointed to another set of photographs.

"But subsequent blows were delivered after they fell.

What's particularly telling is the angle of impact.

In both victims, we see a consistent pattern—blows delivered from slightly above and to the right, suggesting a right-handed attacker of above-average height.

The killer focused almost exclusively on the head in both cases, with remarkable similarity in the number and placement of strikes. "

She pulled up another set of images. "The force used was also consistent. Enough to ensure death but not excessive—no post-mortem strikes, no signs of rage or loss of control. This was methodical. Efficient." A pause. "Personal, but not passionate, if that makes sense."

"Like they were checking off items on a to-do list," Rachel murmured, remembering similar patterns from other cases. Some killers attacked in rage, others in fear or desperation. But the ones who killed with such precision, such control—they were often the most dangerous.

"I suppose," Dr. Colet agreed. "There's a... professionalism to it, for lack of a better word. The killer knew exactly what they wanted to accomplish, and though he may

have gotten a bit carried away, not a single blow was wasted.”

"You're certain it's the same killer?" Rachel pressed.

"In my professional opinion?" Dr. Colet's steel-gray eyes met Rachel's.

"Yes. The similarities are too precise to be coincidental.

This is someone who's developed a specific technique and is replicating it exactly. Even the number of blows is nearly identical—though, honestly...it's hard to get an accurate count of the number of blows off of Mr. Whitman. The damage is that extensive."

Novak shifted his weight, perhaps subtly angling himself away from the computer Colet was using to show them the pictures. "Anything else of note?"

"Actually, yes." Dr. Colet moved to another screen, zooming in on what appeared to be an unremarkable patch of skin.

"Ms. Foxworth had mild bruising at her cubital fossa—the inner elbow.

I nearly missed it while cleaning away the blood, but the pattern is distinct.

She had blood drawn within forty-eight hours of her death. "

Rachel frowned. "A routine medical procedure?"

"Possibly. The technique was professional—clean insertion, minimal bruising. But I can't tell you more than that without her medical records."

The information settled in Rachel's mind like a piece of a puzzle—small, possibly

insignificant, but worth remembering. Blood tests would certainly be part of any medical screening process. It made her wonder if there was something medically concerning to Diana in her last days.

"Thank you, Dr. Colet," Rachel said. "Your observations have been incredibly helpful."

The medical examiner nodded, her expression remaining neutral. "I'll have my full report ready by tomorrow morning."

Rachel and Novak made their way back through the labyrinth of corridors.

Each step felt heavier than the last, weighted down by the new information and its implications.

The killer they were looking for wasn't just dangerous—they were methodical, precise, and apparently very good at what they did.

The kind of person who could plan a murder with the same detachment as planning a business meeting.

The afternoon sun seemed impossibly bright after the fluorescent sterility of the coroner's office.

Rachel squinted against it, her mind already racing ahead to next steps.

A blood draw could mean anything—routine physical, donation, specialized testing.

But with two victims already confirmed and no other leads. ..

"I guess we'll be bothering Mr. Foxworth again," she said, pulling out her phone.

“Maybe he’ll know why Diana had recently had blood drawn.”

“You think it’s significant?”

“No clue. But we may as well check. It’s not like we’re drowning in leads. And I’d rather ask her father than her healthcare provider. Getting anything out of them will be a nightmare.”

She pulled up the case files, looking for the Foxworth home number. The weight of the morgue still clung to her clothes, but at least now they had something to go on. Something that might lead them to the killer before anyone else ended up on Dr. Colet's examination table.

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Rachel studied the stark concrete facade of the county coroner's office through the windshield. It wasn't the most inspiring of places to figure out their next steps, but it would have to do.

Next to her—behind the steering wheel—Novak shifted in his seat, the leather creaking beneath him.

She had no idea why, but the sound made her think of the sheet that had been covering Diana Foxworth back in the coroner's exam room.

She'd pulled up Steven Foxworth's number, switching it to speaker mode before placing it on the center console between them. The memory of his quiet voice and sorrow-laden face was still quite clear in her mind's eye.

The phone rang twice before Steven Foxworth answered, his voice tight with strain. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mr. Foxworth, I apologize for bothering you again so soon—"

"No, please," he cut in. "Anything to help find the person who killed Diana. Anything at all." The raw grief in his voice made Rachel's chest tighten. She'd heard that tone too many times in her career, but it never got easier.

Rachel exchanged a quick glance with Novak. "I wanted to ask if you knew about Diana having blood drawn recently?"

"Blood drawn?" There was genuine confusion in his voice. "No, if she did, I wasn't

aware.”

"What about her general health? Was she having any issues that you knew of?"

A bitter laugh crackled through the speaker.

"Diana? God no. She was the picture of health.

Always eating clean, always exercising." His voice softened with remembered affection.

"Always griping at me about eating too much junk.

Just last week she threw out my secret stash of Oreos.

Said she wasn't going to let me give myself diabetes.

" He paused, and Rachel could hear him fighting to maintain composure.

"Sorry, I... it's still hard to believe she's gone. "

"It's quite alright, sir," Rachel said gently. She'd learned long ago that sometimes giving witnesses a moment to process their grief led to better information. "I wonder...do you know what doctor she saw?"

"Yeah, that I do know. We all went to the same family practice – Diana, me, and Becka. Wellness Family Medicine on Oak Street. Dr. Welsh's office. Been going there for years."

Rachel jotted the name down. "Thank you, Mr. Foxworth. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

"Please," he said, his voice suddenly urgent. "Please find whoever did this. Diana deserved better than... than what happened to her."

"We will," Rachel promised, meaning it.

After ending the call, Rachel immediately looked up the number for Wellness Family Medicine.

As she dialed with the phone still set on speaker mode, Novak opened up his Notes app on his phone.

He seemed to always have it at the ready, one of the many things Rachel was starting to appreciate about him.

The phone rang several times before a crisp, professional voice answered.

"Wellness Family Medicine, this is Jessica speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Jessica. This is Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI." Rachel's tone was equally professional. "I'm calling regarding one of your patients, Diana Foxworth. We're investigating her murder and need to look into any medical visits from the past few weeks."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, perhaps as Jessica absorbed the fact that one of their patients had been killed.

When Jessica did speak again, her voice had cooled considerably.

"I'm sorry, Agent Gift, but we take patient confidentiality very seriously here.

Even in the case of deceased patients, there are strict protocols we need to follow.

If you can come by to retrieve the proper forms—"

"I understand that," Rachel said, keeping her voice level despite her mounting frustration. "But we're trying to catch a killer here. The autopsy showed evidence of a recent blood draw, and we need to know if it was done at your office. And why."

"Agent Gift," Jessica replied, her tone clipped, "HIPAA regulations don't simply disappear because someone has died. There are specific procedures that must be followed, documentation that needs to be filed—"

"I'm aware of HIPAA requirements," Rachel interrupted, her patience wearing thin. "I'm also aware that there are exceptions for law enforcement investigations, particularly in cases involving violent crimes."

"Nevertheless—"

"A woman is dead," Rachel pressed. "Murdered in a vicious and violent manner. And whoever killed her might strike again. Every hour we spend dealing with bureaucratic red tape is another hour this killer has to find their next victim."

There was a long pause. When Jessica spoke again, her tone had softened slightly. "I appreciate the difficult position you're in, Agent Gift. Let me speak with Dr. Welsh and see what she advises. Please hold."

As generic hold music filled the car, Novak cleared his throat. "While we wait... I've been thinking about something. Both victims were wealthy, successful people, right?"

Rachel nodded slowly. "You're thinking class warfare?" It had crossed her mind, too.

"Maybe. In this economy, and in a city like this one...with the wealth gap wider than ever..." He shrugged, adjusting his tie. "Could be someone deciding to take matters

into their own hands. Twisted form of economic justice."

"Like a modern-day Robin Hood, except with murder instead of theft?" Rachel watched a crow land on a nearby lamppost, its black feathers gleaming in the sun.

"Something like that. Think about it – Thomas Whitman was a tech executive, Diana Foxworth a high-powered attorney. And you saw Whitman's home. That's a lot of wealth concentrated in two people."

Rachel considered this, absently noting how the crow seemed to be watching them. "It's possible. I've certainly seen cases like that before. But still...these murders...there's something cold about them. Clinical."

"Agreed. Most wealth-motivated killers tend to want to make a statement, right? There's usually more violence, more dramatic staging. These skills are precise, efficient."

"Almost professional," Rachel added while the hold music continued to fill the car.

"But we should keep the class angle in mind," Rachel conceded. "Even if it's not the primary motivation, it might factor in somehow."

The hold music cut off abruptly, interrupting their discussion.

"Agent Gift?" The voice was different now – older, more authoritative. "This is Dr. Miriam Welsh. And let me save us both some time and tell you that I understand why you're calling, but I can't simply release patient information without proper documentation."

Rachel opened her mouth to argue, but Dr. Welsh continued: "However, what I can tell you is that Diana had recently been asking about the legitimacy of

cryopreservation. We had a rather lengthy discussion about it, with her wanting my medical opinion."

Rachel's eyebrows shot up. She glanced at Novak, who looked equally surprised. "Cryopreservation?"

"The blood draw you were asking about was part of a routine check-up," Dr. Welsh continued. "My impression was that she wanted to ensure she was in perfect health, possibly because she was seriously considering cryopreservation as an option."

"Just so we're clear here," Novak cut in, leaning toward the phone with an uncertain edge to his tone, "we're talking about freezing yourself while alive in order to cheat death, right?"

There was a slight chuckle from Dr. Welsh.

"That's the popular conception, but it's more complex than that.

Cryopreservation involves the preservation of a person's body immediately after clinical death, using specific protocols and cryoprotectant solutions – think of them as medical-grade antifreeze – to prevent ice crystal formation in the cells.

The body is then cooled to ultra-low temperatures to...

well, to preserve you until a cure for whatever is ailing you is found. "

She paused before continuing, her tone becoming more measured.

"The process has to begin immediately after legal death is pronounced.

The body is cooled with ice water, while mechanical chest compression maintains

blood circulation.

Then the blood is replaced with organ preservation solution and the cryoprotectant chemicals. "

"And this actually works?" Novak asked, skepticism clear in his voice.

"That depends on your definition of 'works,'" Dr. Welsh replied.

"The idea isn't to 'cheat death' exactly, but rather to preserve the body and brain structure until future medical technology might be capable of both reviving the person and curing whatever caused their death in the first place.

It's controversial, certainly, but the scientific principles behind it are sound...

even if the technology for revival doesn't exist yet. "

Rachel pressed her lips together, processing this information. "Do you know if Diana had already begun looking into specific facilities, or was this just a passing interest?"

"I'm not certain," Dr. Welsh replied, "but based on our conversations, it seemed she'd already been in contact with a local facility. A place called New Horizons Cryonics."

"That's here in Charlottesville?" Rachel asked.

"Yes. They have an unusual business model – you make arrangements while you're still healthy, essentially securing your spot for when you reach old age or face a terminal illness."

"Are you familiar with the facility?" Novak asked.

"Only by reputation. I know they exist, but that's about it.

I prefer to stay in my lane of traditional medicine.

" There was a slight edge to her voice now, one of skepticism.

"Though I will say, Diana seemed quite excited about the possibility.

She talked about it as if it were a kind of insurance policy against death itself. "

“And do you—”

“I’m truly sorry, agents. But I’ve probably already said too much. So I’m going to go now...and I’d appreciate it if you’d not call me back.”

“I understand,” Rachel said. “Thank you, doctor.”

She ended the call, and she and Novak sat in silence for a moment. The only sounds were the soft idling of the car's engine and the distant hum of traffic.

"Well," Novak said finally, "this case just got very odd."

Rachel nodded slowly, already trying to sort through the implications. "New Horizons Cryonics," she muttered, pulling out her phone again. "Let's see what we can find out about them."

“You look into them,” Novak said. “I’ll see if I can find out whether or not Thomas was in any way connected to them.”

As they set to work in the still-parked car, the crow took flight from its perch, its shadow briefly passing over their windshield like a dark premonition.

Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that they'd just stumbled into waters that might be deeper than she was willing to consider.

Cryopreservation sounded very sci-fi to her, very over her head.

And if this case was taking them to places like that, what else might be waiting for them?

As she began typing the facility's name into her phone's search bar, she couldn't help but wonder: what kind of person kills people who are trying to live forever?

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While Rachel found the website for New Horizons Cryonics to be very vague and unhelpful, Novak was able to find out what he needed right away.

She listened to his side of the conversation as he called Ellie Whitman, only to have her sister, Ramona answer.

She was able to answer all of Novak's questions, though, and less than five minutes after hearing New Horizons Cryonics mentioned for the first time, it appeared they had a solid link.

"Get this," Novak said. "Not only was Thomas Whitman speaking to people at New Horizons, but he'd already paid them a handsome sum. Neither Ramona or Ellie knew the exact amount, but Ellie was sure it was at least fifty thousand dollars."

Rachel chewed this over for a while, trying not to get too excited about what now looked like a very promising link between the victims. "And they're certain about this?"

"According to Ellie, Thomas wasn't exactly subtle about it. He'd been trying to convince Ellie to sign up too. But Ellie said she shut him down every time. Said she wasn't comfortable with it...that it sounded like something people did in horror movies."

"Can't blame her there," Rachel muttered, as Novak finally pulled out of the parking lot of the coroner's office and started in the direction of the highway.

The mid-afternoon traffic was relatively light, giving them a clear shot to the location

of New Horizon, which the GPS placed as being thirteen miles away, on the outskirts of the city.

Now that they were moving again, she allowed herself to dwell on something that had been bothering her ever since Dr. Welsh had mentioned the topic of cryopreservation.

This wasn't the first time Rachel had heard of it.

In fact, the mere mention of it had triggered a memory she'd rather forget—one of many she thought she'd buried so far down that it would never come back again.

Three years ago, lying in a hospital bed in Sweden, watching snow fall outside her window while doctors discussed her "options.

" Her tumor had been particularly aggressive then, starting to spread again after one of the experimental treatments was supposed to have not only stopped it, but caused it to shrink.

Just one of several failed experiments. She remembered the endless hours spent online, researching alternatives, desperate for anything that might give her more time.

She could even recall the face of the kind nurse who had brought her the laptop to do her research on.

That's when she'd first stumbled across cryonics. The websites and articles she'd read had been filled with optimistic promises about future revival, about beating death itself.

She'd read every article, every testimonial, her hands shaking as she clicked through page after page.

The price tags had been astronomical – hundreds of thousands of dollars for whole body preservation, slightly less for just the brain.

But even if she'd had the money, something about it had felt fundamentally wrong. Silly, almost.

Rachel glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror, touching the small scar near her hairline where they'd gone in to remove the tumor when it had initially shrunk to a point where it could be removed safely.

The experimental treatment had worked, in the end. No need for science fiction solutions.

"You okay?" Novak asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Yeah, just..." She paused, considering how much to share. "When I was sick, I actually looked into this stuff. Cryopreservation, I mean."

Novak's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously?"

"It wasn't my proudest moment...but I never really gave it much serious consideration, anyway.

" Rachel kept her eyes on the road ahead of them, but her mind drifted back to those desperate days.

"When you're facing death, really facing it, you start entertaining ideas you'd normally dismiss.

The science sounds almost plausible when you're desperate enough.

They talk about vitrification instead of freezing, about nanobots that'll repair cellular damage, about quantum computers that'll map and restore consciousness. You name it, the hope for it is out there."

"Wait...quantum computers?"

"Yeah...to upload your consciousness and then download it whenever some weird bio-miracle body can be created to store it."

"And this is a real thing?" Novak asked.

"In theory...though we don't have the tech for it right now."

"Man, people will do anything to beat death, huh?"

She nodded her head. "But the more I researched, the more red flags I saw.

The complete lack of peer-reviewed evidence.

The way they dance around the fact that no one's ever been successfully revived.

Not even the mice they test it on. And the ethical implications.

.. who gets to decide when or if you're brought back?

What happens to your assets in the meantime?

What if future societies want nothing to do with reviving people from the past? "

"Plus the whole 'playing God' angle," Novak added.

Rachel nodded. "That too. Though I try not to judge. When you're staring down your own mortality, rationality isn't always your strongest suit. I get why people buy into it. The promise of a second chance, even a far-fetched one, can be pretty seductive when you're out of options."

Her phone buzzed in the midst of their discussion, displaying an unfamiliar number. Rachel hit the speaker button. "Agent Gift speaking."

"Agent Gift, this is Sergeant Rose." The voice crackled through the car's speakers.

"Oh, hi again. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm calling about Jill Satterfield."

Rachel straightened in her seat, expecting to hear that she'd taken a turn for the worse or even passed away. "How is she?"

"Stable as of about an hour or so ago. Doctors say we can start questioning her if needed."

"Good to hear." Rachel exchanged a quick look with Novak. "We're following up on another lead right now, but I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for letting me know."

She ended the call, her mind already shifting back to their current destination.

The GPS showed another twenty minutes to New Horizons.

The facility's website had shown a sleek, modern building, all glass and chrome among a huge expanse of lawn and ornate gardens – trying hard to look more like a tech startup than a morgue.

"What do you think we'll find there?" Novak asked.

Rachel considered the question. The whole setup made her uneasy.

Modern medicine had its share of snake oil salesmen, but at least most of them limited themselves to fleecing the living.

Cryonics felt different – more predatory somehow.

Taking advantage of people's deepest fears, their desperate hope for immortality.

"Best case scenario? A paper trail connecting Thomas Whitman and Diana Foxworth...or maybe someone on the inside that will have all the answers we need. Worst case...a fancy presentation on an approach to cheating death that comes right out of a science fiction movie."

Her gut told her they were dealing with something bigger than a single murder. The precision of the kill, the specific targeting – it felt systematic, planned. And now it also seemed to be connected to cryonics.

And in the midst of it all, the irony wasn't lost on her – investigating a murder tied to people trying to cheat death, when she'd come so close to death herself.

The difference was, she'd fought her battle with science that actually worked, with doctors who dealt in facts rather than far-fetched promises.

The idea of preserving a body in liquid nitrogen, waiting for some hypothetical future cure, struck her as a particularly cruel form of false hope.

She'd seen too many people in the hospice cling to similar promises, watching their families drain their savings on treatments that had no chance of success.

Yet even as these thoughts crossed her mind, she remembered the desperation that had driven her to research cryonics in the first place.

The late nights in the hospital, pain keeping her awake, scrolling through websites that promised a way out.

She remembered thinking about Paige, about all the moments she might miss.

In those dark hours, even the smallest chance of seeing her daughter grow up had seemed worth any price.

She kept this at the center of her mind, determined not to judge those who might see cryopreservation as a way to cling to their lives. When faced with death, people got desperate.

And maybe, if this case was any indication, they tended to get violent as well.

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The gates of New Horizons greeted them with a strangely warm and inviting feel—ironic, Rachel thought, given the sort of work that went on inside.

First, there was the entrance flanked by a guard shack that looked more like a stylish pool house.

It looked like it might have been designed by Apple.

They were checked in, and the guard didn't seem to even bat an eye when they showed their badges in order to be given access.

Once they were beyond the gates, a long, paved drive led them to a thin strip of asphalt that served as the parking lot.

Rachel could see dense tree coverage beyond the perimeter—a natural barrier that promised additional privacy.

The morning sun caught the security cameras mounted at regular intervals, their presence both obvious and intentional.

This wasn't a place that hid its surveillance; it advertised it.

"Some setup they've got here," Novak said, pulling their Bureau vehicle up to the security checkpoint. The guard booth itself looked like it had been designed by Apple—a seamless blend of brushed metal and curved glass that made standard guard shacks look like relics from another century.

As they followed the curved driveway, the main building revealed itself gradually through breaks in the perfectly maintained landscaping.

The lawn stretched out in emerald waves, broken only by artfully placed native stone formations and clusters of local flora.

The cold temperatures of January gave the large, open space the feel of another planet.

Rachel had seen plenty of modern architecture in her time, but New Horizons looked like something out of a science fiction film.

The structure seemed to defy gravity—a sweeping curve of white composite and electrochromic glass that changed opacity as clouds passed overhead.

The main entrance featured a cantilevered overhang that extended at least forty feet, sheltering a circular drive without visible support columns.

The building itself appeared to float above its foundation, an illusion created by recessed lighting and clever engineering.

To say the building was striking was an understatement.

"Makes you wonder what the electric bill looks like," Rachel said, noting the vast expanse of climate-controlled glass.

But she knew the real energy demands lay beneath the surface, in the preservation systems that promised their clients a chance at a second life—or an extended life, she supposed.

It really all depended on how you looked at it.

The parking area was surprisingly modest—perhaps thirty spaces total—with a separate service entrance visible around the eastern curve of the building.

Each space was covered by an elegant solar array that doubled as a charging station.

Novak found a spot marked for visitors, and they made their way toward the entrance.

Automatic doors whispered open, welcoming them into an atrium that managed to feel both intimate and vast. The ceiling soared three stories up, but clever use of wood paneling and indirect lighting created a warm, almost cozy atmosphere.

A living wall of lush greenery stretched floor to ceiling behind the reception desk, which appeared to be carved from a single piece of white marble.

The air carried a subtle scent—something clean and vaguely botanical that Rachel couldn't quite identify. Maybe eucalyptus.

Water trickled down a geometric sculpture near the seating area, its gentle sound masking conversations and creating acoustic privacy zones. The floor was polished concrete, but inlaid with strips of metal that caught the light, creating subtle pathways that guided visitors through the space.

The receptionist looked up from her curved display screen, her smile practiced but genuine.

Her charcoal blazer matched the building's aesthetic perfectly, as if she'd been chosen to complement the architecture.

She looked to be thirty or so and was somewhere between beautiful and gorgeous.

"Welcome to New Horizons. How may I help you? "

Rachel showed her credentials as she and Novak approached the desk. "Special Agents Rachel Gift and Ethan Novak, FBI. We need to speak with whoever's in charge."

The woman's smile faltered slightly, a crack in the perfect facade.

"Of course. One moment, please." Her fingers moved across the hidden interface of her desk, the surface responding to her touch like ripples in water.

She turned away slightly as she picked up the sleek desk phone.

Within seconds, she says, "Ms. Fenway, you have C-level guests down at the lobby.

" She ended the call and returned her attention to the agents.

"Ms. Fenway will be right with you. Please, make yourselves comfortable. "

"Can I ask what a C-level guest is?" Rachel asked.

"Government or commercial visitors."

It made Rachel wonder what A-and-B-level visitors were, but she didn't think it mattered. And she honestly didn't feel like getting into it right now. So, with a pained smile, she started walking to the small waiting area to the left of the desk.

The waiting area featured low-slung chairs that looked uncomfortable but proved surprisingly ergonomic.

Smart glass panels lined the walls, displaying a rotating series of calming nature scenes.

Rachel watched as other employees moved through the space—all dressed in variations of business casual that somehow seemed color-coordinated with the building itself.

Everything felt choreographed and precise.

"The place looks cleaner than the inside of a soap box," Novak muttered. "Almost too perfect."

Rachel nodded, understanding what he meant. The facility radiated competence and cutting-edge technology, but there was something almost unsettling about its perfection. Like a smile that showed too many teeth.

Before she could respond, the click of heels on polished concrete announced a new arrival.

Margaret Fenway moved with the confidence of someone who knew exactly how much power they wielded.

Her navy suit was impeccably tailored, and her silver hair was styled in a way that suggested both authority and approachability.

She wore minimal jewelry—just a single platinum pendant that caught the light as she walked.

"Agents," she said, extending her hand. Her grip was firm but not aggressive. "I'm Margaret Fenway, CEO of New Horizons. How can I help you today?"

"We were hoping you could give us some insights into two of your clients," Rachel said. "Locals, from right here in Charlottesville. I'm afraid they've been murdered."

“Oh...oh my God,” Fenway said with genuine shock. “Can I ask...what happened?”

Rachel noticed the slight tightening around Fenway's eyes as she explained about the murders. The CEO's composure cracked just enough to reveal genuine concern—or at least a convincing facsimile of it.

"This is... disturbing news," Fenway said, her voice lowered. "Though I'm afraid I can't discuss specific client information without—"

"We understand privacy concerns," Rachel cut in, "but I'm sure you know that employee records aren't protected the same way. Given the connection between victims, we need to start with anyone who might have had access to both clients."

Fenway's lips pressed into a thin line as she considered this. Rachel could tell that she wanted to ask more questions, perhaps to even argue. But Rachel also figured that running a place like this, public image was everything. The last place a cryonics facility needed were headlines about how they'd been difficult and uncooperative in the midst of an FBI investigation.

After a moment, Fenway pulled out her phone and typed briefly, giving them a practiced apologetic look. "I've just requested a complete staff roster from HR," she said seconds later when she pocketed her phone. "We should have that shortly. Ten minutes at most."

“Thank you,” Rachel said.

“While we wait,” Novak piped up, “could you explain how this place operates?”

She gestured toward a hallway with a proud nod. "Of course. And you can have a look around at the same time, if you wish."

As they walked, Fenway outlined their process with the precision of someone who had refined their pitch over countless presentations. The hallway curved gently, its walls alternating between smart glass and warm wood paneling. Every fifty feet or so, subtle security cameras tracked their movement.

"Initial contact usually comes through referral or our very choice marketing channels," she explained, leading them past a series of consultation rooms. Each featured the same warm wood and gentle lighting as the lobby, carefully designed to put clients at ease.

"We screen for serious intent—this isn't a service for the merely curious.

Our clients are individuals who understand both the implications and limitations of what we offer. "

And the price tag, I'm sure, Rachel thought.

They passed through a security checkpoint that required Fenway's badge and biometric scan. The hallway beyond felt more clinical, though still carefully designed. The temperature dropped slightly, and Rachel noticed the air had a different quality—more filtered, perhaps. Again, she found herself reflecting back to the time when she'd first read about cryonics...

and hated the defeated and weak way it made her feel.

"Qualified candidates undergo comprehensive medical and psychological evaluation," Fenway continued, her heels clicking against the harder flooring.

"We partner with top specialists in major cities, though many clients prefer to travel here for the full assessment.

The psychological component is particularly crucial—we need to ensure clients have realistic expectations and understand the speculative nature of what we offer. "

Rachel noticed how Fenway emphasized the word "speculative," a careful hedge against any accusations of false promises.

"The medical screening is extensive," Fenway continued, guiding them through another set of secure doors.

"Current health status, genetic predispositions, family history.

We're not just preserving bodies; we're preserving data that might be crucial for future revival.

Each client undergoes full genome sequencing, advanced imaging, and a battery of tests that often identify health issues their regular doctors missed. "

They reached what appeared to be a demonstration room.

One wall featured a cutaway diagram of what Rachel assumed were the preservation pods, though the technical details were carefully obscured.

She had to suppress a chill when she noticed that the design—according to the diagram, anyway—did indeed look like something you might expect to see in a long-distance spaceship from a movie.

The opposite wall displayed a timeline of cryonics research, ending with New Horizons' founding and subsequent breakthroughs.

Rachel was quite impressed to see that New Horizons had partnerships with cutting-edge firms and scientists all over the world.

She fought the urge to look for the names of hospitals, treatment centers, or medical facilities she had spoken with during her battle with her tumor and the subsequent recovery.

"Once approved, clients make their initial deposit and begin the planning process," Fenway went on.

"This includes everything from legal arrangements to specific preservation protocols based on their medical profile.

The full fee..." Fenway paused, perhaps gauging their reaction, "starts at eight hundred thousand, with additional costs for certain options and services. "

Novak whistled softly. "Quite an investment."

"In potentially unlimited future returns," Fenway replied smoothly.

Her hand moved to touch her platinum pendant briefly—a tell, Rachel noted.

"We currently have one hundred and twenty-six confirmed clients, with another fifty in various stages of evaluation.

Our expansion in Orlando will increase our capacity to fifteen hundred within four years. "

Her phone chimed softly. "Ah, here's the employee list." She glanced at her screen, then back up. Some of the professionalism remained on her face—perhaps from having just given her spiel—but there was also a tightness there as well. She obviously wasn't happy about handing over the list.

"What email should I send it to?"

Rachel provided her bureau address, watching Fenway's face carefully as the CEO forwarded the information.

The warm, professional demeanor she'd shown earlier had cooled noticeably since being asked to share internal information.

The change was subtle but unmistakable, like a cloud passing over the sun.

"Is there anything else you need?" Fenway asked, her tone making it clear she hoped the answer was no.

"No, thank you," Rachel said. "You've been more than helpful already. Thank you."

"Come on, then," she said. "I'll see you out."

As they followed her back through another biometric checkpoint, Rachel caught Novak's eye.

They were both thinking the same thing: it seemed that Ms. Fenway was not only being hospitable in ushering them to the door, but also a push in a very subtle way.

She wanted to make sure these unannounced agents left, and she wanted to be the one to show them the door.

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Rachel spotted them first—a small cluster of people gathering near New Horizons' main gate as she and Novak left the facility.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the manicured lawn, and through the tinted windows of the car, she counted at least twelve people.

Some clutched handmade signs, their messages indistinct due to the distance.

The scene triggered something in her investigator's mind—a nagging sensation that wouldn't quite form into a coherent thought.

"Look at that," she said, nodding toward the group as Novak steered them toward the exit.

Two more cars pulled in behind the line already formed along the edge of the sprawling lawn.

The vehicles were modest—a weathered Honda Civic and what looked like a decade-old Chrysler minivan.

More protesters climbed out, joining the growing crowd with their own hastily made signs.

Rachel studied the gathering through her trained eye. The group wasn't random; there was organization here and purpose in their movements. They positioned themselves with practiced efficiency, spreading out to create maximum visual impact for passing traffic. These weren't first-time protesters.

At the guard shack, the same heavysset man who had checked them in regarded them with a weary smile. As the guard opened up the small window into his shack to wave them off, Novak leaned out the window. "What's the story with them?"

The guard rolled his eyes, his security badge glinting in the sunlight. "Religious protesters." He sighed, shoulders slumping. "Happens at least once a month. Say," he brightened, adjusting his ill-fitting uniform jacket, "since you folks are FBI, any chance you could shut it down?"

"Not as long as they keep it peaceful," Rachel said, studying the growing crowd.

Their numbers had swelled to nearly twenty, and they'd begun a slow march in front of the gates.

The guard's joke hadn't landed with her—something about the determination in the protesters' movements set her on edge.

After years in the Bureau, she'd learned to trust these instincts.

"Yeah, that's what the cops have said every time we've called them. They aren't violent, they're not blocking traffic...so they can't do anything. Free speech and all that." He pressed a button somewhere inside his shack and the little wooden barrier in front of them rose up.

Novak gave him a wave as he pulled through.

He then turned left onto the road and instantly pulled over on the opposite side of the road, across from where the protestors had parked and formed their ranks.

Rachel got out of the car, her boots crunching on loose gravel.

The signs among the protestors were clear now: CRYO IS SINFUL painted in jagged red letters.

ONLY JESUS CAN SAVE! emblazoned on white poster board.

GOD ALONE HOLDS THE KEYS TO ETERNAL LIFE.

Each message is more confrontational than the last.

The protestors themselves were a study in conviction.

An elderly woman in a floral dress, her silver hair pulled back in a severe bun, clutched her sign with trembling hands.

Her face bore the deep lines of someone who'd spent years expressing disapproval.

Beside her, a pair of young men in their twenties, wearing identical sweaters with a Bible verse printed on them, chanted scripture verses in perfect unison, their faces flushed with religious fervor.

A mother had brought her teenage daughter, both of them in long skirts that brushed their ankles.

The daughter's expression mirrored her mother's zealotry, but Rachel caught moments when the girl's eyes darted to her phone, suggesting not all the younger generation shared their parents' passion.

A middle-aged man in pressed khakis and a thick jacket looked more like he should be heading to a golf course than a protest, yet he shouted verses with particular vehemence.

Their breath created multiple little clouds in the chilly air.

At the center of it all stood their apparent leader.

Unlike his followers, he carried no sign—just a well-worn Bible with dozens of colored tabs marking its pages.

The book's spine was cracked and mended, suggesting years of dedicated study.

He wore a navy cardigan and pressed jeans, watching the proceedings with an air of quiet satisfaction behind thick-rimmed glasses.

His demeanor reminded Rachel of a college professor observing a successful experiment.

"Excuse me," Rachel said, approaching him. She noticed how the protesters' chanting subtly decreased in volume as she drew near. "Did you organize this protest?"

He turned, and a proud smile spread across his face.

The kind of smile that suggested he'd been waiting for someone to ask.

"I absolutely did." His voice carried the practiced resonance of someone used to public speaking, each word carefully enunciated.

"I'm Pastor David Thorne of Christ's Hope Church. And you are?"

Rachel and Novak displayed their badges.

The reaction was immediate—protesters stopped their chanting, all eyes turning to watch the exchange.

"FBI?" Thorne's smile tightened, though his voice maintained its measured tone.

"I suppose the powers that be finally sent in the cavalry to protect their precious multi-million-dollar freezer. "

"Actually, we're here on other business," Rachel said, noting how Thorne's followers had begun to drift closer, hanging on every word. The air grew thick with tension. "We saw your group forming and wanted to understand what's happening here."

"What's happening?" Thorne's eyes lit up with evangelical fervor, and Rachel recognized the look of someone who'd been handed a captive audience.

"What's happening is we're taking a stand against an abomination.

Margaret Fenway and her kind think they can play God, preserving human remains like—like cosmic leftovers in some technological refrigerator.

" He held up his Bible, the pages ruffling in the afternoon breeze.

"They're selling false hope at premium prices. "

Rachel maintained eye contact, her investigator's instincts firing. The passion was genuine, but was there something darker beneath it? "Are there other churches or religious organizations that share your concerns?"

"Oh, certainly." Thorne warmed to the subject, gesturing expansively.

His cardigan sleeve rode up, revealing a silver watch that caught the sun.

"The Trinity Baptist Coalition has been vocal about it.

Several Catholic parishes have issued statements.

But most are too timid to take direct action.

They fear negative press, or worse, losing their tax-exempt status.

" He scoffed. "As if that matters more than eternal souls. "

"Why do you personally consider it an affront to God?" Rachel pressed, aware of Novak taking notes beside her. She watched Thorne's face carefully, looking for any micro-expressions that might betray something beyond religious conviction.

“Do you not?”

“I honestly have no horse in this race,” Rachel said. “I’d just like to know your thoughts.”

Thorne's expression grew solemn, and he took a step closer.

Rachel caught a whiff of coffee on his breath as he spoke.

"Death is not a technical problem to be solved.

It's a divine appointment, ordained by our Creator.

" He began to pace, his words taking on a rhythmic cadence that suggested countless sermon rehearsals.

"These people, they think they can cheat death with liquid nitrogen and computer processors and whatever other gadgets they have.

They're promising resurrection through science, usurping what rightfully belongs to God alone. "

He stopped, jabbing a finger toward the New Horizons building.

The gesture was theatrical, practiced. "Every person they freeze is a soul led astray from the true path to salvation.

They prey on the desperate, the wealthy, the arrogant—those who think their money can buy them immortality.

But there is only one way to eternal life, and that's through Jesus Christ."

"And these specific protests," Rachel said, gesturing to the group still watching their exchange. "Why here? Why now?"

"Location is everything, Agent Gift." Thorne's voice took on a conspiratorial tone as a thin smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"New Horizons is the largest facility of its kind in the region.

They're the face of this... this technological blasphemy.

As for timing..." A knowing smile crossed his face.

"It's nearly three o'clock. Perfect timing for the local news crews to get their footage for the evening broadcast. We're not just witnessing to New Horizons—we're spreading the message to everyone in their living rooms at six o'clock. "

Rachel felt Novak shift beside her, and something in her gut twisted.

The religious angle was worth exploring—zealotry had motivated plenty of killers she'd encountered over the years.

But something about this felt too obvious, too performative.

Thorne wanted attention, certainly, but murder would defeat his purpose.

He needed New Horizons to remain operational so he could continue his crusade against it.

"Thank you for your time, Pastor Thorne," Rachel said, watching as another car approached and parked behind the others—another protestor, eager to get started. "We appreciate your cooperation. Please ensure the protest remains peaceful."

"Of course, Agent Gift." Thorne's smile never wavered. "We're soldiers in a spiritual war, not a physical one. Violence would only serve the enemy." The words were perfect, rehearsed, ready for the evening news.

Back in the car, Rachel watched through the window as Thorne positioned himself for the news cameras yet to come, his Bible held high.

The elderly woman with the silver bun dabbed at tears while she carried her sign in her trembling hand.

The teenage girl had finally put away her phone, standing dutifully beside her mother and watching the FBI agents walk away.

"What do you think?" Novak asked as they got back into their car and pulled away, the engine's hum replacing the sound of religious chants.

Rachel shook her head, watching the scene shrink in her side mirror.

"I think we need to focus on people with inside access to client information.

Someone who knows enough about the victims to target them specifically.

" She paused, considering her words carefully.

"Thorne wants to save souls, not take them.

Our killer wants to end lives. Different motivations entirely. "

The protest faded from view, but Rachel couldn't shake the image of all those signs, all that certainty.

In her experience, the truly dangerous ones rarely advertised their intentions so boldly.

They worked in shadows, not in front of news cameras.

Still, she made a mental note to perhaps take a look into the killer, perhaps approaching this from a religious angle.

In this job, you couldn't afford to dismiss any possibility completely.

The car fell into silence as they merged onto the highway, leaving New Horizons and its protesters behind. But Rachel's mind was already racing ahead, analyzing angles, connecting dots to a picture that was starting to look larger and larger with every step they took.

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Peter Wells closed his laptop with a satisfied click, leaning back in the butter-soft leather of his executive chair.

The quarterly numbers had exceeded even his optimistic projections – the new Lexus line was practically selling itself, and the certified pre-owned program he'd implemented last quarter was showing remarkable returns.

He allowed himself a moment to savor the victory, eyes drifting across his corner office to the framed photo of Michelle and Chloe at the beach last summer, both of them laughing as they buried him in sand.

Cloe looked just like her mother in the picture, and it was a resemblance that only got tighter as the years went by.

And those years were going by far too fast.

The response came almost immediately: Fresh strawberries for Chloe's lunch tomorrow? And maybe a bottle of that Cab we like? Also...warning: she's obsessing over her science fair project. Be prepared for an onslaught of info when you get in.

The thought of his daughter's enthusiasm made him smile.

At ten, Chloe attacked everything with the same fierce determination, whether it was mastering her multiplication tables or perfecting her Belle costume from Beauty and the Beast .

Just yesterday, he'd caught her twirling through the kitchen in her yellow dress,

singing to their increasingly exasperated golden retriever, Max, asking him to “ Be our guest, be our guest...”

"Speaking of Belle," Peter murmured, pulling up his to-do list. The princess performer company still hadn't confirmed for Chloe's birthday party, three weeks away.

He'd pay double their normal rate if he had to – the thought of his little girl's face lighting up when her favorite Disney princess walked through their front door would be worth every penny.

Rising from his desk, Peter walked through his meticulously appointed office.

The space reflected the success he'd fought so hard to achieve: original artwork on the walls (Michelle's choices – she had the eye for these things), custom mahogany furniture, and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the showroom floor.

He paused at the glass, admiring the lineup below.

A metallic blue BMW M8 Competition Gran Coupe caught the recessed lighting perfectly, its curves suggesting motion even at rest. Beside it, a pearl white Porsche Cayenne Turbo GT practically glowed, while a murdered-out Mercedes AMG GT crouched like a predator ready to pounce.

The sight still gave him a thrill, even after all these years.

Sometimes, usually, late at night when he was closing up alone, he'd walk the showroom floor and remember the kid he'd been, pressing his nose against dealership windows, dreaming of just sitting in cars like these.

Twenty-six years ago, he'd been that kid: a college dropout sleeping on his buddy

Mark's lumpy couch, eating microwave burritos and desperately applying for any job that would take him.

The used car lot had been his last resort – minimum wage plus the theoretical possibility of commission, working for a manager who looked at him like something scraped off his shoe.

But Peter discovered he had a gift, an ability to connect with people that transcended the usual sleazy car salesman stereotype.

He remembered his first sale: a beaten-up Dodge Neon to a single mom with two kids.

He'd spent hours helping her figure out financing, running numbers until they found a payment plan she could manage.

"You're different," she'd told him after signing the paperwork. "You actually care."

He'd carried that moment with him as he worked his way up from lot assistant to top salesman within two years, saving every possible penny.

When he was twenty-five, he'd leveraged everything he had – including a second mortgage on the tiny starter home he and Michelle had just bought – to secure a loan for his first dealership.

The place had been struggling, the previous owner practically giving it away, but Peter had seen the potential.

Michelle had believed in him even then when they were living on ramen and store-brand cereal when he worked eighteen-hour days trying to turn the business around. "You're building something," she'd tell him, massaging his shoulders after another

marathon day. "We're building something together."

Now, at forty-seven, he owned six dealerships across Virginia, two ranked in the state's Top 25 for sales volume.

The success had brought everything they'd dreamed of: the stunning five-bedroom house in Riverside Heights, private school for Chloe, summer vacations exploring Europe.

Chloe's college fund was already substantial enough that she could attend any university she chose.

He'd made another investment in the future recently – one that had led to a rare argument with Michelle.

Peter thought of the New Horizons Cryonics membership card in his wallet, and a trail of scattered memories followed.

The memory of his father's death still haunted him: watching helplessly as the massive heart attack took him at forty-eight, barely older than Peter was now.

He could still smell the antiseptic hospital air, still hear the flat tone of the heart monitor, still feel the crushing weight of finality.

The terror of mortality had never quite left him after that day.

Every time he had a headache, every slight chest pain from too much coffee, every routine physical – they all carried the whisper of his father's fate.

Cryopreservation felt like insurance, a chance at more time with his family, even if Michelle thought it was a waste of money.

"It's not natural," she'd said during their argument three days ago, her voice tight with frustration. "And two hundred thousand dollars, Peter? For something that might not even work?"

"What if it does work?" he'd countered. "What if it means we're guaranteed to get to see Chloe graduate college? See our grandchildren? Wouldn't that be worth any price?"

"And you expect me to do it as well?" she asked, nearly fuming at that point.

"I'd hope you would. It would suck to be brought back to life only to find you gone." He'd meant it as a sweet sentiment, but it had come off as creepy.

The argument had ended in a stalemate, but Peter knew Michelle would come around. She always did when she understood how much something meant to him. And nothing meant more than time with his family.

"Hey, Rich!" Peter called out as he made his way through the showroom. His night manager looked up from the computer at the sales desk. "Everything set for closing?"

"All good, Mr. Wells. Just finishing up the paperwork on that RS7 we sold this afternoon. That custom order you suggested for Dr. Fabri? He loved it."

"Perfect. See you tomorrow. Oh...and what's with this 'Mr. Wells' crap?"

Rich chuckled as Peter made his way out.

The employee entrance was around back, where Peter's Range Rover sat alone in the reserved parking space.

The evening was still bright, golden sunlight glinting off the endless rows of cars in

the lot.

He paused to admire a particularly striking Audi R8, its Daytona Gray paint catching the light like liquid metal.

Maybe for his fiftieth birthday, he thought.

Michelle would roll her eyes, but she'd love it too – she had as much of a speed demon streak as he did, though she tried to hide it.

He came to his car—a basic Tesla, which he planned to drive until the wheels fell off. He reached for the door handle, but that's as far as he made it.

The first blow caught him completely by surprise – something hard striking the back of his knee, buckling his leg with shocking force.

He felt something snap and loosen completely as he went to the ground.

He opened his mouth to yell, but then the second blow came.

This one struck him hard in the side of the head with a sharp, ringing crack against the base of his skull.

The sound was oddly musical, like a bell being struck underwater.

Peter had a fraction of a second to register the strange thought before darkness rushed in from all sides.

His last conscious image was of Chloe in her Belle costume, twirling in their living room with Max at her heels, singing about a tale as old as time.

Then, nothing at all.

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"Back corner," Novak said, nodding toward a quiet nook partially hidden behind a towering potted fiddle leaf fig. Two oversized leather armchairs flanked a reclaimed wood table, offering both comfort and privacy.

"Some of us actually appreciate good coffee," Novak replied, setting up his laptop. "And yes, even this late. Besides, when was the last time you had a decent cup at a precinct?"

"Point taken." Rachel settled into one of the chairs, the leather butter-soft with age.

She pulled her iPad from her shoulder bag while Novak set his laptop up.

The playlist overhead shifted from Iron & Wine to what sounded suspiciously like a folk version of "Sweet Child O' Mine. " "Though the music's debatable."

A barista approached their corner, her dark hair pulled back in a neat braid, tattoos of constellations dotting her forearms. "Welcome to the Bean. Can I get you started with anything?"

"Large dark roast, black," Rachel said, spreading the first batch of files across the table.

"Make that two," Novak added, "but add cream to mine. And we'll take a couple of the prosciutto and fig sandwiches."

The barista nodded. "Good choice. I'll have those right out."

As she walked away, Rachel raised an eyebrow at Novak. "Fancy sandwich guy now, are we?"

"Trust me on this one." He typed in his FBI credentials into his laptop, the blue glow of the database login screen reflecting off his features.

"Better than the vending machine dinner we'd be having at a station.

Speaking of which—" he gestured around at the cafe's warm ambiance, "—not bad for an office, right? "

Rachel had to admit he had a point. The Copper Bean hummed with quiet energy, but it was worlds away from the harsh fluorescent lighting and stale coffee of their usual workspace.

The aroma of freshly ground beans mingled with the savory scent of warming sandwiches and the subtle earthiness of the potted plants scattered throughout the space.

Through the front windows, she could see the last rays of sunlight painting the sky in shades of amber and rose—colors she thought always looked faded in the sky during cold weather like this.

"I could get used to this," she conceded, pulling Margaret Fenway's list closer. "Though maybe with different music."

"What, you're not feeling the acoustic cover of Soundgarden?"

"Is that what this is? I couldn't tell under all the banjo."

Their coffee and sandwiches arrived as Rachel began sorting through the personnel

files. The sandwich, she had to admit, was exceptional—the fig jam adding an unexpected sweetness that balanced perfectly with the prosciutto and sharp cheese.

"Okay," she said, wiping her fingers on a napkin.

"Let's see what kind of people New Horizons attracts.

" She began methodically opening the files and then scrolling through them on her screen, through the stack of personnel files, creating neat digital piles based on department and specialization.

"First up, their research division. Dr. Paula Greene—double PhD from MIT, biomedical engineering and molecular biology.

Three patents in cryopreservation techniques, specifically in neural tissue preservation.

" She whistled softly. "Turned down department chair positions at both Johns Hopkins and Mayo Clinic for this place.

Published over forty papers in the last decade alone. "

"Impressive," Novak said, taking a bite of his sandwich. "What's her specialty?"

"According to this, she's developed a new method for preserving synaptic connections during the freezing process.

Previous attempts resulted in significant degradation, but her technique.

.." Rachel scanned the technical documentation.

"Well, I can't understand half these terms, but the results speak for themselves. She's revolutionizing the field."

Rachel moved to the next file. "Here's Dr. James Morrison.

Former chief of neurosurgery at Mass General, pioneering work in hypothermic surgery techniques.

Was making seven figures, had a staff of thirty under him.

" She scrolled through more pages. "Walking away from that to join a startup? That's a hell of a career move."

"Maybe he really believed in the mission," Novak suggested.

"Maybe. But look at this pattern." Rachel spread out more files.

"Dr. Elena Rodriguez—left her position as head of cellular regeneration research at Stanford.

Dr. Marcus Wong—abandoned a tenure-track position at Harvard Medical to join New Horizons.

Dr. Brian Carter—walked away from a prestigious research grant at Johns Hopkins. "

She pulled out another stack. "And it's not just the medical staff. Their engineering team is just as impressive. It's filled with mechanical engineering folks, PhDs all over the place, researchers from CalTech, MIT, you name it. Dr. Kenneth Park, formerly part of the cryogenics team at CERN. Dr. Laura Hammond, who literally wrote the textbook on biomedical preservation systems." She stopped and let out a laugh even though a small chill raced up her spine.

“Christ, I had to study her work during my forensics training. ”

Novak leaned forward, interested. "They're building quite a brain trust."

They spent the next few minutes reading over everything—Novak typing in the occasional name into the bureau database to see if anything popped up. By the time Rachel came across anything of note, the sandwiches were gone, and what remained of their coffee had gone lukewarm.

"I think I may have found something here," she said, stretching her neck slightly.

"Look at the pattern. Over six years, they've recruited forty-seven top-tier scientists and doctors.

And here's what's really interesting—" she tapped the employment records, "—only three people have ever left voluntarily, all for prestigious positions elsewhere.

Dr. Michael Chang went to lead research at the Max Planck Institute.

Dr. Rebecca Sullivan took over as department chair at UCLA Medical.

Dr. Thomas Lienhart was personally recruited by the NIH to head their new cryobiology division. "

"Instead, they're all working for a six-year-old startup," Novak mused. "That's how long New Horizons has been around, right?"

"According to these records." Rachel took a sip of her coffee, wincing at the temperature.

"And again...just look at these retention statistics. Three voluntary departures in six

years—all to incredibly prestigious positions. That's saying something.

Zero firings...except a guy named until Alex Manning.

Zero resignations without immediate career advancement.

That's not normal, Novak. Even the best research facilities have turnover. "

She pulled out another set of documents.

"Their support staff is just as stable. Lab technicians, administrative personnel, facility managers—most places cycle through those positions every couple of years.

But at New Horizons?" She tapped a spreadsheet.

"Ninety-eight percent retention rate across all non-research positions.

The only people who've left their maintenance and security teams did so for medical retirement or relocation due to family circumstances. "

Around them, the dinner crowd had begun to thin, replaced by students settling in for evening study sessions. The playlist had moved on to what might have been a folksy rendition of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," though she couldn't be entirely sure.

"Fenway must have one hell of a recruitment pitch," Novak said, scrolling through database entries. "Or deep pockets."

"Probably both." Rachel continued through the files, noting publication records and research achievements that read like a who's who of cutting-edge medical science.

Then she paused, something catching her eye. "Hold on. Here's something

interesting."

"What've you got?"

"Alex Manning...again. Harvard Medical School, biochemistry research fellowship at Stanford, impressive publication record in cellular preservation techniques." She frowned, scanning the documentation. "But, like I said, he's the only one to have ever actually been fired."

"How long ago?" Novak asked.

"Five months."

Novak looked up from his screen. "Fired? That doesn't track with what you've been reading to me. Most of their staff either stays put or moves on to other positions. Nobody gets fired."

"Exactly." Rachel pushed the file across the table. "Can you pull up anything on him?"

"Give me a minute." Novak's fingers flew across the keyboard, the soft clicking nearly lost under the sound of an acoustic guitar transforming what might have been a Metallica song into something unrecognizable.

Rachel's phone buzzed against the table. It was a familiar number...one she'd seen recently. She was pretty sure it was a call from Sergeant Rose.

"This is Agent Gift," she answered, already knowing from the late hour that it couldn't be good news.

"Agent Gift." Rose's voice was tight. "We've got another one."

Rachel caught Novak's eye across the table, doing what she could to communicate the news without breaking away from the call. "Where?"

"Car Dealership near Beacon Hill. Owner's name is Peter Wells—runs those car dealerships you see advertised everywhere. He just also happens to be the victim. Looks to be the same M.O. as the others."

Rachel's hand tightened around her phone. Three victims now, and a pattern emerging that she didn't like at all. "We're on our way."

She ended the call, looking at Novak, who was already closing his laptop. The cozy atmosphere of the Copper Bean suddenly felt very far away from the reality of their investigation.

"That was Sergeant Rose," she said. "We've got a third victim."

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Rachel watched the dealership materialize through the passenger window as Novak guided their vehicle toward the entrance.

Sodium lights cast an artificial day across rows of gleaming metal and chrome, creating harsh shadows that seemed to pulse with each sweep of red and blue from the police cruisers already on the scene.

A new nearby Mercedes caught the light, its silver paint transformed into liquid mercury.

Beyond it, a line of BMWs stood like high-end sentinels.

Three police units were already on scene.

Two blocked off the employee parking lot while another maintained position at the dealership entrance.

Novak lowered his window and held out his badge as they came to the one partially blocking off the entrance.

The officer—young, probably fresh out of the academy—gave it a cursory glance before waving them through.

His face had the pale, tight look of someone trying very hard not to be sick.

They parked behind the other two cruisers.

As Rachel stepped out, the chill night air carried the metallic scent of blood.

Several officers milled about, their faces drawn, conversations reduced to whispers.

One broke away from the group and approached them.

He kept his head low at first, but when he looked at them, his nameplate caught the harsh light: S. ROSE.

"Agent Gift?" His complexion had a greenish cast that made the shadows under his eyes look like bruises.

"Nice to finally meet you in person. Though I wish it were under better circumstances.

" He cleared his throat, Adam's apple bobbing.

"We've got two officers inside with the assistant manager, going through security feeds. They started about ten minutes ago."

Rachel studied his face—the tight lines around his mouth, the way his eyes kept darting back toward something behind him. "How bad is it?"

Rose's jaw clenched. "Bad. Really bad." His voice carried the seriousness of the moment, and Rachel found herself dreading what might be waiting for them behind her.

Rachel moved past him, Novak falling in step beside her.

The security lights created overlapping pools of harsh illumination, turning the asphalt into a patchwork of light and shadow.

Three officers stood in a loose circle around Peter Wells' body, their postures rigid with tension.

The amount of blood pooling beneath his head caught the security lights and gleamed like fresh paint.

Her stomach clenched. She'd seen her share of blunt force trauma over the years, but this...it was among the worst she'd ever seen.

The side of Wells' head was completely caved in, the damage extending from his temple to the base of his skull.

Fragments of bone and teeth mixed with the congealing blood, creating a grotesque mosaic on the concrete.

The killer had struck again and again, well past the point of death.

This wasn't just murder—it was rage made manifest, a violence that spoke of something deeper than simple homicide.

And it was identical to the severity and violence shown in the other two victims.

Beside her, Novak's lips moved in silent prayer.

Rachel understood the impulse. The scene felt profane under the stark lighting, like a sacrifice on an altar of concrete and steel.

She forced herself to look closer, to see past the horror to the details that might matter: the angle of the body, the spray pattern of the blood, the lack of defensive wounds on Wells' hands.

"Who found him?" she asked, finally forcing her eyes away from the corpse.

"A guy named Rich," Rose said. "The night manager. I'll show you." The relief in his voice was evident now that he had something to do besides stare at the carnage. "He's inside with the assistant manager and the officers."

They followed him into the dealership. The showroom felt frozen in time—spotless floors reflecting ranks of cars that were unmoved and unaffected by the tragedy outside. Their footsteps echoed off the high ceiling, each step seeming to disturb the unnatural quiet.

Sergeant Rose led them to a back office that had been converted into a security hub. Banks of monitors lined one wall, showing different angles of the dealership. The blue light from the screens cast everything in a ghostly glow, making the room feel like an aquarium.

A man stood in the corner, hands thrust deep in his pockets. His tie was loose, and sweat darkened the collar of his shirt despite the cool night. Dark patches spread from his armpits, and his face had the waxy sheen of shock.

"This is Rich Yancy," Rose said. "He found the body."

Rich nodded jerkily, his shoulders hunched as if trying to make himself smaller. He regarded the agents like a scared kid as they introduced themselves.

"When exactly did you find him?" Novak asked.

"I was heading home for the night....so right around 6:15, I guess.

" His voice cracked. "I... I saw him lying there and thought maybe he'd fallen.

But then I got closer..." He swallowed hard, the sound audible in the quiet room.

"We've been watching the feeds with Blake and the officers, but it won't help.

There aren't any cameras covering the employee lot. "

A man at the security desk—Blake, the assistant manager, Rachel assumed—confirmed this without looking away from the monitors.

His fingers moved mechanically over the controls, rewinding and fast-forwarding through footage that showed nothing useful.

"He's right," Blake said. "We can see vehicles entering the main lot, and then there are cameras aimed down just about every row of cars. We've got three inside the building as well.

But if someone parked on the far side and went around back.

.." He trailed off, shoulders slumping. "We won't see them. "

Rachel studied both men. The loss hung heavy in the room—this wasn't just the death of a boss.

These men had lost a friend. The air felt thick with grief and shock, the kind that hadn't yet given way to tears.

Blake's hands trembled slightly as he manipulated the controls, and Rich kept rubbing his palms against his pants as if trying to wipe away something only he could feel.

Taking a chance, Rachel asked, "Rich...did Peter ever mention anything about cryopreservation to either of you?"

Rich's brow furrowed, confusion momentarily replacing the shock on his face. "I don't even know what that is."

"I do," Blake said, finally turning from the monitors.

His face was ashen in the blue light of the screens, making him look decades older than he probably was.

He looked almost terrified to have responded,...

like he wished he'd just stayed quiet. "Peter brought it up last week.

Said he'd met with someone local about it.

" He gave a hollow laugh that held no humor.

"I thought it was science fiction stuff.

Make-believe." His expression darkened. "I mean, is it related to this? Is that why...?"

Rachel caught Novak's eye. There was no doubt now—this was their third victim with connections to cryonics, and probably New Horizons Cryonics at that. Margaret Fenway would have some explaining to do, whether she liked it or not.

The security office fell silent except for the soft whir of cooling fans and the muted clicks of the officer reviewing footage.

On the monitors, cars gleamed under the sodium lights like coffins sealed in metal and glass as the sun went down—the footage showing feed from two and a half hours ago.

Rich slumped against the wall, his reflection a ghost in the darkened windows.

Beyond the window to his right, the crime scene techs moved around Wells' body with mechanical precision, documenting the violence with flashbulbs that briefly outshone the security lights.

At the monitors, Blake rubbed his eyes, leaving his hand over his face a moment too long.

When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"I keep thinking I should call his wife.

" He dropped his hand, revealing red-rimmed eyes.

"Shit. Fifteen years we worked together.

Fifteen years of Christmas parties and cookouts and.

.." His voice caught. "He has a daughter. Chloe. She's ten. She..."

But he trailed off, struggling with emotion.

Rachel watched a tear track down Blake's cheek, quickly wiped away.

Behind him, the monitors showed endless loops of normal moments—customers browsing, salespeople chatting, cars being moved around the lot.

Normal moments that would never be normal again. But not what they were looking for.

Rose walked over and, with heaviness in his voice, said, "A unit has already headed over that way to speak with her. If she doesn't already know, she will very soon."

Rich suddenly pushed away from the wall, his breathing becoming erratic.

"I need some air," he mumbled, fumbling for the door.

No one tried to stop him. They all understood the need to escape this room with its endless loop of useless footage, its walls that seemed to be closing in with each passing minute.

Through the window, Rachel watched him stagger to a corner of the building between the rear of the building and where the cops were still staggered around the crime scene.

Rich took a deep breath and then hurried to a trashcan, where he emptied his stomach.

The sound carried faintly through the glass, a reminder of the horror waiting outside.

The crime scene techs had set up portable lights now, their harsh beams cutting through the sodium glow, creating new shadows that seemed to writhe and dance across the parked cars.

She turned back to Blake, who had resumed his vigil at the monitors. "We'll need copies of all the security footage, even if it doesn't show the actual murder. Is that possible?"

He nodded his head, wiping tears away. "Yeah. You want them for the entire day?"

"Might as well."

“Just tell me where to send it. I can get it to you by like midnight, maybe.””

Blake’s eyes were still fixed on the screens where his dead friend’s cars sat in perfect rows, waiting for customers who wouldn’t come.

Tomorrow, the sun would rise on a crime scene instead of a dealership.

Yellow tape would replace for sale signs.

And somewhere, a killer was already choosing their next target.

Outside, Rich was sitting on the curb, head between his knees while Rose stood nearby, offering silent support.

Rachel closed her eyes briefly, knowing this scene would stay with all of them: the sodium lights casting their artificial day, the blood-slick concrete, the hollow eyes of men who had lost a friend.

But she couldn’t afford to let it paralyze her.

Three victims now, all connected to cryonics.

The pattern was clear, even if the reason wasn’t.

She looked at Novak, saw the same determination in his face.

They had work to do. Margaret Fenway’s stonewalling would have to come to an end, one way or another.

And thanks to their earlier digging, they already had a potential lead in a man named Alexander Manning.

She tried to see this as a positive thing, as something to send them out into the night with at least a small bit of hope that there was an end to all of this just waiting around the corner.

But it was hard to hold on to that when the brutalized body of Peter Wells was still laying in the parking lot just a few feet away.

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The bathroom mirror had fogged over, but Cody Austin could still make out the dark smudges on his hands.

Motor oil. Transmission fluid. The daily grime of honest work.

Even after his shower, some of it had not come off.

Naked, he walked to the sink, twisted the hot water knob, and watched steam rise as he worked the orange pumice soap into his palms.

Ten years in prison, and now here he was—changing oil and rotating tires for minimum wage plus commission.

The thought should have made him angry, but instead, he smiled.

Let them think he'd been beaten down, reformed into some mundane worker bee—that he was just as happy as a clam to just have a second chance.

Every oil change, every tire rotation was another brushstroke in his masterpiece of mediocrity.

The soap's gritty texture reminded him of the fertilizer he'd used in the bomb.

He'd spent weeks getting the mixture exactly right, testing small batches in abandoned lots far outside the city in the dead of night.

Amateur bombmakers always got caught because they rushed things and got sloppy

with the details.

But patience had always been his strength.

He scrubbed harder at a particularly stubborn spot between his thumb and forefinger.

"Come on," he muttered, his voice barely audible over the running water.

The physical act of cleaning brought him back to that day at the hospice, walking through the front doors with the backpack of books for the Christmas book drive.

Such a simple thing, really. Christmas...kindness...

the book drive. It had been the perfect cover.

The spot on his hand finally came clean, and Cody felt a familiar surge of satisfaction.

He'd always been good at removing evidence and erasing traces.

In prison, he'd learned to fade into the background, to become so unremarkable that even the guards' eyes slid past him. He'd managed to stay out of trouble all that time, not causing a fuss, not drawing attention to himself.

Now he used that same skill every day, playing the role of the quiet mechanic who kept to himself, who was even starting to make friends among his coworkers.

His apartment reflected that persona perfectly. Bare walls, basic furniture, a TV tuned to whatever sports game was on. Nothing that would draw attention. Nothing that would make anyone look twice at the man in unit 3B.

The only personal touch was the newspaper clipping taped inside his medicine cabinet.

He opened it now, wiping away condensation to read the headline he'd memorized weeks ago: "BOMBING AT LOCAL HOSPICE LEAVES FOUR DEAD, MULTIPLE INJURED.

" Below that, in smaller text: "FBI Agent Rachel Gift Among Those Hospitalized. "

Rachel Gift. Even thinking her name made his jaw clench.

She'd stolen ten years of his life, and for what?

Because she'd somehow pieced together what he really was, even though she could never prove it.

He remembered her testimony at his sentencing, the way she'd looked right at him as she detailed the circumstantial evidence linking him to those murders.

The ones they couldn't charge him for. But Rachel had known, and he had always hoped it had nagged at her.

The bomb had been worth the risk, worth all those careful months of planning, all the reading and studying, just to imagine her face when she realized what was happening.

He'd known she volunteered there—it had taken surprisingly little effort to discover that fact. It's why he'd gone after Scarlett when he'd also learned that she had been Rachel's little pet project.

And he'd also known she'd respond when the threat came in. That's what made it perfect: she would have been there, helping evacuate patients, when it went off.

There had been a moment, reading about the bomb squad member who died, when something like guilt had flickered in his chest. But it passed quickly, replaced by a deeper satisfaction.

Every death was a weight added to Rachel's conscience.

She would blame herself for not catching him sooner, for not connecting the dots faster.

That was so much better than simply killing her.

But he did plan to do that, too...eventually.

Cody dried his hands carefully, then wiped down the sink until it sparkled. Everything in its place, everything perfectly normal. He'd go to work tomorrow, smile at his customers, do his job without complaint. And after work... well, that's when things would get interesting.

He studied his reflection in the now-clear mirror.

An unremarkable face looked back at him.

Brown hair starting to thin at the temples, eyes neither notably dark nor light.

The kind of face people forgot as soon as they looked away.

His greatest weapon had always been his ability to blend in, to seem harmless.

The recessed light shown overhead as he opened his medicine cabinet again, this time reaching past the newspaper clipping to take out a small notebook.

Its pages were filled with his neat, precise handwriting—schedules, routines, patterns of movement.

Rachel's patterns. He'd been watching her for months, learning her habits, the ways she'd changed since putting him away.

Marriage to her former partner. A closer relationship with her daughter.

Regular appointments with an oncologist to monitor her remission.

So many potential pressure points, so many ways to make her suffer.

The bomb had been loud, messy, obvious. What came next would be subtle, surgical. A scalpel instead of a sledgehammer.

He returned the notebook to its hiding place and closed the cabinet. Through the thin walls of his basement apartment, he could hear his upstairs neighbor's television, the muffled sounds of a sitcom laugh track. Such a normal sound on such a normal evening.

Tomorrow would be normal, too, right up until it wasn't. He'd already decided how to start: small, almost imperceptible disruptions to her sense of safety.

The kind of things that could be dismissed as paranoia or coincidence.

He wanted her scared, but he also wanted her feeling alone.

And by the time she realized what was happening, the psychological damage would already be done.

Cody walked into his sparse living room and settled into his recliner, grabbing the

remote to turn on SportsCenter.

Just another quiet night for the unremarkable mechanic in 3B.

He felt the smile tugging at his lips again as he thought about Rachel, probably at home right now, still healing from her injuries, still jumping at unexpected sounds.

The bomb had been his announcement, his way of letting her know he was back. Now the real game could begin. He had no timeline and no rush to reach the endgame. After all, he'd already waited ten years. What was a few more months if it meant doing things right?

The television droned on, but Cody barely heard it.

In his mind, he was already playing out tomorrow's moves, anticipating Rachel's reactions.

It would be subtle, careful work—just like removing engine grime from beneath his fingernails.

Some stains might be stubborn, might take time and patience to eliminate.

But in the end, everything came clean. In the end, Rachel Gift would be eliminated.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

The dealership's lights cast long stretches of sickly white across the pavement as Rachel and Novak made their way to their car.

The entire scene looked like something out of an over-produced horror movie, made all that much stronger by the knowledge of the bloody scene behind them.

A slight wind had picked up, making the already frigid January temperatures even colder.

Rachel pulled her coat tighter around herself, her footsteps echoing off the blacktop.

They had a lead, though it felt like a flimsy one—a name they'd discovered during their research but hadn't gotten a chance to properly investigate due to the call regarding the murder of Peter Wells.

"I think it's time we look into Alexander Manning," she said as they neared the car.

It seemed to take Novak a while to recall the name, but he eventually gave a little nod. "The only guy to have been fired from New Horizons, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll get his address," Novak said, already dialing the field office. He veered toward the driver's side while Rachel slid into the passenger seat, pulling out her phone.

She typed " Alexander Manning New Horizons " into the search bar, and the results populated quickly.

Manning's career read like a roadmap through the evolution of modern biochemistry.

He earned his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in '96, where his dissertation on cellular preservation techniques earned him the Lasker Award for Basic Medical Research.

From there, he'd spent eight years at the Mayo Clinic, heading their tissue preservation research division before being recruited by Harvard Medical School. His publication record was impressive: over seventy peer-reviewed papers, mostly focusing on cellular degradation and preservation techniques in extreme conditions. He'd even written two papers on the lifespan of extremophile organisms in Antarctica.

The driver's door opened, and Novak dropped into the seat, bringing with him a gust of cold air. "Got it. He's over in the Greenbrier neighborhood, about twenty minutes from here." He started the engine, the dashboard lights illuminating his face in a blue glow. "You find anything good?"

"Actually, yes." Rachel scrolled through the results.

"Manning's not just any biochemist. He basically wrote the book on modern cryopreservation techniques.

In 2018, he developed a new method for preventing ice crystal formation in preserved tissue – it's still the industry standard.

" She paused, finding something interesting.

"Wait. Here's where it gets relevant. Directly related to New Horizons...

it looks like the whole reasons he was fired was because he started speaking out against New Horizons' client selection process.

He claimed they were prioritizing wealth over viability. "

"Viability?"

"The likelihood of successful preservation and eventual revival.

" Rachel's eyes caught on a quote from Manning in a local paper: 'We're storing bodies that have zero chance of viable revival, while turning away younger candidates with better preservation prospects. It's become about money, not science.'

“Yikes.”

"So," she said, watching the streetlights flash by, "even if he's not our killer, he might know something useful about what's really going on at New Horizons. And it seems like he'd be almost happy to tell us."

Novak nodded, turning onto the highway. As silence settled into the car, Rachel realized that it was nearing 8:30 at night. And because Novak had said Manning's address was twenty minutes away, it seemed like a good time to make her check-in call to home.

“You mind if I make my check-in call?” she asked.

“Not at all. Actually, when you're done, I need to do the same.”

It was 8:32. She should have called home an hour ago. Of course, she knew that neither Page nor Jack would make a big deal about it. They never did...and she wasn't sure how to feel about that. So when she placed the call, she already had the familiar guilt settling in her stomach like a lead weight.

The phone rang twice before Paige answered. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie. Sorry, I'm calling so late."

"It's not all that late."

"I know, but still...how was your day?"

"It was okay." There was the sound of papers rustling in the background. "I had that English test today, remember?"

Rachel closed her eyes briefly. Of course – Paige had been studying for it all week. "Right, the one on that book you didn't like. What was it?"

"City of Ember."

"How'd it go?"

"I think I did pretty well," Paige said. "Mrs. Peterson said we'd get the grades back tomorrow." Paige paused. "Jack ordered pizza for dinner. He was all apologetic about it...said he was sorry he didn't have time to cook. There's some left if you're coming home soon."

The hope in her daughter's voice made Rachel's chest tighten. "Actually, honey, I might have to stay in Charlottesville tonight. We've got some leads we need to follow up on."

The silence on the other end lasted a beat too long. "That's fine. I understand."

"Is Jack around?" Rachel asked. "I should probably talk to him."

"He's on a conference call in the living room. Been on it for like an hour already. Something about a case in Baltimore? It's why he wasn't able to cook anything."

Rachel watched the highway signs flash past, each one taking her further from home.

From her family. "Right. The Baltimore case.

" She'd forgotten about that one – a series of bank robberies that had crossed state lines.

Jack had mentioned it at breakfast, hadn't he?

Or was that yesterday's breakfast? The days were starting to blur together.

All she knew was that Jack had been responsible for putting the team together and to make sure they had all the resources they needed.

"It's really okay, Mom," Paige said, her voice carrying that forced maturity that made Rachel's heart ache. "I've got homework to finish anyway, and then maybe I'll watch something on Netflix."

Rachel thought of her daughter sitting alone at the kitchen table, with a pizza box pushed aside to make room for her textbooks, while Jack paced the living room, talking about case files and jurisdictional issues.

She thought of all the times she'd promised to be more present, to find a better balance.

Those promises had piled up to toppling, only to come crashing down on all of them.

The only time she'd truly been there for Paige was when the tumor had forced her to be – when death had seemed so certain that work became irrelevant. Now here she was, healthy again, and what was she doing with that second chance?

"Paige, I—" She almost said it again. I'll do better. I'll be home more. I'll figure this out. But the words died in her throat. How many times had Paige heard those promises? "I love you," she said instead.

"Love you too, Mom. Be safe, okay?"

"You know me...I'm always safe."

Rachel made a pfff sound before saying, "I love you," and ending the call.

After they hung up, Rachel stared out the window at the darkness beyond the glass.

She thought about Alexander Manning, fired for speaking uncomfortable truths in an environment where controversy already had people on edge.

She thought about the bodies that were already in New Horizons' facility, preserved in ways she didn't fully understand, waiting for a future that might never come.

And she thought of Thomas Whitman, Diana Foxworth, and Peter Wells – all wealthy, all dead, all connected to New Horizons in ways they were still trying to understand.

And she thought about Paige, doing her homework alone in their kitchen, probably wearing those pink wireless earbuds Rachel had bought her for Christmas, the ones she used to block out the sound of Jack's work calls.

"You okay?" Novak asked, his voice cutting through her thoughts.

Rachel straightened in her seat, pulling up Manning's address again on her phone. "Yeah. Just thinking about the case." She paused, then added, "And wondering if I made the right choice, coming back full-time."

Novak was quiet for a moment, navigating through a particularly dark stretch of highway. "You know what I think? I think there are no right choices, not really. Just different kinds of hard ones...especially when there are kids involved."

Rachel looked at her partner – really looked at him for maybe the first time since they'd been assigned together. In the dashboard lights, his face was serious and thoughtful. "You sound like you're speaking from experience."

He shrugged. "My dad was a cop. Missed most of my baseball games, my graduation, my mom's funeral.

But he put away some really bad people. Saved a lot of lives.

" He signaled for their exit. "I used to be angry about it, but now.

.. I don't know. Maybe some people are just built to carry certain burdens. "

She nodded, recalling that he had told her once before that her father had been a cop—and was pretty much the only real reason Novak himself had looked towards a career in law enforcement.

Rachel thought about the killer they were hunting, about the families of the victims, about all the potential targets they hadn't identified yet. She thought about Paige again, but this time she forced herself to remember something else: the way her daughter had always looked to her as a hero when she'd been younger...

like an actual superhero. She wondered what had happened to change that.

Did Paige now only notice the absence of her mother more than the sometimes heroic things she did?

She looked to Novak's phone on the center console, with the map app open, showing their progress. Seven minutes to Manning's place...and hopefully answers that would, one way or another, provide answers that would end this killer's bloody quest.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

The neat rows of colonial-style homes looked warm and welcoming in the cold night as Rachel and Novak pulled up to Dr. Manning's address.

The neighborhood straddled that delicate line between aspirational and attainable—the kind of place where successful professionals settled when they wanted good schools without the pretension of the truly wealthy suburbs.

Manning's house stood out subtly from its neighbors, not through ostentation but through careful attention to detail.

The brick facade was painted a warm beige, with crisp white trim that looked freshly touched up.

A curved pathway led to the front door, bordered by solar-powered garden lights that gave off an ambient blue light in the darkness.

The small front yard displayed evidence of hands-on care rather than hired landscaping: well-tended beds of native plants and a Japanese maple that had been carefully pruned to create an elegant silhouette against the house.

A covered portico protected the entry, its ceiling painted the traditional pale blue common to Southern homes. Rachel noted the premium video doorbell mounted beside the glossy black door—clearly the Mannings took their security seriously.

She pressed the bell, watching as its ring light pulsed blue. After a moment, a woman's voice came through the speaker, polite but cautious: "Yes? Who's there?"

Rachel held up her credentials to the camera. "I'm Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI, and this is Agent Novak. We need to speak with Dr. Alexander Manning regarding New Horizons."

The door opened almost immediately, following the sound of two locks disengaging.

When it opened, a striking woman in her early fifties stood before them.

Her blonde hair was styled in an elegant bob, and she wore what Rachel recognized as the unofficial uniform of the comfortable upper-middle class: designer jeans and a cashmere sweater in a flattering shade of marine blue.

"Please, come in," she said, stepping back to allow them entry into a foyer with gleaming hardwood floors and a tasteful Craftsman-style light fixture overhead.

Before they could introduce themselves properly, a man emerged from a doorway to their right.

He had the lean build of a distance runner and wore wire-rimmed glasses that gave him a scholarly air.

"I'm Dr. Manning," he said, his tone indicating he'd overheard their introduction.

He looked back and forth between them suspiciously as if wondering if he could trust them. "What exactly can I help you with?"

Rachel met his gaze directly. "We're investigating a series of deaths that appear to be connected to New Horizons."

A slight furrow appeared between Manning's brows. "I see," he said, giving a slight nod. "Please, come into the sitting room."

The room he led them into perfectly balanced comfort and sophistication.

Built-in bookshelves flanked a gas fireplace with a classic marble surround, their shelves filled with an eclectic mix of scientific texts and well-worn novels.

Two leather club chairs faced the fire, each with a book splayed open on its arm, suggesting they'd interrupted the Mannings' evening reading.

A plush sectional in warm cognac leather dominated one wall while floor-to-ceiling windows looked out onto a private backyard garden, currently covered in night and shadow.

The room smelled faintly of cedar and vanilla, emanating from a candle flickering on the mantel.

"Please, sit," Manning gestured to the sectional. His wife hovered near the doorway. "Can I offer you anything? Tea? Coffee?"

Novak shook his head, but Rachel smiled. "Tea would be lovely, thank you."

"Peppermint or black?" Mrs. Manning asked.

"Peppermint, please."

As Mrs. Manning left the room, Rachel settled onto the sofa, noting how Manning chose to sit in one of the club chairs, maintaining a slight distance. "Dr. Manning, we'd like to discuss your time at New Horizons. Specifically your feelings about the organization."

Manning's fingers drummed once on the chair's arm before he stilled them. "Are you asking if I harbor resentment for how my time there ended?"

"Do you?"

He let out a short laugh. "I did, for about a week.

I'll admit I said some things to colleagues and other organizations that weren't entirely professional.

But bitter? No." He leaned forward slightly, his expression becoming more animated.

"My concerns were never personal. They were ethical.

I understand what they are trying to accomplish and share the same desires.

We just have different opinions on how it should be presented. "

"Could you elaborate?" Novak asked, his notebook already open.

Manning's eyes took on an intensity that Rachel recognized from other scientists she'd interviewed—the look of someone passionate about their field.

"New Horizons has perverted the entire purpose of cryopreservation research. The technology itself is fascinating, potentially revolutionary. There are certain things they will be able to do within the next decade that are going to blow people's minds.

But they've turned it into an exclusive club for the ultra-wealthy. "

He stood and began to pace, his earlier reserve forgotten.

"The basic process—the preservation itself—could be offered for as little as fifty thousand dollars, perhaps even less, depending on the preservation term.

But New Horizons charges over seven hundred thousand for whole-body preservation.

Why? Not because of actual costs, but because they can.

They've created artificial scarcity to drive up prices and ensure their client list remains... exclusive. Have you been to the facility?"

"We have," Novak said.

"Then you've seen what I'm talking about...the way they present themselves. They want you to think what they are doing is some sort of science fiction fantasy come to life. And they do a good job of it. They make themselves look almost...almost ethereal ...and are able to charge ridiculous prices."

Mrs. Manning returned with a delicate china cup of tea, steam rising in fragrant wisps. Rachel thanked her and took a careful sip; it was warm and soothing, as she'd hoped. Meanwhile, Novak continued the questioning.

"Have you had any contact with anyone at New Horizons since your departure?" he asked.

Manning settled back into his chair, looking almost defeated. "I emailed Margaret Fenway a few months ago. I apologized for some of the things I'd said when they let me go. I told her I'd be happy to talk it over in person, but she never responded."

Rachel watched him carefully as she asked her next question. "Would it surprise you to learn that someone connected to New Horizons appears to be murdering people?"

His reaction seemed genuine—a slight paling of his complexion, a barely perceptible flinch.

But he sat back up in his chair again, his eyes filled with shock and concern.

"I'd be shocked beyond measure if any of my former colleagues were capable of murder," he said quietly.

"They are, after all, working very hard to extend life. "

Rachel knew that the recent murder of Peter Wells had occurred within the last three hours, making it simple to rule out Manning if his whereabouts could be verified. It was one of the many advantages to getting to a fresh scene. "Where were you this afternoon, Dr. Manning?"

"Teaching an online course until 5:30, then Sandra and I went out for dinner. We came home and started reading—until you knocked on our door."

"What school was the course for?"

"Aspen Paget University—a strictly online university," he answered.

"Can you prove the dinner?" Novak asked.

Mrs. Manning, who had been listening silently from her perch on the arm of her husband's chair, pulled out her phone. The whole time, Rachel watched Manning to see if he'd get upset about the questions, about basically accusing him without coming out and stating it.

"We paid with my Apple Card," his wife said, showing her phone. "Here's the receipt."

Rachel glanced at the timestamp—it aligned perfectly with Manning's story, and the online course would be easy to verify. Still, she had one final question. "During your

time there, was there anyone at New Horizons who gave you pause? Anyone who raised red flags?"

Manning was quiet for a moment, clearly giving the question serious consideration.

"The truth is, most of the staff were idealists.

Brilliant minds who truly believed in the potential of the technology.

Even Margaret, for all her faults, believes in what she's doing.

She's just... lost sight of the broader possibilities in favor of immediate profits. "

His expression grew distant, and Rachel could see him mentally reviewing his time there.

"The labs were state-of-the-art, of course.

Everything was pristine, controlled. But there was always this undercurrent of.

.. desperation. Not from the staff, but from the clients.

People who were essentially trying to buy their way out of death.

Some of them would visit regularly, checking on their future 'accommodations.

' The way they talked about it—as if they were booking a long-term stay at some exclusive resort. .."

He shook his head. "But no, I can't think of anyone specific who worried me. The ethical issues were systemic, not individual."

Rachel and Novak exchanged a glance. They had what they needed.

As they stood to leave, Rachel noticed a framed photo on one of the bookshelves—a younger Manning in a lab coat, surrounded by other scientists, all smiling broadly.

The picture spoke of enthusiasm, of possibility.

Whatever had soured at New Horizons had come later.

“Well, thank you for your time,” Rachel said. “And the tea.” She took another sip before placing the cup down and starting for the door, Novak followed, taking one last look around the room.

At the door, Rachel saw Manning's wife touch his arm gently. "Alex, should we be worried? About all this?"

"No," Rachel answered for him. “Not for now. But we appreciate your time and cooperation. If you think of anything else, please call." She handed Manning her card.

As they walked back to their car, the solar lights along the path had fully illuminated, creating pools of soft light in the gathering darkness.

Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that Manning's insights about the clients' desperation might be more relevant than he realized.

Sometimes the most dangerous person wasn't the one with the grievance, but the one with everything to lose.

"What do you think?" Novak asked as they pulled away from the curb.

Rachel watched the Manning house recede in the side mirror. "I think we need to

look more closely at the clients. The living ones, though. Not the ones already on ice."

"How do we do that?"

"We pay another visit to New Horizons." She sighed, looking out into the darkness. "But I suppose that will have to wait until tomorrow. I doubt anyone on staff right now, at this time of day, is only in the realm of security."

"I can call and make sure," Novak offered.

"Sure."

But as they headed for the car, she knew how it would play out.

If they wanted to speak to Fenway in any real capacity and hope for any real information, they'd need to be at the office.

She supposed they could call Fenway and demand that she meet them at New Horizons but with the woman already being a bit difficult, Rachel didn't see the point in pissing her off.

So they'd have to wait until the morning.

Which meant the killer would have the entire night to scheme and plan...which made Rachel feel far too uneasy and uncertain.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

She slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb the perfectly made other side – a habit from sharing a bed with Jack that persisted even when she traveled alone.

The carpet felt rough beneath her feet as she padded to the bathroom, going through her morning routine with mechanical efficiency: brushing her teeth, combing her hair, getting dressed with a speed she'd long ago gotten down to a science.

Dressed in a charcoal pantsuit that had spent the night hanging in the bathroom to release its wrinkles, Rachel approached the room's diminutive coffee maker.

The thing looked like it had been designed for a dollhouse, but it would have to do.

She loaded the provided packet of house blend, wincing at the artificial hazelnut smell that wafted up as hot water began trickling through.

While the coffee maker wheezed and sputtered, she spread the case files across the room's small desk.

The autopsy reports for their three victims stared back at her, full of clinical details that failed to paint the bigger picture she was searching for.

The coffee finished brewing, and she took a sip of the weak result, grimacing.

No hidden clues emerged from the files, just the same frustrating dead ends they'd been chasing.

Rachel walked over to the meager variety of selections and picked out a slightly stale

blueberry bagel, an orange that was about two days away from being over-ripe, and a yogurt cup from the breakfast spread.

She chose a seat in the far corner, positioning herself to keep both exits in view – another habit she couldn't shake.

The businessman didn't look up as she passed.

She sat down and spread cream cheese on the bagel and was pleased to find that it wasn't as stale as she'd thought.

She had taken three bites of it and had peeled the lid off of her yogurt when her phone's vibration startled her.

Jack's name on the screen brought an involuntary smile to her face. She accepted the FaceTime call, his familiar features filling her screen. She saw that he hadn't shaved last night, giving him that five o'clock shadow she found so sexy—which was a shame because it was far too prickly whenever he kissed her.

"Hey, stranger," he said, his voice warm even through the tinny phone speaker. The soft light in their kitchen at home illuminated him from behind, and she could see their coffee maker in the background – the good one, that actually produced something worth drinking.

"Hey yourself. Good morning."

"Sorry I missed your call last night," he continued. "That damn Boston meeting ran late."

"Don't worry about it," Rachel said, meaning it. "How are things at home?"

"Good. Talked to Paige for a while before she went to bed last night." He paused, and Rachel recognized his expression – the one he wore when choosing his words carefully. "She's worried about you. Says you're starting to sound guilty again when you call."

Rachel sighed, picking at her bagel. "I know better than to feel that way, but..."

"But you do anyway," Jack finished. "I know. But there's no need, Rachel. You know that."

"I do. It's just..." She struggled to put the feeling into words. "I can remember the way she used to look at me when she was little...how she used to look at me like I could do anything. Fix anything."

Jack's expression softened. "She still does, you know. These days, she just has trouble finding joy or awe in much of anything. Typical teenage stuff, maybe." He groaned a bit and added: "Sorry. Not trying to talk smack about your child. She's wonderful. You know that."

Rachel chuckled. "If that's what you consider 'smack talk,' you're perfectly fine. "But I think it's maybe just everything she's been through. Everything I put her through."

"Rachel..." Jack leaned closer to the camera, his face filling more of the screen. "You didn't put her through anything. The cancer, Alex Lynch, Alice – none of that was your fault. You fought through all of it, showed her what real strength looks like."

"I just miss her smile," Rachel said quietly. "The real one, not the one she puts on to make us feel better."

"She smiled yesterday," Jack offered. "Actually laughed. We were watching

Brooklyn 99 , and she let out a big ol' belly laugh."

Rachel felt a genuine smile tugging at her lips. "I still think she's too young for that show."

"Oh, me, too. But she said you'd okayed it."

"Well, mister...you've been played."

They shared a laugh together, but movement caught her eye. Novak had entered the breakfast area, already dressed in a crisp navy suit.

"I should go," she said. "Novak's here....and we're starting early today."

"Be safe," Jack said, their usual goodbye. "Love you."

"Love you too."

She ended the call just as Novak reached her table, a plate loaded with scrambled eggs and toast in his hand. He sat down across from her, checking his watch.

"Another hour and fifteen before New Horizons opens for the day," he said, reaching for the salt. "Do you think Margaret Fenway will be happy to see us?"

Rachel thought of their three victims – Thomas Whitman, Diana Foxworth, and Peter Wells. All connected to New Horizons, all dead. All brutalized.

Popping another piece of bagel into her mouth, Rachel said: "I honestly don't care if she is or not."

The morning sun cast long shadows across the New Horizons parking lot as Rachel and Novak approached the building.

As they came to the guard shack, Rachel saw evidence of yesterday's protest lingering in the form of discarded signs and pamphlets that the morning wind scattered across the asphalt. For a group of so-called Christians, they apparently didn't give much of a crap about other people's property.

After parking, they headed inside and Rachel did her best to remain in control, keeping her pace to a steady walk rather than a march.

The lobby's automatic doors whispered open, releasing a burst of climate-controlled air that carried the faint antiseptic smell Rachel had noticed yesterday.

The same receptionist from their previous visit sat behind the curved desk, her professional smile faltering slightly when she recognized them.

Rachel noticed her hands still on the keyboard mid-type, like a pianist caught between notes.

"We need to speak with Ms. Fenway," Rachel said, her tone leaving no room for deflection.

She watched the receptionist's throat work as she swallowed and wondered if her mounting frustration was visible on her face, like storm clouds gathering before lightning strikes. She kept her voice as professional as possible, but with a tone that indicated she really didn't have the patience for an argument.

The receptionist's fingers trembled slightly as she reached for her phone and punched in the numbers for an extension within the building.

Rachel listened to the one-sided conversation, reading volumes into each "yes" and "of course."

"When the girl hung up, she seemed almost relieved to deliver good news."

"Ms. Fenway will see you in her office," she said, smoothing her skirt as she stood to guide them. "Second floor, end of the hall."

They found the elevators at the end of a wide, short hallway. The entire back wall was made of reinforced glass that looked out onto a patio that was covered in a variety of plants—most of which looked rather dead and sad, given the recent cold weather.

The elevator ride was silent except for the soft hum of machinery and the faint click of floor numbers changing.

Rachel used the time to study their reflection in the polished steel doors – herself, tension visible in the set of her shoulders, and Novak, maintaining his usual calm demeanor but with a glint in his eye that made it look like he was always ready for the unexpected.

The doors opened onto a floor that struck a careful balance between professional and futuristic.

The sci-fi elements of the lobby were muted here, replaced by tasteful abstract art and warm wood accents, but hints of the building's purpose remained in the sleek chrome fixtures and glowing LED strips that lined the hallway.

Their footsteps were muffled by thick carpeting as they made their way to Fenway's office.

The CEO's corner office commanded impressive views through floor-to-ceiling windows that wrapped around two walls.

The open expanse of the land around the building spread out below, the morning sun beginning to paint the grass in a golden light.

Fenway stood as they entered, her trepidation evident in her stiff posture as she gestured for them to sit in the leather chairs facing her desk.

"Something else I can do for you?" she asked, her carefully maintained smile not reaching her eyes.

There was a tone hidden in her voice, barely there but there all the same, that indicated she was not at all happy to see them again.

A half-empty cup of coffee sat cooling on her desk, the surface marked with countless rings from previous cups – small imperfections in her otherwise perfect workspace.

Rachel leaned forward, abandoning any pretense of social niceties.

"There's been a third murder, Ms. Fenway.

Peter Wells, a man that has visited this facility and spoken to either you or someone else about cryopreservation.

That makes three victims, Ms. Fenway, all connected to New Horizons.

Given this obvious link...well, I'm beyond trying to be nice or by-the-book. We need information."

Fenway's perfect posture faltered slightly as she sank back into her chair. "Agent Gift, I understand your position, but I can't simply—"

"Can't give out client information?" Rachel finished. "Fine. Let's talk about prospective clients instead. People who couldn't afford your services and maybe got angry when they were rejected. People with a reason to lash out."

"That's not how we operate," Fenway said, her own frustration beginning to show as she shifted files on her desk, straightening already straight edges.

"We're very upfront about the costs involved.

It's often the first thing discussed before anyone even tours the facility. We don't waste anyone's time."

Novak cleared his throat. "Even if that were the motive, eliminating current clients wouldn't guarantee entry for someone who couldn't afford it."

"I'm sorry, agents." Fenway spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness that Rachel didn't buy for a second. "I can't just hand over that sort of information...even for potential clients. Surely you understand the confidences I'd be breaking."

Rachel felt her jaw tighten, but before she could respond, Fenway continued.

"It's not just me and New Horizons," she said, gesturing toward her window.

Her voice was softer now, almost sad. "You saw the protest yesterday, right?

If I give out names and information and it gets to people like those religious zealots.

.." She shook her head, causing a strand of perfectly styled hair to fall out of place.

She tucked it back with practiced precision.

"Tormenting us and protesting outside the building is one thing, but I fear people like that would start going to these people's homes.

Anyone interested in cryopreservation could become a target. "

Rachel almost dismissed the comment outright – it felt like a convenient excuse to stonewall them.

But something about it nagged at her, like a loose thread that could unravel the whole case if pulled properly.

The religious zealots...targeting. It flipped a switch in her mind as she sat in Fenway's office.

Maybe they were looking in the wrong direction. Maybe this wasn't about money at all, but something less tangible. Something darker.

"These protests," Rachel said slowly, studying Fenway's reaction. "How long have they been going on?"

"On and off since we opened," Fenway replied, seeming relieved at the change in topic. "But they've gotten more aggressive lately. More organized. The leader – David Thorne – he's become more... zealous in his messaging."

"Aggressive? Have they tried getting into the building?"

"Oh, no. If I'm being honest, they are always quite civil. But they're growing in size. It used to be just five or six people. But three weeks ago, right after Christmas, there was a protest out there that was about fifty people. It was on the news."

Rachel felt that new idea tugging at her, demanding her attention.

She leaned forward a bit and said, "I'm going to be honest with you, Ms. Fenway.

If it becomes clear that we have to have information from you, we can make requests to bodies above the FBI to obtain it.

I don't want to do that because it's a bureaucratic nightmare.

And it would slow our case significantly.

In the meantime, there are other avenues we are going to pursue.

But if they lead back here, to you and New Horizons, things could get ugly.

I don't tell you this to scare you or intimidate you.

Just to forewarn you so you can prepare. "

Fenway considered this and nodded, her expression slack now. For a moment, Rachel thought she was going to cave, but she remained resolute.

As they left Fenway's office, Rachel's mind was already racing ahead.

Money might motivate plenty of killers, but faith?

Faith could drive people to extremes that defied logic.

And someone who viewed cryonics as an abomination against nature or God's will?

They might see themselves as righteous while targeting New Horizons' clients.

“You’re got another idea cooking, don’t you?” Novak asked as they stepped back outside.

“I do. I think there’s a chance this might not be about money—or the lack of it—at all. I think that even though David Thorne, the pastor from yesterday’s protest, seemed harmless, I do think his field of expertise might be just as likely to go after people like our three victims.”

“You’re thinking it’s religiously motivated?”

“I think it could be. I think we should at least explore the idea, given that we know there have been protests on this property.”

"Do you remember which church he said he works out of?" Novak asked.

She pulled it out of her memory instantly. “Christ's Hope Church.”

“Well, let’s go say good morning to Pastor Thorne.”

They got into the car and started back out toward the security gate.

Rachel looked back via the rearview, watching the shape of the New Horizons building shrink smaller and smaller.

She wasn't sure if they'd end up back here with an official order for Fenway or not, but she felt a small twinge in her gut when she realized that there was a very good chance their killer was just as familiar with the building as she and Novak were slowly becoming.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

Rachel hadn't set foot in a church since Grandma Tate's funeral.

As she and Novak pulled into the expansive parking lot of Christ's Hope Church, she was struck by how different it looked from the traditional red-brick buildings she was used to, with their steep steps and reaching spires that dotted the city's landscape. The building that was Christ's Hope Church resembled a modern community center more than a house of worship – a sprawling single-story building with clean lines and large windows that reflected the morning sun.

The facade was wrapped in a combination of natural stone and contemporary metal panels, giving it an almost corporate feel.

"Different from what you'd expect, right?" Novak said, cutting the engine.

Rachel nodded, studying the manicured flowerbeds that lined the walkway to the entrance.

The landscaping was impeccable, not a dead leaf in sight.

"Makes me wonder what they do with all that space.

" Her memories of churches were limited to cramped wooden pews and dusty hymnal books, the smell of old carpet and wooden rafters high above.

This place looked more like somewhere you'd go for a yoga class or community theater production.

"My sister's church is like this," Novak offered as they walked toward the entrance. "They do everything there – daycare, food bank, senior activities, youth sports. It's like a community hub that happens to hold services on Sunday. Helpful and quaint, but it just seems... big. "

They approached the doors, Novak opening and holding it for Rachel as she passed through.

Inside, they entered a vast vestibule with polished concrete floors and walls painted in warm earth tones.

The space felt more like the lobby of a contemporary arts center than a church.

To their right, a sleek coffee bar sat empty, its chrome espresso machines gleaming in the morning light, waiting for Sunday morning.

The air carried the lingering aroma of fresh coffee and pastries.

Ahead, a curved welcome desk crowned with brushed metal lettering served as the focal point, its wood panels matching the aesthetic of the entrance.

Behind the desk's counter, a man in his sixties looked up from a leather-bound devotional, his reading glasses perched low on his nose.

A coffee mug steamed beside him, and a name tag identified him as "Walter - Guest Services.

" His smile was genuine, the kind that reached his eyes, creating a web of comfortable wrinkles at the corners.

"Good morning," he said, setting his book aside. "How can I help you folks today?"

Rachel showed her credentials, noting how his expression shifted slightly at the sight of them – not afraid, but definitely more alert. "FBI. We're here to see Pastor Thorne."

"Ah, you're in luck. David just got in about ten minutes ago.

Should be settling into his office by now.

" He gestured toward a hallway to their left, then seemed to reconsider.

"All the way through the atrium, then take a left at the hallway at the back of the building. His is the second office on the right."

"Thank you," Novak said as they stepped away from the counter.

Following Walter's directions took them through the heart of the building.

The main sanctuary doors stood open, revealing rows of comfortable chairs instead of traditional pews.

Natural light poured through tall windows, illuminating abstract stained glass panels that cast subtle colored shadows across the floor.

The stage area – Rachel noticed they didn't call it an altar – was set up more like a concert venue, with musical instruments and sophisticated lighting equipment visible.

But despite the modern design and feel of the place, religious imagery throughout was understated – a simple cross here, a framed Bible verse there, all in modern fonts and minimalist designs.

Nothing like the ornate iconography Rachel remembered from her limited church

experiences as a child.

The whole place smelled faintly of coffee and lemon-scented cleaner, with occasional whiffs of new carpet from what appeared to be a recently renovated section.

"Place probably costs a fortune to heat and cool," Novak commented as they walked, his investigator's mind always running calculations. Rachel couldn't help but grin; it was the exact same sort of comment Jack would have made.

Rachel nodded, thinking about the building's sprawling layout. "Wonder where the money comes from."

"Saw a donor wall back by the coffee bar. Lot of corporate logos."

They found Thorne's office exactly where Walter had indicated. The door was open, and to Rachel's surprise, the pastor's face lit up when he saw them make their way toward the entrance.

"Ah...the agents from yesterday!" He rose from behind his desk, gesturing to the chairs on the opposite side. They were comfortable-looking leather armchairs, not the utilitarian office furniture Rachel had expected. "Please, come in."

They settled into the chairs, but Rachel found that stepping into his office made her slightly uneasy...though she wasn't clear why.

Rachel shook her head as they sat, taking in the office.

Unlike the rest of the building, this space felt more traditional – dark wood bookshelves lined with theological texts, a few religious paintings on the walls, and a large wooden cross behind his desk.

The window overlooked a small prayer garden, where a stone fountain bubbled peacefully.

"Any progress finding your murderer?" Thorne asked with a bit too much cheer.

"We're working towards it, but nothing certain," Rachel said gauging his expressions. "Actually, we just came from New Horizons. We saw the aftermath of yesterday's protest."

Thorne's brow furrowed, genuine confusion crossing his face. "I'm sorry. I mean...surely that's not why you're visiting me this morning."

"You're right, that's not why we're here," Rachel clarified, still studying his reaction. His bewilderment seemed authentic, but she'd seen skilled liars before. "But I am curious – why target New Horizons specifically? There must be other causes that concern you."

"Ah." Thorne leaned back, folding his hands across his stomach.

A gold wedding band caught the light. "They're the only facility of their kind in the state, as I'm sure you know. According to my research, they're one of only a dozen nationwide.

And when you're trying to open the world's eyes to its own sins, you have to start in your own backyard. "

"And beyond your backyard?" Rachel prompted. "What else troubles you about the world, Pastor?" She honestly didn't care. She just wanted to get a better picture of the sort of mind they were working with here.

The question ignited something in Thorne's eyes.

Rachel got the sense that she had just extended an invitation that Thorne had been waiting for—perhaps for a very long time.

He leaned forward, his chair creaking. "Where do I begin?"

" His voice took on a different quality, and Rachel recognized the shift into what must be his preaching cadence.

"We live in an age of unprecedented moral decay, agents.

Take abortion – the systematic murder of innocent lives, sanctioned by our government.

Or our worship of false idols – celebrities, athletes, social media influencers...

none of whom carry the cross of Christ but instead tear down our morals and values.

" His voice grew more intense with each example.

"People bow at the altar of their smartphones instead of at the feet of Christ."

Though he remained sitting, Rachel could tell by his posture and the way his hands were suddenly very fidgety that he wanted to get up and start moving around.

"But perhaps most disturbing is our reliance on modern medicine to play God.

We pump our bodies full of chemicals, replace organs like car parts, freeze ourselves in the hope of cheating death itself.

" His hand slapped the desk. "Death is not the enemy!"

It is the gateway to eternal life through Christ. These attempts to circumvent God's natural order – they're not just foolish, they're blasphemous! "

His face had reddened slightly, and Rachel noticed a vein pulsing in his temple.

"We're watching science fiction become reality, and nobody stops to ask if we should! Genetic engineering, artificial wombs, digital consciousness uploads—and yes, that is a blasphemous science that is currently being worked on—it's all an attempt to usurp the divine plan.

And places like New Horizons?" He practically spat the name.

"They're selling false hope to desperate people, promising them they can buy their way out of God's design. "

Rachel let him wind down, noting how his chest heaved slightly. She glanced at Novak, who had been quietly observing the performance. "Have you ever had any trouble with the law, Pastor Thorne?" Novak asked once the storm of Thorne's answer had passed.

The question seemed to deflate him somewhat. He sank back into his chair, straightening his tie. He sighed deeply and took a moment to answer. Rachel figured he was mentally shifting gears from the diatribe he'd just unleashed.

"Yes, just once," he answered. "Three years ago, two of my parishioners and I were arrested while protesting outside a gentleman's club. First and only time."

"Why were you arrested?"

"The other men I was with were trying to speak to one of the performers before she went inside, trying to share the gospel. A patron seemed to take offense at this, and

things got physical. I never threw a punch, only tried to break up the scuffle, but the result was denting a man's car and the young lady being pushed to the ground.

The cops saw it fit to arrest us all...except the young lady. ”

"What about your congregation members?" Novak asked, speaking for the first time since they'd entered. "Any overzealous protesters in their ranks? Anyone you know of who might be prone to fits of violence?"

Thorne started to shake his head, then paused. "Well..." He shifted uncomfortably, his fingers tracing the edge of a Bible on his desk. "There was one incident. I had to counsel a member who'd been following New Horizons employees home after work. But we addressed it."

Rachel felt the information settle in her head like a bomb. It was an undeniable lead. "We'll need a name," Rachel said, keeping her tone neutral despite her growing interest.

Thorne hesitated, his fingers drumming on his desk.

The fountain bubbled in the background outside beyond his window, a peaceful counterpoint to the tension in the room.

"I suppose it's my Christian duty to assist...

to bring truth to the light." He sighed heavily again, and Rachel did not think the war being waged in his head was a fake one.

Much like Margaret Fenway, Pastor Thorne did not want to sell his people out.

"His name is Jason Dewalt. A meek sort of man...

in his fifties. But please, be gentle with him.

He lost his wife less than a year ago. He's still struggling with it. "

Rachel's interest sharpened even more. A man who admittedly tried following New Horizons employees home and had recently suffered a loss. Holy shit, she thought. This might be our guy.

"Did his wife have any connection to New Horizons?" Rachel asked.

"Not that I'm aware of." Thorne's eyes flicked to the cross behind his desk, as if seeking guidance.

"Pastor Thorne, I know you may feel bad about giving us that name," Rachel said, "but you could have just helped us close this case...and save lives."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Agent Gift...but I hope not. I find it impossible to think of any members of this church capable of such terrible things."

"Well...thanks all the same," Novak said as he stood up from his chair.

Rachel joined him and they exited the office together.

Rachel took one look back at Pastor Thorne and noted the anxiety that had crept into Thorne's expression as they departed.

Walking back through the building, the morning light had shifted, casting longer shadows through the stained glass.

Walter at the welcome desk waved goodbye to them as they made their way to the doors.

"Loss of a spouse, anti-death technology," Novak mused, pulling out his phone. "Could be our motive."

They pushed through the doors and walked back out into the brisk January morning. "Someone who couldn't save his wife, angry at those trying to cheat death," Rachel said. "Plus, Thorne just admitted the guy had tried following New Horizons employees. It fits."

Novak was once again calling the field office with an information request, this time for Jason Dewalt.

As they got back into the car, Rachel couldn't dislodge her final image of Thorne's nervous expression as they'd left – like a man who'd just released something dangerous into the world.

The pastor's zealotry had been concerning enough, but if someone from his church and his protests were indeed capable of murder, Rachel wondered what that might do to a church leader.

Rachel felt that they might be on the right track, but she also felt a creeping darkness working its way into her thoughts.

If Jason Dewalt was indeed their killer, it was hard not to feel somewhat sorry for his situation—having lost a wife while others in his city could afford to freeze themselves in the hope of avoiding death.

But whatever his story, it gave him no right to brutally kill others. And if she and Novak could act quickly, they'd make sure he never did it again.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

From his position in the strip mall lot across the street, he had a perfect view of the restaurant's facade – all gleaming steel and angular glass, bathed in purple accent lighting even in broad daylight.

The entrance was flanked by towering metal sculptures that looked like twisted DNA helices reaching toward the sky.

Modern art for people who thought themselves too sophisticated for tradition.

The whole building screamed new money, with its forty-foot ceilings visible through floor-to-ceiling windows and a rooftop bar that would be packed with the young tech crowd come spring.

The restaurant had opened just six months ago, replacing an old family-owned Italian place that had served the community for three decades.

Now, instead of checkered tablecloths and candles stuck in Chianti bottles, Whitehall's offered minimalist décor and plates so large and empty they looked like modern art installations themselves.

The transformation was a perfect metaphor for everything wrong with this city – with this whole society.

Old values discarded for whatever was trendy and expensive.

Lunchtime traffic crawled past on Preston Avenue, an endless stream of luxury vehicles and delivery trucks jockeying for position.

The constant motion provided perfect cover.

He was just another face in a parked car, maybe waiting for his turn at the dental office or the cell phone repair shop behind him.

Nobody spared him a second glance. The strip mall lot was half-full – busy enough to blend in, not so crowded that anyone would notice how long he'd been there.

His fingers drummed against the steering wheel as he remembered the hours spent learning everything there was to know about Jonathan Maxwell.

He had a job that sounded painfully boring: venture capitalist. And his life was an open book to anyone willing to dig deep enough.

Princeton undergrad, where he'd been president of the Ivy Club – the most exclusive of Princeton's eating clubs.

Harvard MBA, graduating with distinction.

Five years at Goldman Sachs before striking out on his own, where he'd quickly developed a reputation for identifying promising biotech startups before anyone else saw their potential.

Maxwell had built his first tech investment fund from nothing to \$500 million in assets under management within three years.

Now, he ran three different funds, sat on six corporate boards—including the New Horizons board—and had an estimated net worth of fifty million dollars.

All by age fifty-two. His Manhattan office occupied the entire forty-seventh floor of a Madison Avenue tower.

His Hampton summer home had been featured in Architectural Digest and had been used as an example of one of those “best homes” television shows a few years back.

Last year alone, he'd earned eight million dollars in carried interest from his funds.

The numbers made his jaw clench. Fifty million dollars.

What Maxwell spent on his watch collection could fund a dozen cryonic preservations.

Instead, the man had already reserved his own space at New Horizons despite being in perfect health – just another backup plan for a man who'd never faced real consequences in his life.

He'd spent weeks piecing together Maxwell's daily routines.

He divided his time between New York and Boston, with frequent trips to Silicon Valley.

He stayed at the same hotels, ate at the same restaurants, followed the same workout routine every morning.

Maxwell's Instagram-famous wife documented their lives exhaustively online – their travels, their charity galas, their perfectly curated existence.

It had made tracking the man's movements almost too easy.

Currently, though, he was in Charlottesville for a conference.

Right on schedule, Maxwell's midnight blue BMW M760i pulled into the valet line.

He watched the man emerge, straightening his bespoke suit jacket – Tom Ford, if he had to guess, based on the cut.

The recent interview Maxwell had given to TechCrunch played through his mind: "Within five years, we'll make cryonic preservation accessible to the upper middle class.

Within a decade, anyone with a decent 401(k) should be able to afford it. "

The arrogance of it all made his blood boil.

Maxwell and his fellow board members treated life extension like a luxury good to be marketed to the masses, not the precious resource it truly was.

They were building a future where the wealthy could hoard immortality itself, doling it out to the "worthy" while people who actually needed it died waiting... or unable to afford it.

Inside Whitehall's, Maxwell would be ordering eighteen-dollar cocktails and thirty-dollar pasta dishes, discussing how to commodify the very boundary between life and death with others just like him.

The restaurant's pretension matched its clientele – menus without prices, waiters who spoke in hushed tones about "house-made" everything, sommeliers hovering nearby to suggest hundred-dollar bottles of wine.

All so the masters of the universe could feel special during their power lunches.

His research had revealed every detail of Maxwell's visit to Charlottesville.

The man was only in town for the Biotechnology Innovation Summit at UVA, where

he'd be speaking tomorrow about "Democratizing Longevity Technology.

" The irony was almost too much to bear.

Maxwell's idea of democratization meant making it slightly easier for the merely wealthy to access what should be a fundamental human right.

Maxwell's New Horizons connection went deeper than just his board seat, though.

Maxwell had paid a solid 1.2 million dollars to reserve his preservation pod five years ago despite being decades away from needing it.

That space could have gone to someone facing actual mortality – someone who'd earned the right to a second chance.

Instead, it would sit empty, waiting for a man who treated death like an inconvenience to be solved with his checkbook.

He'd tracked down everything about Maxwell's involvement with New Horizons.

He had first invested in the company three years ago, leading a thirty-million-dollar funding round.

Since then, he'd become their most prominent advocate, speaking at conferences and writing opinion pieces about the "moral imperative" of life extension technology.

But Maxwell's version of morality conveniently aligned with his financial interests.

Every time he spoke about democratizing access to cryonics, New Horizons' waiting list grew longer.

Through the restaurant's windows, he could just barely see Maxwell moving deeper into the place, no doubt about to hold court at a prime table. He wished people like Maxwell and what they stood for didn't anger him so badly.

He hated to feel like those sorts of men were getting the best of him by simply getting under his skin.

He forced himself to take slow, steady breaths. Emotion was the enemy of execution. He couldn't afford to let his hatred of Maxwell and everything he represented cloud his judgment. Not when the window of opportunity was so narrow.

The past three victims had been easier. He'd had time to plan, to wait for the perfect moment.

But Maxwell was different. He would be flying back to New York on Saturday morning, returning to his penthouse overlooking Central Park.

That left less than forty-eight hours to finish this part of his mission.

At 1:22, Maxwell's group began filtering out of Whitehall's.

He was easy to spot, holding court in the center of four others, standing briefly out in the cold.

Maxwell's laugh carried across the street, loud and utterly unconcerned with who might be watching.

A hundred-dollar lunch was just another tax-deductible business expense for him.

The valet brought his car around, and Maxwell exchanged elaborate goodbyes with his lunch companions. Everything about the man's movements suggested someone

who had never questioned his place at the top of the world.

Two more days. That's all the time he had to take Maxwell out.

After that, he'd head back to New York, and there was no telling when he'd be back in this part of the country again. He'd show up again sooner or later, he figured, just to make sure he was still prominent and visible on the New Horizons board. But he couldn't wait that long.

He waited until Maxwell's BMW pulled into traffic before easing his own car out of the strip mall lot. The lunch rush provided plenty of vehicles to hide behind as he followed at a discreet distance. All he needed was one clean opportunity. One moment when Maxwell's carefully ordered world would slip just enough to create an opening.

Maxwell might have fifty million dollars, but money couldn't buy immortality. Not yet. And he would make sure the man learned that lesson before his reservation at New Horizons came due.

Maxwell's right turn signal began blinking.

He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel and settled in to follow.

Patience was everything now. The perfect moment would come – it always did.

And when it did, Jonathan Maxwell would discover that death was the ultimate equalizer, rendering all bank accounts equally worthless.

First, though, he had to wait. And watch. And remember why this was all so necessary.

Because some people deserve a second chance at life.

And some people needed to learn they weren't gods.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

Rachel kept her eyes on the road as Novak drove, watching the industrial district unfold before them as they made their way out of the heart of the city.

Steel and concrete structures rose against the morning sky, their shadows stretching across empty parking lots.

The silence between her and Novak felt charged in a way that made Rachel feel as if they were on the same page without really speaking it out loud.

For Rachel, it was loaded with unspoken thoughts about what drove people to take justice into their own hands.

Rachel's fingers tightened imperceptibly on her knee.

She knew that grief often did strange things to people.

It was a fact she knew intimately. She had lived it, breathed it, nearly drowned in it.

After Alex Lynch murdered Peter, she'd felt it: that consuming need for vengeance that burned through logic, and law like acid.

She remembered those dark days with perfect clarity, how the world had narrowed to a single point of focus.

Lynch had to pay, and nothing else had mattered.

The memory of those days after Peter's death came flooding back, unstoppable now

that she'd opened that door.

She remembered sitting in their bedroom, surrounded by his things, plotting revenge scenarios that would have horrified her in any other circumstance while also worrying about Paige and her job.

The way the grief had twisted everything, even her own moral compass, until black and white bled into an endless sea of gray.

And then there was Alice Denbrough. The events that had led up to Grandma Tate's death had unleashed something in Rachel that scared her, even now.

That same darkness had risen up, threatening to swallow her whole.

Both times, she'd walked right up to that edge, peered into the abyss of vigilante justice, and somehow managed to step back.

But she understood the pull of it, the seductive whisper that said sometimes the system wasn't enough, that sometimes justice needed a helping hand.

She was fully aware that her own grief had essentially rewired her whole moral compass.

It had created ideas and thoughts in her head that had not been there before—some of them rather dark and violent.

The scariest part was how rational it all seems in the moment.

How right it feels. Like she was the only one seeing things clearly, and everyone else is just..

. blind to what needs to be done. She hated understanding this because it made her almost sympathize with people that sought their own justice in their own ways.

Novak glanced at her, and she could see that he was trying to determine if she was silently wrestling with something. But he remained quiet, and she was grateful for that.

The warehouse where Dewalt worked came into view ahead of them, a massive structure of corrugated metal and concrete that stretched nearly the length of two football fields.

It sat about a quarter of a mile off the road, as if the city had tried to push it as far away as possible.

The sun caught the few windows ringing the office section, making them gleam like distant signals.

The rest of the building was windowless and utilitarian, broken only by the regular rhythm of loading bay doors along its southern face.

A chain-link fence enclosed the property, and security cameras mounted on tall poles scanned the perimeter.

They pulled into a visitor spot near the front entrance, the asphalt faded.

A small sign to the right of the parking area pointed them toward a glass door marked "RECEPTION .

"It was flanked by potted shrubs that had seen better days.

The shrubs looked like they'd been fighting a losing battle against exhaust fumes and

neglect for years.

And now, of course, the bitter winter chill.

Someone had not cared enough for them to take them inside out of the harsh weather.

The reception area hit them with a blast of over-conditioned heat and the distinct smell of industrial carpet cleaner. The space felt trapped in time, with cream-colored walls bare except for a single framed print of a maritime scene that had faded to mostly blues and greys.

The receptionist, a woman in her fifties with reading glasses hanging from a beaded chain, looked up from her computer with the practiced neutral expression of someone who'd rather not be bothered.

Her desk was a fortress of efficiency, with everything arranged at right angles: a stapler, tape dispenser, a cup of pens, and a small nameplate that read "Mrs. Henderson.

" She struck Rachel as a woman who might be better suited working at a library.

"Can I help you?" Mrs. Henderson asked, her tone indicating that she really didn't want to

"We need to speak with someone who works here," Novak said. "Jason Dewalt."

Mrs. Henderson gave them both a perplexed look.

Did they really expect her to bother someone who was hard at work?

The mere idea of it baffled her. But when Novak showed his credentials, her

demeanor shifted instantly, as if someone had flipped a switch.

The transformation from gatekeeper to helpful assistant was almost comical.

“Jason Dewalt?” she said.

“That’s correct.”

She reached for her phone, the movement making her glasses swing gently. The phone system was ancient – a black plastic affair with a matrix of buttons that had gone dingy with age. She pressed a single button and brought the receiver to her ear.

"Jason Dewalt, please come to the front lobby." Her voice echoed through the building's PA system, tinny and authoritative. She hung up with a self-satisfied nod, as if she'd just done them an enormous favor. “He’ll be with you shortly.”

Rachel settled into one of the vinyl chairs in the small waiting area.

A fake ficus tree stood in one corner, its plastic leaves carrying a fine film of dust. The waiting area consisted of three chairs upholstered in institutional blue vinyl, arranged around a wood-laminate table that had been scratched and worn at the corners.

Three magazines lay splayed across its surface: a trade publication about logistics, a women's magazine, and a copy of National Geographic from last April.

A water cooler in the corner gurgled occasionally, the sound echoing in the sterile space.

Roughly three minutes later, the door behind the reception area opened.

Rachel only happened to see it because she was looking in that direction.

She watched as Jason Dewalt appeared. He looked younger than Rachel had expected, as Thorne had described him as being in his fifties.

He was wearing navy work pants and a high-visibility vest. His brown hair was cut short, and a thin scar ran along his jawline.

The moment his eyes landed on them, a sudden look of uncertainty flashed across his face.

Then fear. Then decision. He spun and bolted back through the door.

"He's running," Rachel announced, already in motion.

She hurried toward the front of the room and vaulted the reception counter, ignoring Mrs. Henderson's startled "You can't—!"

"The door slammed open under her palm, and she found herself in a long, fluorescent-lit corridor.

Dewalt's footsteps echoed ahead, and she caught a glimpse of his vest disappearing through a door to the left.

The corridor seemed to stretch endlessly, identical doors spaced at regular intervals.

The linoleum floor squeaked under her boots as she ran, her breathing measured and controlled.

She could hear Novak somewhere behind her, but his footsteps were growing fainter.

He was taking another route, trying to cut off their quarry.

Smart move – they'd worked together long enough now that she could anticipate his tactics. However, she wasn't sure how effective this would be since they didn't know the layout of the building.

Rachel hit the door Dewalt had taken at full speed, her hands driving into the metal crash bar.

She burst into what looked like a secondary storage area – a cavernous space with concrete floors and ceiling-high metal shelving units creating a maze of aisles.

The air was thick with the smell of cardboard and forklift exhaust. Boxes of merchandise stretched in every direction, creating shadows and blind corners that could hide a dozen people.

Some were stacked almost all the way up to the very tall ceiling.

Voices echoed from somewhere in the maze – warehouse workers, probably wondering what was causing the commotion.

A radio crackled with confused chatter. Rachel forced herself to focus, to filter out the distractions.

Her feet carried her forward as her training kicked in, eyes scanning for movement, ears straining for any sound that might give away Dewalt's position.

A flash of movement caught her eye as she came around a tall stack of crates – Dewalt's vest, visible through gaps in the shelving.

He was heading for the far wall, where emergency exits gleamed with reflected light

from overhead fixtures.

Rachel cut diagonally through the aisles, her footsteps echoing off the concrete and just barely able to slip between two stacks of boxes.

A forklift sat abandoned, its warning beeper still chirping plaintively.

She had to dodge around a pallet jack, losing precious seconds.

Dewalt knocked over a stack of boxes as he ran, sending them cascading into her path.

Rachel vaulted over them as a strange assortment of goods spilled out—toothbrushes, batteries, roll-on deodorant— her muscles burning with the effort, but the obstacle had given him precious seconds.

She could hear his ragged breathing ahead, the sound of desperate fear.

More boxes tumbled, forcing her to weave and dodge.

Her lungs burned, but she pushed harder.

"FBI! Stop right there, Mr. Dewalt!" Her voice boomed through the space, but Dewalt just ran faster.

He darted between two tall shelving units, disappearing from view.

Rachel followed, only to find herself facing a mess of toppled inventory.

She had to scramble over it, feeling valuable seconds slip away and trying not to give in to the surreal nature of this chase that had her sprinting through spilled household

goods.

The newest pile consisted of dishcloths, bed sheets, and an assortment of plastic cutlery.

Ahead of her, Dewalt slammed through the emergency exit, triggering an alarm that wailed through the warehouse.

Rachel caught the door just before it closed, bursting out into daylight.

She had a split second to register the loading dock area, the rows of semi-trailers, the chain-link fence in the distance—

And then Novak appeared from behind a trailer.

He came rushing toward Dewalt with a football player's stance and Dewalt didn't see him until the last minute.

Novak took Dewalt down with a perfectly executed tackle.

Dewalt yelled out in surprise, but it was cut off when they hit the concrete hard, Dewalt's breath leaving him in a whoosh.

Rachel was on them in seconds, helping to secure Novak and get the cuffs around his wrists as their suspect thrashed and cursed.

"I haven't even done anything!" Dewalt shouted, his face pressed against the pavement. Sweat darkened his shirt, and Rachel could feel him trembling beneath her hands – from exertion or fear, she couldn't tell.

Rachel caught her breath, the adrenaline still coursing through her system.

"Yeah? Most innocent people don't run at the sight of FBI agents.

" She looked up at Novak, who was slightly winded but looking satisfied.

"Looks like we're going to be making a trip to the closest police station... .have a word with Mr. Dewalt."

As they hauled Dewalt to his feet, Rachel couldn't help but wonder what kind of grief had driven him to run.

What darkness was he carrying? What was it he was worried about?

She'd been on both sides of this equation now – hunter and hunted, justice-seeker and vengeance-taker.

The line between right and wrong should have been clear, marked in bold black and white.

But experience had taught her that it was always more complicated than that.

Some people ran because they were guilty.

Others ran because they were scared. And some ran because they'd been running for so long, they'd forgotten how to stay still.

The weight of her own past decisions pressed against her thoughts, reminding her how close she'd come to crossing lines she couldn't uncross.

The question was: which kind was Jason Dewalt? And more importantly, what would they find when they started digging into whatever he was running from?

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

Dewalt's handcuffs clinked softly in front of her and Novak as they walked, each with a hand on one of Dewalt's arms, currently behind his back.

Rachel had insisted on them, despite his cooperation—too many years on the job had taught her that compliance could flip to violence in an instant.

Still, she kept her grip on his arm light.

No need to bruise someone who might turn out to be innocent.

The air inside carried that distinct mix of stale coffee, printer toner, and desperation that seemed universal to small-town precincts.

Different building, same smell. A wall-mounted HVAC unit rattled in protest against the late afternoon heat, pushing warm air around without actually cooling anything.

Rachel could feel sweat beginning to form at the base of her neck.

No sooner had they come into the building than they were met by a very large man.

He met them at the front desk, his massive frame filling the space between two support columns.

He had to be pushing six-foot-five, with shoulders broad enough to make his standard-issue uniform look custom-tailored.

But his face, with its ruddy cheeks and earnest eyes, belonged on a mall Santa.

A badge that looked tiny against his chest identified him A. Dunphy.

"Agent Gift? Agent Novak?" His voice matched his appearance—deep but gentle, like distant thunder without the threat.

"I'm Deputy Al Dunphy. I was told you called, and I have your room ready.

Follow me." He moved with the careful grace of someone who'd spent a lifetime being conscious of his size, each step measured and precise. He was a bear of a man for sure.

Rachel noticed how Dunphy's heavy boots barely made a sound on the floor, like he'd spent years learning to move quietly despite his size.

She appreciated that kind of attention to detail in a law enforcement officer.

It spoke to self-awareness, to conscious choice rather than just following procedure.

He led them past a row of desk clusters where three officers worked in various states of concentration.

One was speaking quietly into a phone, shoulders hunched as if to create privacy in the open space.

Another typed with two fingers, muttering under his breath at whatever report demanded his attention.

The third officer, a woman with steel-gray hair pulled back in a severe bun, looked up briefly as they passed, her eyes sharp and assessing before returning to her work.

A dispatcher's voice crackled through someone's radio, all codes and static: "Unit 14,

respond to a 415 at Carson and Main..." The rest faded as they moved deeper into the building.

"Watch your step here," Dunphy said, gesturing to a slight lip in the flooring where the old bank lobby met what must have been the vault area.

"Building's got character, that's what the chief likes to say.

" He chuckled, the sound warming the sterile space.

"Though between you and me, 'character' is just what we call all the things the budget won't let us fix. "

"Was it once a bank?" Rachel guessed.

Dunphy looked back to her, impressed. "Yeah, it did. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

The hallway narrowed as they approached the back.

Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, one of them flickering in an arrhythmic pattern that made Rachel's eyes hurt.

The walls here were cinder block, painted the same tired beige as everything else, but someone had made an effort to brighten the space with a corkboard full of community notices and children's artwork.

Rachel caught glimpses of crayon thank-you notes from a local elementary school, a flyer for an upcoming police charity basketball game, and what looked like a decades-old newspaper clipping about officer awards.

The temperature dropped noticeably as they entered the former vault area. The thick walls that had once protected money now served to contain suspects and secrets. Rachel felt Dewalt shiver slightly under her hand.

"Right in here." Dunphy unlocked a door that looked sturdy enough to survive a small explosion.

"Interview Room Two. Best ventilation, newest chairs.

" He gave them a proud smile, revealing a slightly crooked front tooth that somehow made him seem more trustworthy.

"Just holler if you need anything. Coffee machine's down the hall if you want it, though I wouldn't recommend it unless you're desperate."

The room itself was small but well-maintained.

A metal table bolted to the floor dominated the center, with three chairs arranged around it.

The observation window reflected their movements like a mirror, and Rachel knew the recording equipment behind it was already running.

The room also held a chilly note, which was intentional.

The chill would help keep their suspect alert, uncomfortable enough to want to end this quickly.

Novak guided Dewalt into one of the chairs while Rachel took position opposite him.

She studied their suspect as he settled in, noting how his fingers drummed against his

thighs, how his eyes darted between them like a spectator at a tennis match.

He was practically vibrating with the need to speak, but he was holding back.

Smart. The restraint suggested someone who thought before acting—not typically the profile of a killer.

Rachel let the silence stretch, watching Dewalt's reactions. His right hand kept moving to his left wrist, where he'd suffered a scratch and slight abrasion from Novak's tackle.

It had been bleeding a bit when they put him in the car, but she'd tended to it with the small first aid kit in their trunk.

"Do you have any idea why we're here today, Mr. Dewalt?" Rachel kept her voice neutral and professional. The room's acoustics gave every word weight, bouncing them back from the concrete walls.

He shook his head, a quick, jerky motion that reminded her of a puppet on strings. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple despite the room's chill.

Novak leaned forward slightly, his chair creaking under the shift in weight. "Then why did you run when we showed up at your workplace?"

Dewalt's laugh was hollow, nervous. "Because you both look very ... official ." He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I figured you were detectives or feds and I... I panicked and ran."

"Why would that make you run?" Rachel pressed. She could see Novak in her peripheral vision, his body language mirroring hers—both of them slightly forward, engaged but not threatening. They'd worked enough interviews together to fall into

this rhythm naturally. "You had to have a reason.

Dewalt's mouth opened, then closed. He looked down at his hands, now flat against the table's surface. His fingers splayed wide, like he was trying to anchor himself.

Rachel decided to cut through the dance of it all. "Are you a murderer, Mr. Dewalt?"

The question hit him like a physical blow. His head snapped up, eyes wide with genuine shock, as if he'd been slapped hard across the face. The color drained from his cheeks so quickly that Rachel wondered if he might faint. Even his lips went pale.

"My Lord... no!" The words exploded from him, bouncing off the walls. "I've never killed anyone! Why would you think that?" His hands pulled back from the table, curling protectively against his chest.

Rachel caught Novak's eye and gave him a slight nod. They'd practiced this dynamic enough that he knew to take the lead. Good cop, bad cop was amateur hour. They preferred to work more subtle angles.

"Mr. Dewalt, we are in town working on a case that now involves three very gruesome murders," Novak said, His tone was matter-of-fact, almost conversational.

"All of these murders are connected to New Horizons Cryonics.

.. which we know your church has openly protested.

Have you ever taken part in one of those protests? "

Dewalt's shoulders slumped. The fight seemed to drain out of him all at once. He understood where this was headed and he did not like it. "Yes, I have, but so have a lot of others." His voice had gone quiet, defeated.

"Yes, but those others weren't following New Horizons employees home," Novak countered.

"I suggest you explain yourself quickly," Rachel said.

Rachel watched as realization dawned on Dewalt's face. The betrayal was evident in his eyes—Pastor Thorne had revealed his secret. His next words came out in a rush, like a dam breaking.

"After Sarah—my wife—died, I..." He paused, collecting himself.

Rachel could see him struggling to order his thoughts.

"I became interested in Not just cryopreservation, but all of it.

Every experimental treatment I could find about life extension research, anything that might.

..." His voice cracked. "Anything that might have saved her. Even though I knew she was gone and there was no bringing her back...that's where my mind went."

Rachel felt a familiar twinge in her chest. She knew that desperation, that willingness to grasp at any possibility, no matter how remote. Her own brush with death had left similar scars. She pushed the memory aside, staying focused on Dewalt.

"I followed them because I wanted to see," Dewalt continued. "Just... see their lives. Their homes...where they lived. I knew it was weird...wrong. But I thought I could maybe work up the courage to talk to one of them outside of New Horizons and ask questions I couldn't ask inside."

"Why outside of New Horizons?" Rachel asked, though she suspected she knew the

answer. The fluorescent light flickered again, casting strange shadows across his face.

"The church," he said quietly. "If anyone from Christ's Hope saw me there, asking questions..." He shook his head. "They'd never understand. They barely understood when I started asking questions about Sarah's treatment options."

"You spoke to Thorne about this?" Rachel asked. "About following these people?"

"Yes. I asked for prayer because I knew it was stupid and maybe even sort of illegal. I needed help."

Novak leaned back in his chair, the metal creaking slightly. "You have to understand how this sounds, Mr. Dewalt. Following people home isn't normal behavior."

"I know." Dewalt's voice was barely above a whisper. "I know how it sounds. But I only did it twice, and I didn't even know their names. I made sure to only follow men when they left for the day—following women seemed..." He gestured vaguely. "Wrong. Creepy."

"How did you choose who to follow?"

"I didn't really choose. Everyone usually left at the same time, so there was usually a pretty big group. It let me sort of wave into the traffic with them without anyone even noticing me."

Rachel studied him carefully. There was a raw honesty in his grief that rang true.

She'd interviewed enough killers to know the difference between genuine emotion and performance.

Still, they needed to be thorough. And she again knew that using the very recent

murder of Peter Wells as a start for their timeline could either eliminate Jason Dewalt as a suspect or pin him down.

"Where were you yesterday between five in the evening and nine at night?" Rachel asked.

"Working." The response was immediate. "Double shifts, yesterday and the day before. Both nights, I was at the warehouse until eight, then went home."

"Any stops between work and home last night?" Novak asked.

"Just the grocery store. Green's Market on Madison."

Rachel did the mental math; it was far too easy.

Peter Wells had been murdered between 6:05 and 6:45 PM.

If Dewalt's alibi checked out—and she was certain it would—he couldn't be their killer.

In her experience, murderers rarely lied about easily verifiable details like work schedules.

They typically constructed more elaborate alibis, ones that were harder to prove or disprove.

But something Dewalt had said a few minutes ago suddenly caught her attention.

Something about employees leaving New Horizons at the same time and how he'd chosen who to follow.

She remembered the sign-in sheet they'd seen both times at New Horizons.

A new possibility began to take shape in her mind quickly.

Rachel exchanged a look with Novak, and she gave a very quick shake of the head. She could see he'd come to the same conclusion and was certain his alibi would check out.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Dewalt," Rachel said, standing. "We'll need to verify your whereabouts for last night, but assuming everything checks out, you'll be out of here shortly."

It looked like he wanted to say something else but he closed his mouth over it. He saw freedom just ahead and decided to be happy enough with that.

When she and Novak were back out in the hallway, Rachel took a few steps toward the central part of the building and took out her phone. "I think I have another idea," she told Novak. "It may pan out to nothing, but if I'm wrong, it will only waste half an hour or so."

"Care to share?" he asked. She really liked the fact that he was already interested, already tuned in. Given time, they were going to be a very successful pair of partners.

"There's a sign-in sheet at New Horizons, right there the desk. I remember it because I thought it seemed sort of basic and out of date for how modern the place is. And if our killer somehow got their hands on the sign-in sheet..."

"It could basically be a checklist," Novak finished.

"Exactly. That, or it could show us if our three victims have ever been there at the same time. And if they have, any other names there at the same time instantly become

very important to us.”

She was already three steps ahead, plotting out their next move.

They'd eliminated one suspect, but in doing so, they might have stumbled onto something much more significant. She sighed and said, “Do you mind checking Dewalt’s alibi? I’m going to call ahead to New Horizons.

I’m sure Ms. Fenway will be very excited to see us again. ”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

The glass doors of New Horizons slid open with a soft hiss, releasing a burst of climate-controlled warm air into Rachel's face.

The lobby's clinical brightness hadn't changed since their last visit, but something felt different today.

Maybe it was the way her pulse quickened as she crossed the threshold, or how her fingers kept brushing against her holster.

After three visits in two days, the angular modernist furniture and brushed steel accents were becoming uncomfortably familiar – like a second office she never wanted.

"This place is really starting to feel like home," Novak said, voicing her thoughts.

He pulled out his phone, scanning a text.

"And Jason Dewalt's alibi just got confirmed by our friend Deputy Dunphy.

Security footage shows him at work until eight last night, plus at least ten witnesses can verify it. He's definitely not our killer."

Rachel nodded, watching the play of afternoon light across the polished floor.

That meant that this new path they were exploring could very well be more important than it had seemed just two minutes ago.

The list was getting shorter, and with each eliminated suspect, they were closer to the truth.

Her attention shifted to Margaret Fenway, who was already striding toward them from the elevator bank, her fitted charcoal suit a stark contrast against the white walls.

The fact that she had come down to meet them rather than having them come to her only added to the urgent undertone of the moment.

Fenway carried a slim computer bag over her shoulder and a steel coffee cup in her hand.

The ready cooperation was surprising – either Rachel's earlier threat about increased federal presence had hit home, or something else had changed.

Rachel studied Fenway's face as she approached, looking for any sign of what had prompted this reversal.

Fenway intercepted them before they reached reception, her perfectly manicured hand gesturing toward a side hallway.

"Agents, welcome back," she said. "Follow me.

" She led down the primary hallway and into a conference room just off the lobby – all clean lines and metallic surfaces, with a wall comprised of a sleek dry-erase surface.

The aesthetic screamed cutting-edge tech startup meets medical facility, with just enough clinical sterility to remind visitors that this was, ultimately, a place of science rather than science fiction.

The conference table was a single piece of black glass, so polished Rachel could see their reflections in its surface. Fenway retrieved a laptop and smart pad from her bag, her movements precise and efficient. The tablet made a soft click as she set it on the table's surface.

She slid the laptop to Rachel. "It's already logged into the system." A pause, then, almost apologetically, "And it's already opened up to the system you need."

"The sign-in records?" Rachel asked.

"Everything's digitized now." Fenway pulled up her own screen. "We still maintain the physical sign-in for legal purposes and ease of access, but it's all transferred to our secure servers weekly. What exactly are you looking for?"

"Days when all three victims were here simultaneously." Rachel's fingers moved across the keyboard as Novak leaned in beside her, close enough that she could smell his aftershave. Fenway had her own fingers poised over the smart pad in front of her. "Thomas Whitman, Diana Foxworth, Peter Wells."

The screens cast a pale blue glow across their faces as they worked. Rachel could hear the soft whirl of the building's advanced climate control system, maintaining the perfect temperature for both the living and those in suspended animation below.

"What changed, Ms. Fenway?" Rachel asked as they began searching, her eyes never leaving the screen.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her eyes never leaving her pad as she searched for the names.

"You weren't exactly forthcoming before." The words came out sharper than intended, but she didn't soften them.

Fenway's normally composed features showed a flicker of discomfort.

She smoothed an invisible wrinkle from her blazer sleeve before responding.

"I saw the news about Peter Wells after you left.

The articles, the news coverage..." She paused, matching Rachel's direct gaze.

"I've spent fifteen years building this facility, this technology.

Call it self-interest if you want, but if these deaths are indeed connected to New Horizons, everything we've built could collapse. If I can help prevent that..."

Rachel kept her opinion about the selfish motivation to herself, focusing instead on the screen—mainly because she did see it as selfish self-interest. They worked methodically through the records, Rachel and Novak scanning the laptop while Fenway searched her tablet.

The work was tedious – cross-referencing times, dates, names.

October's records yielded nothing but routine visits and maintenance checks.

September was equally empty, filled with mundane appointments and regular client updates.

Rachel started to worry that they may have to go back even farther.

And if that was the case, there was no telling how long this would take.

The silence was broken only by the soft tapping of keys and the occasional murmur as they compared notes. Rachel felt the weight of time pressing against them,

knowing that somewhere in these records was the connection they needed.

"Got something," Novak said suddenly, his voice cutting through Fenway's technical explanation. "November second. All three victims.... all checked in within about an hour and fifteen minutes of one another."

Rachel leaned closer to the screen, the blue light highlighting the tension in her face. "Diana Foxworth, 10:15 AM. Peter Wells, 11:00. Thomas Whitman, 11:05." She turned to Fenway, who was already inputting the information into her tablet. "Who else was here that day...?" she murmured.

Fenway's fingers moved across the screen, her expression growing troubled as she read.

"Five others. An IT specialist for server maintenance, two delivery personnel, a board member from New York, and.

.." She paused, the tablet lowering slightly.

"One client. Richard Aldridge. He checked in at 11:20. "

"Tell me about Aldridge," Rachel said, her instincts humming. The timing was too perfect to be coincidence. She could feel Novak tensing beside her, sensing the same thing.

"Terminal diagnosis. Aggressive form of pancreatic cancer.

" Fenway set down her tablet, her professional demeanor cracking slightly.

Rachel could see the reality of the situation settling into her eyes like storm clouds.

"He'd been interested in cryopreservation for years—before the cancer came around.

But when he got the diagnosis... he wanted everything fast-tracked.

But six months wasn't enough time for our standard protocols. "

"How did he take that news?"

"Badly." Fenway's gaze dropped to her hands, manicured nails pressing into her palms. "He'd already paid the initial deposit fee – a substantial amount.

When I explained the timeline issues, he broke down.

Started talking about how he'd earned his place, how he deserved it more than.

.." She trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"More than who?" Rachel pressed, leaning forward.

"More than 'trust fund kids who'd never worked a day in their lives.' His words, not mine."

"Successful people," Novak noted, his pen scratching against his notepad. "Wealthy."

"So, what about the process made it too hard to expedite Aldridge's need?" Rachel asked.

"The medical screening process alone takes three months minimum," Fenway explained.

Her voice took on a professorial tone, as if she'd given this explanation many times

before.

"Then there's the psychological evaluation – multiple sessions with different specialists.

Financial verification isn't just about having the money; it's about ensuring the long-term stability of the investment.

Legal documentation has to be absolutely pristine.

And that's before we even begin the medical preparation protocols.

" She looked to both of them, as if to make sure she wasn't speaking too much, but carried on when she saw that she had their rapt attention.

"When a client requests expedited preservation, especially on a six-month timeline like his.

.. it's problematic. The preservation process requires precise timing.

We need to begin the cooling process immediately after clinical death, but we also need to have administered specific medications beforehand.

Some treatments start weeks in advance."

She stood, pacing as she continued. "The legal framework has to be airtight.

Insurance, next of kin agreements, advanced directives – rushing all of that and getting sloppy in those areas can get very risky.

It practically invites lawsuits. And that's assuming we even have a chamber ready.

Each unit has to be prepared specifically for the client, calibrated to their body mass, medical history, cellular stability factors. .."

Rachel noted how Fenway's clinical terminology couldn't quite mask the underlying enthusiasm when she spoke about the process. This wasn't just a business for her – it was a calling, a mission she truly believed in.

"But he didn't want to hear that?" Novak asked.

"Well, from what I recall, he's a very smart man. Went to Yale, I believe. In and out of a few investment firms, I think. He understood it all, and I think that's why he got so mad. It wasn't something he could argue about or convince others to change."

"But I think it's safe to assume that anyone who could just slap a deposit down on something like cryopreservation must be wealthy," Rachel said. "It's one of the reasons Alexander Manning had his issues, right?"

"That's correct."

"Would you consider Richard Aldridge wealthy?" Novak asked.

"Most would, yes. Maybe not as wealthy as some of our other clients, though."

"So this isn't about wealth at all," Rachel said, essentially thinking out loud to herself. "This is about jealousy. This is about other being able to have a spot while Aldridge couldn't."

"All of the victims..." Fenway said. "They'd already put down deposits."

Hell, Diana Foxworth was almost paid in full.

So maybe that is what he's going after. But I don't...

I don't know that Aldridge, based on what I know of him, would be capable of murder.

"He was weeping when he left that day and told me to forget the whole thing.

But the way he looked at me..." She shuddered slightly. "I should have reported it."

Rachel felt the pieces clicking into place, the pattern emerging with horrible clarity. "The board member from New York – which name is he on the sign-in sheet?"

"Jonathan Maxwell."

"Is he a client too?"

Fenway's face paled, the blue screen light making her look almost ghostly. "Yes. He helped fund our initial research. He's in town now, actually. For a conference."

"Where?"

"I'm not certain of his hotel, but the conference is at the Metropolitan Convention Center. Most attendees stay at the Radisson nearby." Fenway was already reaching for her phone. "I can call him..."

Rachel was on her feet, adrenaline surging through her veins.

This wasn't just a theory anymore – it was their best lead yet.

Three victims who'd been in the building with Aldridge, all clients who'd secured their spots years ago.

And now Maxwell, another early client, is back in town and potentially exposed.

And on the same list, having checked into the building in that same window of time.

"Get us everything you have on Aldridge," she told Fenway, her voice tight with urgency. "Address, photo, medical records – all of it. And call Maxwell. Tell him not to let anyone into his room, no matter who they claim to be."

"Of course," Fenway said. Her hands were trembling a bit but Rachel was impressed with how well she was handling the very odd turn of events.

Rachel felt the familiar surge of adrenaline, the clarity that came with finally seeing the pattern.

Aldridge wasn't just killing random clients.

He was eliminating the competition, one by one, making room for himself in the frozen future he believed he deserved.

She knew there was a chance she could be wrong on all of this—that everything lining up on that sign-in sheet could just be coincidence.

But her gut told her the exact opposite.

They had to reach Maxwell before Aldridge did.

"Send everything to this number," Rachel said, handing Fenway her card. "And Margaret? If Aldridge contacts you, if he tries to access the facility again for any reason – call us immediately."

Fenway nodded, already typing on her tablet, her fingers flying across the screen.

As Rachel and Novak hurried toward the exit, she couldn't help but notice how the sleek, futuristic lobby felt different now.

Less like a place of scientific progress and more like a marketplace where the wealthy traded in the currency of extended life.

A place where desperation could drive a man to kill for the mere promise of a future.

The glass doors hissed shut behind them as they stepped into the afternoon sun.

Rachel checked her weapon out of habit as they approached their vehicle, the metal inviting under her fingers.

Somewhere in this city, Richard Aldridge was planning his next move.

And Jonathan Maxwell's time was running out.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across South Jefferson Avenue as Novak navigated through the crush of downtown traffic.

Rachel watched the gleaming glass facade of the Metropolitan Convention Center grow larger and brighter through the passenger window.

Its modernist architecture—all sharp angles and reflective surfaces—stood in stark contrast to the restored Art Deco elegance of the Radisson Hotel almost directly across the street.

The convention center's main entrance was flanked by towering concrete pillars, their surfaces catching the golden light of approaching sunset.

A sea of conference attendees had spilled out onto the broad sidewalks, their ID badges and lanyards catching the sunlight as they swayed from lanyards.

Some clutched leather portfolios and promotional materials, while others balanced laptop bags and coffee cups.

Small groups clustered near the building's entrance engaged in animated discussions while others stood in little groups, looking down at their phones.

Rachel noticed several people wearing identical blue lanyards—probably speakers or presenters—heading toward the hotel.

The sidewalks in front of the hotel were also a maze of motion.

A woman in a charcoal suit juggled her phone and a stack of papers as she waited for the crosswalk signal.

Two men in white coats—likely physicians attending the conference—gestured enthusiastically as they discussed something on a tablet.

A hotel bellhop pushed a loaded luggage cart through the revolving doors, forcing several conference attendees to step aside.

"This is ridiculous," Novak muttered, inching their car through the gridlock.

A taxi had stopped abruptly to pick up passengers from the convention center, forcing their lane to a crawl.

The driver ahead of them kept checking his phone, barely moving when spaces opened up.

"We're never going to find parking at this rate. "

Rachel watched another stream of people crossing Jefferson toward the hotel's entrance—a grand archway flanked by original brass light fixtures and ornate stonework.

The Radisson's twelve stories of warm red brick and limestone trim provided an architectural anchor for this corner of the medical district.

The building's corner position gave it commanding views down both Jefferson and Market Streets.

The way the sun reflected from it made late afternoon sun look like burnished copper.

Through the revolving doors, she caught glimpses of the recently renovated lobby with its coffered ceilings and marble floors.

The hotel had maintained its historic character while updating the amenities—she could see both vintage brass railings and modern digital displays from her vantage point.

A doorman in a crimson uniform assisted an elderly couple with their bags, holding the door as they stepped into a waiting town car.

"Just drop me off here," she said, already reaching for the door handle. "I'll head into the hotel, see if Maxwell is even staying there. If he is, I'll check his room." Her seatbelt clicked free as Novak guided the car toward a small gap in the traffic.

"And I'll text you when I park," he replied, scanning the street. "After I do, I'll head over to the convention center, just in case."

Rachel slipped out of the car and strode purposefully through the small crowd of people.

She made sure to remain quiet and not attract attention, wanting to remain as invisible as possible.

She managed to do this rather easily as she passed through the revolving door into the lobby.

The space opened up before her—intimate seating areas with leather club chairs arranged in conversational groupings, brass chandeliers casting a warm glow across the space, the concierge desk of polished mahogany gleaming like honey.

The air carried hints of fresh flowers from massive arrangements flanking the

entrance, their white lilies and green ferns artfully arranged in tall mercury glass vases.

The lobby buzzed with activity. A tour group huddled near the concierge desk, their matching red bags arranged in a neat pile.

Business travelers typed on laptops in the seating area, surrounded by coffee cups and papers.

Conference attendees drifted in and out, some heading for the hotel bar that opened off the lobby's north side.

She approached the front desk, where a young woman in a crisp black blazer looked up with a practiced smile.

Her name tag read "Lisa." Rachel kept her movements subtle as she displayed her FBI credentials, keeping them pressed hard against the surface of the counter, conscious of the business travelers and conference attendees milling about the lobby.

The last thing she needed was to create a scene that might tip off their suspect.

"I need to know if a man by the name Jonathan Maxwell is staying here."

The clerk's smile faltered slightly as she glanced between Rachel's badge and her face.

Her fingers worried the pearl necklace at her throat—a nervous tell that Rachel filed away automatically.

After a moment's hesitation, she turned to her computer, manicured fingers moving swiftly across the keyboard.

The soft click of keys barely audible above the lobby's ambient noise.

"He is. Mr. Richard Aldridge, Room 212."

Rachel thanked her and made for the stairwell, her footsteps silent on the thick carpeting.

The door to the stairs was tucked almost privately behind a decorative screen where the restrooms were also located, the kind of detail that spoke to the hotel's thoughtful renovation.

The stairwell itself was utilitarian—concrete steps and metal railings that smelled like dirt and old cigarette smoke—but immaculately maintained.

She came to the second floor and opened the door.

The second-floor corridor stretched out before her, walls painted in muted earth tones and lined with numbered doors in dark wood.

Framed black and white photographs of historic city landmarks provided visual interest between the doors.

The hallway carpet featured an abstract pattern in deep blues and golds, its thick pile muffling any sound of approach.

She found 212, located off to the right of the elevators, and rapped her knuckles against it. Silence. She knocked again, harder this time.

"Mr. Maxwell? Are you there?"

More silence. Just the distant hum of the ice machine down the hall and muffled

voices from a neighboring room. Maxwell must still be at the convention center.

Her phone vibrated as she turned back toward the stairs. It was a text from Novak: Parked, headed to the convention center.

She quickly typed back: He's staying here but not in his room. Will meet you at the convention center. Her thumbs had barely finished the message when she heard the distinctive whir of arriving elevator cables, followed by the soft chime of opening doors.

The corridor was empty as she approached the elevator bank, its polished brass doors reflecting the warm wall sconces.

She passed it by, heading for the stairwell doorway.

But just as she reached for the stairwell door, she heard the soft chime of the elevator arriving and the soft thunk of the doors opening.

She turned, more out of instinct than curiosity, her hand still resting on the door handle.

Two men stepped out. The first wore designer jeans and a charcoal blazer over a vintage band t-shirt—typical conference casual wear for the younger crowd.

He carried a leather messenger bag slung across his chest and a coffee cup from the lobby café in one hand.

But it was the second man who caught her attention.

He wore khakis and a navy polo beneath a heavy wool peacoat.

She saw no conference materials, no name badge.

And from what she could tell, the two men did not know one another—just two men who'd happened to catch the same elevator.

"Sorry to bother you," she said, forcing a casual tone while her mind cataloged details. She was acting on instinct now, not really allowing herself time to overthink every little thing. "But would either of you happen to be Jonathan Maxwell?"

Both men shook their heads. "No, sorry," said the one in jeans, already turning toward his destination. The man in the peacoat merely shook his head, his expression neutral but eyes alert in a way that triggered Rachel's internal alarm.

"Thanks anyway." Rachel turned back to the stairwell door, but her trained eye had already cataloged several other concerning details about the man in the peacoat. Years of FBI work had taught her to trust her instincts, and right now every one of them was screaming.

The coat itself was slightly too large, the sleeves extending past his wrists—possibly borrowed or recently purchased for concealment.

His right hand was curled awkwardly, the fingers bent upward as if securing something within that excess fabric.

The movement wasn't natural; it spoke of conscious control rather than casual motion. He was hiding something.

His movements were too controlled, too deliberate for someone simply returning to their room.

There was a practiced quality to his casualness, like an actor who had rehearsed

appearing unremarkable.

Most telling was the slight bulge along his right side—the kind created by a shoulder holster.

Rachel had worn enough of them to recognize the subtle disruption in how fabric fell.

She watched through the closing stairwell door as the men separated, the one in jeans turning left while the man in the peacoat moved purposefully to the right...

toward Room 212. Her pulse quickened as years of experience crystallized into certainty.

The coat was meant to conceal both weapon and identity.

The carefully casual demeanor masked predatory intent.

Even the timing felt calculated—arriving just as the convention was letting out, when the hotel would be at its most chaotic.

When Maxwell would return to his room.

Rachel pulled out her phone as she stood in the isolated silence of the stairwell platform.

She sent a text to Novak as quickly as she could, her fingers flying across the screen: Might have a suspect here at the hotel.

A man, possibly concealing a weapon, is heading for Maxwell's room.

212. She noticed her hands were steady despite the surge of adrenaline.

She took a single breath to make sure she was centered and focused before drawing her weapon.

She then eased the stairwell door open once more.

The weight of her Glock was familiar in her hands, its stippled grip reassuring against her palm.

Somewhere down the hall, a door clicked shut.

Rachel moved silently into the corridor, every sense alert for what might come next.

And by the time she had taken two more steps out into the corridor, her gut was now all but certain: she was mere feet away from a killer.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

Rachel moved through the corridor with measured steps, her breathing controlled and even.

Years of training had taught her how to regulate her heart rate in situations like this, though the sound of blood rushing in her ears never quite went away.

Her Glock felt familiar and reassuring in her grip, its weight a reminder of countless similar moments throughout her career.

She'd been in this position hundreds of times before, but experience hadn't dulled her edge – if anything, it had sharpened it.

The empty hallway stretched before her, its soft lighting casting gentle shadows in the corners. The thick carpet muffled her footsteps and for a moment, it seemed so quiet that she thought if she tried very hard, she could probably hear the ringing of the desk phones a floor below her.

The air felt different here than it had in the lobby – cooler, with that slight metallic taste that came with industrial heating to ward off the cold outside.

Rachel noticed everything, cataloging details automatically now that this was no longer just a hopeful hunt for Jonathan Maxwell.

Now she noticed even the smallest of things...

the flicker in one of the overhead lights, the faint smell of coffee long-ago brewed, the distant hum of the ice machine elsewhere along the hall.

Of course, she also knew that Peacoat could just be another guest. Maybe the clicking of a door she'd heard had been him opening his door.

She knew this was a possibility, but the sounds didn't match up.

She'd have heard two clicks...one from the keycard—maybe even the small beep if it was the electronic kind—and then the solid chunk of a door closing.

She came to 212 and pressed her ear against the door.

She held her breath and listened intently for about ten seconds.

Nothing. Not even the background hum of a TV.

The silence was absolute, confirming her suspicion that the room was empty.

She tested the handle anyway, finding it locked as expected.

Stepping back, Rachel allowed herself to slip into the mindset she'd developed over years of hunting killers.

If Aldridge was the killer and knew Maxwell was in 212, he wouldn't risk standing in plain sight.

He'd need a vantage point, somewhere to observe without being noticed.

Her eyes scanned the hallway methodically, cataloging possible hiding spots.

The layout was typical hotel design: long corridor, rooms on both sides, utility spaces scattered between.

The ambient hum of machinery caught her attention – an ice machine, punctuated by the distinct sound of fresh cubes dropping into the bin. The noise came from her right, further down the corridor. Rachel moved toward it, keeping her stance low and ready.

The ICE/SNACKS door appeared halfway down the hall, opposite her position.

A rectangular window offered a glimpse inside: two vending machines casting their familiar fluorescent glow, a single Coke machine, and the bulk of an industrial ice maker partially obscured by the door.

The machine was massive, nearly ceiling height, with a large sliding panel in its metal center allowing people easy access to the ice.

But she couldn't see the entirety of it through the glass.

In other words, it could be a perfect hiding spot. The kind of place she herself would choose if she needed to observe while staying hidden.

Rachel knew the next few seconds were critical.

A slow entry would give anyone hiding inside time to prepare – and if Aldridge was there, she couldn't afford to give him that advantage.

As soon as he saw that door handle turning downward, he could attack.

She took a deep breath, feeling the familiar calm settle over her.

This was one of those moments where training took over, where muscle memory and instinct merged into pure action.

Her left hand found the door handle while her right maintained a firm grip on the Glock, pointing it straight ahead. In one fluid motion, she turned the handle and pushed, using the door's momentum to carry her into the room. She moved in a practiced sweep, weapon extended.

The attack came before she could complete her scan.

A blur of motion from the narrow space between the wall and ice machine – a blind spot she hadn't been able to see from the window.

Something hard and metallic crashed into the meat of her left shoulder.

The impact sent a shock wave of pain down her arm, a thousand needles of electricity shooting through her nerves.

Rachel spun to face her attacker, but he was already pressing his advantage. She caught a glimpse of what he was wielding: a lead pipe, its surface dull under the fluorescent lights. A lead pipe...which was the weapon that had been suspected of taking the lives of the three victims.

He was already mid-swing for another strike, and he was too close for her to risk a shot in the confined space. A shot from this sort of space could be fatal to either of them. Besides that, as the pipe came down again, her instincts were more worried about self-preservation.

She deflected the incoming blow by striking his wrist with her right forearm, the impact jarring but effective.

She followed through with a knee strike, aiming for his groin but connecting with his thigh instead due to their proximity.

The attacker—presumably Richard Aldridge—stumbled back, giving her the space to land a solid right hook to his temple.

He reeled but didn't go down. The pipe whistled past her face as he swung wild, forcing her to duck. The movement brought fresh waves of pain from her injured shoulder, but Rachel pushed it aside. She'd fought through worse – much worse.

They traded blows in the cramped space, the vending machines humming their indifferent soundtrack to the violence.

Rachel managed to land several solid strikes, her combat training evident in every movement.

A punch to the kidneys, another to the chest. A particularly effective combination – jab, cross, elbow – drove him back against the ice machine, the impact rattling the entire unit.

Bags of chips shuddered in their metal spirals in the vending machine beside it.

But Aldridge fought with the desperate strength of a cornered animal.

He absorbed the punishment and came back swinging, the pipe creating deadly arcs through the air.

Rachel had to constantly give ground, using the limited space to her advantage when she could.

Her back hit the vending machine, and she barely managed to slide along it as the pipe struck where her head had been, leaving a deep dent in the metal.

The clang of metal on metal rang in her ears like a tiny explosion.

He was also stronger than she'd anticipated.

Despite his age and illness, desperation lent him power.

It took a fifth solid punch to finally rock him—a solid, stifled uppercut that clocked him just below the nose.

The punch rocked Aldridge back, blood instantly spilling from his upper lip.

He collapsed against the ice machine, his eyes suddenly unfocused.

Rachel saw her opening and moved in, reaching for her cuffs.

But it was a trap – he'd been playing hurt, waiting for her to get close. The pipe was already in motion as she realized her mistake.

When Rachel tried to transition to cuffing him again, he twisted away, the pipe already drawing back for another swing.

Her injured arm screamed in protest as she prepared to defend herself.

The pipe began its deadly arc toward her head.

She staggered back, fighting to maintain her balance and bring the gun up...

not wanting to kill the man but wondering if she may not have a choice.

The door burst open from the hallway with enough force to crack the wall.

Novak's solid frame filled the doorway for a split second before he launched himself at Aldridge. With the man already on the ground and having taken several punches,

there wasn't much fight left in him.

He threw out a single, feeble punch that barely clipped Novak's shoulder.

But after that, Novak essentially fell onto him in a move that was part tackle and part restraint.

From there, Novak was easily able to wrangle him into a modified chokehold.

Rachel immediately dropped her knee into Aldridge's back, using her weight to pin him while wrestling the pipe from his grip.

It was only then that she noticed several streaks and splatters of what appeared to be dried blood.

Novak had already slapped one cuff around Aldridge's wrist and was securing the second. "You good, Gift?" he asked, his voice tight with exertion. She could see the concern in his eyes – the same look Jack used to give her during their partnership.

Rachel rotated her injured shoulder, wincing at the movement.

It was going to be sore as hell. There may be some muscle damage, but nothing serious.

"I'll live," she replied, watching as Novak hauled their suspect to his feet.

"Though I might need some ice." She glanced at the machine they'd nearly destroyed in their fight and allowed herself a small smile. "Convenient location, at least."

Aldridge said nothing, but his eyes burned with a hatred Rachel recognized all too well.

It was the look of a man who'd believed himself untouchable, finally brought low.

She'd seen it countless times before and would likely see it countless times again.

But she also saw a sadness in there...something that almost looked like sickness.

As Novak read him his rights, Rachel felt her shoulder throbbing in time with her heartbeat, but the pain felt almost righteous. Another killer caught, another case closed. Jonathan Maxwell saved.

It wasn't a cure for death itself, but it was its own form of justice. And sometimes that had to be enough.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

An hour later, Rachel found herself returning to yet another familiar building—not the New Horizons building again, but the small police precinct where they'd interrogated Jason Dewalt. Rachel and Novak led Richard Aldridge through the entryway doors with Rachel doing her best to pretend that her shoulder wasn't hurting immensely.

And just like the time before, Deputy Dunphy met them at the entrance, his round face brightening with recognition.

"Agents Gift and Novak," he said, nodding to each in turn. Rachel had called ahead once again and Dunphy had been all too eager to help. "Same room as before is all yours."

"Thanks, Deputy," Rachel said. Her voice sounded hollow in her own ears, the weight of what they'd discovered pressing down on her chest.

Novak pulled the car keys from his pocket. "There's evidence in the trunk that needs processing," he told Dunphy, his tone deliberately neutral. "A lead pipe wrapped in an evidence bag. We need a forensics unit to run tests to see who the dried blood belongs to."

Dunphy's eyebrows shot up, but to his credit, he simply took the keys with a quick "No problem," he said and hurried off. A few other officers within earshot watched him go. Several others seemed to be more interested in the two federal agents and the suspect they'd brought into their quiet precinct.

Rachel watched Aldridge as they entered the interrogation room.

His composed exterior was beginning to crack.

His hands—which were surprisingly well manicured, she noted—trembled slightly as he lowered himself into the metal chair.

The room was unchanged from their earlier visit: same drab walls, same water-stained ceiling tiles, same two-way mirror reflecting their faces back at them.

The only difference was the man sitting on the other side of the table.

"Mr. Aldridge," Rachel began, settling into the chair across from him. "You've been silent since we found you in that hotel room. You refused to answer our questions on the ride over. So let's start over here, okay? Why were you hiding on the second floor with a lead pipe in your possession?"

Aldridge's jaw worked silently, but his eyes—those were speaking volumes. Rachel watched as emotions flickered across them like shadows: fear, resignation, and something deeper. Something that made her own chest tighten with recognition.

"Nothing to say?" she pressed. "Then let me tell you what Deputy Dunphy is doing right now.

He's processing that pipe you swung at me.

The one with dried blood all over it." She leaned forward slightly.

"Want to guess whose blood we'll find? Maybe it's blood from Peter Wells? Thomas Whitman? Diana Foxworth?"

The change in Aldridge's face was subtle but unmistakable. Aldridge's shoulders sagged by a fraction of an inch, and his carefully maintained facade cracked. A tear

welled up in his right eye, then tracked slowly down his cheek. He made no move to wipe it away.

Rachel felt her throat constrict. She'd seen that look before—in her own mirror, during those dark days when her diagnosis felt like a death sentence. The desperation, the rage against fate's cruel lottery. The man looked trapped.

"We know about the cancer," she said softly, surprised by the tremor in her voice. Novak shifted beside her, probably sensing her emotional investment. He may also have been shocked at the sudden change in direction of the conversation.

But she pressed on. "Terminal diagnosis.

Pancreatic cancer, right? But what I don't understand—" She had to pause, gather herself.

"What was your endgame? Even if New Horizons had fast-tracked you, even if you'd eliminated every other client ahead of you.

.. what if they never find a cure for what is killing you?

Were you planning to just stay frozen indefinitely? "

Aldridge's composure shattered completely. More tears fell, and his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists on the table, jangling the cuff chains. When he finally spoke, his voice was raw with emotion.

"At least it would have been a chance." The words came out in a broken whisper.

"These people—these rich, entitled people—they were banking spots for some hypothetical future need.

Just throwing money down because they could.

Meanwhile, I'm dying now. " His voice rose, cracking with desperation.

" NOW ! And I...I just wanted a chance. One chance. Is that so much to ask?"

Rachel's vision blurred. The familiar smell of antiseptic cleaner, so much like a hospital, brought memories flooding back: the cold examination tables, the endless scans, the moment she'd had to tell Paige about her diagnosis.

She remembered lying awake at night, trying to imagine a world that would go on without her in it.

The knowledge that there was a very good chance she was going to die and there was nothing she could do about it.

The swelling of emotions surprised her, catching her completely off guard.

"Agent Gift?" Novak's voice seemed to come from far away.

She stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. "Finish the interrogation, please," she managed, already moving toward the door. "I need a minute."

She exited the room as quickly as she could without seeming distraught.

The hallway felt too narrow, the air too thick.

Rachel found the women's restroom at the end of the hallway and darted inside.

There, she gripped the edges of the sink, staring at her reflection in the spotted mirror.

Her hands were shaking. She took one deep breath, then another, trying to center herself.

The worst part wasn't that they'd caught him. That, she knew, was a very good thing. The worst part was understanding him. Rachel had been lucky—experimental treatments, a second chance at life. But Aldridge? He would spend his remaining months in a prison cell, watching the clock run down, knowing there would be no miracle cure, no last-minute reprieve. He'd made awful decisions and deserved what he got, but she still felt sorry for him in a way she could not describe.

She splashed cold water on her face, trying to wash away the memory of his tears, of the desperate hope in his voice when he'd talked about wanting just one chance.

The water dripped from her chin, and she watched it spiral down the drain, remembering all too clearly how it felt to have your future suddenly narrowed to a vanishing point.

Back in the hallway, Rachel could hear Novak's steady voice through the interrogation room door, methodically building their case.

She should go back in. It was her job, after all.

But she needed another moment to rebuild her professional facade, to push down the empathy that threatened to overwhelm her.

Because that was the cruel irony of it all: Aldridge's desperate bid for survival had ensured he would spend his final days in a cell.

His fear of death had led him to take lives, and now both justice and karma would collect their due.

Rachel pressed her palm against the cool wall, steadying herself.

She'd beaten cancer. She'd survived. But standing here, listening to a dying man confess to murder, she felt the weight of that survival pressing down on her shoulders like a lead blanket.

Finally, she straightened her jacket and squared her shoulders.

She had a job to do. The victims deserved justice, regardless of how much she understood and sympathized with the desperation that had driven their killer.

Taking one last deep breath, she turned back toward the interrogation room, carrying her hard-won perspective like armor against the emotions that still threatened to overwhelm her.

Because sometimes survival came with a price. Sometimes it meant having to face the darker reflections of your own past, your own fears, your own desperate moments. And sometimes it meant having to be strong enough to carry empathy in that same heart, no matter how much it hurt.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:24 am

It had been three days since they'd arrested Richard Aldridge.

And ever since she's returned home, Rachel had not been sleeping well.

The nightmares had been relentless for three nights straight, almost like an overly familiar stranger always knocking on her front door.

In them, she was always running through the hospice center corridors, but they twisted impossibly like a Mobius strip, stretching and contracting with dream logic that left her disoriented and panicked.

The walls would pulse with an orange glow, and she'd hear the laughter of children—except the hospice center didn't have a pediatric ward.

She'd sprint past doorways where patients sat in their beds, all wearing Aldridge's face, all with his sunken eyes and desperate expression.

Except for the one room where Scarlett sat waiting for her, pointing an accusing finger at her and asking why Rachel had not been there for her...

why Rachel had not been able to make sure she stayed alive.

Some nights, the patients would reach for her with withered hands, begging to be saved.

Other times, they'd just watch her run, their collective gaze heavy with accusation.

In the dreams, she never reached the bomb in time.

She always woke up just as the flames reached her, heart hammering against her ribs, sheets soaked with sweat.

Last night had been the worst. In that version, she'd found Scarlett sitting in one of the rooms, alive and healthy again, smiling that bright smile that had drawn Rachel to her in the first place.

"You couldn't save me," dream-Scarlett had said, her flesh melting away even as she spoke, "and you won't save them either.

" Rachel had jerked awake at three AM and hadn't gone back to sleep.

Instead, she sat in the living room, reading cold case files until dawn painted the sky in shades of winter gray.

The bruise on her left arm throbbed, a purple-black reminder of Aldridge's final desperate attack.

The steel pipe had indeed caused a bit of muscle damage but nothing that required a doctor or time off.

She absently rubbed the spot, wincing at the tenderness as she made her way to her car.

Even through her winter coat, the touch sent a dull ache through her arm.

The doctors had assured her nothing was broken, but the impact had left a mark the size of a grapefruit, dark as a thundercloud.

Aldridge. The case still gnawed at her. She understood his terror, his rage against

death.

Hadn't she felt that same desperate clawing when her own cancer diagnosis came?

That primal fear of extinction, of being erased from the world while others continued on?

But understanding didn't excuse his choices.

Three people dead because he'd decided his life was worth more than theirs.

Because he'd convinced himself that eliminating "less worthy" candidates would guarantee his own preservation at New Horizons. The eerie rationality of his planning made it worse somehow—the careful selection of victims, the absolutely brutal way he'd killed them, as if to make absolutely sure they were dead.

Her sensible black boots clicked against the concrete as she walked, the sound bouncing off the support pillars and creating a weird echo chamber effect that made it sound like someone was walking behind her.

Row D, Level 2. Her assigned spot felt miles away tonight.

The fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows, creating dark corners that seemed to shift and writhe in her peripheral vision.

She blamed the lack of sleep for her paranoia, but her hand still strayed closer to her holster.

The garage had always felt exposed, but tonight it felt positively hostile.

All she wanted was to get home, to sink into the couch between Jack and Paige.

Maybe watch one of those cooking shows Paige had gotten addicted to lately.

The ones where amateur bakers tried to recreate impossible sculptures out of cake and fondant.

Or even Brooklyn 99 if Paige really pushed the issue.

Let the competitive baking drama or slapstick comedy wash away the echoes of interview rooms and evidence folders.

She had sleeping pills in her bathroom cabinet—the ones she hadn't needed since her recovery, the ones Jack didn't know she'd kept.

Tonight felt like the right time to break that streak.

Just one dreamless night of at least eight solid hours, that's all she needed to reset.

Her car chirped as she pressed the key fob.

The sound was oddly cheerful in the tomb-like garage, bouncing off the concrete walls like a demented bird call.

The temperature had to be near freezing down here; she could see frost forming on some of the windshields, creating delicate patterns that reminded her of crime scene photos of glass fractures.

As she reached for the driver's door handle, something caught her eye. A white envelope, trapped beneath the windshield wiper like a fallen leaf.

Rachel's stomach clenched. The garage suddenly felt colder, darker.

She scanned the shadows between the parked cars, the spaces behind the concrete

pillars.

Nothing moved, but that meant little. Her hand slowly inched toward her holstered Glock with practiced efficiency, checking under and around her vehicle.

The motion aggravated her bruised arm, but adrenaline was already pushing the pain aside.

Finding nothing, she returned to the envelope. It was plain white, unmarked. No name, no address.

Her hands trembled slightly as she pulled on a pair of latex gloves from her coat pocket.

Evidence procedure was muscle memory by now, one of the first things that had come back to her after returning to work.

She documented the envelope's position with her phone camera before carefully removing it, noting the high-quality paper stock, the precise creasing of the fold.

Inside were three items, each one hitting her like a physical blow.

The first: Scarlett's obituary, carefully cut from the newspaper. The article praised her volunteer work, her spirit in fighting cancer, her tragic death just weeks after entering remission. A thick black line had been drawn across the text, the ink so heavy it had bled through to the other side.

The second: A news article about the hospice center bombing.

The evacuation had saved lives, but the building's east wing and lobby was severely damaged.

The photo showed the blackened walls, the blown-out windows.

Her own name was mentioned in the article as an injured FBI agent on the scene.

Another black number marked this one, a bulky 2.

She thought of the nightmares again, of all those identical Aldridge faces watching her fail to reach the bomb in time.

The third item made her blood run cold. A playing card.

The Jack of Hearts. A bold, black 3 defaced the familiar face.

The card was pristine except for that marking, as if it had just been pulled from a fresh deck.

She thought of Jack at home, probably already starting dinner, completely unaware that he'd been marked as the next target.

Because to Rachel, there was not even a shred of doubt that was what this card, along with these two newspaper clippings, meant.

Her heart thundered in her chest as the message became crystal clear. Cody Austin was counting his moves against her. Past, present, and future. Each one calculated to cause maximum pain, to show her just how powerless she was to protect the people she loved now that he was free.

And he was coming for Jack next.

Rachel's training kicked in through the fear.

She pulled out her phone, thinking over what her next steps should be.

First call: Evidence Response Team for the envelope.

Second: Protective detail for Jack. Third: Assistant Director Anderson.

Her fingers flew across the keypad, muscle memory again taking over while her mind raced through contingency plans.

But then she stopped, thinking in the cold.

Her eyes swept the garage again. Cody Austin was out there somewhere, watching, planning.

He'd been released early for good behavior, but Rachel knew what he really was.

She was the only one who had seen the full scope of his darkness, the true extent of his kills.

Now he was turning that methodical brutality toward her world, her family.

She thought of his face in the interrogation room all those years ago, the bland pleasantness that never quite reached his eyes.

The perfect mask of normalcy that had allowed him to walk among his victims undetected.

She also knew that as of right now, not even Jack believed her when she had mentioned her concern that Austin had been behind Scarlett's death and the bombing.

But now there was this...and because it seemed Jack was being targeted, she needed to talk to Jack before she spoke to anyone else.

If she knew she had him firmly on her side in all of this—in all of whatever came

next—it would be so much easier to tackle it.

All she knew was that she'd be damned if she would let Cody Austin have his Number 3. Or 4 or 5. Whatever it took, Cody Austin's morbid countdown would end here. She'd stopped him once before, and she'd do it again—this time permanently.